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The Birdlip Cemetery

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THE BIRDLIP MIRROR is one of the most famous examples of Celtic art in Britain. Thus it has been sporadically studied in the past, particularly from a technical or art-historical viewpoint (Fox and Hull, 1948; Lowery, Savage and Wilkins, 1976; Smith, 1909). It is unfortunate, however, that little attention has hitherto been paid to the context in which this item was actually found. The mirror was in fact merely one of the grave goods, albeit an elaborate one, associated with a group of 3 burials discovered in the 19th century at Barrow Wake near to the hamlet of Birdlip (Bellows, 1881). The area has in fact produced evidence of other burials nearby and thus it appears that this was indeed a centre for burial during the Iron Age and probably in preceding millennia — presumably a recognised cemetery of some local tribal group. Thus the site is important not only because of the superior quality of the artefacts discovered, but more specifically because as an inhumation cemetery dating to the late Iron Age in Gloucestershire it is so far unique. It seems important therefore that some attempt should be made to fit this site into an overall context of local iron age activity and also to explore its importance in the study of iron age funerary traditions in the broader region of southern Britain.

Discovery

The mirror grave was the first to be discovered in the area and although early accounts are tantalisingly brief and often conflicting in detail, some facts do emerge (Bellows, 1881; Guise, 1882). The grave was found in 1879 by a local quarryman, Joseph Barnfield, at Barrow Wake, a common field with an evocative name near Birdlip (Nat. Grid. SO 931 153).¹ Barrow Wake is situated on the escarpment of the Cotswold Hills and commands a wide view of the Severn Valley (FIG. 1). The field has been extensively quarried, since the freestone of the Inferior Oolite lies just below the surface there; and it was during the collection of stone for road-mending that Mr Barnfield made his important find. He broke into a cist containing 3 skeletons aligned with their heads to the east.² All were extended and lay at a depth of approximately 1.5 m. Since early accounts of the find are obscure it is unclear whether the burials were all contained in a single cist or, as seems more likely, individually interred.

1. An exact 8-figure grid reference is quoted by the RCHM (1976) for the mirror grave. However, this is misleading; the precise location of the find was never accurately recorded.
2. There is some disagreement about the orientation of the burials. Bellows states N-S; Witts (see *Proceedings Cheltenham Natural Science Society*, Nov. 1883), however confirms the E-W orientation noted by Dr Cook (Guise 1882).

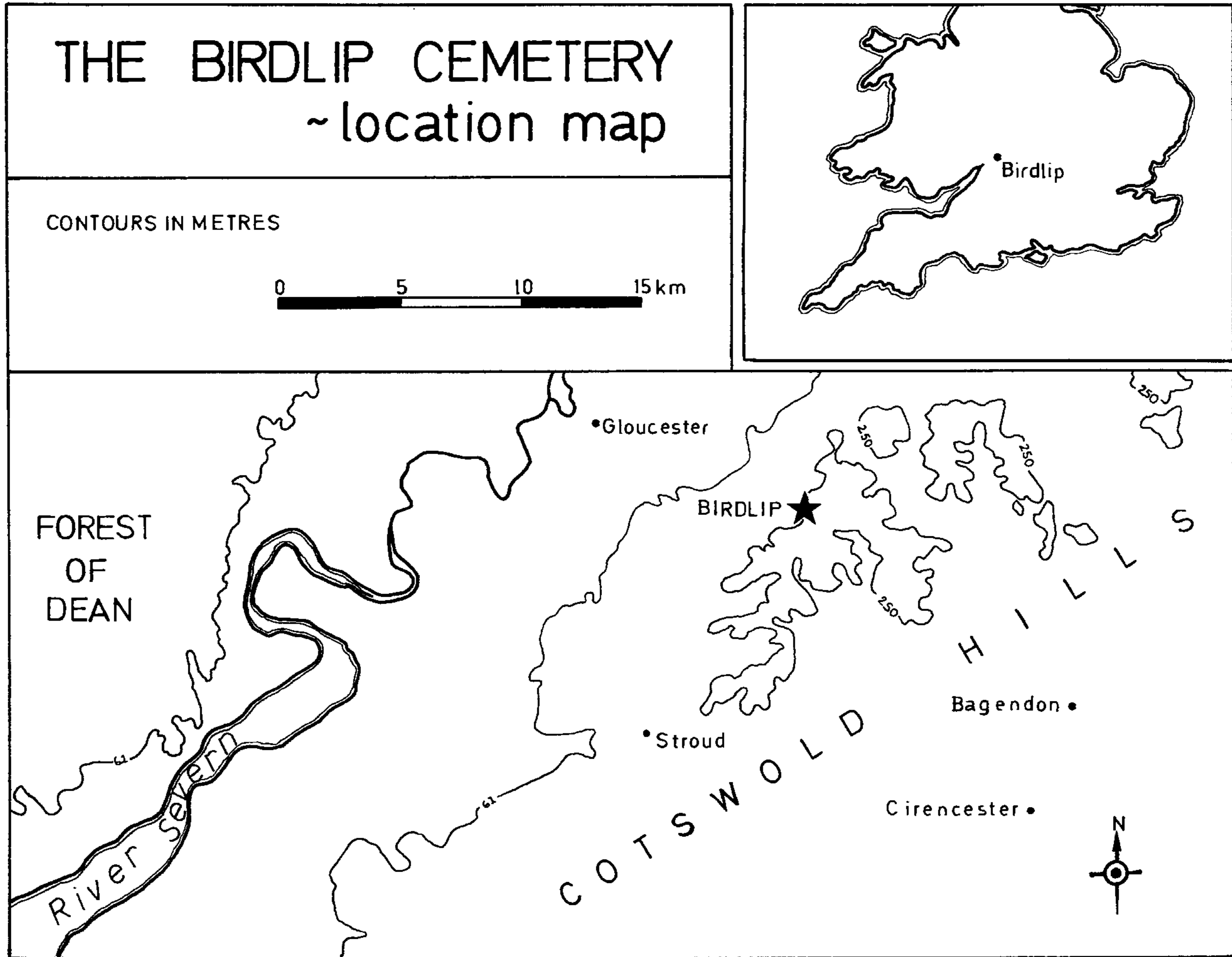


FIG. 1

The graves were lined and covered with large slabs of oolitic limestone, but no slabs are recorded underneath the burials, which presumably rested on the smooth surface of a natural table of freestone. The 2 outer burials were reported to be those of adult males without noticeable grave goods; the central skeleton was female (confirmed by pathological examination report forthcoming). Accompanying this burial was a rich array of ornamental metalwork and jewellery. A large bronze bowl covered the face; the mirror, brooch, expanding bangle, beads, zoomorphic handle, drop handle, finial loop, tweezers, bronze rings and a small bronze bowl were also deposited in the grave, but their exact relationships were unrecorded (Bellows, 1881).

A few days later,³ a fourth grave was discovered situated about 18 m northwards of the original find, upon the same table of freestone, which here lay only 0.75 m below the surface (Guise, 1882). This was unlined and contained the skeleton of an adult male. The face again was covered, this time with a metal-rimmed vessel, presumably a wooden or leather bucket, of which only the bronze rim and mounts survived.

References to round barrows in the vicinity indicate that other burials were once located nearby (Witts 1879; Guise, 1876, 47). Noteworthy also is a stray find of twisted gold wire which Green (1949) suggested may have originally formed part of a torc of simple design. Although there was no specific evidence to support the idea that this was a grave good, it is possible that it may have come from a burial destroyed or disturbed by quarrying or by burrowing animals. Unfortunately the 3 round barrows recorded by Witts in a coppice called Emma's Grove (SO 934 160) have since been destroyed and remain undated (Witts, 1879, 202). Also a crouched burial under a mound of earth, found 'near Cowley' in 1876, may have been located nearby; however, no details of this are known (Guise, 1876, 47).

It is possible that the Birdlip mirror and accompanying grave goods may also have come from a barrow, since the first account states that these artefacts were recently found in a tumulus (*Trans. B.G.A.S.* V, 1880-1, 62). This is not mentioned in any of the later accounts and confidence in the first account is disturbed by a probably wrong attribution to a barrow on the next page (as noted by O'Neil and Grinsell, 1960, 21-2). Green (1949), however, revives the cairn controversy by stating that the burials were covered with a carefully built cairn or cairns standing nearly 5 ft above a shallow lined hollow in the original surface, but he gives no reference for this and the existence of this feature remains tenuous.⁴

It is of course tempting to refer to the other undatable (and unfortunately no longer extant) barrows noted in the vicinity. Perhaps other iron age burials were concealed beneath these also. Unfortunately such an argument cannot be supported; but the speculation is interesting, particularly since iron age burials of precisely this nature (i.e. concealed beneath a small round barrow) were excavated nearby at Leckhampton (Knowles, 1925; O'Neil and Grinsell, 1960, 121).

Most important, however, is the fact that the available evidence reveals that the Birdlip lady no longer constitutes an isolated burial: other burials surround her in a cemetery containing tumuli, undated, but perhaps iron age, bronze age or earlier.

3. Some confusion has arisen over the date of the second discovery due to a report in the *Cheltenham Examiner* (7 Nov. 1883) stating that the burial had been found 'within the last few days'. This is erroneous. The report in the paper is the same as the one read to the Corteswold Naturalists Field Club the previous year, which said '... fourth skeleton found within a few days (of the earlier discovery)' (Guise 1882). Evidently the report was transferred unaltered to the *Cheltenham Examiner*.

4. Green appears to have misinterpreted Cook's rather ambiguous statement that the lady had 5 ft of oolite above her, (Guise 1882, 81).

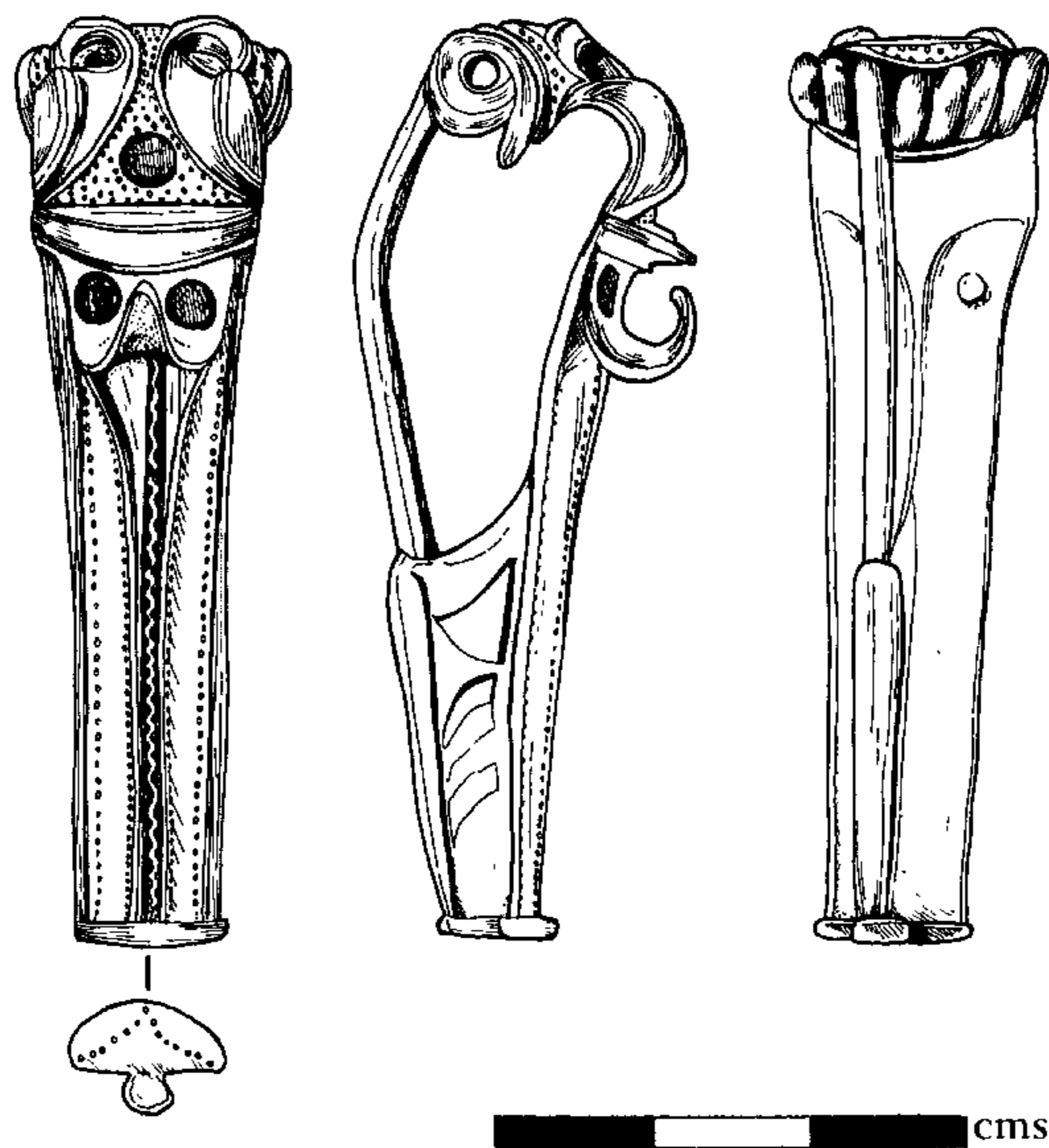


FIG. 2 The Birdlip Brooch

Dating

The dating of all of the Birdlip graves relies upon the associated artefacts and the spatial relationships of the inhumations discovered. In the mirror grave, the suggestion (Bellows, 1881) that the 3 inhumations were all contained in a single cist indicates contemporaneity, and since the grave goods associated are recognisably iron age in character the burials are loosely datable to the Iron Age. Refining the dating relies largely upon the mirror and the brooch.

The tradition of including mirrors in burials can be traced back to the 4th century BC at Arras (Yorks.), where 2 graves contained plain iron examples (Stead, 1979, 81-3). These mark the beginning of a long tradition of mirror-making in iron age Britain. Later examples of mirrors datable to the 1st centuries BC and AD, however, were predominantly of bronze and the backs of the polished plates gave scope for the most intricate development of iron age art (see Fox, C.F., 1958). It is unfortunate, however, that none of the late series of mirrors (of which the Birdlip and Desborough examples are arguably the finest) can be assigned an accurate date. The Birdlip mirror is no exception. Although the brooch associated with this artefact may be dated with some degree of certainty, the mirror cannot. The Birdlip brooch indicates that the burial is likely to have been made in the early 1st century AD; however, such a date cannot be related to the mirror, which may have been an heirloom of much greater

antiquity. Thus, as Spratling (1970) notes, 'when exactly the mirror was made is an open question'.

The Birdlip brooch (FIG. 2) provides more specific dating evidence largely because it is the finest example in a class of about 20 brooches which have been found, occasionally well-stratified. For example, a brooch of this type excavated at Dragonby (Lincs.) was found closely associated with pre-conquest pottery of the late 1st century BC/early 1st century AD (Spratling, 1970, 14). Another example from Kingsholm (Glos.), a mere 11 km from Birdlip was also stratified, and was recovered badly corroded from a pit datable to the 40s/50s AD.

The ancestry of the Birdlip brooch is complex but it does help with the dating problem. Green (1949) has shown that it is not related to the *Augenfibeln* as postulated by Smith (1909) but that it has characteristics derived from La Tene III brooches of 'Aylesford' type. The type-specimen of this particular class has been re-assessed and subsequently dated to c. 50/30 to 10 BC (Birchall, 1965, 290). The Birdlip example is, however, also related to Germanic brooches of Almgren's group series 2 (Almgren, 1923, 12-17, figs. 26-30), which are dated to the 1st century AD and later. Overall, therefore, the Birdlip brooch should be dated to the 1st century AD, probably pre-conquest; it is impossible to attempt further precision which must await the retrieval of more securely stratified examples.

Thus the date of this burial still cannot be precisely ascertained. Certainly the brooch indicates a pre-conquest 1st-century date, but further refinement is at present not possible.

The next question to be considered is how this group of burials relates to the other interments in the cemetery. As previously noted, the barrows are undated due to their apparent destruction; however, the single burial containing the bucket may be contemporary. In this grave a male skeleton (report forthcoming) lay extended and orientated east-west with the head to the east. The face was covered with a metal-rimmed vessel, apparently a wooden bucket, and the only other item recorded in the grave was an iron blade much corroded and since lost. Dr Cook (Guise, 1882) compared this weapon with Roman swords figured in Dr Smith's *Roman Antiquities*, and thus concluded that this was the grave of a Roman legionary. This identification is unlikely, however, because of the obviously native rite of face-covering present, the date of the bucket which performed this function, and the lack of Roman military equipment. Fortunately the bucket rim and mounts have survived and although similar examples of this type of vessel have been found (notably from the Glastonbury Lake Village, Marlborough (Wilts.), and the elaborately decorated Aylesford bucket (Kent)), dating is again problematical. The mounts provide the only clue and Green (1949) is of the opinion that these items are examples of 'cheap Belgic metalworking technique of the last century BC'. Thus this burial could be broadly contemporary with the mirror grave, although the likelihood is that this grave is earlier.

The inclusion of a weapon in the grave and the identification of the skeleton as male, together with the iron age metalwork, leaves no doubt that this is one of the series of 'warrior graves' recently studied (Collis, 1973). This burial is however unusual amongst warrior burials, exhibiting, as it does, the rite of face-covering. This ritual has already been observed in the Birdlip cemetery and it provides a positive cultural link between this burial and the mirror grave. Perhaps face-covering after death with some kind of vessel is a specifically local rite, or possibly it has some other significance which cannot be guessed at.⁵

5. Another example of face-covering was probably discovered at Bridport (Dorset). A female burial associated with a mirror and other bronze grave goods was found. Like the Birdlip example, the skull was stained green in places, probably due to contact with a metal rimmed vessel covering the face (Farrar 1954).

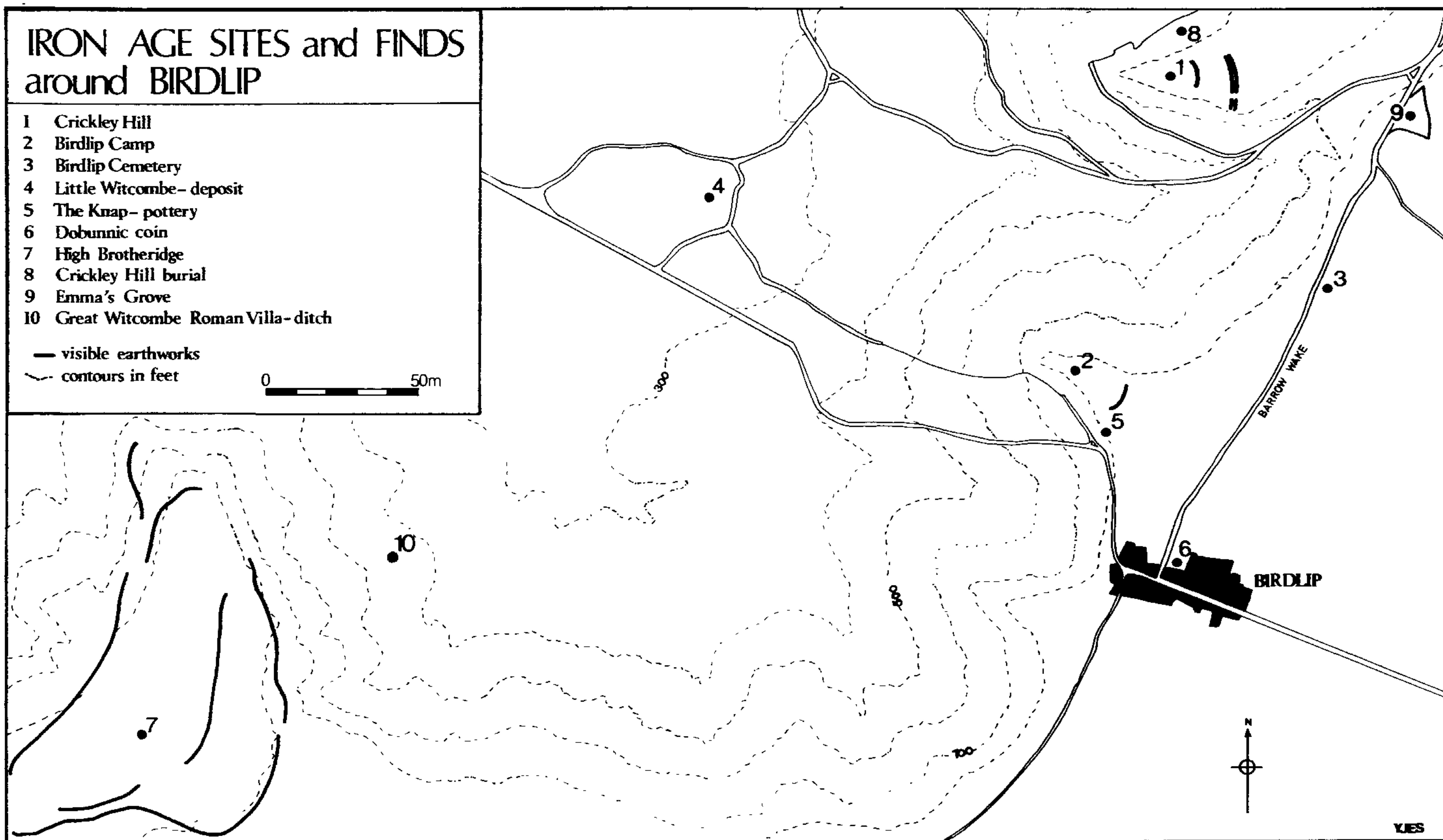


FIG. 3

Iron Age Activity around Birdlip (FIG. 3)

Direct evidence for iron age occupation around Birdlip is so far limited to the early iron age site on Crickley Hill, which ceased to be occupied long before the 4 datable Birdlip burials were made (Dixon and Borne, 1977). Where exactly the local population moved on to is unknown; some may have settled at the newly-founded site at Bagendon (Clifford, 1961), but evidently some groups remained in the vicinity.

A possible occupation site near the Birdlip cemetery is Birdlip Camp (SO 925 150), which has the appearance of an iron age promontory enclosure. The RCHM (1976) has classified this site as dubious, and recent excavation by T.C. Darvill (*Glevensis* 15), has revealed neolithic evidence only; so other occupation sites must be looked for. One such site may have existed near the Roman villa at Great Witcombe (SO 899 144), where an iron age ditch was excavated under the north-east corner of the villa, (RCHM, 1976, 60). Further investigation is needed here to reveal the extent of this.

Many stray finds of iron age date have been recorded from the Birdlip area, and one of the most interesting collections was found at Little Witcombe (Hawkes, 1948). This consisted of a fragment of conglomerate, identified as a phallic carving, worked flints, animal bones and teeth, 2 pieces of human skull with incised markings and 2 flat sherds of hard, brownish, pitted coarse pottery.⁶ The exact provenance of the deposit was unrecorded and the finds are now in a private collection. The significance of the find is only conjectural but the phallic carving and incised skull fragments may have some ritual significance, or the finder may have recovered these items from the edge of a midden; any number of explanations is possible.

More pottery of iron age date has been found at The Knap (SO 923 148) but the precise nature of this is unclear. The find apparently consisted of a coarse vessel with a clay suspension hook; but whether the hook was a separate item or merely a feature of the vessel (perhaps a lug) is uncertain (inf. from Cheltenham Museum Index). Since this has now disappeared, no precise date can be given to the find according to fabric and type of vessel.

A Dobunnic gold coin from Birdlip can, however, be more accurately described and dated (Evans, 1864, 135). This was inscribed BODVOC, and studies of coin types and their distributions indicate that this type of coin does not appear much before 43 AD (Frere, 1967, 85). A more specific study of coin distribution in Dobunnic territory at this period indicates that the kingdom may have been divided, with the coins of Bodvoc circulating in Gloucestershire and those of his contemporary, Corio, circulating both north and south of this supposed principality (Allen, 1961). Birdlip is situated right at the centre of Bodvoc's coin distribution and it has been suggested that a series of earthworks nearby at High Brotheridge (c. SO 892 142) could enclose his capital (Harding, 1977).

In 1952, at the request of Mrs Clifford (who was just about to begin excavations at Bagendon), Mr G.T. Harding undertook a survey of all the features at High Brotheridge. His conclusions are remarkable. The RCHM (1976) dismisses this site as a hill-fort, yet Harding claims it as being 'the largest complex of iron age earthworks thus far outlined in southern Britain', enclosing an area of 250 a. (c. 1,000 ha.). If this is indeed an occupation site, then it is exactly the type of site in which an aristocratic group would presumably reside; obviously only under such leadership would it be possible to acquire and organise the man-power necessary to

6. Finds in possession of Mrs E.M. Clifford. This assemblage may be neolithic.

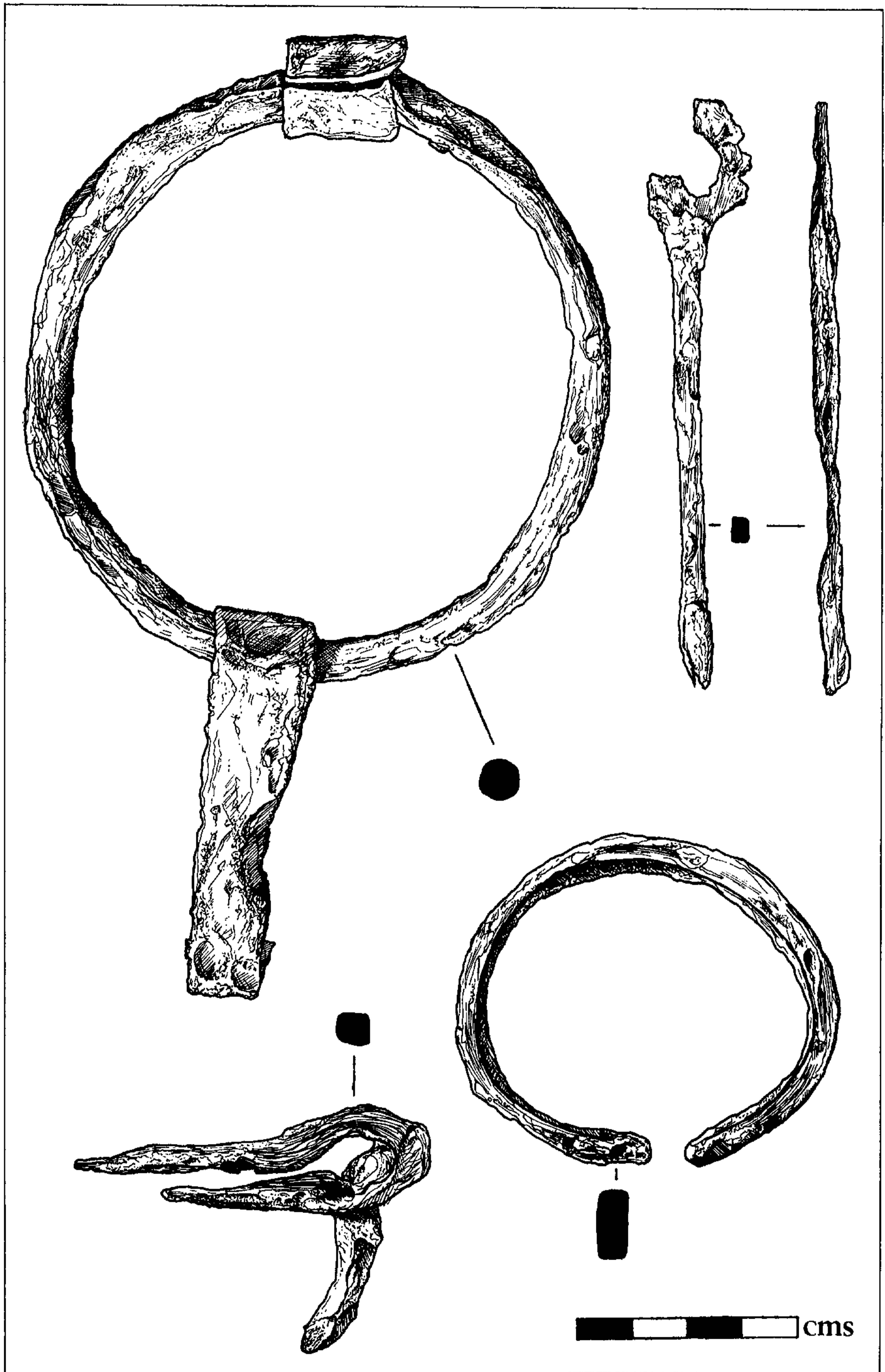


FIG. 4 Crickley Hill burial assemblage

construct such large-scale earthworks. Therefore, perhaps it is the home of the Birdlip lady and warrior. (It is however stretching the evidence rather to suggest, as Harding does, that this is the citadel of Bodvoc).

Finally, an important iron age find from this area was made on Crickley Hill.⁷ There, an apparently isolated burial was found and reported by Dr Cook (Cook, 1883). Details of the discovery are once again piecemeal, but a collection of items originally labelled 'Found with a skeleton on Crickley Hill' and now in Gloucester City Museum, seems to be the only remains of this burial (FIG. 4). Unfortunately, the nature of the burial and the spatial relationships of the grave goods were unrecorded, but at least one article may be identified; this is an iron bracelet that closely resembles an example from the Maiden Castle War Cemetery (Dorset), which was recovered from the left wrist of a skeleton (Wheeler, 1941, fig. 92, No. 9). As for the other grave goods, little can be said. The discoverer thought at first that the iron fragments were the remains of a headpiece, which may indicate the area of the body from which they came; this identification is however unlikely. It is possible, though, that they could be the remains of iron fittings from some vessel since decayed, and thus perhaps a further example of face-covering.

What this find represents and its relationship, if any, to the Birdlip cemetery, are unknown. The possibility of face-covering may indicate a degree of cultural affinity between the burials. The presence of iron grave-goods, however, may point to the low social status of the Crickley Hill individual, and if this is so then the class of this person may have barred him from burial within the aristocratic plot. However, since there is no good dating evidence for this grave which might indicate contemporaneity with the Birdlip cemetery, these conclusions remain speculative.

Iron Age Burial in Southern Britain

Until recently, knowledge of iron age burial in southern Britain was limited to a very few restricted regional traditions, from Yorkshire (Arras cemeteries), the south-east (Aylesford-Swarling), the south-west peninsula, and several isolated burials with no particular affinity.

There is a striking contrast between evidence for burial in bronze age Britain and the burial evidence from the Iron Age, both in the range of evidence, and in sheer numbers. Although some attempts to explain this lack of iron age evidence have been made in terms of hypothetical practices which would leave no trace in the archaeological record, few attempts were made to consider in depth the references to scattered remains that are known from the period. Whimster (1977) has recently examined this evidence and shows that the apparent dearth of funerary remains is in fact a myth. Notwithstanding the fact that some areas have revealed little in the way of burial evidence, and only sporadic examples have occurred in others, the distribution of all known examples represents a fairly even scattering throughout southern Britain (ibid, 319, fig. 7).

Generally the study of available information suggests that, with the exception of a cremation technique mainly limited to south-eastern Britain, inhumation appears to be the main method of disposal in all areas from which burials are known. Thus the Birdlip burials must be seen as part of this general trend towards inhumation, with the grave goods included representing the social class of the individual interred. Although the presence of stone-lined graves in the Birdlip

7. The exact location is uncertain. Possibly this burial was recovered from the vicinity of a sand-pit on the north side of Crickley Hill (SO 926 162): inf. from J.F. Rhodes, Glouc. City Museum).

cemetery makes it tempting to equate these burials with the south-western cemeteries (such as Trelan Bahow (Hencken, 1932, 115–21); Harlyn Bay (Ashington–Bullen 1923, 3rd edition); and Mount Batten (Bates, 1871)), which involved crouched and occasionally extended inhumations in stone cists exactly like the mirror grave, this must be resisted. The use of a stone cist, inhumation, and the geographical proximity of the areas from which such graves are known is not sufficient to suggest any cultural link. Inhumation, as already noted, was the main disposal method at this period, and the use of a stone cist simply serves to delimit a grave and keep the contents together. The wooden coffins common in the Arras cemeteries (Stead, 1979) serve the same purpose, they are the timber counterparts of the Birdlip cists; however, no cultural link has ever been postulated between these two areas. Obviously if the Birdlip cemetery is to be attached to any known regional tradition, then more criteria are necessary than simply the use of a stone cist and the extended inhumation for comparison. It must be said that the female grave from Birdlip, in particular, represents a type to which there is no need to attach any cultural significance; this is simply the standard mode of burial for moderately wealthy women. The Birdlip warrior is also culturally undiagnostic; it is a standard type occurring throughout southern Britain (Collins, 1973).

Thus, although the Birdlip cemetery should not be connected with any known regional tradition, it is probably worth considering what the evidence for iron age burial from the locality reveals with regard to funerary practices in general in this area of Dobunnic territory; and whether any tradition may in fact be detected in the region.

Iron Age Burial in Gloucestershire

The RCHM (1976) volume for Gloucestershire gives several examples of iron age burials and a few which may be iron age. The latter group is undated, largely due to the paucity of associated artefacts; however, the inclusion of grave goods in the former group presents its own problems. Undue emphasis is often placed on these items and usually results in inadequate recording of the burials themselves. The early discovery of many of these graves has meant that little attention was paid to significant features such as grave forms, or to the spatial relationship of the entire material buried, and thus much valuable information has been lost.

A few burials were, however, recorded in detail, and these certainly provide an interesting contrast with the rich Birdlip graves. At Hailes (SP 0423 3068) for example, 2 graves were excavated which bore some resemblance to the Birdlip burials (Clifford, 1944). Both burials were defined by limestone slabs and were aligned and orientated east-west, exactly like the Birdlip examples. Unfortunately, good dating evidence was not forthcoming, although fragments of iron age pottery and other occupation debris were found in the fill of the graves, with sherds of Romano-British pottery occurring in the soil covering them. The finds from these burials included animal bones, carbonised grain, pottery and a flint flake. There was also a triangular (? worked) stone of reddish ferruginous limestone which had apparently been carefully placed on the breast of one of the skeletons. This possibly constitutes the only deliberately deposited grave good; the other recorded items were probably accidentally included when earth was re-deposited to back-fill the graves. Of course finely worked items of wood, leather, textile and other less durable materials may have originally been included in the graves, and thus the poor status of the individuals may only be an archaeological distortion. Obviously, however, the total lack of metallic items in these graves does seem to indicate that these people were from the lower end of the social scale.

The linear arrangement of the Hailes and Birdlip burials is noteworthy, perhaps this was a well-defined local custom.

The use of stone cists and related structures for burial purposes has a long history in Gloucestershire. Cists can be traced back to the Neolithic, through the Bronze and Iron Ages, and throughout the Roman period and later. The long barrow at Nympsfield, for example, contained a small area in the north chamber which had been partitioned off to form a cist (Clifford, 1938, 190). Another example of a similar structure was also found in the Notgrove long barrow (O'Neil and Grinsell, 1960, 86). Several barrows of bronze age date also exhibit cists such as these, and good examples were found in the tumuli at Chedworth and Foxcote (Bird, 1877, 335-6). The proximity of good freestone in the form of Cotswold limestone must have been a major influence in encouraging the continuance of this form of burial structure, with the type continuing into the Roman period, when coffins made out of solid stone were in common use (Clifford, 1934, 129).

Many undated cist burials are known in the region and at least some of them should be regarded as being of iron age date. One such burial, for example, was discovered at Naunton (SP 1201 2461) in 1934 (Dunning, 1934). The grave was paved and lined and was orientated east-west; it contained an extended inhumation with the head at the eastern end. No grave goods were recorded with this find, which could be Roman (as suggested by the excavator) or possibly iron age, perhaps a poor burial of the same order as the Hailes example. Similar burials in stone cists have also been recorded nearby at Kinton Quarry, Temple Guiting, and Copse Hill near Upper Slaughter. These graves were all discovered in 1876-7, and although the finders noted scattered pottery fragments in the soil above the interments none was collected or identified; and thus the burials were undated. It seems likely, therefore, that the discoverers excavated part of what must have been a substantial cemetery or cemeteries. Only further investigation can confirm this and may provide the vital dating evidence needed (Royce, 1883, 77-9). Attention should be drawn here to the baby burial found in an iron age pit, nearby at Guiting Power (SP 083 258), which contained various occupation debris including pottery, bones and slag (Gascoigne, 1973). Obviously, therefore, iron age groups were located in the vicinity.

One cist burial of definite iron age date was found in 1959 in Tinkley Lane, Nympsfield. This was an inhumation and the only grave good was a sherd of pottery.⁸

Not all examples of iron age burial in Gloucestershire were in cists however. At Salmons-bury Camp (SP 173 203), near Bourton-on-the-Water, a crouched burial was found concealed inside a bank and at least 6 burials had been interred in pits inside the settlement; none of these burials had any grave goods associated (Dunning 1931). Similarly, at Barnwood (SO 865 179), near Gloucester, at least two iron age burials were discovered in a cemetery containing graves from the early Bronze Age to Romano-British periods. There a contracted female skeleton was found in a pit with a hand-made vessel datable to about the 2nd century BC (Clifford 1930, 224). Another crouched burial had been recovered in 1919 (*ibid.*, 222) but this was undated. A cremation burial contained in a 'Belgic' beaker was excavated in 1934 at Barnwood; there the only grave good was a small bronze bead (Clifford, 1934).

Other cremations are also known in Gloucestershire; at Bagendon, for example, 6 Belgic inurned cremations were found in 1861 (near SP 011 068: Rees, 1932, 28). Such burials must represent an intrusive Belgic element in the area, but how widespread or persistent this tradition was is unknown.

8. Few details of this find are known — pottery identified as iron age 'B'; the burial was concealed beneath a 4-in stone slab; bones in the B.M. (Natural History); inf. from L.F.J. Walrond, Stroud Museum.

An early iron age pot (with expanded rim and fingerprint impressions on the neck) is said to have been found in the round barrow 'at Ebworth' near Cranham (Green 1942). Unfortunately the details of this find are obscure and it is uncertain whether this vessel was actually concealed in a barrow. A barrow burial was also located near the hill-fort of Leckhampton (SO 9491 1839). There burials were found under a small round barrow which was itself contained in a square enclosure. This was excavated in 1925 (Knowles et al., 1925), but had previously been opened before 1880 when parts of human skeletons are said to have been found, (O'Neil and Grinsell 1960, 121); unfortunately, it is unclear whether these were cremations or inhumations.

Overall, therefore, the evidence for burial in this region is varied and no particular set of criteria may be devised which typify the characteristic mode of burial in it at any one period. Emphasis must be placed on the fact that insecure dating hampers any study of this nature and, although general trends and features are discernible, the picture is still far from clear. Most striking, however, is the apparent survival of the inhumation rite in the area, suggesting a strong indigenous element continuing pre-Belgic rites in spite of the Belgicisation of centres such as Bagendon.

The Birdlip cemetery therefore represents both typical and atypical aspects of iron age burial in Gloucestershire. Here are the inhumed bodies typical of the later Iron Age period and the region; but the remarkable collection of artefacts associated with the mirror and warrior graves raises them above the level of lowly graves, such as the Salmonsbury pit burials for example. Finally, the most important outcome of this study is the fact that the Birdlip grave group has emerged not as an isolated burial group but a component, albeit a rather fine one, of a cemetery of unknown size and antiquity which dominated the Cotswold escarpment at Birdlip perhaps for many centuries, until the quarrying activities of later generations both revealed and destroyed it, perhaps completely.

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October 1981

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