A Grooved Ware Pit on the Seven Barrows All Weather Gallop, Sparsholt, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

This report describes the results of an archaeological watching brief carried out during the construction of an all-weather gallop at Sparsholt. Two pits and a ditch were observed, one pit dating to the later Neolithic and containing Grooved Ware and other finds.

INTRODUCTION

The gallop is situated on Sparsholt Down 500 m. to the north of Lambourn Seven Barrows and is centred on SU 330837. It runs eastwards along the bottom of a dry valley before turning north upslope to run eventually along the top of Sparsholt Down at a height of 210 m. above OD. The gallop is 1 km. long. The underlying geology was chalk, with colluvial deposits at the bottom of the slope.

During the stripping of the topsoil (0.2–0.3 m. deep) and digging of a central drainage trench for the gallop (0.5–0.6 m. deep and 0.2 m. wide), three archaeological features were observed (F3, F7 and F10). Excavation of these features was limited as it was confined to the central drainage ditch, which cut through them.

F7 was an irregular pit 1.1 m. in diameter and 0.5 m. deep with two fills (54, 55). One sherd of Late Bronze Age flint-gritted pottery was recovered from fill 55 at a depth of 0.1 m. F10 was a section of ditch running north-west to south-east and was 1.15 m. wide and 0.5 m. deep. No finds were recovered from this ditch.

Grooved Ware pit (F3)

F3 was a steep-sided pit 1.17 m. in diameter and 0.84 m. deep, containing three fills of silty loam (51, 52, 53) (SU33028389). It appears that 52 and 53 are actually one context (see bone report below). The primary fill (53) had an ashy component and flecks of charcoal, and fills 52/53 produced finds of bone, antler, pottery, struck flint and stone.

Pottery

Two sherds were recovered from fills 52 and 53 and are identifiable as Grooved Ware, belonging to the Woodlands substyle. The sherds have a wavy plastic decoration in a converging knotty pattern, and a shelly temper (Fig. 1). It was not possible to identify the source of the shell used but a marine origin is not impossible.[1]

[1] R.M.J. Cleal, J. Cooper and D. Williams, 'Shells and sherds: identification of inclusions in Grooved Ware with associated radiocarbon dates from Amesbury, Wilts.', *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 60 (1994), 445–8.

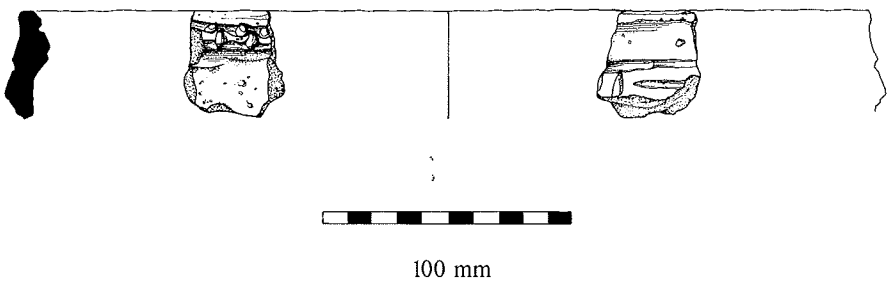

Fig. 1. The Pottery: Grooved Ware.

The Struck Flint by TESS DURDEN

25 pieces of struck flint were recovered from the pit, though this represents only a sample of the pit contents as it was not fully excavated. These comprise: 20 flakes, 4 retouched pieces and a core fragment.

The flakes from the pit are considerably more regular than the easement finds, with only two bearing significant amounts of cortex. Two flakes also have prepared platforms, which may indicate a more skilled level of flint knapping. The core fragment is from a broad flake core. The retouched material from the pit consists of two serrated flakes, a scraper and an oblique arrowhead (burnt). The broad flakes and core, the serrated flakes and particularly the oblique arrowhead clearly indicate a later Neolithic date.

Struck flint was also collected from the easement strip along with 29 intact and broken flakes. All are broad and most are relatively thin, though about a fifth are thick and irregular with some cortex, and probably represent nodule and core trimmings. None of the pieces are retouched or have platform preparation. The lack of diagnostic finds means dating is not secure, though the removal of broad flakes which are relatively thin and even suggests a later Neolithic date. All the flintwork is heavily patinated.

The pit also produced 33 fragments (2.53 kg.) of sarsen and 5 pieces (58 gm.) of ferruginous sandstone.

The Animal Bones by SHEILA HAMILTON-DYER

A total of 65 bones were recorded, but 28 of these are small, recently broken pieces which are probably from other bones. Apart from the fragmentation, the condition of the material is generally good, with little surface erosion. Butchery and gnawing marks are clearly visible, and the few measurements available follow von den Driesch.[2]

The species identified, in order of numerical frequency, are pig, cattle, sheep/goat, red deer and aurochs. There are also some fragments which have been identified only as cattle-sized and pig/sheep-sized. None of the 28 small fragments could be positively identified to species.

Of the 14 pig bones, 9 are teeth and jaw fragments of adult animals, 4 are foot bones, the other bone is a small fragment of scapula. One of the bones, an astragalus, has been cut across the centre front, presumably when disarticulating the foot from the hind leg.

The cattle fragments are large and form the mass of the material; if the eight cattle-sized fragments are included they almost equal pig in numbers and certainly exceed pig in terms of meat weight. Humerus, pelvis, maxilla and tibia are present, together with a rib and vertebra in the cattle-sized fragments. The tibia is severely fragmented distally but appears to be unfused; as this is already a large bone the ossibility of aurochs cannot be ruled out.

The single largest and complete bone is undoubtedly that of an aurochs. This is a right metacarpus, the distal end of which is unfused and therefore the animal was not fully-grown. Even at this stage the length of the bone is such that a withers height of 1.6 m. can be estimated. This bone is therefore highly likely to be from a bull. The proximal width is 78.6 mm. and the shaft has a minimum width of 42.4 mm. There are two fine cut marks on the lateral side

[2] A. von den Driesch, *A guide to the measurement of animal bones from archaeological sites*, Peabody Museum Bulletin 1 (1976).

of the distal part of the shaft. As only a small portion of this feature was excavated it is not known whether this bone was a single deposit or part of a group. The condition of the bone is good, like the others in the deposit, perhaps indicating fairly rapid burial while still fresh.

Two of the cattle-sized fragments have been worked, one as a short awl or needle. The other, of unknown function, is incomplete and in two pieces.The bone shaft used is very thick and is possibly from an aurochs.

The only red deer fragment is an unworked antler tip, and there are three fragments of sheep or goat including the vertebra of a lamb or kid.

Only one fragment had been burnt; this is a cattle-sized shaft fragment which had also been cut.

There is indirect evidence of dog in the form of two cattle-sized fragments possessing gnaw marks.

The bulk of animal bone from Neolithic sites is usually of domestic cattle together with some pig and sheep/goat. The predominance of pig, as found here, is typical of Grooved-Ware contexts and may be a product of feasting.[3]

The presence of the aurochs tend to support the other evidence that this feature is Neolithic, and perhaps ritual in purpose. Although occasionally found in Bronze Age material, the aurochs is more often associated with Neolithic and earlier material, becoming extinct in Britain during the Bronze Age.[4] The good preservation of the bone may imply that it was recently acquired rather than an object traded over a long distance. Although now extinct, this species was a ruminant, the ancestor of domestic cattle, and would probably have been able to utilise a mixture of habitats including forest and scrub as well as grassland.

Plant remains by JOHN LETTS

A small quantity of plant remains was recovered from two 10-litre samples taken from F3; minor charcoal fragments, *Chenopodium sp.*(1) and two nut stone fragments, cf. *Prunus sp* – plum. *Chenopodium* is common on waste and arable land, and plum has occurred on a small number of other Neolithic sites.

The Snails by GEOFF MEES

Soil samples were taken from fills 51 and 52//53 from F3. These samples were then examined for molluscs. Fill 51 is dominated by *Vallona spp.* together with *Pupilla muscorum* and *Helicella itala*; these species are typical of short-turved, dry calcareous grassland. Fill 52/53 contained a high percentage of *Vallonia* spp., though the proportions of *Pupilla muscorum* and *Helicella itala* have decreased considerably. The percentage of *Carychium tridentatum* is similar to the latter two species, and *Discus rotundatae* and *Nesovitrea* are also present in small numbers. This might suggest a damper or more shaded environment, so the combination of species could indicate grassland with scrubby areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Pits containing Grooved Ware and particular lithic artefacts, often in perfect condition, such as transverse arrowheads, serrated flakes and polished flint or stone items, are a recurrent feature of the later Neolithic. They are more likely to represent some kind of ritual activity than purely rubbish disposal.[5]

Grooved Ware is also widely associated with large ritual monuments and Grooved Ware pits are often found in the vicinity of earlier monuments.[6] In our case no large monumental

[3] C. Richards and J. Thomas, 'Ritual activity and structured deposition in later Neolithic Wessex', in R.J. Bradley and J. Gardiner (eds.), *Neolithic studies* (BAR 133, 1984), 189–218.

[4] J. Clutton-Brock and R. Burleigh, 'Some archaeological applications of the dating of animal bone by radiocarbon with particular reference to postpleistocene extinctions', in W.G. Mook and T.H. Waterbolk (eds.), 'Proceedings of the first international symposium on C14 and archaeology', *PACT Journal*, 8 (1983), 409–19.

[5] J. Thomas, *Rethinking the Neolithic* (1991), 76.

[6] G. Wainwright and I. Longworth, *Durrington Walls* (Soc. Antiq. London. Res. Rep., 1971); Thomas, op. cit. note 5, 76.

TABLE 1. FAUNAL REMAINS SPECIES AND ANATOMICAL DISTRIBUTION

	aurochs	*cattle*	*sheep/goat*	*pig*
skull fragment	—	1	1	—
maxilla/premaxilla	—	1	—	—
jaw	—	—	—	3
loose teeth	—	—	1	6
other vertebrae	—	—	1	—
ribs	—	—	—	—
scapula	—	—	—	1
pelvis	—	1	—	—
humerus	—	1	—	—
tibia	—	1	—	—
astragalus	—	—	—	1
other carpal/tarsal	—	—	—	2
metacarpus	1	—	—	—
phalanges	—	—	—	1
shaft fragments	—	—	—	—
other fragments	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	1	5	3	14

	red deer	*cattle sized*	*sheep/pig sized*	*mammal*
skull fragment	1	—	3	—
maxilla/premaxilla	—	—	—	—
jaw	—	—	—	—
loose teeth	—	—	—	—
other vertebrae	—	1	—	—
ribs	—	1	—	—
scapula	—	—	—	—
pelvis	—	—	—	—
humerus	—	—	—	—
tibia	—	—	—	—
astragalus	—	—	—	—
other carpal/tarsal	—	—	—	—
metacarpus	—	—	—	—
phalanges	—	—	—	—
shaft fragments	—	6	2	—
other fragments	—	—	—	28
TOTAL	1	8	5	28

sites are known nearby but the site lies close to the large round barrow cemetery at Lambourn Seven Barrows with the Lambourn long barrow to the west.

The western end of the Berkshire Downs is rich in archaeological material and has seen much field survey,[7] yet this area has rarely produced finds of Grooved Ware. The discovery of this site will serve to increase the area of known later Neolithic activity in the region.

The molluscan evidence gives an insight into the environment at the time of deposition, if only for the immediate environs of the pit. This suggests an open environment perhaps of

[7] e.g. V. Gaffney and M. Tingle, *The Maddle Farm project* (BAR 200, 1989).

TABLE 2. SNAIL SPECIES FROM GROOVED WARE PIT

	F3 (51)		F3 (52/53)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Vallona spp.	187	30	393	56
Pupilla muscorum	206	33	59	8
Helicella itala	121	20	52	7
Hygromia hispida	29	5	6	1
Carychium tridentatum	8	1	70	10
Cochlicopa spp.	7	1	13	2
Vertigo pygmaea	12	2	5	1
Discus rotundatus	1	tr.	21	3
Nesovitrea radiatula	5	1	18	3
Vitrea contracta/cryst.	2	tr.	17	2
Pomatias elegans	11	2	3	tr.
Undetermined fragments	30		40	

grassland with scrubby areas. This concurs with other molluscan data from the west part of the Berkshire Downs which indicates an open landscape from early times.[8]

A more detailed version of this text is preserved in the site archive, which has been deposited along with the finds with Oxfordshire Museum Service (Acc. no. 1994.121).

[8] S. Ford and G. Mees, 'A molluscan analysis from a Late Iron Age linear ditch at Moulsford, South Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lviii (1993), 305–8.