

5. The Human Skeletal Assemblage

by Angela Boyle

5.1 Introduction

The human skeletal assemblage was recovered over two seasons of excavation in 1996 and 1997. It comprised a single cremation, an infant inhumation, an articulated torso and 12 deposits of disarticulated bone. The material derived mostly from pits and postholes. Preservation was generally poor.

5.2 Methodology

The sexing of the adult individuals was based on standard morphological and metrical data (Workshop 1980) although in keeping with current practice no attempt was made to sex subadults. Age estimations for the adults were based on the degree of dental attrition (Brothwell 1981, 72), skull vault thickness and morphology in general. Pelvic bones did not survive well thus precluding the assessment of pubic symphysis and auricular surface. The subadult age estimates were based on the degree of epiphyseal fusion (Brothwell 1981, 66) and on dental development (Van Beek 1983). Dental notation is based on Brothwell (1981) as follows:

/	post mortem loss	X	ante mortem loss
C	caries	A	abscess
NP	not present	U	unerupted
E	erupting	-	alveolus and tooth absent

5.3 Quantification

A summary of all the material appears in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. With the exception of the infant skeleton from (1020), which was largely complete, and the torso from (1254), all the deposits were disarticulated fragments.

Table 5.1 Unburnt disarticulated bone and inhumation

Context	Context type	Period	Preservation	Age	Comments	Associated finds
SC 96 disarticulated unburnt bone Trench 1						
1008	Upper fill of pit 1007	Early Iron Age	Low	Adult	Left radial midshaft, animal bone also present	233g EIA pottery, FAS, daub, animal bone.
1024	Fill of ?posthole 1023	Iron Age	Low	Young adult, uncertain sex	Very fragmented skull vault including parietal, fragments are generally small and abraded	Charcoal
1254	Fill of posthole 1082	Iron Age	Low	Adult, uncertain sex	spinal column, rib cage, sacrum	3g IA pottery, animal bone, FAS
1489	Fill of posthole 1196	Iron Age	Low	Adult male, aged 25-35 y	Right frontal and orbit, left and right temporal, dentition	FAS and daub

Context	Context type	Period	Preservation	Age	Comments	Associated finds
SC 97 complete skeleton						
1020	Upper fill of pit 1019	Iron Age	Low	2 years +/- 8 months	Virtually complete, pottery and charcoal present	344g EIA pottery, animal bone, daub
SC 97 disarticulated unburnt bone						
1733	Secondary fill of large pit 1336	Iron Age	Medium	Adult, female??	Right humerus, missing proximal end and one third of distal end, very gracile	7g IA pottery, animal bone
6000	Unstratified		Low	Adult, uncertain sex	Skull vault fragments	7g IA pottery, animal bone
6003	Fill of main ditch cut 6002	Iron Age	Low	Adult, uncertain sex	right distal humerus (very abraded)	21g IA and RB pottery, animal bone, FAS, 1 flint, 20 slingstones
7023	Fill of possible posthole 7022	Iron Age	Low	Adult, uncertain sex	Right femur head	Animal bone
7302	Spoil from modern road cut	Iron Age	Low	Adult?, uncertain sex	Radial midshaft	32g IA pottery, flint, daub, animal bone
7365	Chalk rubble layer within main hillfort rampart	Iron Age	Medium	Adult, uncertain sex	Midshaft of humerus	4g EIA pottery
7619	Fill of main enclosing ditch 7607 outside rampart	Iron Age	Medium	Adult, uncertain sex	Left femur midshaft	99g IA pottery, RB pottery, animal bone, 5 slingstones
7621	Primary rubble fill of ditch 7607	Iron Age	Medium	Adult, uncertain sex	Right humerus, missing proximal and distal ends, ends are very ragged though bony surface is very smooth and whitened, muscle insertions not well marked	Animal bone

Table 5.2 The cremation

Context	Context type	Period	Weight	Identifiable fragments	Colour	Age and sex	Comments
2042	Fill of irregular pit 2041	Iron Age	547 g	skull vault, 3rd molar root, premolar root, rib, humerus, fibula	Uniformly white and well calcined	Adult female?	Charcoal, burnt flint present

Dentition survived in two examples and is summarised in Table 5.3 and 5.4.

Table 5.3 The dentition of 1489

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Table 5.4 The dentition of infant 1020

U	U
6 e d c b a	a b c d e 6
6 e d c b a	- - - - -
U	

5.4 Provenance

Trench 1

Four deposits of human bone were recovered from Trench 1 in 1996. These were from pits or postholes located around the outside the southern circular gully (roundhouse) [1003]. Two of the deposits came from features to the south-east, [1023] and [1082], another from north of it (feature [1007]) and the fourth was found to the north-west, [1196].

During the 1997 season a further two deposits of human bone were recovered from pits [1019] and [1336] which were located to the south of the northernmost roundhouse gully.

Trench 2

A deposit of cremated human bone was present in a shallow pit [2041] located in the centre of Trench 2.

Trench 6

Skull vault fragments were found in the topsoil (6000). An adult right distal humerus was found in the uppermost fill of main ditch cut [6002], which is a possible hornwork ditch at the eastern entrance of the hillfort leading off from the main enclosing ditch.

Trench 7

Five deposits of human bone were excavated in this trench. One from the fill of a posthole [7022], two from fills (7619) and (7621) of the main enclosing ditch [7607] and one from layer (7302), probably the spoil from a modern road cut. A single fragment derived from a chalk rubble layer (7365) within the main hillfort rampart.

5.5 Discussion

Apart from the cremation, these deposits fall within a well-known Iron Age tradition of human bone (articulated and disarticulated) in and around settlement sites. Examples local to Segsbury include Yarnton Worton Rectory Farm (Hey *et al.* 1999, 58) where a number of neonates and eight deposits of disarticulated bone were recovered from settlement features. At Gravelly Guy, Stanton Harcourt 65 deposits of bone were recovered from pits, ditches, shallow scoops and postholes (Lambrick and Allen 2005). No less than 48 of the deposits were infants.

There is some suggestion (Wait 1995, 94) that while the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age was characterised by the presence of single bones on both hillforts and settlements (Brück 1995), the middle Iron Age saw a dramatic increase in the number of formal inhumation burials on settlements, albeit in storage pits, with a corresponding decrease in the number of deposits of single bones.

It has been argued (Fitzpatrick 1997, 82) that since human remains in pits constitute the majority of archaeologically recoverable evidence at this time, *a priori* they represent the typical. However, there is mounting evidence, mainly the identification of Iron Age inhumation cemeteries by radiocarbon dating, that human pit burials do not represent the normal Iron Age burial rite, but have some other significance, possibly representing sacrificial offerings.

Excarnation

Excarnation by exposure is assumed to be the most likely mortuary practice at least in the early and middle Iron Age. It has been argued that four-post structures which are a common feature of Iron Age settlements may have served as excarnation platforms (Ellison and Drewett 1971, Walker 1984, 457).

Isolated, articulated limbs must derive from a recently deceased individual, not so fresh that the limb would have been strongly held to the body, but not so old that the corpse would have been skeletonised, perhaps the only tissue surviving would have been the ligaments, which are among the last tissues to decay. An alternative is dismemberment of the body and removal of body parts before decay. Cut marks from this procedure should be visible on the bones in the area of the muscle attachments, depending on the skill of the person(s) involved (Carr and Knüsel 1997, 167).

Clearly the deposit (1254) was at least partially articulated when it was buried but only the torso remained. This is in contrast to the humerus in (7621) for example, which has a smoothed and whitened appearance as though it had been left exposed for some considerable time.

The cremation

An average adult cremation can weigh between 1000-2400g if complete (McKinley 1997, 68; observations at modern crematoria). At 547g it is clear that the deposit in (2042) does not represent the entire remains of any one individual.

5.6 Conclusion

Pits which contain human remains are often close to the settlement limits (Wait 1995), while the boundaries of settlements are increasingly recognised as being as much of social and symbolic significance as practical (Hingley 1984). Thus the appearance of deposits of human bone in such contexts should not necessarily be seen as surprising. Even so, at Segsbury many of the deposits occur in Trench 1 in the interior of the hillfort associated with the roundhouse structures. The remaining human deposits were associated with the enclosing rampart and ditches. The enclosure boundary, which demarcated and helped define the settlement and its occupants, may have been equated with rites of passage, which also involved crossing barriers (Hill 1995). This could be why the structured ritual deposits associated with rites of passage (from life to death) are seen in such locations. The function of a rite of passage is to reduce the harmful effects of transitions over boundaries, thus it would be logical to expect human remains to be placed in such locations.

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