

*Jo Pine, Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman Features and a Saxon Burial at Spratsgate Lane, Shorncote, Gloucestershire* (Thames Valley Archaeology Monograph 44 2022) xi+109pp., 29 col. Plates. 27 figs., 32 tables. Hardcover, £17 [ISBN:978-1-911228-61-5]

This volume reports on the excavation of a c.8.5 ha parcel of land in advance of quarrying. Archaeological Research Services (ARS) undertook the excavation of the southern part of the designated area, c.4ha, between September and December 2011 and Thames Valley Archaeological Services (TVAS) the excavation of the remaining northern sector from June to September 2018. This TVAS volume contains the results of both ventures, the ARS component being taken from the interim report published in 2018 (2018/55).

The Upper Thames Valley gravels consist of a tightly packed, highly organised prehistoric landscape settlements 0.5km in every direction and field systems, roads and tracks, occupying more or less every space in between. One of the drawbacks of excavating on the Upper Thames Valley gravels is the damage by medieval and later agriculture, especially ridge and furrow ploughing, truncating earlier features and destroying the stratigraphic relationships between them. This is more problematic if features are lacking in finds or they contain long-lived pottery shapes or fabric styles. An example quoted in this report is the 175 pits excavated by ARS with only one piece of worked flint as dating evidence. This dating can be crucial when dealing with surviving pits of what might have been linear features. Where finds and stratigraphy were lacking, features were allocated to sub-phases in relation to the wider archaeological landscape or an association with the site development narrative. However, 'it must be admitted that often details of the phasing are

speculation'. An appendix records types of evidence for the determination of date of each feature. 'Landscape' and 'Association' occur frequently.

During each period on this small site the evidence for occupation was very sparse. A Mesolithic presence was detected from flint cores. The Neolithic produced worked flint and a 'placed deposit' of a damaged polished axe, probably originating from the Lizard peninsula, and the late Neolithic /early Bronze Age consisted of a small ring ditch with a central inhumation burial and probable head and hoof burial (cow and calf) in the upper fill of the grave. The middle Bronze Age was represented by the crouched burial of a woman, the only feature of the period on the site. The later Bronze Age to early Iron Age is not well dated, mainly because of problems with stratigraphy and dating of pottery. Six round houses were identified but it was impossible to determine whether they were contemporary. Middle Iron Age activity indicated a possible cattle and goat/sheep regime.

Although pits represented the late Iron Age and early Roman material, it was the later period where a substantial trackway in the west of the site was traced northwards towards ditched enclosures with a well and some slight hints at a high-status building suggested by ceramic tiles. Close by was a cemetery likely of the third century with three or four inhumations, and eight cremation burials. Finally, in the southern part of the site a Saxon burial of a robust adult male was retrieved which suffered two perimortem sharp forced wounds probably two days apart when the victim was still alive. The isolated position suggests a particularly heinous crime.

Also dated to the middle Iron Age was a putative three-sided rectangular shaped feature bounded by segmented ditches wide enough to allow passage between them for humans and animals. The author suggested that the open side may have been the edge of a wood and the whole feature having a ritual

or spiritual function. This was compared to a similar one at Cotswold Community site close by to the north-east which had been dated to the middle Bronze Age. The excavator states 'allowing that the dating of these features at both sites was rather tenuous, the similarities of form might be allowed to be more persuasive than the difference in preferred chronologies'. Added to this could have been that the existence of the wood, the relationship with the features at the other site and the function of segmented ditches are also unconvincing.

However, that there was a wood close by is evidenced from a range of samples of charred wood from intentional deposition or accumulation of domestic waste associated with fire. The assemblage suggests an oak-ash dominated wood also containing hazel and willow which indicates preferred woods for different tasks. Oak and ash have good burning properties, making excellent firewood for heat and flame as well as being commonly used for structures and artefacts. Ash will also burn when green. Hazel is recorded as good fuel which is widely available within oak woods and willow/poplar is good for kindling as the high temperatures produced by their less dense structure would encourage oak to ignite and start to burn. Oak was also the most abundant species on funeral fires in the late Roman cremations, though the considerable heat reached during the cremation process may have burnt up the majority of other species.

Most of the evidence for the pattern of occupation in the Upper Thames Valley comes from open area excavations of up to 42 ha. and has tended to be on the highly populated areas of the late Bronze Age and Iron Age. The small sample of 8.5ha at Shorncote might have given a valuable window into the area in between the dense pattern of settlement, but unfortunately it has suffered from damage to features and the stratigraphy from agriculture.

In the case of this report it is the nearby excavation at Cotswold Community that is a constant source of reference essential in dating features on a landscape scale or an association with the site development narrative. While it is valuable to have the map of the archaeological interventions up the whole of the Upper Thames Valley, in this case a plan of immediate sites was desperately needed to make sense of the features reported in this investigation.