A PREHISTORIC CROUCHED BURIAL AT PRINCES RISBOROUGH

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Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Squadron Leader and Mrs. G. Collins and family who gave every facility for investigation of the burial, to Mr. J. Dumont for examining the flint knife and Mr. A. R. Pike who assisted with the excavation. We are also grateful to Caroline Cartwright who reported on the charcoal, Pat Hinton who examined the floated samples for seed remains and Mr. D. R. Brothwell, Institute of Archaeology, London, for discussion and help in preparation of the report on the skeleton. Dr. I. Kinnes kindly read the report. The drawings are by Helen Ashworth.

The finds were donated to the County Museum, Acc. No. 359.1983; other records at CAS 5236.

Circumstances of Discovery, and Excavation

During April 1983 Squadron Leader Collins was extending a terrace at the rear of 35 Clifford Road, Princes Risborough (SP 80820 02876) when he disturbed parts of a skeleton. The Coroner's Officer subsequently informed one of the writers (M.E.F.) who arranged for further investigation. A vertical face 0.7m high had been cut back, the lawn sloping upwards and away from the house. Bone, which proved to be the end of a human femur, could be seen protruding from the exposed section. The house is the final one in a road which gives way to open fields, and lies about 100m from the crest of Culverton Hill (Fig. 1).

The topsoil and grey clayey subsoil were removed from above the burial but no trace of a grave cut was seen until chalk bedrock was reached on either side of the cut and the skeleton began to appear. The upper part of the body had been removed by the finders, leaving *in situ* a portion of the chest, pelvic area and flexed legs. The general state of the bones was poor, necessitating the lifting of several parts of the skeleton in its soil matrix. The body had been laid on its left side, flexed, facing north-east (Fig. 2). At its knee lay a flint knife (Fig. 3, 1) and near its thigh a flint flake (Fig. 3, 2). Adjacent to the chest was a fragment of pottery. The burial was of a male about 25 years old; a fuller account of the skeleton is given further on.

The grave itself was of irregular outline, little more than a shallow scoop cut out of the hard chalk bedrock. No other features were visible in the section cut at the edge of the terrace, so it is not known whether the burial was originally contained within a barrow, although this is quite likely. Certainly agriculture and subsequent landscaping left no trace above ground in the garden.

The Skeleton

by Sue Browne

The burial was a crouched inhumation of a male, aged about 25 years at death. There is no skeletal evidence for disease or dietary deficiency to suggest the cause of death. A suspected fracture of the right clavicle was confirmed by radiography: it had obviously occurred many years prior to death and had healed well with only slight distortion of the shaft.

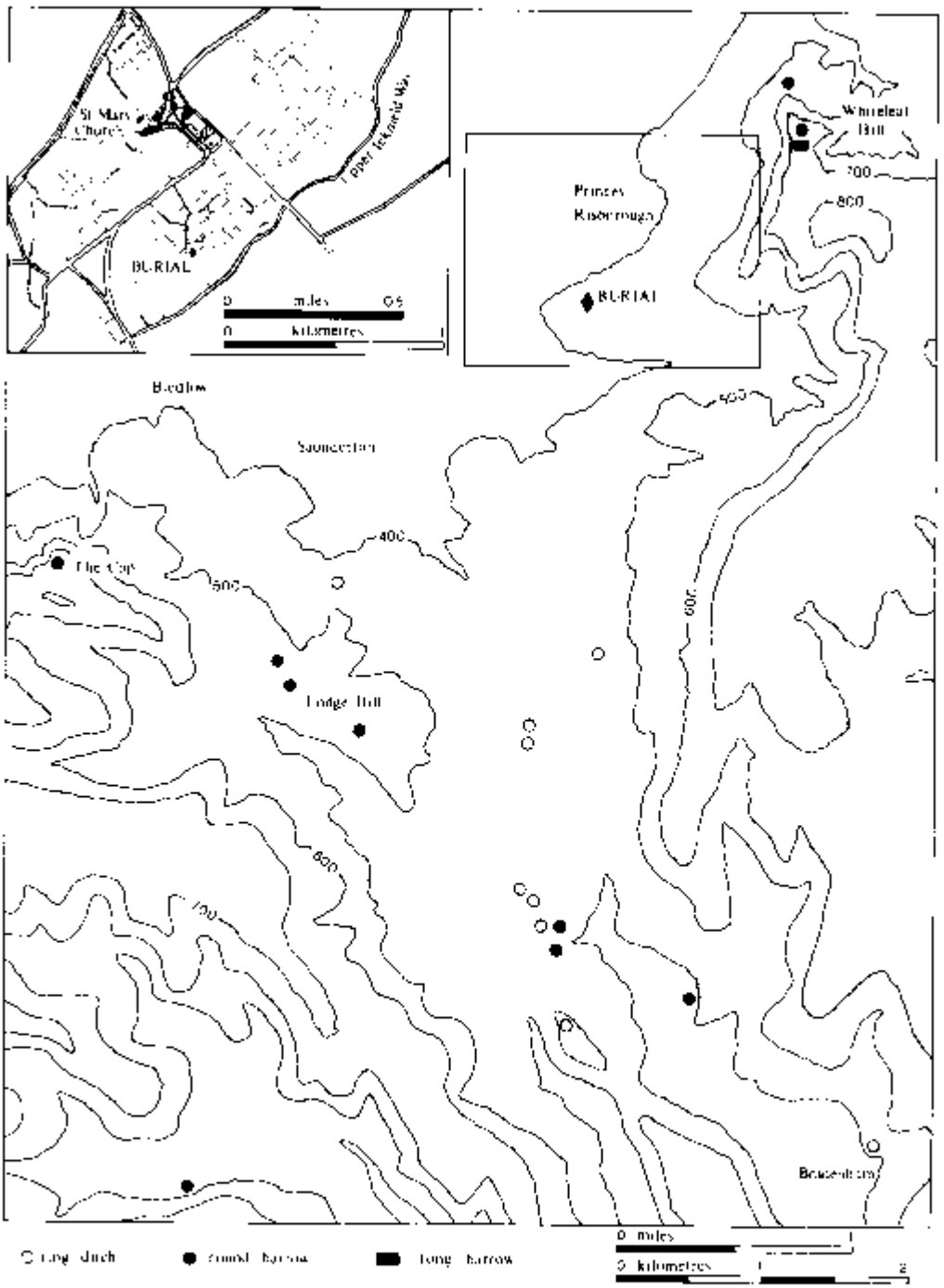

Fig. 1. The Princes Risborough Burial and other prehistoric burials in the Saunderton valley.

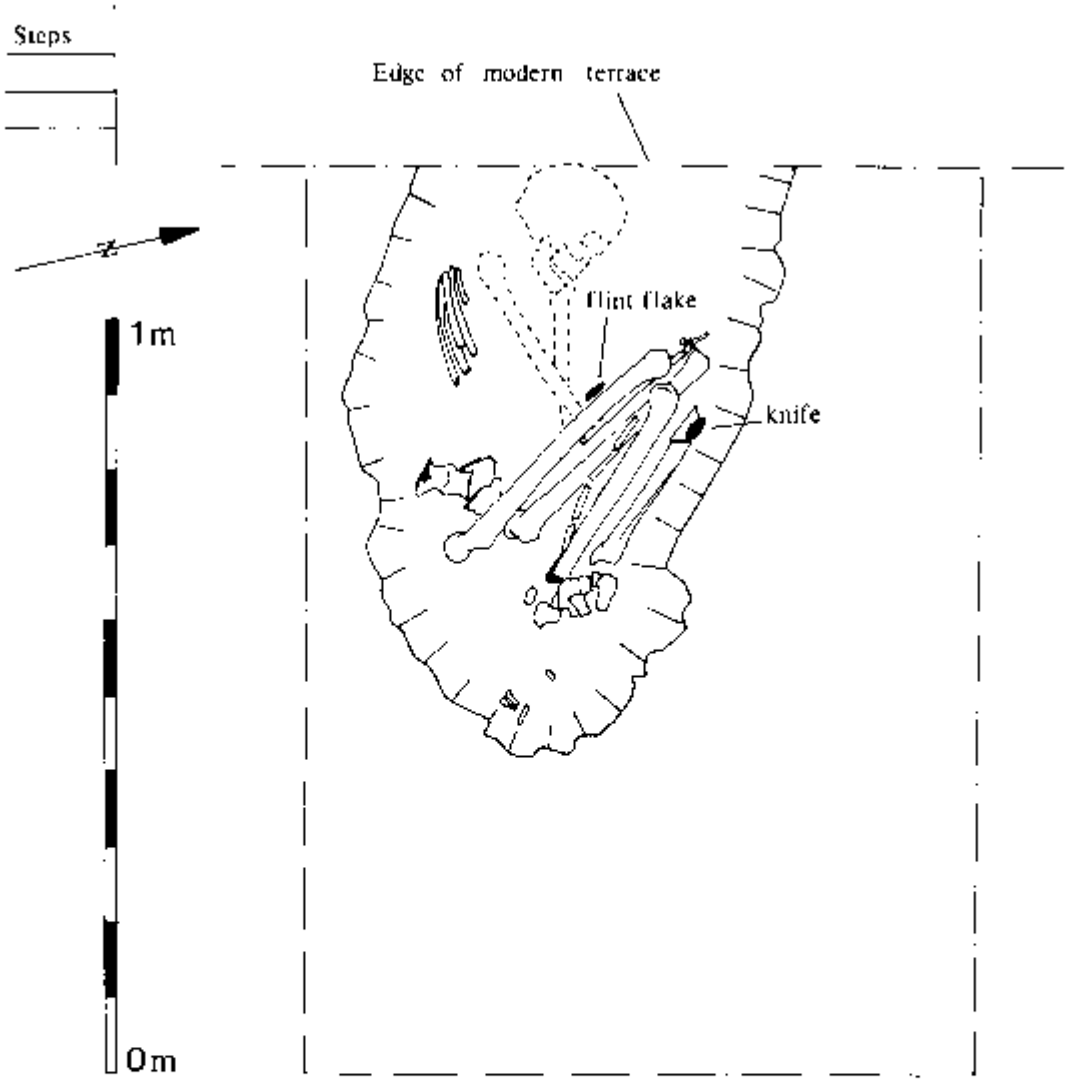

Fig. 2. The Burial

The dental formula, following Brothwell (1981, 52-54), is shown in Table I. There are interproximal caries cavities in both the lower third molars (the right one has an occlusal caries cavity as well) and in the left lower second molar. There are signs of mild periodontal disease in the region of the right lower third molar and the left upper third molar and slight alveolar recession has occurred. Small sub-gingival calculus deposits are present on some teeth: supra-gingival deposits may have been present originally also but, if so, either they have not survived post-mortem burial conditions or they were removed accidentally during washing. Slight enamel hypoplasia on the canines indicates that this individual

Table I. Dental formula for the Princes Risborough skeleton.

R	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	—		—								—	—			–	
	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	c														c	c

experienced a period of illness or malnutrition in early life.

A list of the bones recovered is deposited in the site archive. The cranial vault, mandible and some of the long bones have been reconstructed in order to obtain the measurements shown in Table II. Standard biometric measurements of the right side were taken (most of them are described and illustrated in Brothwell 1981, 79-87) and the femoral head breadth is the maximum horizontal dimension. The maximum lengths of the clavicle, radius and fibula are unrecordable as the ends of the bones are missing. The pelvis fragments and the right metatarsal from context 104A were slightly separated from the other pelvic and foot bones but it is unlikely that they represent a second burial. There is nothing about the condition of the bones from context 104A which suggests that they are from a second individual, nor was any duplication of bones noted during examination, and their location at the time of excavation was probably due to bioturbation at some stage.

Table II. Measurements of the Princes Risborough skeleton.

104 Y	*Skull*	
	Frontal arc (S_1)	125.5 mm
	Frontal chord (S'_1)	111.3 mm
	Foramen mentalia breadth (*ZZ*)	44.0 mm
	Minimum ramus breadth (RB')	38.0 mm
	Symphisial height (H_1)	29.1 mm
104 Y & 104 Z	*Humerus* (right)	
	Max. diameter midshaft (HuD_1)	20.5 mm
	Min. diameter midshaft (HuD_2)	16.7 mm
	(N.B. The midshaft point has been estimated as the distal end is incomplete.)	
104 Y & 104 Z	*Ulna* (right)	
	Max. length (UlL_1)	247.5 mm
104 C (R) & 104 G (L)	*Femur*	
	Max. length (FeL_1): approximate, because of abrasion of distal end	426.0 mm
	Min. antero-posterior diameter (FeD_1)	25.6 mm (left: 24.9 mm)
	Transverse diameter (FeD_2)	31.2 mm (left: 32.0 mm)
	Max. femoral head breadth	42.0 mm
104 D (R) & 104 F (L)	*Tibia*	
	Total length (TiL_1)	341.0 mm
	Max. antero posterior diameter (TiD_1)	34.5 mm (left: 34.5 mm)
	Projective transverse diameter (TiD_2)	22.0 mm (left: 21.2 mm)
	Proximal epiphyseal medio-lateral breadth (TiE_1)	71.2 mm

The height of this individual, calculated from the formula for the femur and the tibia in Brothwell (1981, 101) was about 164cm (approximately 5ft 4ins). The femur shafts are flattened in an antero-posterior direction (platymeric), the indices being 82.05 for the right femur and 77.81 for the left; and the left tibia is platycnemic (flattened transversely), the index being 61.45. The right tibia, with an index of 63.77, shows a smaller degree of transverse flattening.

Non-metrical cranial features noted are a supra-orbital foramen on the right side and a supra-orbital notch on the left side. There is a small maxillary torus on the left side of the palate. No ear bones were recovered.

The thoracic region and part of the pelvis were submitted in their soil matrices, which have been separated from the bones by flotation and examined for environmental evidence. Caroline Cartwright (Institute of Archaeology, London) has submitted the following report on the charcoal recovered from the floated material:

'Soil associated with the thoracic and pelvic regions of the human skeletal material in the burial at Princes Risborough was water-floated through a series of fine mesh sieves. Some small fragments of charcoal were recovered from this process and have been identified as follows:

Thoracic region, 1g charcoal *Quercus* sp. (oak); Pelvic region, 0.8g charcoal *Quercus* sp. (oak).

From such a small sample of charcoal few environmental/ecological assessments can be made. Oak has been a widely-selected timber throughout prehistory for construc-

tional, fuel and artefactual purposes, and its presence in association with this burial obviously reflects this, albeit to a very small degree.'

The floated samples were also examined by Pat Hinton (c/o Sussex Archaeological Field Unit, Institute of Archaeology, London) for seed remains, but unfortunately no seeds were recovered. Molluscs were present, but in view of the uncertainty concerning their source and their association with the burial, a molluscan analysis was not undertaken.

Unfortunately on the basis of the evidence from the bones themselves little can be said about the possible date of this burial. Both platymeria and platycnemia are common in early populations and modern primitive groups and because of the damage to the cranium and the small number of recordable cranial measurements, it is not possible to say whether it is within the range, metrically, for crania from the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in Britain.

Other Finds

Flints

103E Knife: adjacent to the left knee of the skeleton and a deliberate deposition. The flake retains some cortex. The edge of the dorsal surface has been retouched around the perimeter and tiny subsidiary dub flake scars hint at utilisation. The edges of the flake scars at the bulbar end are diffuse, also implying wear. L. 51mm, W. 22mm.

Mr. J. Dumont of the Donald Baden Powell Quaternary Research Centre, Oxford, kindly examined the piece microscopically for microwear traces but patination had unfortunately destroyed any evidence for use characteristics which might have existed (Fig. 3, 1).

The piece has the outline of a plano-convex knife (Clark 1932) but lacks the distinctive overall pressure flaking of this form. Similar pieces to the Princes Risborough example have been noted in Late Neolithic contexts at Dorchester, Oxon (Atkinson 1951, Fig. 13, 144), Durrington, Wilts (Wainwright and Longworth 1971, Fig. 76, F71) and at South Street, Wilts (Smith 1979, Fig. 32, 9). The associations of true plano-convex knives suggests that these may be a later refinement of the Princes Risborough form, although not necessarily supplanting it.

103 Flake: a single waste flake was found halfway along the femur and may have been a

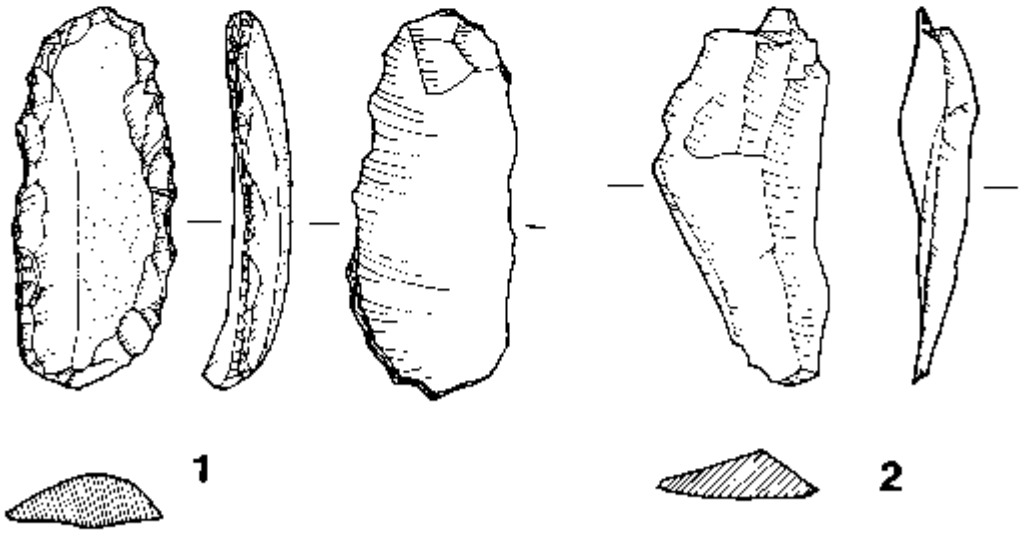

Fig. 3. Knife and flake associated with the burial (1 : 1).

deliberate deposit. There is slight utilisation wear along one edge (left in Fig. 3, 2).

One other waste flake, 103D was found in the grave fill. From topsoil above the grave came two further flakes, a calcined snapped blade, and one utilised flake/scraper fragment (all 100B).

Pottery

103B Sherd: small black undecorated sherd with one smooth intact surface only. Angular flint grit up to 3mm in fine sandy fabric. This fabric occurred at the Whiteleaf barrow (Childe and Smith 1954, 221) but is a common Chilterns prehistoric fabric. It was found beneath the skeleton's ribs and probably incorporated into the grave during backfilling.

Animal Bone

A few fragments of bone from topsoil and subsoil above the grave were identified by Sue Browne:

100A: caprovid right distal tibia and *Bos* (probably scapula fragments), and one fragment of non-human bone was among the bones collected by the finder.

104Y: caprovid vertebra from an immature animal.

Conclusion

The Chiltern scarp has in many places been utilised for early prehistoric burials, particularly where the chalk lies near the surface and is not mantled by clay-with-flints. Fig. 1 shows barrow burials on the hills around the Risborough gap and also probable burials, mainly recorded by aerial photography as ring ditches, on the floor of the valley. A few of the latter survive as low mounds although badly ploughed down. All the barrows are round except for the Whiteleaf Barrow which was kidney-shaped and probably of earlier date than the others. The map shows a notable concentration of prehistoric activity in the area, a phenomenon used by J. F. Head to argue that the valley was an important natural routeway to the Thames (Head 1974).

Although no other burials are known from Culverton Hill on which the latest find was made, its dominant position in the landscape suggests it is more likely to be part of a cemetery than a single burial. The accompanying knife suggests the burial to be Late Neolithic or possibly slightly later, within the range in radiocarbon years *c.* 2,100-1,500 bc.

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