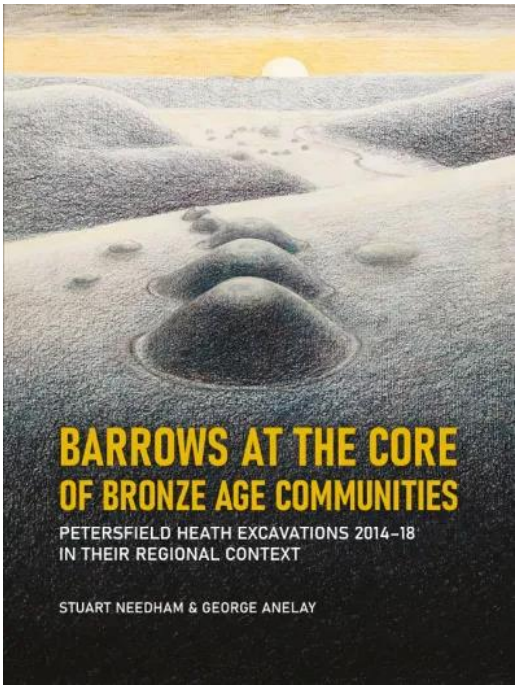
The Golden Barrow of the Sun
Early Bronze age barrows, funerary practices & cosmology in the Rother Region
By Stuart Needham



The subject of this lecture is the **People of the Heath Project** which aimed to understand and conserve early Bronze Age barrows on Petersfield Heath, based on excavations from 2014-18 and on-going research. The project started as a "blank canvas" as no modern excavations of the area had been undertaken. Excavation on the core site was at Petersfield Heath in the region of the Rother valley, where the river joins the river Arun on the western edge of the Weald. This is an area of complex geology with the Hampshire Hangers, high sandstone hills to the north and lower hills and also heathland along the valley. Antiquarian excavations in 18th century had been carried out on some of the known barrows, but there is no surviving documentation.

Firstly, community volunteers undertook an extensive regional survey of the barrows and area to understand how the cemetery was made in this area. The HER records for Sussex and Hampshire had recorded around 280 sites, but after LIDAR and ground surveys were completed the total number was estimated to be 550. Some of these additional sites were a little doubtful until they were excavated

The core cemetery site has been documented for over two centuries and the first edition 1820 Ordnance Survey (OS) map shows many monuments, although the map is small scale and therefore not precise. Phillip Crocker undertook surveying for the OS, as he knew about barrows and was interested in the area: the original survey plan made by his team is held by the British Library. The Heath was an impressive area, and antiquarian William Cunnington undertook excavations after receiving information from Crocker. By the mid-19th century, some of the barrows had been destroyed and by overlaying the old maps with a modern version, it is evident that a further six barrows were there originally. Petersfield Heath is out on a limb and is the most numerous cemetery condensed into a small area.

As well as some of the normal types of mound barrows, there are five enclosure barrows which are very unusual due to the size of the mounds, some of which are over 600 cubic metres square. Radio carbon dates from excavated material show that the cemetery was mainly in use from ~2000bc over a 200-year period, with a further 150 years of reduced activity until finally use tailed away.

The major use of the barrows was for burial, mostly for cremations after 2000BC. Most of the cremations were placed in urns, one found in the bottom of a log coffin but another one in a sack. The identifiable remains show that some of the urns contained the remains of more than one person. One particular cremation contained teeth which allowed Strontium isotope testing and showed that there were almost certainly at least two individuals within it, one being a juvenile around 16 years old and the other elderly. The young adult was possibly a female. Analysis of the teeth showed where these individuals were born and other bone indicated where they had died, what food they had eaten and where it had come from. Not many were eating food grown in chalklands, so they had not spent all their lives in this locality, although possibly not far away.

Other finds included prestige objects such as whole and fragmented daggers; faience beads; crafting/maintenance equipment; whetstones, a perforated whetstone (quite rare), and arrow heads. The most unusual was a set of objects for the manufacturer of flint arrow heads, pre-formed ready for finishing, but no complete arrow heads, barbed and tanged. These pre-formed pieces were ready for an experienced knapper to complete, which seems to suggest that this burial may have contained the body of such a person.

Mineral replaced organics were found, consisting of accretions of hardened mud or sand. In some cases these remains had the appearance of a log but the wood had decayed and been replaced by mud. Some were in situ, many others found during macro excavation of the urns. In all, four urns contained identifiable organic material which were probably basketry imitations of a collared urn, but in each urn the contents were different. One unique object of hardened sand content must have been in a bar with a handle strapped to the top. Another item looked like an ear but was part of a cup or bowl fragment, possibly wooden; another held a cradle with rope and leather; and the padding in the bottom of another urn could have been bracket fungus.

Two log coffins were also found in intercutting pits – there are only 65 of these in the country, so these were obviously very grand and expensive. Others showed boat-shaped coffins possibly made of wickerwork. In total more than 40 mineral replaced organics were found, which were similar to the “sand bodies” at Sutton Hoo. Also found was preserved wood of a possible spatula, but other end was missing so its use could not be identified.

Reliquary Barrow 19 – two coffin graves, one with an urn set into the top of the grave containing a log coffin grave. The urn had slumped downwards with a hardened sand (organic) lump attached on the outside, possibly a rag. The inner contents of this urn were dated as 100 years earlier than the organic lump, which could indicate that the urn was redeposited, perhaps being bandaged when it was dug up to keep it together for reburial. This might be done because at this time there was a need to be near to the ancestors, but sometimes a burial could be moved from the original site and buried in another area. One excavation showed a ‘part-pot group’ with no associated bones, comprising part of a vase or similar vessel, part of an incense cup, and the bowl of a ladle, all united with fine clay before putting it in the vessel - possibly ancestral relics. Another urn was placed in a small pit in the

same barrow. It was inverted with bone and other organics inside, but also sherds of an earlier urn strapped onto it. This could have been retrieved from another burial site and added to this burial, which contained at least two individuals, and the remains may have been from one of those bodies. The reason for re-deposition could be because the original burials were, by that time, deemed to be in a "bad" place.

There were occasional pauses in the funerary sequences of burials, when deposits indicated that the pits were left for a period before being filled in. When someone died, the process of cremation and burial was sometimes protracted and complicated, with a return to add deposits or recycle elements. The exchange of burials appeared to be going on all the time.

Enclosure barrows are lesser known that the usual mound barrows, and no saucer or disc barrows were found in Petersfield Heath. 8% of the barrows were enclosure type and they were all distributed within sight of the river. Enclosure mounds were more monumental, with the implication of added labour involved meaning they are rarer and could be for "special" or elite individuals. Any difference does not seem to be attributable to differing wealth, but probably tradition.

Local variations seem to indicate that there were several individual communities using the Rother valley burial sites. Four of these communities concentrated on enclosure barrows while others used only smaller mound barrows, showing perhaps different culture origins.

The Solstice factor: It was recognised that one of the barrow groups, involving the Devil's Jumps at Treyford Hill, were aligned on the summer solstice; while three large barrows going down the hill, would align with the mid-winter sunrise. This group also showed a second axis with an 8-degree difference involving four barrows, equally spaced, pointing to the top of Beacon Hill, the highest point in the region. Heyshott Down also has the same alignment, including some of the cemetery.

Petersfield Heath cemetery stands apart, and the middle part of the valley appears quite nodal, with communication links along the river and land routes. It is also close to the nose of the Wealden area. On a local level, every barrow identified on the site has a view of the marsh which may have had some sacred significance (the pond is later, made 1735). There are no barrows where the land falls away without a view of the marsh. It has also been noted that the mid-winter sunset passes through the notch near the road from Butser Hill to War Down. All the barrows on the NE side look toward the mid-winter sunset, and the large barrows in the middle are also on that alignment. In this case, the mid-winter sunrise aligns through a smaller notch towards the Devil's Jumps, which may have been a site where a relay signal could be lit to be picked up at Petersfield Heath. There are a number of other significant alignments in the region that go beyond the barrows. Investigations have now managed to find further links to the surrounding field systems from the barrows. Changes in solar alignment during the period since these barrows were built is less than a degree, which has been factored into calculations.

Because those buried in these barrows were obviously only a small percentage of the local population, without any further burials or cremations, it has not been possible to calculate probable numbers for the Bronze Age population.

Stuart advised that the book upon which this lecture is based, is now published and available at the price of £115; but it can be accessed free online at Sidestone Press, or to purchase a digital version for £20.

Mandy Kesby