

## A SIXTH CENTURY ANGLO-SAXON GRAVE AT MEONSTOKE, HANTS

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### INTRODUCTION

On 28th November 1972 I (D.C.D.) was called to inspect a grave which had been cut by a sewer trench at Meonstoke. Various human bones were recovered from the disturbed area, and excavation of the grave took place between 1st and 8th December 1972. As a result of this, it is clear that not all the skeletal material originally disturbed could have come from the one grave. The finds have been deposited with the Hampshire County Museum Service, where the exact location of

the grave is recorded. This note is based on an original draft by D.C.D., with additional material by T.C.C.

### GRAVE AND BURIAL RITE

The grave (Fig. 1) was approximately rectangular in shape and aligned roughly east-west. It was about 1m wide, and at least 1.85 m long, though its full length could not be ascertained because of the disturbance. It had been dug 30 cm into chalk, to a depth of 1 m to 1.10 m below the present surface.

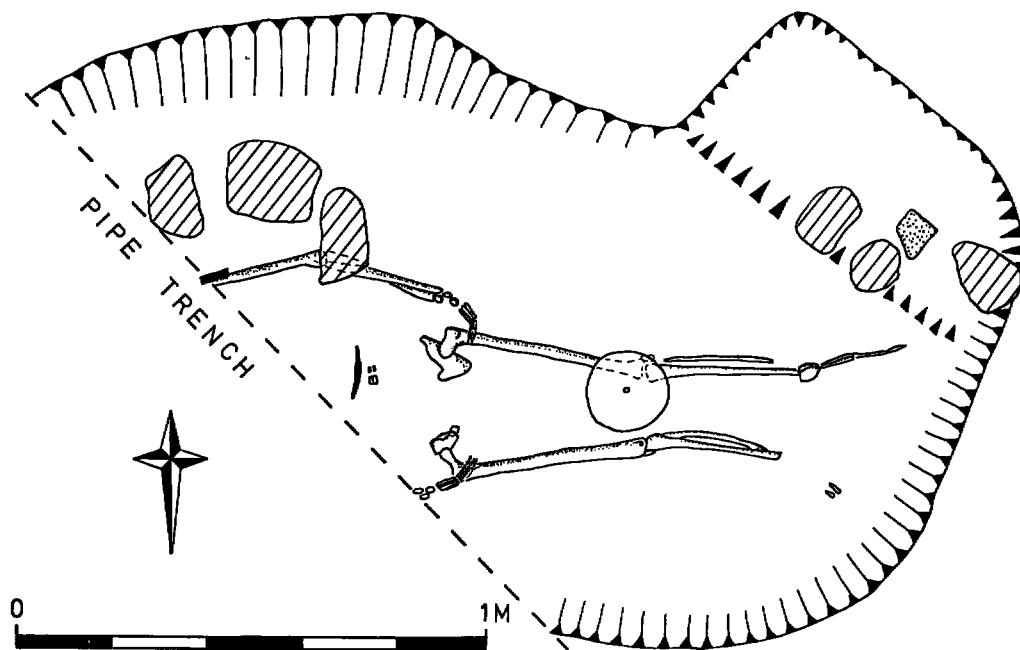


Fig. 1. Meonstoke: plan of grave.

The overburden contained much modern material, and a short distance away natural chalk could be observed only 10 cm below ground level, suggesting substantial modern deposition, and a possible original depth of the grave of no more than 40 cm. The filling was chalk with hardly any admixture of earth. At the north-east corner of the grave was a rectangular flat-bottomed pit, dug 10 cm deeper than the grave; it contained three large flints and a block of sandstone.

The body had been laid on its back with the head at the west end. The sewer trench cut through the grave from the north-west corner to the middle of the south side, removing the skull and the right arm with the exception of the fingers; these parts of the skeleton were recovered. Ribs and vertebrae were not found, and the pelvis and right foot were very fragmentary. The left arm lay extended down the side with the fingers resting on the femur; the right arm must have been similarly arranged, since the fingers were found in a comparable position on the right femur.

Three large blocks of flint were found in the filling at the north-west corner of the grave, one overlying the left elbow. According to the workmen, other large flints had been dug up in the disturbed area near the skull.

#### GRAVE GOODS

1. *Iron Spearhead* (HCMS 1972. 549/1 and 1972. 567/2). (Fig. 2, 1).

Length 24 cm, but now broken and originally c. 25.5 cm; maximum width 4.4 cm. The section is corrugated, with the left side sharply depressed; the widest part occurs towards the bottom, and the edges are straight from there to the point. One side is more sharply angled at the widest point with a concave profile to the lower section, whereas the other is more rounded with a slightly

convex lower profile. The socket is split and the wooden haft with a diameter of 2 cm survives for a distance of 1.5 cm below it. A large part of the spearhead was removed in trenching but the socket was recovered in excavation, showing its original position at the left shoulder.

2. *Iron Shield-boss and grip* (HCMS 1972. 567/7) (Fig. 2, 2 and 3).

Boss, diameter 16.5 cm, height 7.7 cm. Grip, length 13.5 cm, maximum width 3 cm. The boss has a low, straight-sided dome, terminating in a solid, almost spherical button 2 cm in diameter, a marked carination above a short indented waist and a long sloping flange. It was attached to the shield-board by five iron rivets with disc-heads 1.9 cm in diameter, of which three survive. The grip is slightly concave sided, and was fixed by two iron rivets with disc-heads of 1.5 cm in diameter. Fragments of wood were recovered; the remaining structure of these mineralised fragments suggests a diffuse porous wood, which could be a member of the *Salicaceae*, probably a willow, *Salix* sp. Boss and grip were found over the knees, with the face of the boss uppermost.

3. *Iron Knife* (HCMS 1972. 567/3). (Fig. 2, 4)

Length 14 cm, though end of tang broken, maximum width 2.1 cm. The blade is triangular in section, with a broad, flat back, sloping gently to the tip, where the blade curves up sharply. The tang is set slightly above the centre of the blade. It was found at the waist, above the buckle, tip pointing to the right, with the blade edge downwards.

4. *Bronze buckle* (HCMS 1972. 567/4) (Fig. 2, 5)

Height 3.2 cm, width 2.1 cm. Rectangular buckle of bronze, originally tinned. Three sides of the rectangle are decorated with a row of punched dot ornament along the inner and outer edges. The tongue is plain, but the square plate has a similar row of punched dots, with the central ring and dot

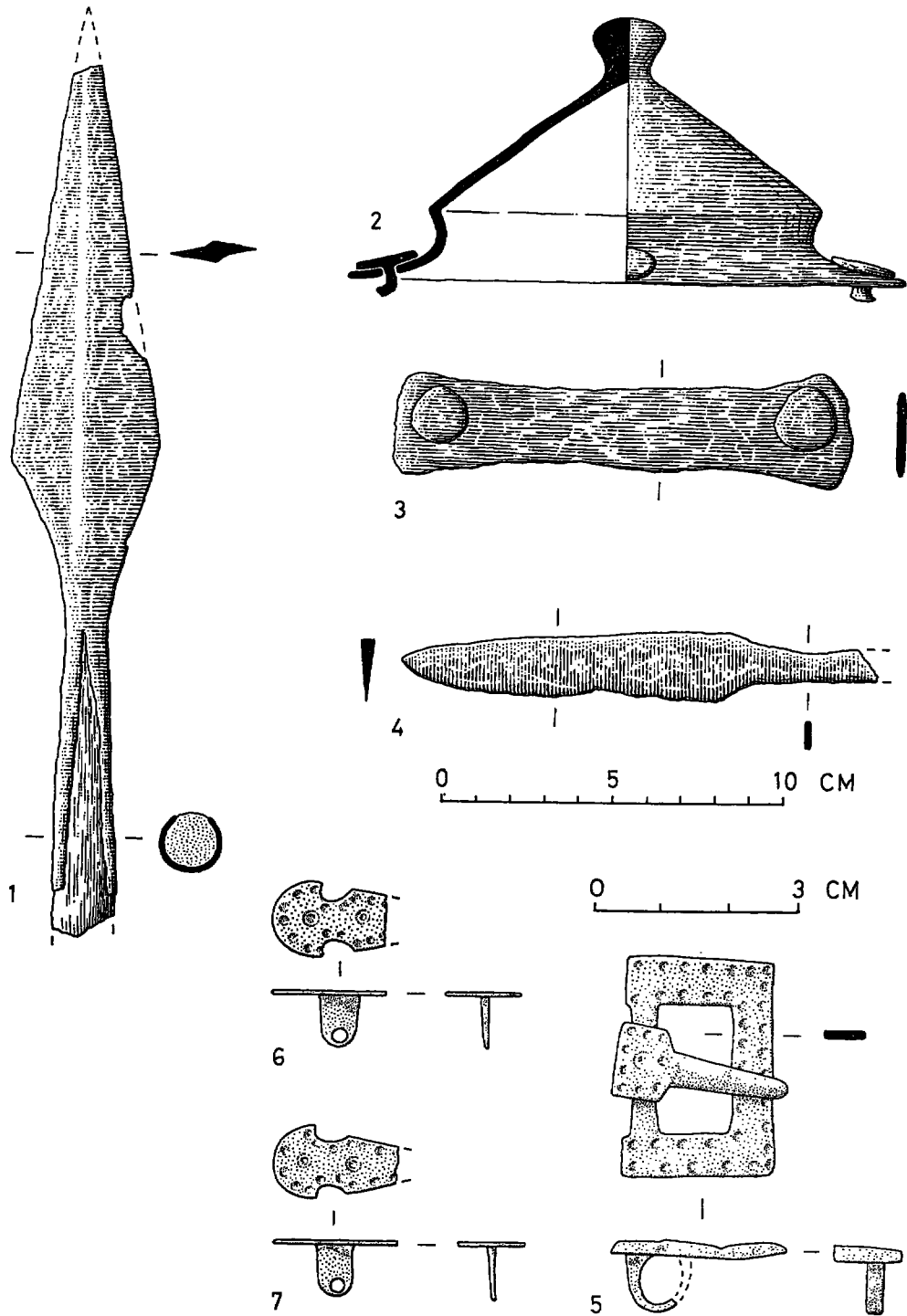


Fig. 2. Meonstoke: grave goods. Scale  $\frac{1}{2}$  (nos. 1-4),  $\frac{1}{1}$  (nos. 5-7)

motif. Found at the waist, with the tongue pointing to the right.

5. *Pair of bronze 'shoe-shaped rivets'* (HCMS 1972. 567/5, 6). (Fig. 2, 6 and 7).

Lengths 1.7 cm and 1.8 cm, though both broken in antiquity. Studs of bronze, originally tinned, with perforated attachment lugs on the back surviving in both cases. They are decorated with a row of punched dots following their outline, and with punched ring and dot designs on the semicircular head and on the main part of the plate. Found at the waist, adjacent to the buckle, one above the other with semicircular heads nearest the bar of the buckle.

#### DISCUSSION

##### *The burial rite*

Both inhumation and cremation rites are known for Anglo-Saxon burials in Hampshire, so the discovery of an extended inhumation grave need cause little surprise. One interesting feature is the presence of large flints above the left shoulder and upper arm of the skeleton and the possibility that others had originally overlain the head. Similarly placed large flint blocks have been noted at Winnall II, Graves 24 and 25 (Meaney and Hawkes 1970, 30-1), and there are also records of large flints in graves at Droxford (Dale 1902, 125) and Chessell Down, Isle of Wight (Hillier 1855, 29), though it is not possible to tell from the description whether the rite is strictly comparable. The small pit at the north-east corner of the grave, containing flints and a sandstone block, is difficult to interpret, and without obvious parallel.

##### *Grave goods*

The shield boss is an example of the low-domed sharply carinated form, with a marked waist below the carination; as here, fixing to the shield was by means of a wide flange and disc-headed rivets. Good parallels can be quoted locally, as at Winnall I (Meaney and Hawkes 1970, fig. 4, no. 3). The carinated and waisted form, combined with the low

profile of the dome, suggests a date in the sixth century (Evison 1963, 39).

The spearhead, despite its present lopsided appearance, can clearly be assigned by virtue of its corrugated cross-section, its broadly leaf-shaped profile and the position of its widest part, to Group K1 in Swanton's classification (1973, 128-31; 1974, 22). This is a type found mainly in the Upper Thames valley and Hampshire, with good local parallels at Droxford and Worthy Park. When found with a shield, the boss is invariably of the carinated or, as here, waisted variety. All datably associated examples of the Group K1 spearheads can be assigned to the late fifth or early sixth century; there is no evidence that the form lasted beyond the middle of the century.

The iron knife belongs to a very numerous class of objects found in all phases of the Anglo-Saxon period. These English knives have not been the subject of any detailed study, but if it is permissible to use the classification evolved by Böhner for similar knives from the Trier region (1958, 214), this example belongs to his Type B, the dominant form in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The most distinctive objects in the grave are the buckle and its associated pair of 'shoe-shaped rivets.' Though buckles with a rectangular loop are widely recorded, especially in Kent, in contrast to the more common oval-looped form, there are few good parallels for the Meonstoke piece with its unusual square plate on the loop and its punched decoration. The only closely comparable example is from Petersfinger Grave 63 A (Leeds and Shortt 1953, 50 and Pl. VII); this buckle has the same form of loop and tongue, and decoration identical in technique and general design. The only difference is that the Petersfinger buckle was associated with a rectangular plate decorated with similar punched dot ornament, while in the case of

Meonstoke the belt end was secured by two separate rivets.

These 'shoe-shaped rivets' are examples of a sixth-century fashion well known both in Frankish cemeteries and in those parts of England where Frankish styles were adopted. They are indeed no more than studs with elaborately shaped heads, and were occasionally used, most commonly in sets of two or three, to fix the buckle to the end of the belt in place of the more frequent plate. This is the only case so far recorded of such 'rivets' in association with a square-looped rather than an oval-looped buckle. The term 'rivet' is in fact inappropriate, as attachment was by means of the loop on the underside. One method of fixing can be seen from a pair in Bifrons Grave 35, where small bronze pegs were recovered inserted through these hoops as though to act as wedges (Godfrey-Faussett 1876, 311); that pair was found near the knees and apparently without a buckle, but the principle was probably the same.

In England, these 'rivets' are commonest in Kent, as at:

- Guilton Grave 88 (Faussett 1856, 29 and Pl. 8, no. 13),
- Postling (Faussett 1856, Pl. 8, no. 14),
- Chatham Lines (Douglas 1793, Pl. 15, no. 9),
- Ozingell (Smith 1854, Pl. 6, no. 13),
- Strood I (Smith 1852, Pl. 36, no. 7; Evison 1965, fig. 14 no. 7; Swanton 1973, fig. 79, j),
- Sarre Grave 4 (Brent 1863, 313),
- Bifrons Grave 39 (Godfrey-Faussett 1876, 312-3; Evison 1967, fig. 7, e),
- Bekesbourne II Grave 3 (Swanton 1973, fig. 80, c),
- Monkton Grave 22 (Hawkes and Hogarth 1974, 71 and fig. 9, no. 4),
- Finglesham Graves D3 and E2 (Chadwick 1958, 11-20 and fig. 6, h and j),
- Dover, Buckland, various graves including Grave 96 (Swanton 1973, fig. 66, e).

Outside Kent they have only occurred in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, as at:

- Chessell Down (Hillier 1855, fig. 59; Smith 1900, pl. opp. p. 388, no. 11),
- Bowcombe Down Grave 13 (Evison 1965, fig. 28, f),
- Droxford (unpublished material in British Museum).

Where these occurrences can be dated, they belong to the sixth century, and the fashion appears to have been limited to that century in England, as also on the Continent (Böhner 1958, 181-2).

In a large number of cases both the 'rivets' and the accompanying buckles are, as here, made of bronze with a tinned finish. This might suggest that they were a buckle fashion of a superior type, though it was not apparently restricted to one sex or the other, since they occur both in association with weapons, as at Strood I, Bekesbourne II, Bifrons and some of the Dover graves, and in such female assemblages as Finglesham Graves D3 and E2.

#### *Date and significance*

The evidence of the grave goods, in particular the shield boss, the spear and the buckle and 'rivets', indicates a date in the sixth century for the grave, and probably in the first half of the century.

Though only one grave was excavated, human bones were recovered from the original trench digging which must have come from another disturbed grave. There are no other records of Saxon material in the vicinity except for a shield-grip discovered in 1901 (Meaney 1964, 98); though details of its recovery and even of the exact location are uncertain, it is possibly from the same area. Even if it is discounted, however, the present evidence indicates more than an isolated burial, and there is a distinct possibility of another sixth-century cemetery awaiting further exploration. If so, it would be little

over 2 km from the neighbouring cemetery at Droxford. Like Droxford and the cemeteries of the Isle of Wight, it shows strong links, in the buckle and 'rivets', with Kent and the Frankish fashions adopted there in the sixth century.

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