

ANGLO-SAXON CREMATION BURIALS FROM SNAPE

by STANLEY E. WEST, M.A., F.S.A. and ELIZABETH OWLES, B.A., F.S.A.

*with notes on the cremated bones by Calvin Wells and the textiles by
Elisabeth Crowfoot.*

In the Autumn of 1972 Mrs Mary Harrison of Snape Hall informed Ipswich Museum that a sewer trench was about to be cut through the Anglo-Saxon cemetery surrounding the Snape ship burial which had been partly excavated in 1862 and 1863. The site of the excavation had been identified by Dr. Bruce Mitford as the garden of St. Margarets¹ and this was strengthened by the discovery in 1970 of a cremation urn in the adjoining field (TM/40185937).² Since the trench was to be cut not through the garden but through the road immediately to the south, it was not possible to examine the site beforehand; however, the contractors, Messrs. Tilbury Ltd., provided every facility for observation and the rescue of material while the work was in progress (Fig. 18).

Eight cremations were recovered, 6 urned, 1 unurned and 1 contained in a bronze bowl. Forty-five metres east of the first burial portions of another urn, cremated bones and a clay spindle whorl were recovered over a restricted area of the spoil heap; these probably represented a single burial and were accordingly given the number 9. All burials, where it was possible to ascertain the depth, were found to lie within 70 cm and 1 m from the present road surface.

Just by the western boundary of St. Margarets (TM/40235933) a pair of ditches was observed, reaching a depth of 1.80 m from the present ground surface and yielding 6 plain body sherds of Saxon pottery high up in the fill. The inner lips of the ditches on the north side of the trench were 3.4 m apart and they were just over 1 meter wide; those on the south face were almost touching and, since the section was more oblique, appeared 1.6 m wide. They obviously constituted the south end of a barrow ditch. At first it was thought likely that it was the largest and most westerly of the three

¹ R. L. S. Bruce Mitford, 'The Snape Boat-Grave', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxvi (1952), pp. 1-26.

² E. Owles, 'Archaeology in Suffolk', *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.* xxxii (1970), p. 103, fig. 27.

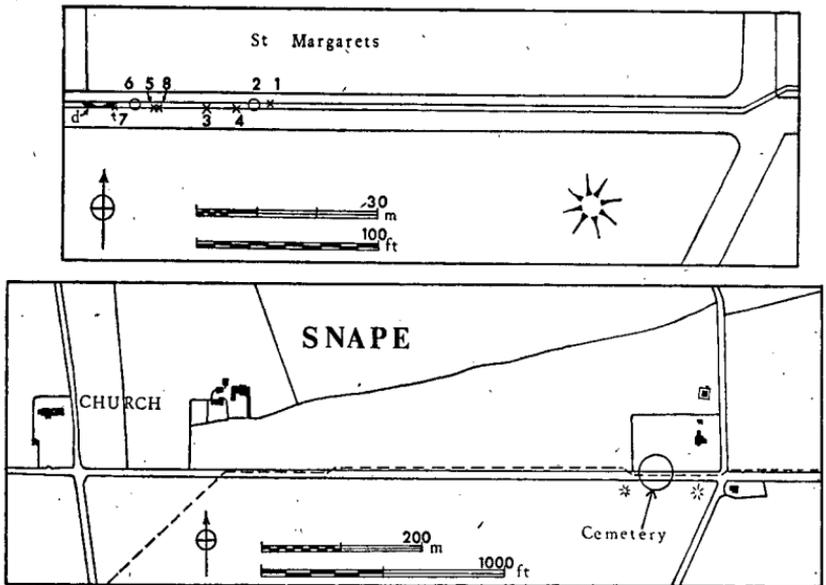


FIG. 18.—Snape, cemetery area. Burials numbered; *d*, ditch.

barrows excavated in 1862; since according to Francis Francis³ a portion of this had been removed by the road constructed in 1792. Furthermore, Hele⁴ states that the urns were concentrated between the two largest barrows, and in 1972 all the urns were found to be to the east of the ditches.⁵

However, it would appear that the ring ditch was only some 8 m in diameter, while the largest barrow was 72 ft (21·3 m) in diameter. It would seem from Davidson's account⁶ that this contained the ship and also the inverted collared urn; if this is so it is possible that a small Bronze Age barrow was enlarged to receive the ship burial.

On the other hand, Davidson mentions that there were several tumuli, at least 8 or 10 in number, some not exceeding 6 or 7 ft (2 m) in diameter. It is perhaps, therefore, more likely that here was one of the smaller barrows which was destroyed when the turnpike road was constructed. Only trenching in the garden of St. Margarets to locate the exact position of the ship burial could settle this point.

³ Francis Francis, 'Aldborough', *The Field, the Country Gentleman's Newspaper*, 17 January 1863, p. 61.

⁴ N. F. Hele *Notes or Jottings about Aldeburgh, Suffolk* (1870), p. 28.

⁵ To the W. nothing was observed except a single ditch 3.75 m. beyond the boundary of St. Margarets; it was running north-south and was probably a field boundary of more recent date.

⁶ Septimus Davidson, *Society of Antiquaries Proceedings*, 2nd ser.; II (1863), pp. 177-182.

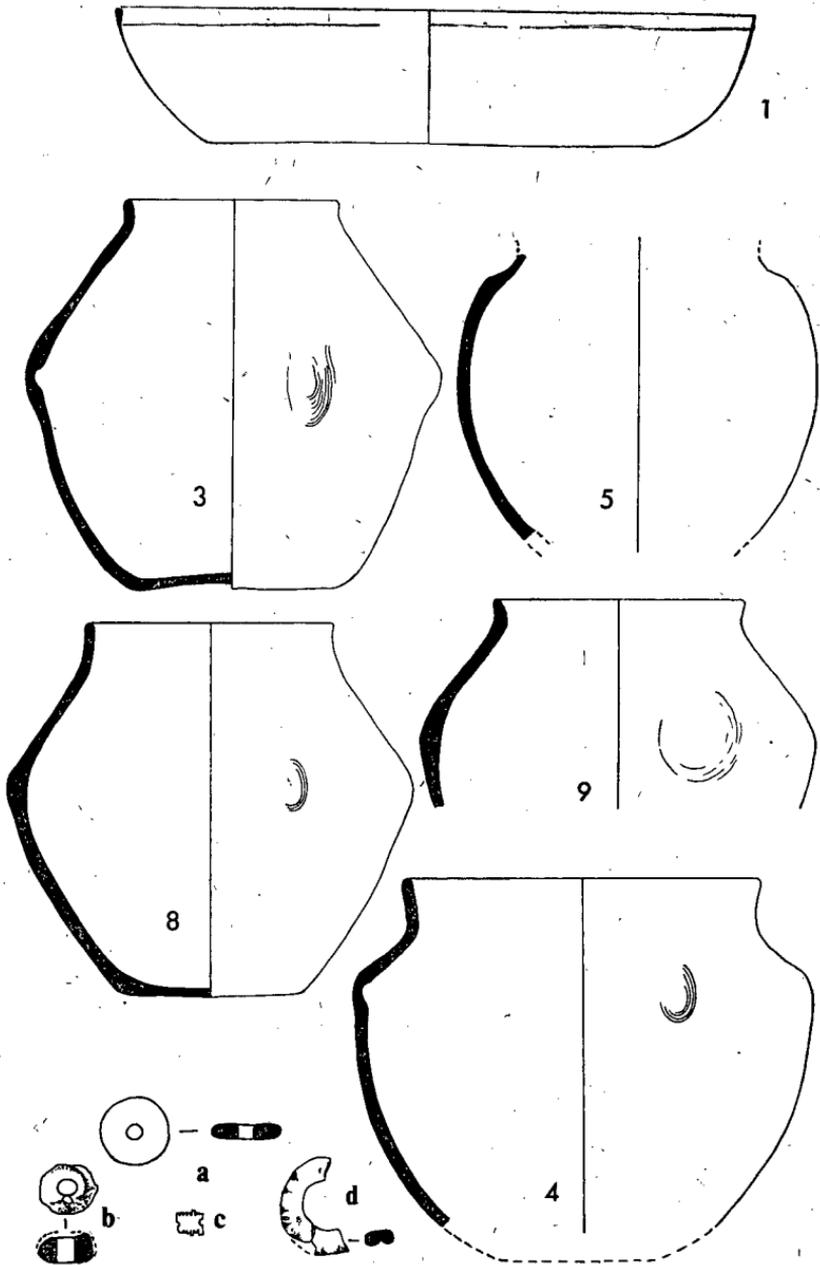


FIG. 19.—Bronze bowl, urns and grave goods from Snape. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

THE BURIALS

Burial 1 (Fig. 19, 1)

A flat bottomed pit, 55 cms across, the base 90 cms. from the present road surface, contained a cremation in a bronze bowl 31.5 cms in diameter and 6.5 cms deep. The metal is extremely thin and was in a fragmentary condition. The restored shape shows an open bowl with a flat base, curving sides and rim of thickened triangular section. Traces of fine material were visible on the bowl. It had evidently been wrapped in cloth, one corner of which had fallen inside, leaving impressions on the rim and the inner face of the wall (see below, Appendix A). When it appeared in the side of the trench pieces of wood were adhering to the west side of the bowl but these were probably tree root. The bones were probably those of a young female.

Burial 2 (Fig. 20, 2)

A large, biconical vessel, rim missing. The upper half of the body is covered with chevrons enclosed top and bottom by bands of horizontal lines and infilled with open rosette stamps in groups of seven. The vessel is in light grey ware. The surface is reduced and originally well burnished all over. The stamps are sharp, clear and deep, all made with the same die. The bones are those of a young adult male.

Burial 3 (Fig. 19, 3)

Plain, squat biconical urn. Dark brown, soft ware with some chaff backing, burnished all over. Five small bosses are ranged around the girth of the pot, all pushed out from inside. The bones are those of an infant about 9-10 months old.

Burial 4 (Fig. 19, 4)

Shouldered jar with rounded profile and short, upright rim. Fine, pale buff, soft ware with grey-brown reduced surfaces. Not apparently burnished. Five bosses high up on the shoulder, pushed out from inside. Base missing. The bones are those of an infant about 3-6 months old.

Burial 5 (Fig. 19, 5)

Fragments only of a rather globular vessel with a high shoulder, rather more marked than no. 4 but without bosses. Rim and base missing. Dark red-brown ware with smoothed surfaces. The bones are those of an adult (unsexable).

Burial 6 (Fig. 20, 6)

Squat, open bowl in grey ware with red-brown oxidised surfaces. Most of the upper half was lost, but one fragment of rim and enough of the decorated zone survives to show a single row of cross hatched stamps between horizontal lines immediately under the rim and a zone of chevrons on the shoulder, each containing 6 stamps made

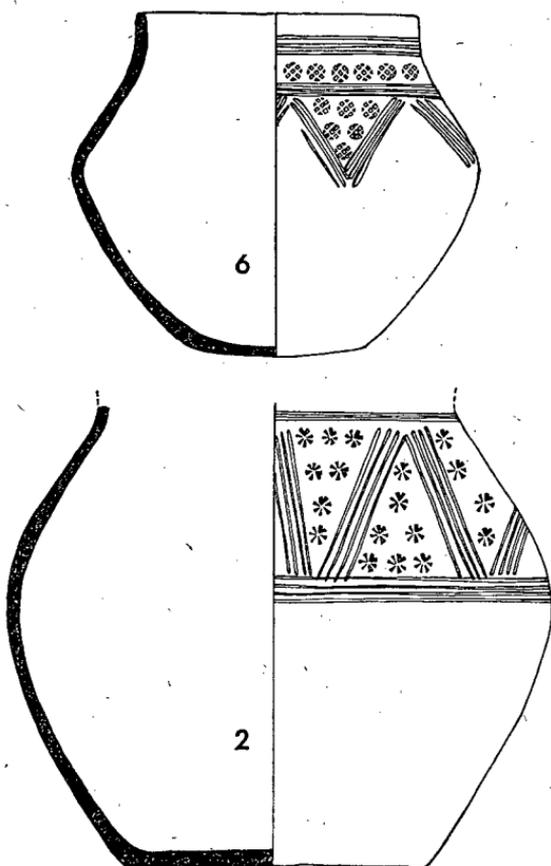


FIG. 20.—Decorated urns from Snape. Scale $\frac{1}{4}$.

with the same die as those above. This urn also contained the following grave goods: a bone spindle whorl 30 mm in diameter (Fig. 19, b); a fragment of double-sided bone comb 13 mm long (Fig. 19, c); and a ring 50 mm in diameter made from the burr tine of a red deer (Fig. 19, d). A similar ring was found at Lackford with

a fragment of horse brooch⁷ of the early 6th century. Mrs. Sonia Hawkes tells us that she found another in grave 203 at Finglesham which can be dated to *c.* 550; it was lying on a women's hip and was evidently a girdle ring. All these objects seem to have shrunk during firing. The bones could not be identified with certainty on anatomical grounds but the grave goods show that they were those of a female. She had suffered for several months from an inflammation of the membrane covering the leg bone. This is a condition fairly commonly found on bones of the Saxon period and was caused by a disease which is not fully understood.

Burial 7

Unurned cremation. The bones are those of a youngish adult male.

Burial 8 (Fig. 19, 8)

Biconical vessel in fine grained buff ware with dark red-brown oxidised surfaces. Rather harder than the rest, apart from no. 2. Six small, plain bosses formed by the addition of clay to the surface. The bones were those of an infant ? 8-12 weeks old.

Burial 9 (Fig. 19, 9)

Fragments of rim and shoulder of biconical vessel in fine, hard grey ware with red-brown oxidised surfaces. One boss, formed by clay added to the wall of the pot, survives. Surface with all-over burnish. A clay spindle whorl 35 mm in diameter was found on the spoil heap near this urn and probably came from it (Fig. 19, a). The bones from the same area were those of a young female.

DATE

Dr. J. N. L. Myers is of the opinion that all the urns are of 6th-century date though the plain ones with bosses could be earlier. Dr. D. Jankuhn has compared similar bossed urns from the Lackford cemetery to typical 5th-century Anglian examples from Schleswig,⁸ but Myres points out⁹ that they could have gone on well into the 6th century. This date is also indicated by the antler girdle rings.

⁷ T. C. Lethbridge, *A Cemetery at Lackford, Suffolk* (1951), fig. 14.

⁸ T. C. Lethbridge, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁹ J. N. L. Myres and Barbara Green, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall, Norfolk* (1973), p. 70.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks are due to Messrs Tilbury & Co., the contractors, and Mr. H. Lass, the engineer of Blyth R.D.C.; to Dr. R. L. S. Bruce Mitford and the laboratory of the British Museum for the restoration of the bronze bowl; to the Misses B. and R. Copinger Hill, Mrs M. Harrison, Mrs A. Harvey and Mrs B. Hawkes who patiently sifted the spoil heaps in most inclement weather, and Mrs A. Harvey who typed the manuscript.

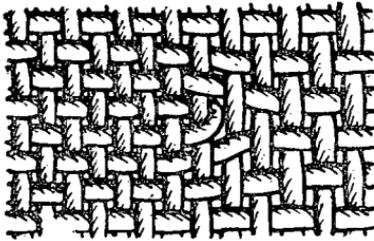


FIG. 21.—Textile on bronze bowl: returning weft to even up shed. Scale $\frac{5}{8}$.

APPENDIX A: TEXTILE

by Elisabeth Crowfoot

The pieces of the bowl had many fragments of textile adhering, as well as patches where the fibres of the threads had been replaced by the metal oxide. The remains were mostly on the outside and rim, though in the largest area, with scraps and replacements spread over 12.5×6.0 cm, the textile came from outside over the rim and fell inside the top of the bowl wall. Other sizeable areas measured c. 6.0×3.5 and 2.6×1.7 cm – the best-preserved fragment. All the traces clearly came from the same fabric.

Threads from the weave, some detached brown scraps with a crushed leather-like appearance, and a small lump of wood adhering to the textile, were submitted to Dr. D. F. Cutler at the Jodrell Laboratory, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, who reports that the weave fibres have the appearance and structure of flax, *Linum usitatissimum*. L., the leather-like material is from deteriorated textile, the wood structure is mostly obliterated but somewhat resembles oak.

The yarn of the linen cloth is Z spun in both systems, noticeably uneven, the warp generally coarser than the weft, plain weave (tabby), with thread counts per cm. varying from 25-6/18, 23/17 and 19/16 in different places in the better preserved areas. The lower count is certainly the weft since, although no selvedge is preserved, in three places a thread in this system can be seen to travel halfway across the fragment, turn, and pass back through the following shed (Fig. 21). This device, used to straighten up an