

Excavation, Analysis and Interpretation of Early Bronze Age Barrows at Guiting Power, Gloucestershire

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Excavation, Analysis and Interpretation of Early Bronze Age Barrows at Guiting Power, Gloucestershire

The Development of an Iron Age and Roman Settlement Complex at The Park and Bowsings, near Guiting Power, Gloucestershire: Farmstead and Stronghold

The Later Saxon and Early Norman Manorial Settlement at Guiting Power, Gloucestershire
Archaeological investigation of a Domesday Book entry

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Part 1

Analysis of an early Bronze Age round barrow: a case study at Guiting Power 1, Glos. (UK).

ABSTRACT

This paper presents detailed analysis by remote sensing, excavation, and environmental analysis of an upland round barrow in the northern Cotswolds (Gloucestershire, UK; SP 0844 2446). The barrow, earlier Bronze Age in date, survived as a clay core revetted by two phases of kerbing. Any stone superstructure at the monument, suggested by the large quarry pit adjacent to the mound, did not survive, but had been removed by stone-robbing and plough erosion. Finds included a few low-grade artefacts and animal bone, mainly comprising debris scattered within the mound, perhaps associated with ritual activity accompanying construction. The monument produced two intact deposits of cremated human bone, and included three surviving pyre sites, with the possibility of others suggested by instrumental survey.

Supplementary information is presented to provide a background for broader discussion of the monument.

Keywords: round barrow, early Bronze Age, remote sensing, environmental analysis, experimental archaeology

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE SITE

LOCATION OF THE SITE (FIGS 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, PLATE 1.1a). See also Section 9/ Sources..maps).

The site is designated as Guiting Power 1 round barrow, according to the parish-based numbering system of O'Neil and Grinsell (1960), and has been recorded as National Monument SM 31940.

The barrow is located between 243 and 245m OD, at SP 084427 244607 (OS field 4131; 14,222ha), on a N facing slope, just below the crest of a hilltop overlooking a tributary stream of the Windrush, about 1km WSW of Guiting Power village in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds. Topographically the area is situated on the high dipslope of the Cotswolds, as the altitude begins to descend towards the upper Thames valley, and lies amongst headwater stream valleys forming the uppermost catchment of the River Thames.

GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND (FIG 1.4; see also Section 9/ Sources..maps).

The limestone uplands of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds are formed from inferior oolitic limestone of the Jurassic, with local superficial deposits of natural periglacial clay and gravel. The site lies near the top of the Inferior Oolitic limestone, within the Aston Limestone formation (Barron 1997), the current surface of which contains minor clay deposits of periglacial origin. The barrow mound itself lies on a band of Upper Trigonon Grit, with its quarry pit cut into an adjacent band of the underlying Notgrove Member, both comprising rock types of durable, high-quality, readily producing slabs very suitable for drystone work and smaller megaliths.

Soils in the Cotswolds include large areas of brown rendzina, often decalcified, with calcareous pelosols, brown calcareous earths and pelo-stagnogley soils also present (map SSEW 1983; Findlay 1976; Courtney and Findlay 1978; Colbourne *et al* 1983; Findlay *et al* 1984).

Upland soils in the area of the site are brown rendzinas, typical of hilltops and upper slopes in the Cotswolds, are shallow, typically 20-40cm deep, and well-drained, directly overlying natural limestone bedrock, sometimes with intervening minor deposits of natural clay.

LANDUSE (FIG 1.5)

The area around the site has been under long-term cultivation, intensive in modern times, and consists of a thin, well-drained soil typically 25-35cm deep, containing much rubble eroded by ploughing from directly underlying limestone bedrock. There has been appreciable gravitation of sediment cover down the slope on which the site lies, towards the base of the adjacent streamlet, as hill-wash, where metre-thick deposits contain environmentally-relevant material. The small area of old ground surface sealed from destruction under the barrow consists of a 20-30cm thick layer of silty-clay soil directly overlying bedrock, containing evidence for early clearance activity, but showing no overt signs of ancient cultivation.

THE STATE OF PRESERVATION OF THE SITE (FIG 1.5; PLATE 1.1 b-d)

The barrow itself has been routinely ploughed in the past over its entire area. The mound surface shows signs of shelving from plough-encroachment, extending from the margins to a point near the centre, and a broken steel ploughshare of modern type was found well down in the clay core during excavation. The site has been fairly continuously under, or surrounded by, arable in modern times, and probably for many centuries before, with some periodic reversion to hill pasture.

There is a thin scatter of Roman debris across the site, suggesting that it attracted interest from the small Roman farmstead a few hundred metres away on Ash Ground. The barrow perhaps lay within an area of surrounding Roman cultivation, and the mound area probably acted as a quarry for readily-available stone. Clearing of the stone superstructure at the barrow may have provided a source of useful walling stone, and worked to include the area more easily within general arable. During the medieval period, the barrow may have lain beyond the intensive plough-zone around the manor at Guiting Power, in the valley below, and found more use as sheep pasture, the main phase of its final erosion being post-medieval.

At any date the softer clay centre of the barrow, once exposed, would have provided little obstacle to easy ploughing, but the presence of the encircling kerbing and rubble ringbank would have protected the entire site as a less ploughed island of grass and scrub: it was certainly capable of breaking a modern plough.

In 1993, when the mound was first surveyed in detail, it survived as a low mound of rough grass about 1.1m high, and had been clipped by lateral ploughing to a square of side 24m. Lines of planted furrows ran downslope towards the NNW, and an encircling set cut into the flanks of the mound, producing an abrupt step 20-50cm high at their juncture with the mound on the N, S, and especially E sides. On the W flank of the mound, ploughing extended up and over its marginal slope, without producing a step. That this process of repeated encroachment had been going on for some time could be seen from the squaring, visible not only on the grassy portion of the mound but on its outermost visible margin within the cultivated field. Over the top of the mound an irregular depression, at most about 25cm deep, suggested the possibility that the site had been robbed, but was shown by subsequent excavation to have been caused by general collapse of the upper surviving core over rodent burrows within the clay core.

Recorded initially by O'Neil and Grinsell (1960) as a low eroded mound, the main part of the barrow had been left deliberately unploughed as a conservation measure, since about 1970, and was scheduled at the instigation of the landowner (Mr E.R. Cochrane). The barrow was visited at intervals by staff of English Heritage to ascertain its state, but remained entirely undefined at the margins, and hence prone to lateral erosion from ploughing, and to damage from heavy vehicles, which continued to pass over it during arable operations. The monument is typical of the majority of scheduled round barrows in the region which have been thus accepted on that list, but which have remained without adequate recording or protection.

After the extent of the original barrow mound and position of its quarry pit had been located by detailed resistivity survey in 1994, the main area was protected by placement of 4 corner-posts in order to move ploughing away from the eroding margin, and to provide a sufficiently large working area for planned excavation, carried out during the summer of 1996. These posts stood about 50cm above the ground surface, low enough to be cleared by the boom of an agricultural sprayer yet high enough to provide an adequate barrier to ploughing. They were deliberately removed when site reverted to care by English Heritage, allowing plough encroachment around the unexcavated margins of the site to continue.

INTEGRITY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEPOSITS (FIG 1.9)

The integrity of archaeological deposits at the site can be roughly ordered on the basis of stratigraphic location, potential vulnerability to disruptive processes (both natural, and of human origin), and observed degree of disturbance. Such basic divisions are obviously central to general archaeological interpretation, especially where this is based on non-artefactual finds and samples, as related for instance to environmental analysis. At this site, such environmental data comes mainly from assemblages of charcoal and snail shells, which could contain intrusive elements, less immediately visible than for instance amongst finds.

The barrow site has been divided into five main stratigraphic blocks. Details for each state typical distance from the ground surface, the nature of any disturbance, possible degree of contamination of assemblages, and some overall measure of integrity as a relatively intact barrow-related feature.

Most features, except for the lower fill of the quarry pit, lie at well less than a metre from the ground surface, even less from the base of the 30cm deep, long-active cultivation zone, a ready source of intrusive material. Survival of the mound as a slightly more upstanding feature, with a core of penetrable clay, and bearing scrubby vegetation more stable than in surrounding arable, has long sustained a population of burrowing animals, and a healthy snail population. Erosive processes on the general slope where the barrow lies, such as natural gravitation of hill-wash, introduce further sources of instability for all but the most securely stratified features.

Data clearly indicate that much of the mound, especially over its softer, unprotected centre does not present stable stratigraphy, except where protected by stonework, such as that forming the central cairn, the kerbs defining the mound, and the rubble surrounding the site on its NW side. Greater stability for sediment is also provided by increased depth from the surface, as with the deeper stratigraphy of the middle and lower fill of the quarry pit. Features on the old ground surface, even if under unstable overburden, do appear well-preserved, such as the fragile pyre bases of the secondary and satellite cremations. Clear survival, as thin layers on the flanks of the barrow core, of char and other debris from possible ritual activities, scattered on the mound during construction, also encourage optimism.

A detailed stratigraphic assessment is presented in Table 1.1.

DETAILS OF THE SITE ALREADY PUBLISHED

Prior to the work presented in this paper the barrow had been recorded as follows (details given are paraphrased from original versions):

O'Neil and Grinsell (1960), p.114: Guiting Power 1: SP 0845 2448 (corrected here from misprinted SO); diameter 26 paces (sic) and height 3 feet; visited May 1959, when under grass, and in May 1960, when the mound was noted as being stony, on arable, but was not itself ploughed. Saville (1980), p.11 and 28: Guiting Power 1: SP 0843 2446; gazetteer number 172; condition: scheduled and unploughed; comment: every effort should be made to secure barrows like this which survive under grass, but within arable, from further encroachment by the plough. Sites and Monuments Record (October 1992): bowl barrow 3'6"-4' high and 55' diameter; smoothed by ploughing but now under grass in arable; scheduled 9th June 1982; no detailed plans relating to scheduling were available beyond a roughly annotated map at 1:10,000; the area to which the scheduling order applied was not explicitly defined, and the actual extent of the archaeological site beyond the mound was neither known, nor the subject of any proposed enquiry.

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Table 1.1: Integrity of strata at the site

	DEPTH cm below surface	DEGREE OF DISTURBANCE							CONTAMINATION of			QUANTITY of			Integ
		bio	root	pl	penet	disp	trunc	exp	eba finds	all char	all snail	eba finds	all char	all snail	
TOPSOIL	0-20	H	H	H	L	H	H	mod	H	H	H	[L]	L	M	L
MOUND															
core : top	20-35	H	H	H	L	M	H	mod	H	H	H	L	L	M	L
: flank	30-65	L	M	-	-	-	-	eba	L	L	L	L	M	L	M
:mid level	35-65	H	M	-L	-	-	L	eba	LM	LM	LM	M	M	L	LM
:lower	65-80	M	M	-	-	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	M	M	L	MH
small crem	50-60	-	L	-	-	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	M	L	H
primary cairn	20-110	-	L	-	-	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	L	L	H
primary crem	70-110	-L	L	-	-	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	H	L	H
ringpyre	65-80	M	L	-	-	L	L*	eba	-	-L	-L	L	MH	L	H
old land surface	75-85	-L	L	-	*	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	L	L	H
KERBS															
top rubble	15-30	M	M	H	-	M	MH	mod	H	H	H	L	L	L	L
inner	30-80	L	L	-	-	-	L	eba	L	-L	-L	L	L	L	H
downwash	30-75	L	L	-	-	H	L	eba	L	-L	-L	L	L	L	H
outer	20-70	L	L	L	-	-	LM	mba	LM	M	M	L	L	L	LM
MARGINS															
top rubble	20-35	M	M	H	-	H	MH	mod	H	H	H	L	L	L	L
rubble platform	40-55	L	L	-	-	-	LM	mba	L	LM	LM	L	L	L	M
NW crem : pit	50-60	-	L	-	-	-	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	H	M	H
: pyrebase	45-50	-	L	-	*	-	L*	eba	-	-L	-L	L	M	M	H
basal clay	55-65	L	L	-	-	-	-	eba	L	-L	-L	L	L	L	H
QUARRY PIT FILL															
upper	20-55	M	MH	H	-	H	L	mod	H	H	H	L	L	L	L
mid	55-150	L	LM	-	-	H	-	ia	LM	LM	LM	L	L	L	M
lower	150-220	-L	L	-	-	H	-	eba	-	-L	-L	L	L	L	H

Key:

PROCESSES

bio (bioturbation); root (root penetration); pl (plough damage); penet (penetration by post-barrow features; disp (the degree to which the feature represents material displaced from an original location); trunc (the degree of truncation to which the feature has been subjected); exp (the date of the last major exposure to near-surface conditions); integ (general assessment of integrity of the feature).

RELATIVE QUANTIFICATION

H (high); M (medium); L (low); '-' (appears absent).

DATING

mod (modern); ia (iron age); mba eba (middle and early Bronze Age); '*' (process related to the period of the barrow).

FINDS

[] (items displaced from their original location).