SHORTER CONTRIBUTIONS

A BRONZE AGE CREMATION BURIAL FROM WESTLETON

by Edward Martin and the late Calvin Wells

In 1976 a Bronze Age urn containing a human cremation was found as a result of a grave being dug in the new extension to Westleton churchyard (at TM 4390 6906; S.A.U. index no WLN005). The urn was found at a depth of about a foot and had been buried mouth upwards, with the cremation inside the urn.

The urn was badly damaged on one side at the time of its discovery, however the other half of the pot is quite well preserved, though it does seem to have lost its rim sometime before its discovery. The urn stands 32.7cm high, with a mouth diameter of 29cm and a base diameter of 19.3cm; it has a red-brown exterior tending to black in the upper quarter, the interior is mainly red-brown with some grey patches; the fabric contains a substantial amount of grog (crushed pottery), with the result that the surface of the urn has a pimply appearance. The urn is basically bucket-shaped though there is a slight inward angle at the top, giving it a slightly biconical appearance. The urn is undecorated, though one sherd from the broken half has had a small hole drilled through it, from the outside, sometime subsequent to the firing of the pot.

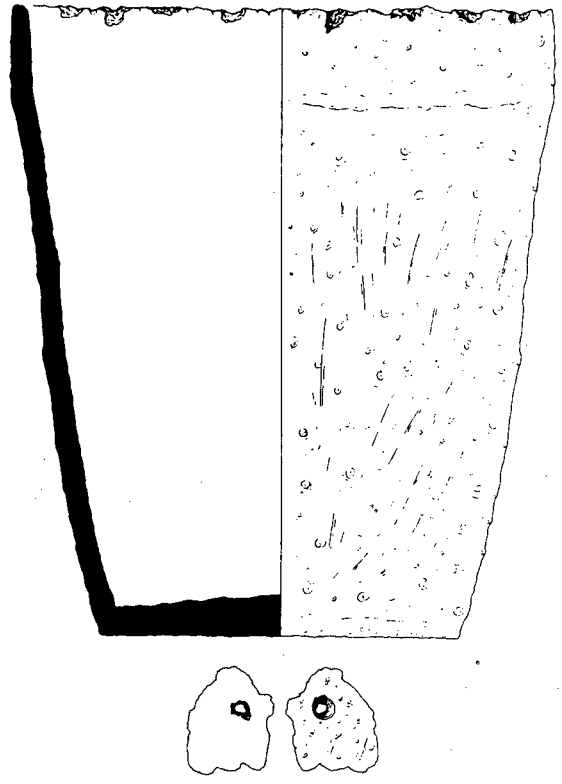

FIG. 2 — Bronze Age urn from Westleton (scale 1:4).

Although the style of the burial is reminiscent of the Middle Bronze Age urnfields of Essex and southern Suffolk, e.g. those at Ardleigh (Erith & Longworth 1960) and Brantham (Gilmour 1974), the urn itself has some marked differences from the Ardleigh-type urns: most noticeable are the complete lack of decoration and the use of grog, instead of flint, as a filler. In terms of fabric the Westleton urn has more in common with collared urns of the Early Bronze Age than it does with Ardleigh-type urns of the Middle Bronze Age. A date in the later Early Bronze Age might, therefore, be appropriate for the Westleton urn.

The cremated bones, by Calvin Wells.

These remains consist of 1,453 fragments of bone with a total weight of 287gm. Each fragment was carefully examined and no animal remains were detected. It cannot, however, be positively asserted that none was present, although this seems exceedingly unlikely, because several hundreds were scraps of bone less than 5mm long. The largest piece to survive was from a tibial shaft: it was 58mm long x 11mm wide.

Identifiable fragments included: cranial vault with several lengths of unfused sutures; frontal, parietal and occipital bones were represented. Cranial base, with scraps of basi-occiput and spenoid. Facial elements with pieces of zygoma, maxilla and mandible; the zygomatic fragments included the lateral border of the right orbit; the jaw fragments showed pieces of alveolus with tooth sockets revealing the presence of at least eight teeth in situ at death and no evidence of any antemortem loss. A tooth root of a maxillary molar survived, and another of a mandibular third molar: in both cases the crown of the tooth had been fractured off by the heat of the cremation, not by caries. The root canals were closed.

Post-cranial fragments include small scraps of vertebrae from the cervical, thoracic and lumbar levels; a few fragments of rib and pelvis; many splinters of long bone shafts, among which humerus, ulna, femur, tibia and fibula are recognisable. Few articular surfaces but part of a humeral head is present and possibly a scrap of femoral condyle. A few splinters of metacarpals or metatarsals, and perhaps of phalanges, are present. Carpal and tarsal elements are uncertain but part of the left patella survives.

It is clear from the above details that fragments have survived from almost all parts of the body. Apart from carpal and tarsal elements which, being fairly small and friable, are often difficult to recognize in cremations, the vertebrae and pelvis are also somewhat under-represented here. But no great significance need be attached to this since, although widely dispersed anatomically, only 287gm of material survive. It is likely that some of the apparently absent bones are present in the many hundreds of minute unidentifiable spicules, splinters, crumbs and flakes. Of the 1,453 fragments only a few dozen are more than 20mm long.

No trace of reduplication of any anatomical feature is detectable and it can be assumed that this is the cremation of one individual only. No hint of pathology was found in any part of these bones.

There is an absence of strongly reliable features for sexing (e.g. there is no mastoid process, superior orbital margin, sciatic notch, etc.) but the general lightness of the bones and the smallness of articular surfaces make it highly probable that this was a female. As far as can be estimated her age would have been fairly close to the 25–30 year range.

All bones had been well fired. In many cremations areas of under-firing are found and these indicate small pyres, inadequately stoked, sometimes with the feet protruding, often with the deeper structures such as the femoral heads only partly burned. No such inefficiency occurred anywhere in the Westleton skeleton. The body seems to have been laid on its back with a large pyre built over it and its thorough cremation may indicate generous stoking as the ritual progressed.

Finally it should be recorded that no trace of any grave goods, such as beads, metal, pottery, etc. was detected among these remains.

The urn is in Westleton church and the cremated remains are in the keeping of the Suffolk Archaeological Unit.

References

Erith, F.H. and Longworth, I.H., 1960. 'A Bronze Age Urnfield on Vinces Farm, Ardleigh, Essex', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.,* XXVI, 178–92.

Gilmour, R., 1974. 'Beaker and Bronze Age Burials at Brantham Hall', *Proc. Suffolk Inst. Archaeol.,* XXXIII, pt 2, 116–30.