

Swords, Settlement and Sacred Places: The Archaeology of Brisley Farm, Ashford, Kent

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Archaeology South-East (UCL) has recently completed the post-excavation analysis of the results of the long-term Brisley Farm project, a series of large-scale archaeological investigations carried out in Kent since 1998. This research has revealed significant insights into the development of an ancient landscape located to the south of Ashford, spanning some three millennia. Amongst the most revealing discoveries, which included two 'warrior burials', is evidence of how funerary and sacred concerns played a pivotal part in the Late Iron Age and Roman everyday life of the area.

Warriors in the Weald

This paper gives an overview of the unique and important archaeological remains found at Brisley Farm, Ashford, Kent (where ten separate area excavations were investigated, totalling 7.4ha) and attempts to place the Brisley Farm findings into the context of the wider south Ashford archaeological landscape. The most important discoveries were two 'warrior burials' dated to the 1st century AD, with swords, spears and other grave goods (Johnson, 2003). These burials were part of a wider and extremely complicated prehistoric and Roman landscape, composed of fields, ditched enclosures, buildings, trackways and sacred monuments, which was developed and added to over many years. Research into this landscape has just been completed – and the detailed monograph publication is to be released later in 2012 by Archaeology South-East (UCL).

Kent cowboys: cattle and sheep rearing in the Late Bronze Age

The history of Brisley Farm begins 1,000 years before the two warrior burials. The earliest archaeological remains were a series of narrow ditches forming large square fields and trackways, found on the same alignment across the Brisley Farm landscape. This formed an extensive system which was probably used for managing herds of sheep and cattle. These fields have also been picked up in other excavations and appear to run beyond the extent of the Brisley Farm area, both to the south and (probably) to the west around the base of the hill at Colemans' Kitchen Wood. There may thus have been an extensive landscape of Bronze Age fields and interlinked droveways across the south Ashford area – and it is tempting to imagine a type of ranching taking place, perhaps on a grand scale.

Was there no one here: what happened from 400-100BC?

No archaeological features contained finds dating to this period, but later evidence

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Fig.1: The warrior burial complex after excavation (top), with the first (left) and second (right) warrior burials during excavation.

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Fig 2: The Brisley Farm excavations showing archaeological remains found from all periods.

shows that the Bronze Age system of ditches was respected and elements of them were re-used, becoming part of new boundaries dug at around 100 BC. Their position must have been known, and the old fields must have been visited and maintained, during this period of apparent abandonment. The re-use, respect and at times deliberate disregard of former boundary ditches are themes that run throughout the history of Brisley Farm.

100 BC: a Late Iron Age horse-riding elite

The new ditches formed a small enclosure, a possible corral. A series of events involving the deposition of pottery and charred animal remains into the enclosure ditches may represent 'feasts' at seasonal gatherings. Horse remains were also found in these ditches. Some archaeologists have suggested the emergence at this time of elite warrior bands based around the use of the horse, for which

control and management of large numbers of animals would have been critical (Creighton, 2000: 16–21). It is possible that Brisley Farm developed as a lowland base from which the nascent warrior bands and their horse herds could operate.

The cultural height of Brisley Farm (1st century AD): a religious sanctuary, houses, shrines, the dead

Often, cultural change as seen in the archaeological record happens slowly, over hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years. At Brisley Farm, however, a complicated and often confusing sequence of archaeological remains was found overlying each other and dated to sometime in the 1st century AD. This archaeological landscape was laid down within a 100-year period: a dynamic cultural explosion of houses, enclosures, cremation burials, sacred spaces, fields, trackways and, of course, the two warrior burials. The Brisley

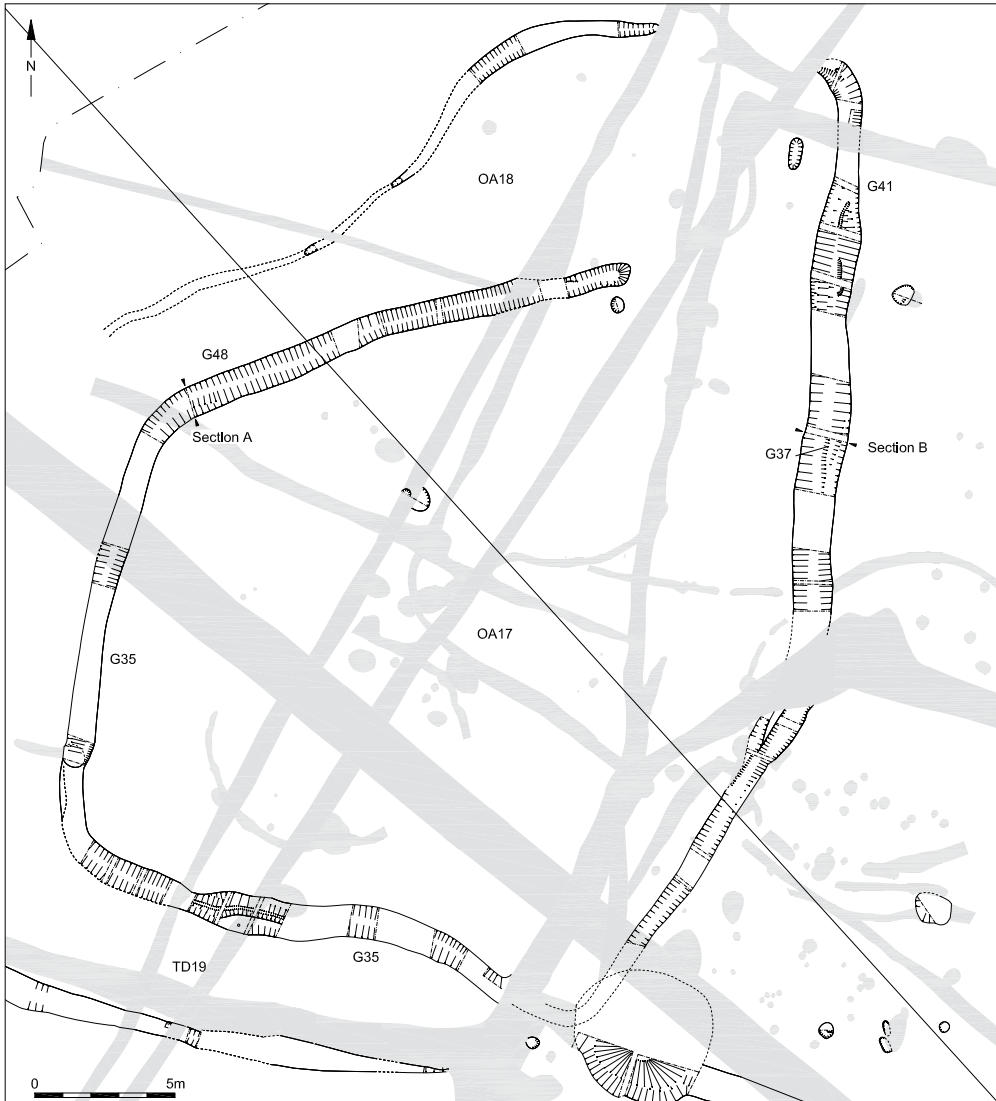


Fig 3: Plan of the corral.

Farm monograph looks in detail at the development of this landscape, but here we can touch on a few key elements which convey the uniqueness and importance of the site and the surrounding area.

At first a small settlement of several round-houses and ancillary buildings developed virtually on top of the former corral. Then the first warrior was buried c.AD 10, marking a shift to a more funerary and sacred bias in the landscape. A rapid sequence of ditches

was dug, infilled and then re-dug, focused around the warrior burial, into which ritual deposits of pottery and foodstuffs were put. Buildings were constructed: shrines and mortuary structures possibly to house the dead. This area was probably used for sacred purposes, suggested in part by the construction of enclosures with multiple entrances, in the same manner that a modern Christian church has for priests, mourners, officials and the public.

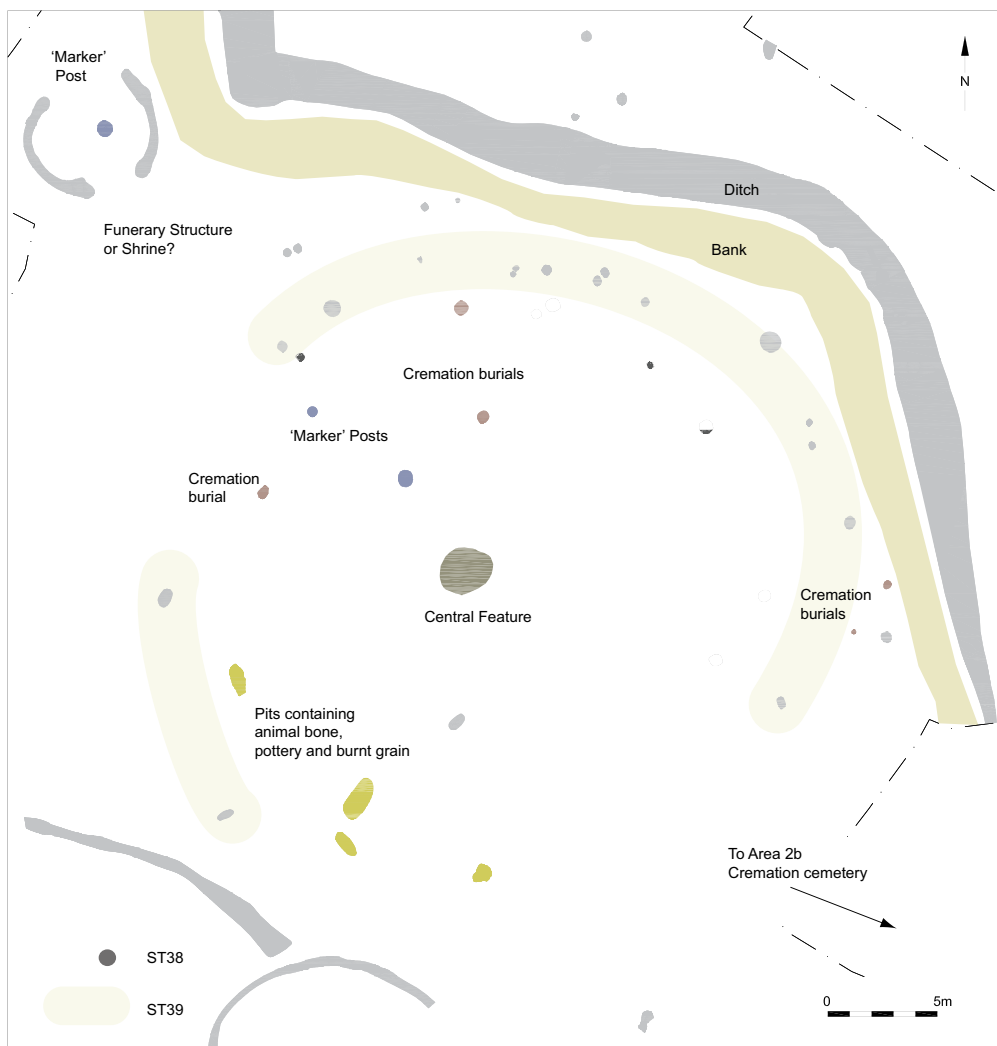


Fig 4: Interpretative plan of the circular space.

There was also a mysterious circular space, centred possibly on a tree and surrounded by cremation burials and pits containing token deposits of pig bones (a perceived high-status animal) and pottery. Possibly, this large circular space deliberately echoed the form of a roundhouse: a metaphorical house of the dead. The largest and most impressive building was also constructed at this time, a roundhouse, possibly built with upright oak planks. But who lived in it? The evidence suggests that Brisley Farm and the slopes around Coleman's Kitchen Wood changed from a farming com-

munity into something different. A sacred place occupied possibly by the religious specialists (druids) who maintained it and carried out the funerary and other rites for which we have subtle, yet convincing, evidence. About a generation afterwards, in the internment of the first, another warrior was buried.

The 'warrior burials'

The most significant discoveries at Brisley Farm were the two 'warrior burials', if more correctly known as 'burials with weapons'. Buried about a generation apart, these burials

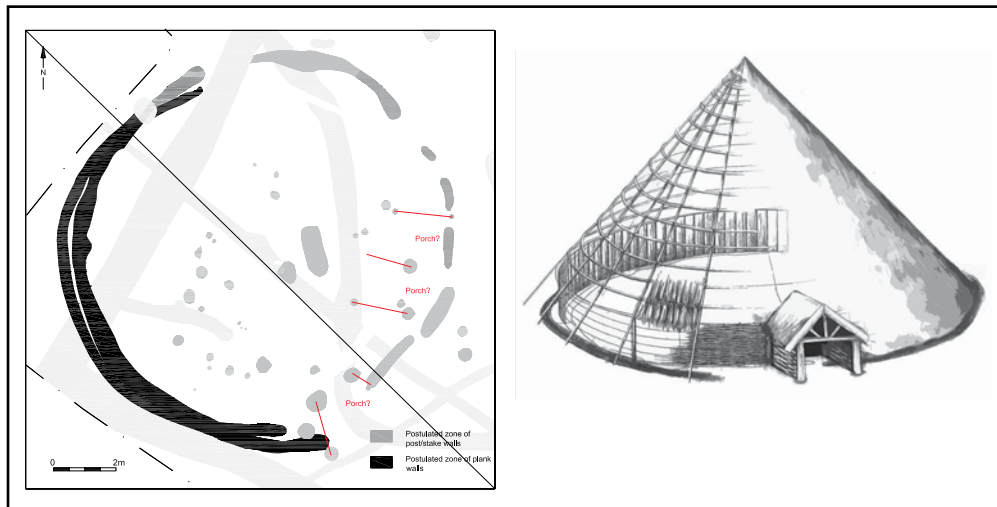


Fig 5: Interpretative plan and reconstruction drawing of the primary roundhouse.

are the latest from Britain and the later of the two is the last one known in Europe. They are of national, if not international, importance, and part of a rare tradition in southern Britain with close continental parallels (Bradley, 2007: 263). The artefacts present, including swords, spears, a shield, animal remains, imported pottery and a brooch, and the burial rites are unique combinations. Both burials were surrounded by square ditched enclosures, the upcast from which would have formed low barrows over the burials which then became focal points in the landscape.

The two burials clearly belong to a similar tradition and employ a similar range of cultural references. Both were supine and buried with British-type swords and spears (Stead, forthcoming). Uniquely for such inhumations, they were accompanied by imported vessels, including similar Gallo-Belgic butt beakers (Rigby, forthcoming).

There were differences between the two. The most obvious is date: the burials are probably about a generation apart (from c.AD 10, and around the time of the conquest c.AD 40–50). The graves were very different, the first being regular, deep and well-constructed, the later more irregular, shallow and almost hurriedly dug. There were also differences in the treatment of the body (one laid north-

south, the other south-north) and in the way the artefacts were placed. The sword of the first, more monumental, burial was partly drawn, perhaps ready for battle, whereas the sword of the later was placed with hilt towards the feet. This is almost unique, there being only one other example known nationally (Stead, 1991: 74, 224), and it may be either a deliberate mark of disrespect or a misunderstanding of the tradition by the mourners. We cannot be sure whether these people were actually warriors in life, but they were important and in death they were equipped as warriors – and not just as foot soldiers, but as elite sword-bearing captains or leaders.

Cultic practice in the Roman period

Towards the end of the 1st century AD, a formal space was created in front of the two warrior burial monuments. Ditches forming this space were filled with cattle jaws, broken pottery, dumps of charcoal and lumps of burnt clay. Most of this was concentrated in front of the earlier of the two burials which seems to have become the focus of cultic practice – a form of veneration.

There are complicated reasons as to why this might have been the case which are concerned with the emergence of Westhawk Farm, the nearby Roman town (Booth

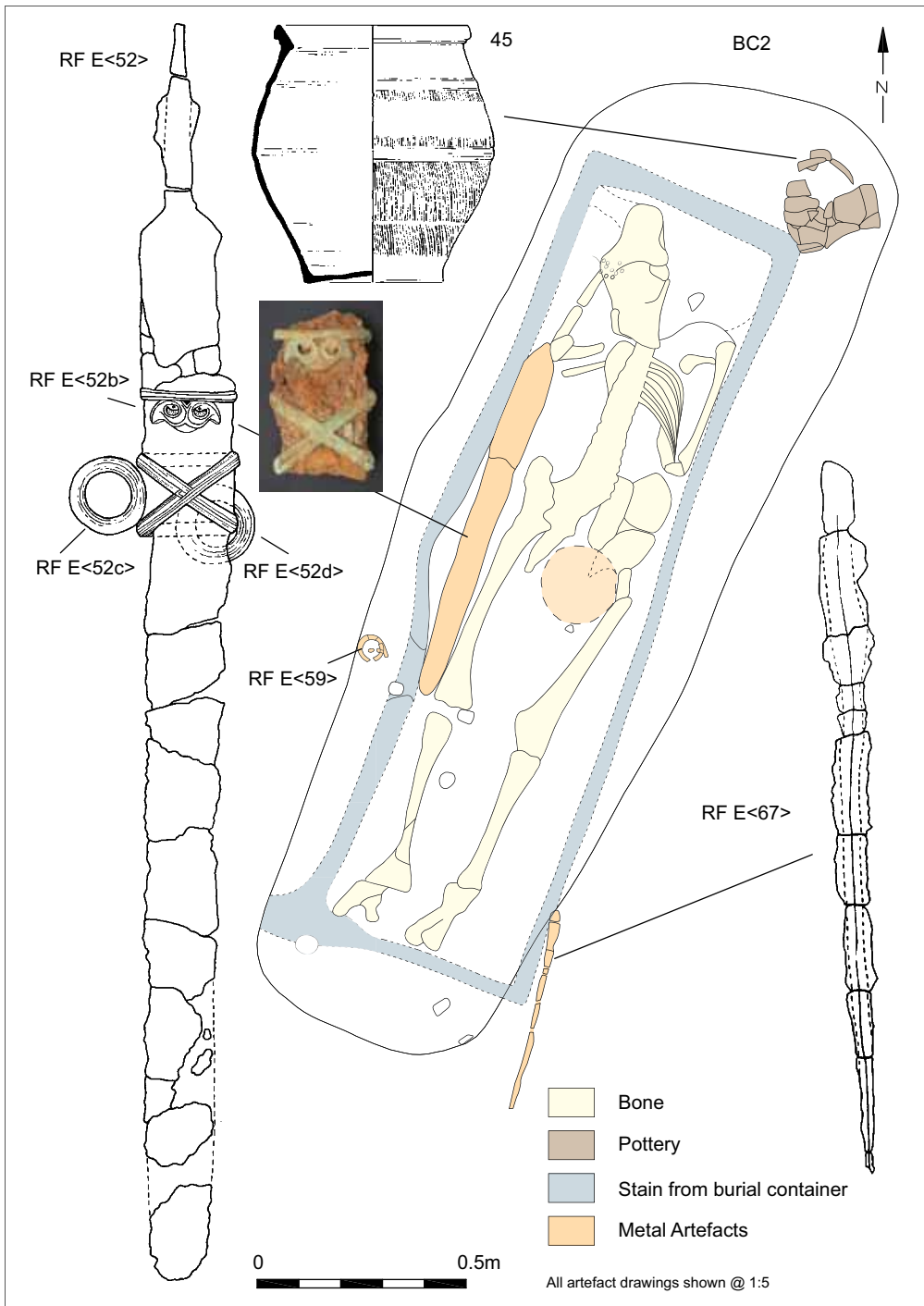


Fig 6: Plan of the first warrior burial, with photograph of a decorated sword scabbard mouth.

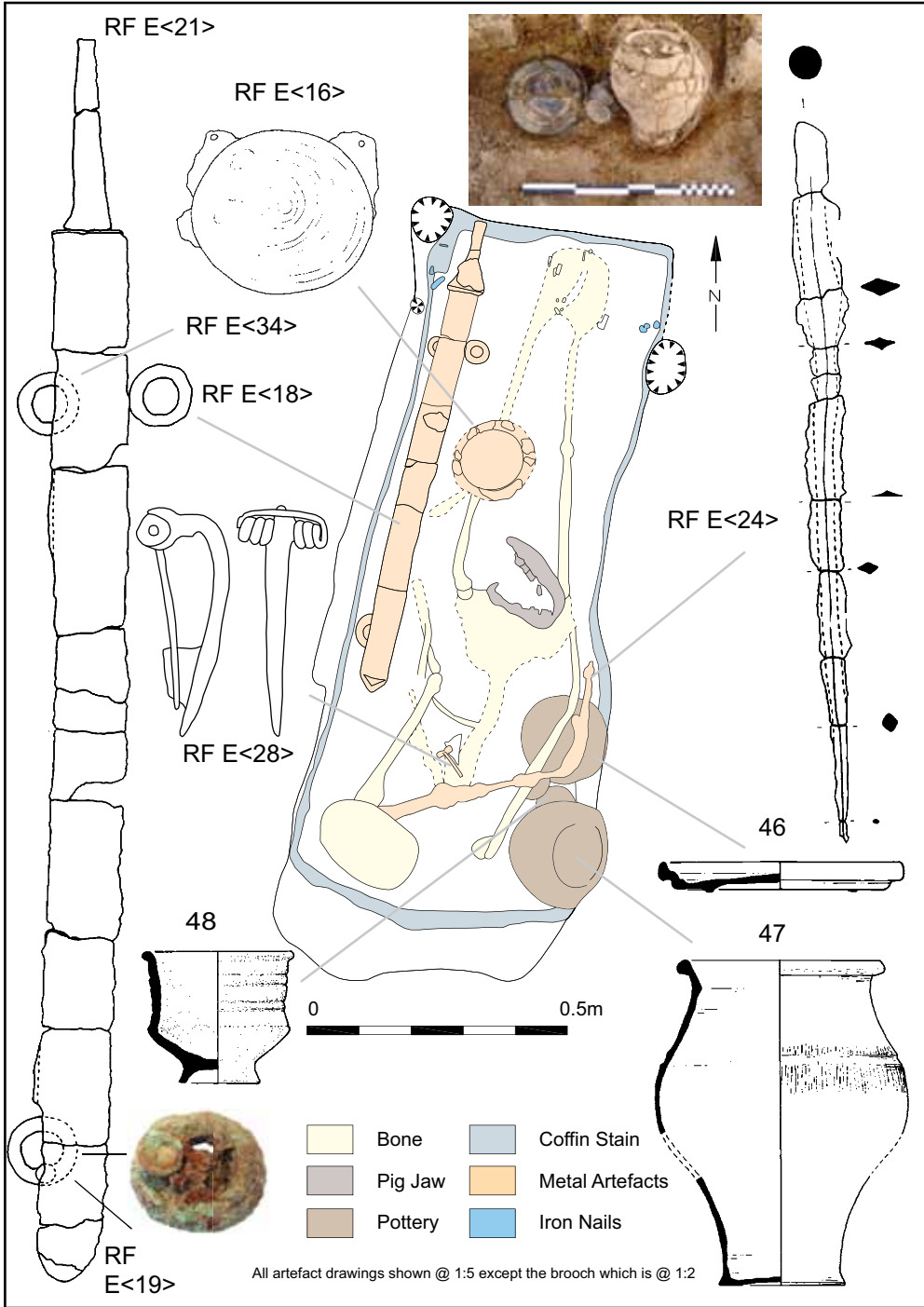


Fig 7: Plan of the second warrior burial, with photographs of accompanying pottery vessels and enamelled suspension ring.

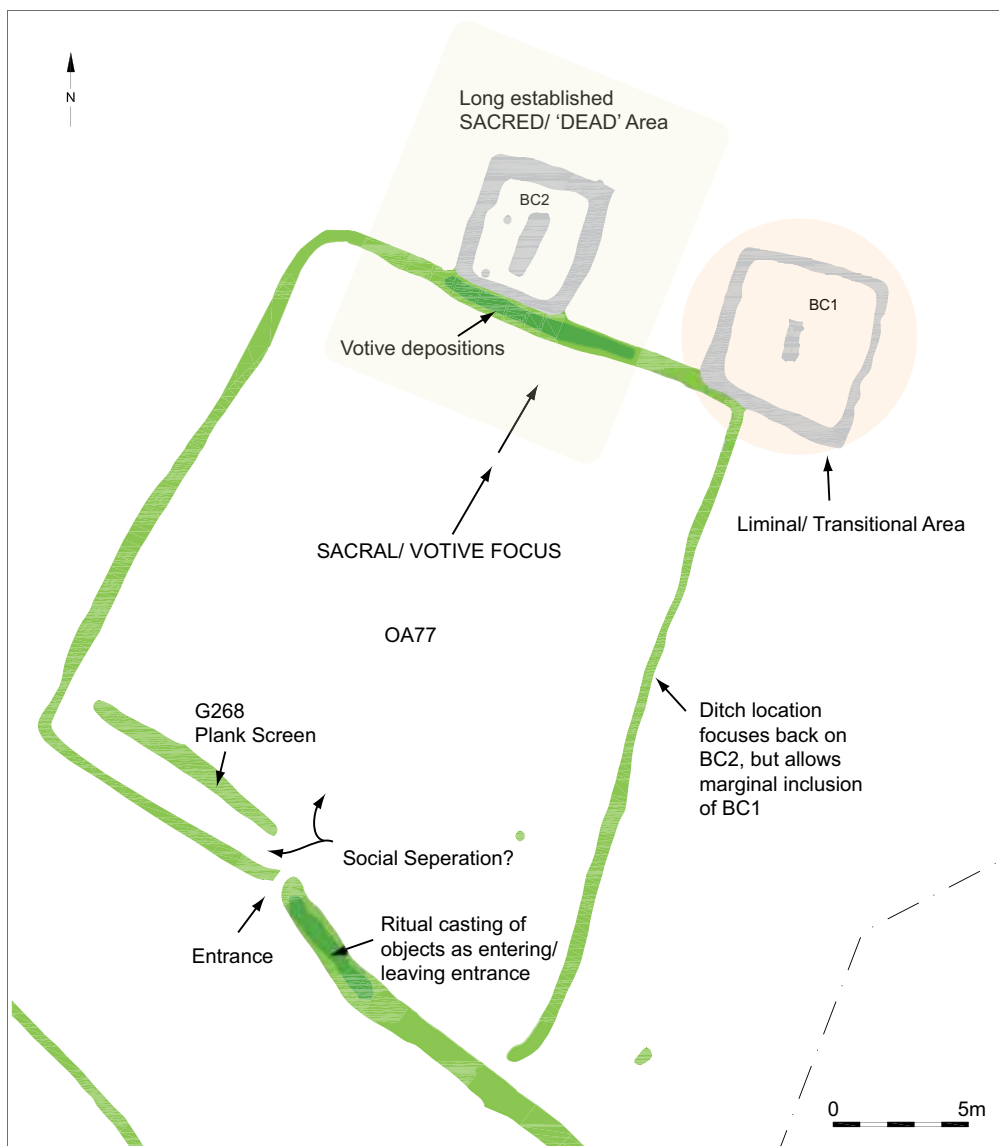


Fig 8: Interpretative plan showing the formal space created in front of the warrior burials.

et al., 2008). This developed as Brisley Farm declined, to which it was almost certainly linked by a ditched routeway.

A formal system of fields was also created and signalled the abandonment of Brisley Farm as a place to live, the populace moving perhaps to Westhawk Farm. The site was still visited occasionally into the start of the 2nd century, as shown by cremation burials being placed near the route to Westhawk Farm and by the contin-

ued veneration at the place of the warrior burials. But after a while activity faded away.

A consideration of the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British landscape of south Ashford

Brisley Farm is not the only important Iron Age or Romano-British-site in the vicinity. Further settlements such as Park Farm East (Powell, 2012) and Bilham Farm (Stevenson,

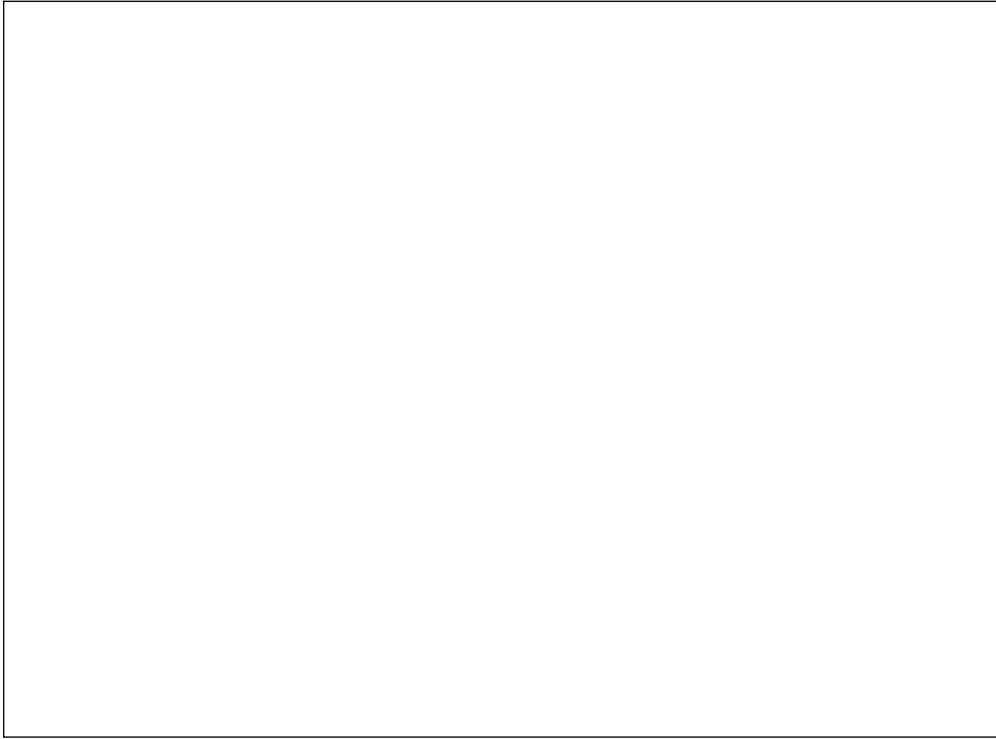


Fig 9: Late Iron Age and Roman sites in the south Ashford area in relation to topography.

2004), about 2.5km to the southeast, Foster Road (Powell and Birbeck, 2006), Boys Hall (Union Railways South, 2000; Eastbury and Blackmore, 2010), Blind Lane (Union Railways South, 2001), Orbital Park (Philp, 1991; Anker and Hughes, 2011) and Waterbrook Farm (Wessex Archaeology, 2008), all around 5km to the east, Magpie Hall Road (Wendy Rogers, KCC, pers. comm.) and Stubbs Cross (Boast, 2011), both 2km to the south, have all been investigated in recent years. The most significant site in the area, Westhawk Farm, was a hitherto unexpected Roman town, a mere 900m to the east (Booth *et al.*, 2008). Although the dating evidence is at times ambiguous, the balance of evidence suggests that these settlements probably co-existed during the Iron Age.

What did the Iron Age landscape around south Ashford actually look like and how did the people live?

The Brisley Farm excavations have gone some considerable way to answering this

question. As with many archaeological landscapes, a good starting point is to understand the topography of the area. At first glance this swathe of land seems a truly undesirable place to live: low-lying and wet, almost marsh in places. There is a band of land stretching from Kingsnorth, through Stubbs Cross and north/northeast towards Chilmington Green, that is low lying and prone to seasonal flooding which has formed a thick deposit of waterborne silts (alluvium) over the clay.

This is not, however, the whole picture and the Brisley Farm project, taken together with the Park Farm East and the Westhawk Farm excavations, has helped archaeologists formulate theories of what might have been happening. The alluvial 'plain' means good pasture, an important resource which would have been exploited by our ancestors. This alluvial land has not been subject to intensive archaeological excavation but, and this is why projects such as Brisley Farm are so

important, traces of ditch systems of Late Bronze Age, Iron Age and Roman date were found which can be projected running into this area. These systems would have formed the boundary ditches of fields serving to contain stock, for example, and also perhaps as the boundaries of arable fields; mainly, they provided much needed drainage. A picture of the landscape can be proposed, for testing by future archaeological research.

This seasonally wet area may have been a good place to farm, but it would not have been a good place in which to have lived, which is why the settlements were located on slight spurs or rises in the wider, broadly flat topography. This is true of Park Farm East, Westhawk Farm, Magpie Hall Lane, Boys Hall and Brisley Farm. Some of these rises are slight, 3–4m above the flood plain, but this would have been enough to make a difference, enabling buildings to have been constructed on marginally less waterlogged land. This infrastructure facilitated farming of the lower lying surrounding land.

Lines of sight and interrelations

The hill of Coleman's Kitchen Wood, on the lower slopes of which Brisley Farm is located, is one of the highest locations in the area – a natural focal point. Looking out from this hill, the western edge of the Park Farm East promontory can be seen, with the site on the slopes behind, and Magpie Lane is visible to the south, with Westhawk Farm to the east.

The surrounding settlements may have used Brisley Farm as a sacred and funerary place. The ashes of the cremated Iron Age dead may possibly have been taken there to be buried. No cremation burials were found at Park Farm East (Powell, 2012), but a cremation cemetery was found at Brisley Farm. Some parts of the land may, then, have had specific functions, possibly used communally by outlying settlements. Proving (or disproving) this is an important question for future archaeological research, but if communal use was the case then there must have been connecting routeways. Evidence

of this has been found at Brisley Farm, where an Iron Age trackway became formalised in the Roman period, probably linking the site to Westhawk Farm. This track appears to continue to Coleman's Kitchen Wood, but we do not know what happens then. It may circle north or south of the hill, another important question for future investigation.

The importance of the south Ashford area

Archaeologists thought for a long time that the heavier clay of the Weald was colonised only from the Anglo-Saxon period (Williams, 2007: 3). This has proven to be incorrect. As Professor Timothy Champion has observed (as academic referee for the Brisley Farm Project): we can now see that Late Iron Age activity to the west and south of Ashford is widespread so that this is beginning to look like something other than marginal – and makes the south Ashford region even more extraordinary.

The Late Iron Age/Romano-British landscape of south Ashford is emerging as potentially one of the most important archaeological resources in Kent, and elements of specific sites, in particular the warrior burials of Brisley Farm, are of international significance. The detailed findings of the archaeological investigations at Brisley Farm are to be published by Archaeology South-East (UCL), later in 2012, as part of the SpoilHeap Publications monograph series. Further information about the project and the forthcoming monograph is available at: www.archaeologyse.co.uk.

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