

The Garton Slack chariot burial, East Yorkshire

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An Early Iron Age chariot burial was discovered at Garton Slack on the Yorkshire Wolds in the early summer of this year by Mr T. C. M. Brewster. It was described in 'The Times' as one of the most remarkable archaeological discoveries made in England in recent years. It will, of course, be published in full in due course. Here the excavator gives a brief account of the discovery and some details of the finds. We are most grateful to him for having prepared for us this account at a time of great personal difficulty (see Editorial, p. 250).

The chariot burial was in a broad shallow valley filled with chalk and flint gravel, known locally as a slack, between Garton and Wetwang on the Yorkshire Wolds SE 952601. Garton Slack has a number of Bronze Age barrows excavated in the last century. The first Iron Age burials were located on the present site where the Driffield-Malton railway was constructed in 1846-53. During 1964 and early 1965 Messrs C. & E. Grantham located Iron Age graves when the quarry was opened by the firm of W. Clifford Watts Ltd.

The first large scale excavations were begun in May 1965 for the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments by the East Riding Archaeological Research Committee. This excavation uncovered a cremation long barrow, four square-ditched Iron Age barrows and a cemetery of single graves of the same date. This phase was followed by two more excavations which yielded square-ditched barrows, single graves, huts, silos, pits and ditch systems of Iron Age date.

In view of the importance of the sites being liquidated by quarrying, and the considerable increase in gravel extraction, it was decided to totally excavate the entire area in advance of quarrying. This scheme began in January 1970. Special all-weather frost-proof canopies were constructed and work proceeded irrespective of the weather. From January 1970 to July 1971 16 acres of the quarry were completely

excavated. The sites exposed include a Bronze Age barrow, square-ditched Iron Age barrows associated with circular ritual enclosures, a small rectangular enclosure with late Iron Age pottery, carved figurines, incised blocks and weights of chalk, semi-circular slots and related burials of sheep and oxen. Groups of pits of Iron Age date contained carved chalk objects and were associated with ox, sheep and lamb burials and infant inhumations. In addition a Romano-British homestead, complete with a well, and hundreds of pits and ditch-systems were cleared. The most interesting Iron Age material excavated in this period include blacksmiths' tongs and tools, an iron mirror with bronze mountings from Barrow II in 1970, headless anthropomorphic chalk figures with swords, an inhumation with 35 blue glass Arras type beads and the chariot burial. Brief accounts of these excavations, written by the present writer, will be found in the *Annual Report of Excavations* published by the Ministry of Public Building and Works for 1965, 1968, 1969, and 1970.

THE CHARIOT BARROW

In the three photographic surveys undertaken while the site was under crop it was noticed there was a c. 12-m. square-ditched barrow with a large grave in the centre 24 m. west of the Romano-British homestead. The area was stripped by a mechanical scraper in May 1971.

ANTIQUITY

A flight was made prior to hand scraping of the surface and a square ditched barrow was clearly apparent with a rectangular barrow to the immediate NE. A circular structure associated with a series of pits lay to the NW. Hand cleaning of the entire area disclosed a large 10.4 m. square barrow with a large trapezoidal grave in the centre, 3.6 m. north to south, 3.2 m. wide on the south and 1.8 m. on the north (PL. XLIV).

Prior to excavation a heavy duty canopy on wheels was placed over the grave: this protected the grave from the weather and enabled a gas heater to be used against the damp. The western side was excavated first in order to profile the grave completely from north to south. A guard was mounted night and day.

The grave infilling consisted of chalk and flint chips with some dull, light-brown marly soil. The profile showed evidence of structural collapse over the area where the wheels were later found. Fragments of sheet bronze with attached wood were associated with this sagging. The central profile was drawn and the eastern side excavated. The entire plan of the burial was clearly exposed. Two parts of the pole-shaft, the felloes, the hubs and many of the spokes survived as clearly defined stains showing the shape of the spokes. Later removal of the wood staining left slots showing clearly the spokes, felloes and pole shaft, from which good casts were obtained (PL. XLII-III).

LOCATION OF THE GRAVE-GOODS AND SEQUENCE OF BURIAL

1. *The pole-shaft.* Apparently the pole-shaft of the chariot had been broken into two portions to fit into the grave. The front portion with its iron pole sheath was placed along the broadest, southern, end of the grave with the tip to the east. The remaining part was placed along the north-south axis to the immediate north and at right angles to the wheels, towards the north end of the grave.

2. *Harness fittings.* Two medium bronze terrets and a larger one lay on the bottom of the grave with a harness buckle beneath the western wheel. Two identical medium terrets were located just outside the west wheel close to the

foot of the burial, the other on top of the same wheel close to the hub. Resting on the lower leg bones of the burial was a harness buckle identical with the one beneath the wheel.

3. *The Wheels.* Both wheels, one on the west the other on the east, had been placed on their hubs on the grave bottom, but the weight of the body, which had been placed on top, had caused them to tilt inwards towards the centre. At right angles to the hub line, towards the north, lay the pole stain.

4. *The Whip.* Close to the NE side of the eastern edge of the western wheel was a pommel of gilded bronze and wood. Just beyond the same wheel to the south were two narrow cylinders of bronze in line with the pommel shaft. It is considered that the pommel and cylinders form part of a whip or stock placed behind the body across the wheel.

5. *The Inhumation.* Covering part of both wheels, but chiefly lying on the eastern one was a crouched burial of an adult male facing the east. Close to, and resting on the upper part of the skeleton was the decapitated skeleton of a pig. The skull of the creature had been cleft in two. One portion was placed near the lower chest the other near the thighs (PL. XLVIA).

6. *The Iron Bridle Bits.* One bridle bit was broken into two portions in antiquity (wear does not explain this fracture) and placed between the two parts of the cleft skull of the pig on top of the body. Another intact bit was placed on top of the knees.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FINDS

The Wheels: The wheels were 0.86 m. in diameter from the edge of the tyres, which were 44 mm. wide and just over 6.4 mm. in thickness. How the tyres were wrought and joined together will have to await X-ray and laboratory examinations. Due to part of one felloe surviving as wood impregnated with iron oxide, and as stains, it is known that the felloes were approximately 50.8 mm. deep. There were 12 spokes to each wheel, and although not all survived, it is known from the imprints that they were about 57 mm. in diameter. The wood hub had been *c.* 355.6 mm. long; *c.*

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133 mm. thick and held together with gilded bronze nave hoops 133.4 mm. in diameter and 19.1 mm. wide. The western wheel had been repaired with a circular nave-hoop of iron of the same dimensions (PL. XLIIIB).

The Pole-Shaft. The end of the shaft had a cap of iron 69.9 mm. long and 57.2 mm. wide with hammered round end and was secured to the end of the pole with two large iron nails. Some of the wood of the pole survived intact. The length of the southern portion of the pole was 2 m., the piece running up the grave centre 1.1 m. The surviving length being not less than 3.8 m., the original pole-shaft must have been longer. The narrowest part was 57.2 mm. at the pole cap, the broadest just over 101 mm. close to the wheels.

The Axle Beam, Coachwork and Linch Pins. As only the wood of the pole-shaft, pommel of whip and wheels survived intact with the exception of small bronze fragments above the grave with wood attached, little can be learnt about the coachwork. It is suggested in fact by the sag of the grave infill, not a break-in, above the wheels and the inhumation, that some form of canopy had existed above them. This cover could have been in fact the coachwork inverted over the remainder of the dismantled vehicle complete with the axle beam. This timber work higher up in the grave would have rotted away without leaving stains as it collapsed. The bronze heading and sheet with portions of the wood attached may represent part of this coachwork.

The lack of linch pins with the burial may suggest they were of hard wood and not iron or bronze. It is unlikely, considering the richness of the other finds, that the linch pins would not have been inserted in the grave.

The Inhumation. The skeleton was that of a robust mature male about 30 years of age and 5 ft 9 inches (1.75 m.) in height with the left leg somewhat shorter than the right. Two teeth had been removed prior to death; the tooth cavity in the lower jaw had healed over, but the one in the upper had not healed (Dawes, 1971).

Bridle Bits. The bits were constructed of

fairly thick iron bars with side rings and three-link bits of the Arras type (Fox, 1946). It is suggested that 'fierce' bits of this form are essential in hilly country to control horse-drawn vehicles.

Terrets. Five bronze terrets occurred in the grave, four medium and one large. They are all identical in form being D-shaped; the semi-circular portion being cast bronze with a protruding shallow cup-shaped hollow on the top holding a paste, or glass bead. The cross pin of iron has traces of leather or wood attached.

Harness Buckles. Two identical harness buckles of cast bronze were associated with the terrets and bits. They consist of two broad rings linked side by side and decorated with three raised studs. Two strap bars are attached to the broad rings by small thick discs.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SITE

It is only possible here in this short article to indicate briefly some reasons for the great importance of the Garton Slack chariot burial. Due to the special soil conditions at the bottom of the grave and the extremely careful excavation by the staff (in particular Miss V. Knight, Mr G. Wilson and Mr P. Armstrong) it was possible to reconstruct the wheel and part of the pole-shaft and to obtain a complete picture of a chariot burial in East Yorkshire. The burial belongs to the dismantled horseless chariot series of East Yorkshire, previous examples being at Danes Graves (Mortimer, 1905), Charioteer's and Lady's Barrow, Arras and Westwood, Beverley (Greenwell, 1906). An interesting feature at Garton Slack was the presence of 5 terrets confirming the suggestion by Leeds that this was a Yorkshire facet (Leeds, 1933). The three-linked bits are another interesting factor. As has been mentioned previously each barrow cemetery has a series of pits and a circular ritual house, with three pits containing articulated sheep burials or limbs. Such a structure lay to the NW of the chariot barrow. Nearby were a number of pits, one containing a sheep burial, another an inverted human skull and a grave shaped hollow with a pig's skull, two highly decorated perfect

weaving combs of bone and two large bone sliders. Originally there had been two barrows in the group: the chariot one, and the rectangular barrow, 14 m. by 10.4 m. Unfortunately the burial in this case had been laid on the Iron

Age land surface and destroyed. This occurs in one in four square-ditched barrows. The above is only a brief account of the burial at Garton. Essential laboratory research is being undertaken and much new information will emerge.

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PLATE XLII (this page)

Chariot burial and grave from the south

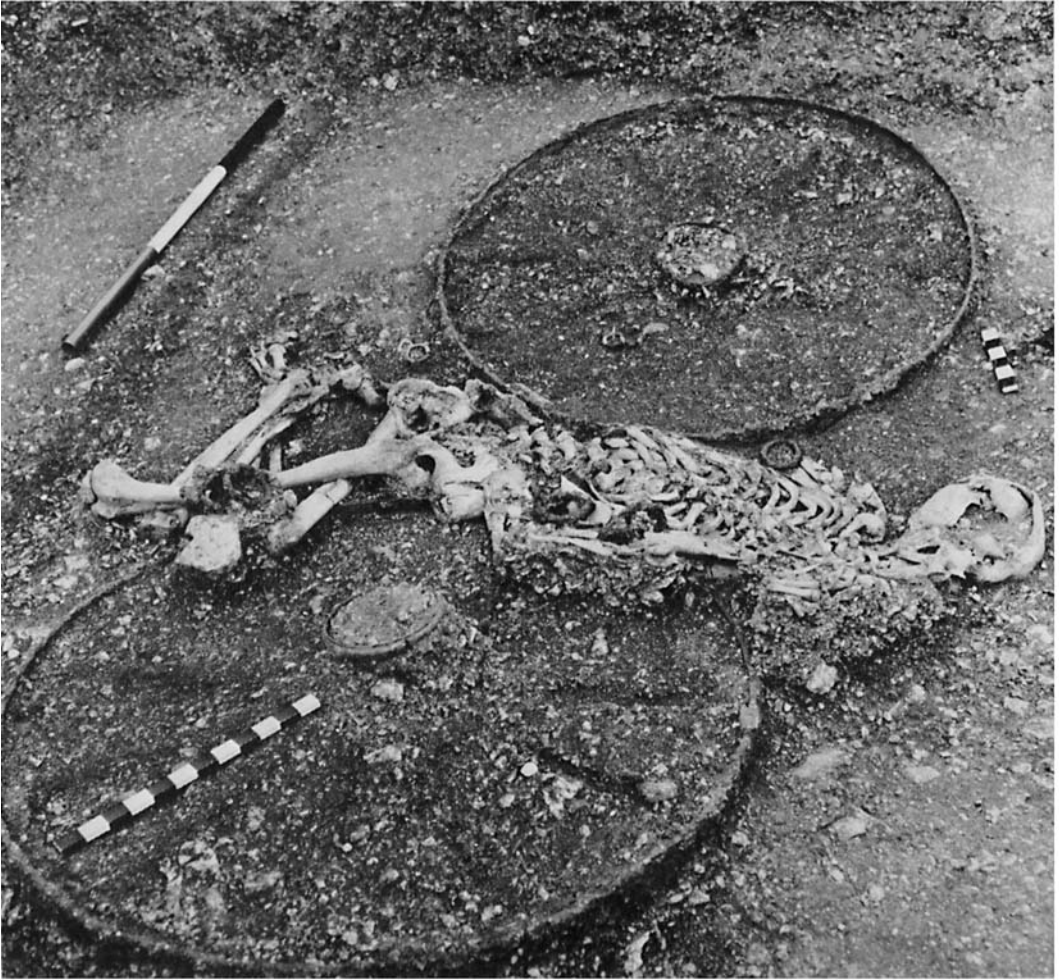
PLATE XLIII (opposite)

(a) Chariot burial from east side of grave

(b) Detail of west wheel, felloe and spokes

See pp. 289–92

Photos: Department of the Environment



a



b

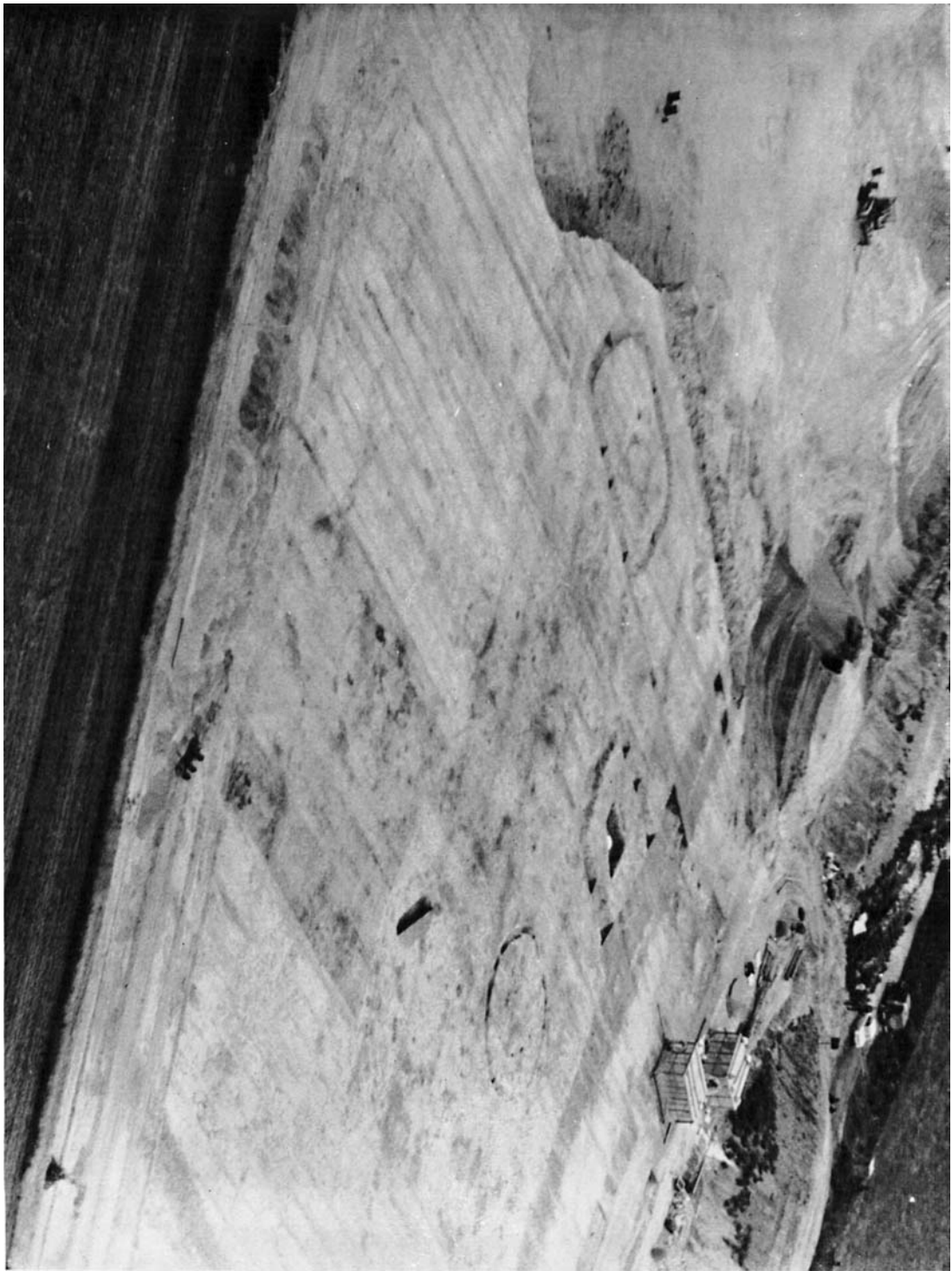


PLATE XLIV: THE GARTON SLACK CHARIOT BURIAL
Air view of rectangular barrow, chariot barrow and circular ritual house from the north

Photos: Department of the Environment

See pp. 289-92