ANCIENT DEAD IN HAMPSHIRE & BEYOND Dr Dawn Cansfield 9 March 2021

Dawn Cansfield became fascinated by the early Neolithic period after becoming involved in investigating and researching past records of burials through the Whitehawk causewayed enclosure archive. Later, her PhD research led to involvement in the *Brighton & Hove Prehistoric Research Project* at Brighton Museum where the twenty-eight skeletons in varying degrees of completeness and preservation were found in the museum stores, and had been originally dated to Neolithic/Bronze and Iron Ages. Fourteen more burials were located from other stores, which all needed to be updated using modern technology: many of the remains were still in inappropriate packaging (paper sugar bags, re-used cardboard boxes) and had 'fossilised interpretations', probably never looked at since their first examination. This 'side project' arose from Dawn's PhD thesis at Winchester University, *Early Neolithic Burial in South-East England*, and was supported by the Prehistoric Society, with further funding for radiocarbon dating from the university.

Dawn has carried out archival research into evidence of demographic data: age, biological sex (not gender), pathology (disease), burial location, position and orientation of burial, and grave goods, plus radiocarbon dating. The burials came from monumental (barrows etc) and non-monumental contexts, and included burials from a mine shaft at Cissbury Ring, causewayed enclosures and barrows. Burial positions where the person is buried on their side with their legs bent have similar terminologies (such as 'crouched' or 'flexed'), which may be confusing. Binding, covering, wrapping and timing of disposal of the body were studied, and Archaeothanatology – looking in detail at joint articulation, as bones can move out of alignment during decomposition. Another of Dawn's interests is orientation of the body, which side they are laid on and orientated and where they may have been facing – sunrise, sunset or a significant point in the landscape: Dawn found a clear pattern from the Bronze Age.

Some specific investigations included the following:

Hampshire and Isle of Wight

Itchen Farm, Hampshire. In 2006 Thames Valley Archaeology undertook excavation prior to the construction of Winchester Park & Ride. The skeleton of a child aged 4-6 years was discovered, dated to the Early Neolithic (4082 to 3971bc) in an oval grave, laid in a crouched or flexed position on the right-hand side, east-west and facing north. Flint flakes, blades, pottery sherds, a large sarsen stone at the feet and some charcoal was found, which is considered to be special treatment, possibly indicating good or bad reasons. The skeleton was very fragmented and the porosity of the eye socket indicated that the child had suffered either from anaemia or a parasitic infection. On the same site there were two Neolithic pits, which were not contemporary with the grave.

Early Neolithic skeleton of child, with stone at the feet + flint flakes. Thames Valley Archaeology Services

Long Barrow at Nutbane near Andover. A Neolithic site, known about since 1955 when it was reported to the Ordnance Survey. On inspection it was found to be a long barrow, and aerial photos showed flanking ditches, 51m long but reduced by ploughing. It was excavated two years later when a mortuary structure was found at the east end with a burial chamber containing four burials *in situ*, all in crouched position. They were covered by a thick layer of soil and chalk blocks. Three of the skeletons were found on a plank of decayed oak wood which could indicate some sort of platform, with sherds of Windmill Hill pottery and an aurochs foot bone. The fourth burial was a later insertion. Two skeletons were of adult males, 30-40 years of age, on their left side and buried east-west, with another adult male aged 40-50 years and a juvenile male of 13-15 years. The head of one skeleton was twisted and could have swivelled when a head rest decayed. One of the skulls had the front teeth removed and the injuries had healed over: this is described as 'dental ablation', which could be a ritual treatment – other similar examples have been found elsewhere.

Barton Stacey near Andover. This was a well-known site with another long barrow and round barrows nearby. Much of the archaeology here was destroyed in 1940 during construction of a rifle range. A retrospective report by W F Grimes on the destruction and the human remains is held by Hampshire Cultural Trust. During the destruction of the barrow by the MOD in 1940 a heap of flints was found overlaying the pit in the long barrow. Remains of 'the skeleton' which was found during the wartime excavation were kept in a shed on site for collection by the archaeologists, but it turns out these are the remains of several individuals: two adult females, one male and a juvenile. These are currently awaiting radiocarbon dating and hopefully, DNA analysis.

Houghton Down, Chattis Hill, Nr Stockbridge. The site was originally excavated in 1898 when primary burials were found. Reports mention a barrow containing skeletal remains but the actual barrow was very truncated with little surviving by the 1970s. The bones were held at Hartley College in Southampton, and when the College closed they were passed to Tudor House Museum, but then apparently lost. Recently Dawn mentioned in a newsletter article that their whereabouts were not known, and Gill Woolrich from Southampton City Council found them in the store and contacted her. Several individuals were represented among the remains, which are still being studied - radiocarbon dating and DNA analysis is ongoing.

St Lawrence, Isle of Wight Undercliff. In 1923 excavations took place prior to construction of a new Nurses Home, where 'sparse remains' comprising three human bones were found 3ft below the surface, near a low hill, but no associated finds were discovered. The remains were examined by Sir Arthur Keith at the time, who had racialistic views of human ancestry (and was involved in the Piltdown hoax). He assessed they had arthritic knee joints and estimated the height at just over 5ft tall. The bones were dated using a system now obsolete and were described as Bronze Age or possibly Anglo-Saxon. However, recently radiocarbon dating has shown them to be early/mid-Iron Age.

Niton Down, Isle of Wight. A 1928 excavation of Barrow II at the southern end of Niton Down, close to Barrow I on St Catherine's Hill, which had been excavated earlier. As a round

barrow this could be transitional between the Neolithic/Bronze Age; a layer of chert beach stones marked the barrow, but Neolithic Windmill Hill pottery could have been from an earlier occupation layer, and in fact the burial was radiocarbon dated to Early Bronze Age. The remains had been originally examined, again by Arthur Keith, who assessed the body to be that of 'a strongly built male' about 5½ feet tall.

West Sussex burials

Tolmare Farm, Findon: in 1957 farm workers discovered a small grave with a skeleton on its left side, lying north-south and facing east, described as 'legs folded back from the knees'. The skeleton was examined by Dr Ratcliffe Densham, GP and archaeologist, and considered to be Neolithic from several 'primitive characteristics' i.e. theories from craniology (a now out-dated method!). He noted the presence of only a few teeth at time of death. Dawn's estimate was a man of 45+ with signs of Schmorl's nodes (depressions in vertebrae due to bending/lifting) and osteoarthritis, radiocarbon dated to Middle Iron Age!

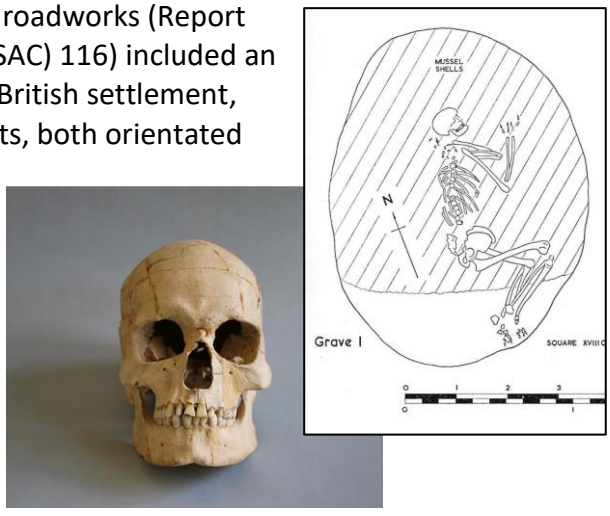
Three skeletons from Brighton project

Moulescoomb 1928, found by workmen – skeleton on the left side, facing north-west with knees slightly drawn up, and no dating evidence. Examined by Keith who assessed this as a male of 60+, height 5ft and dated to Bronze Age from the crouched position, and skull. The re-assessment concluded: male 45+ with osteoarthritis and osteoporosis, myositis ossificans traumatica to right tibia, and Schmorl's, dated to Middle Iron Age.

Woodingdean in 1934 workmen discovered an extended skeleton in a 'flint coffin' surrounded by flints (many burnt). Assessed at the time as adult female, 25yrs, 5½ft, dated to Late Bronze Age from the burial position. Re-assessed as 30-45yrs and shorter, with Schmorl's and persistent metopic suture; radiocarbon date 403-211bc – Middle Iron Age.

Slonk Hill, Shoreham 1968, large excavation for roadworks (Report published in Sussex Archaeological Collections (SAC) 116) included an unenclosed Iron Age settlement and a Romano-British settlement, with two Iron Age burials, male and female adults, both orientated N-S and facing East.

The male, late 20s was described as 'semi-crouched' and laid at the bottom of a storage pit on a thick bed of mussel shells, (unopened and not regular part of the local diet), with a fossilised sea urchin. A facial reconstruction from the skull has been made by Oscar Nilssen a Swedish archaeologist and sculptor, and is displayed in the new Archaeology Gallery at Brighton Museum (where you'll be able to visit once museums re-open).



Well-preserved skull of Iron Age male, and sketch of the grave from Slonk Hill. *Photo D Cansfield*

Conclusion

This review of historically excavated human remains confirms the value of looking again at the archives, and using modern techniques and knowledge to scrutinise earlier conclusions and shed new light on previous findings. For Dawn it all started with the Neolithic – but ended with the Bronze and Iron Ages!

Thanks to MK for her notes and Dr DC for the opportunity to study her slides and notes. SVH

Questions (from SVH)

Q. *I counted the number of skeletons among your case studies from the different eras, which came out as: Neolithic 5; Early Bronze Age 1; mid-Iron Age 7 (Total 13)*
I know this was far from the full number that you studied for your PhD, but is it a representative sample at all?

1. A. The case studies I chose were the ones I thought would be most interesting, but, whereas I had set out to find Neolithic burials, when it came to the 'non-monumental' ones, I ended up instead with a number of Bronze Age and certainly more Iron Age individuals than I had bargained for! For me, these discrete burials are particularly interesting

Q. Regarding orientation of the body in burial, there was a sentence in Mandy's notes saying: 'Dawn found a clear pattern from the Bronze Age', so I wonder if you could tell us more about the pattern?

2. A. I'm afraid it wasn't me who found a pattern of burial orientations in Bronze Age burials but there have been some studies that have found this to be the case. I am currently looking into this in more detail for the Early Neolithic for a paper I'm giving at TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) in December, but the following excerpt from my thesis is probably what I was referring to in my talk to you:

   "*...a study of burials in round barrows in east Yorkshire and Humberside (Tuckwell, 1975) found that the sex of the deceased was a key factor in the arrangement of the body within a grave and that males were laid on their left sides, orientated east-to-west and therefore facing south, and females were laid on their right sides, orientated west-to-east, also facing south. It was subsequently observed that usually in these round barrows a male individual was interred first, followed by either a female or juvenile (Muzoguchi, 1993)*."

   I believe there has been a much more recent study (the last couple of years?) that effectively confirmed Tuckwell's findings, but I can't seem to lay my hands on it at the time of writing, I'm afraid. When it comes to the Early Neolithic, unfortunately the evidence I've found so far isn't as clear-cut as this, although there do appear to be some possible tendencies towards particular orientations in certain demographic groups, perhaps localised.

Question (from AP)
Q. I was intrigued that a large sarsen stone was found at the feet of the skeleton, particularly in light of the recent revelations regarding the importance of these stones at Stonehenge. I wondered if the burial would have been roughly contemporary with the putting up of the sarsens at Stonehenge (or even their suggested earlier life in Wales!). And if so, their possible ritual significance in placing one in the grave?

3. A. Thank you for passing this question on to me, which is a really good one. The presence of the sarsen stone in the Itchen Farm burial is intriguing. In the Early Neolithic database for my thesis there were other cases of sarsen stones associated with burials, but these were multiple stones in cists or 'remnant cairns', for example at Park Farm round barrow in Berkshire. The Itchen Farm burial was notable on several counts, such as being one of the two earliest burials in the whole of my south-east England study area, dated to 4230-3970 cal BC (the other being an adult female at Yabsley Street in London with a very similar date); both were 'non-monumental' discrete flat graves and the grave goods were similar. The Itchen Farm child was buried quite a bit earlier than the Stonehenge sarsens were erected in Wiltshire but sarsens may well also have had cultural significance during the Early Neolithic, although their availability in the landscape may point towards a more pragmatic explanation. I don't know if you are familiar with Katy Whitaker at the University of Reading, but she is doing her PhD on the role of sarsen stones in southern Britain and I, for one, am eagerly awaiting her findings!
http://www.reading.ac.uk/archaeology/meet-the-team/archaeology-team/arch-PGR-students/k-a-whitaker.aspx

   As far as my research into Early Neolithic burials is concerned, I wonder whether the Itchen Farm sarsen could have been some sort of marker, or if it may have held some symbolic significance, perhaps related to deviant burial. There are other burials around this time where stones, chalk or flints (as well as pottery sherds or shells) were used to cover or surround burials. Perhaps these burial practices were related to containing the dead, or alternatively memorialising them? These are just my initial thoughts, though, and I would like to find out more - do let me know if you come across any more examples.

Many thanks to Dawn for proof-reading and correcting details, and for her helpful answers.

Sarah Hanna