



Saltwood, Kent

Channel Tunnel Rail Link workings
Cemetery

Grid ref

Notes

Anglo-Saxon cemeteries come in two different types. There are the ordinary cemeteries often very large, where the richest graves are those of spear men with their shields. However the upper echelons of Anglo-Saxon Society were often buried in separate smaller cemeteries where the richest graves contain swords – only the upper layer of Anglo-Saxon society was allowed to carry, or at least be buried, with swords. Three of these high class ‘sword’ cemeteries came to light at Saltwood in South Eastern Kent.

The site lies at the very end of the CTRL (Channel Tunnel Rail Link) work, where the rail link finally enters the Channel Tunnel, and there are dramatic vistas to the English Channel and sometimes to France beyond. Initial evaluation indicated Iron Age and Roman remains in a limited area but eventually a 900 metres long transect was investigated in detail with a complex landscape running from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages. The most spectacular element however was not the living, but the dead, with the Anglo-Saxon princely burials. The story begins with three Bronze Age barrows set at intervals along a slight ridge that runs the length of the site. These were large barrows with ditches 30-40 metres in diameter, but no central burials have been discovered – there was no firm dating evidence – but the Bronze Age field system seemed to respect the barrows. What is unusual, however, is that in the late Anglo-Saxon period, all three barrows attracted rich burial cemeteries. Princely burials The richest cemetery was that surrounding the barrow at the western end, which attracted nearly 100 Anglo-Saxon burials in all, two of which contained ‘Coptic’ bowls of the type well-known in Eastern Kent as marking the grave of princes.

These two princely graves were probably the earliest graves on the site. The earliest grave appears to be grave 5, which lies more or less at the middle of the Bronze Age barrow. It is not in fact precisely in the centre, and the excavators looked very carefully all around it for the original Bronze Age burial, but it was just not there. The most dramatic discovery was the Coptic bowl which lay on its edge. (These Coptic bowls were

made in the eastern Mediterranean, many of them in Alexandria, in Coptic Egypt). Originally there had probably been a leather purse in it containing some gaming pieces, though these had partly spilled out. The grave also contained a sword and for good measure, two shields. There were also a few arrow heads and knives and a couple of coins. Soon afterwards (probably) a second even more magnificent burial was made just outside the barrow to the south. Here a new barrow was constructed, surrounded by a penannular ditch – see plan. At the centre was a chamber, 2 metres by 4 metres, with a coffin inside it. In one corner of the chamber was a large wooden bucket, twice the size of the average Saxon bucket, bound with iron hoops – which are all that survived. A shield lay up against it. In the centre of the chamber was the coffin with the body inside it with a sword and covered by a second shield. There was also a very large throwing spear of a type known as an angon – nearly a metre long, with barbs near the tip. It is continental in form – traditionally called Merovingian, though they are also known in Scandinavia. This lay just outside the coffin together with the Coptic bowl. There was a third burial, almost as rich, which lay between the other two on the edge of the Bronze Age barrow. This had a spectacular wooden coffin in a hollowed out tree-trunk – see photo – which contained a sword as well as a shield – the boss of which can be seen beside the coffin. The ‘iron’ cemetery These three very rich graves were surrounded by a mass of other graves, nearly a hundred in all, with four swords, 8 shields and 18 spears. Ian Riddler of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust commented that it was very much an ‘iron’ cemetery; there was very little bronze and the most surprising aspect is that in the whole cemetery there is only one brooch. There were indeed some women in the cemetery – if one may judge sex by the clothing. A number of burials had beads with them. 300 beads in all were recovered, while four had keys and one had a chatelaine – that is a group of keys, and in Anglo-Saxon society it was the women who kept the keys. Nevertheless the overall impression is that of a society of warriors, ostentatiously buried with their swords and their shields. Some 300 metres east another cemetery containing at least 10 burials

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(provisionally dated to the 6th century) overlay the second Bronze Age barrow. Two at least of the graves can be counted as princely: one grave produced a sword and an iron shield boss, while an adjacent grave contained a bronze buckle with gilt buckle plates, amber and glass beads, and three elaborate brooches, two of them being a pair of white metal square-headed brooches, while the third was a silver disc brooch with red garnet inlays. A fine tapering glass drinking vessel was retrieved from the subsidiary group of graves. Not all the Anglo-Saxon graves were focused on an earlier barrow. Between the two cemeteries

described above was a further cemetery comprising some 18 graves. Eleven of these were set in a row flanked by segmented ditches - it looked as if the group had been extended, one at a time, creating the effect of a Saxon long barrow. All these graves were late, dating from the 6th through into the 7th centuries, the latest date for Anglo-Saxon pagan cemeteries. Were they, as Martin Carver suggested at Sutton Hoo, the last of the pagans, defiantly flaunting their wealth and emphasising their right to the land by choosing to be buried in old Bronze Age barrows?