

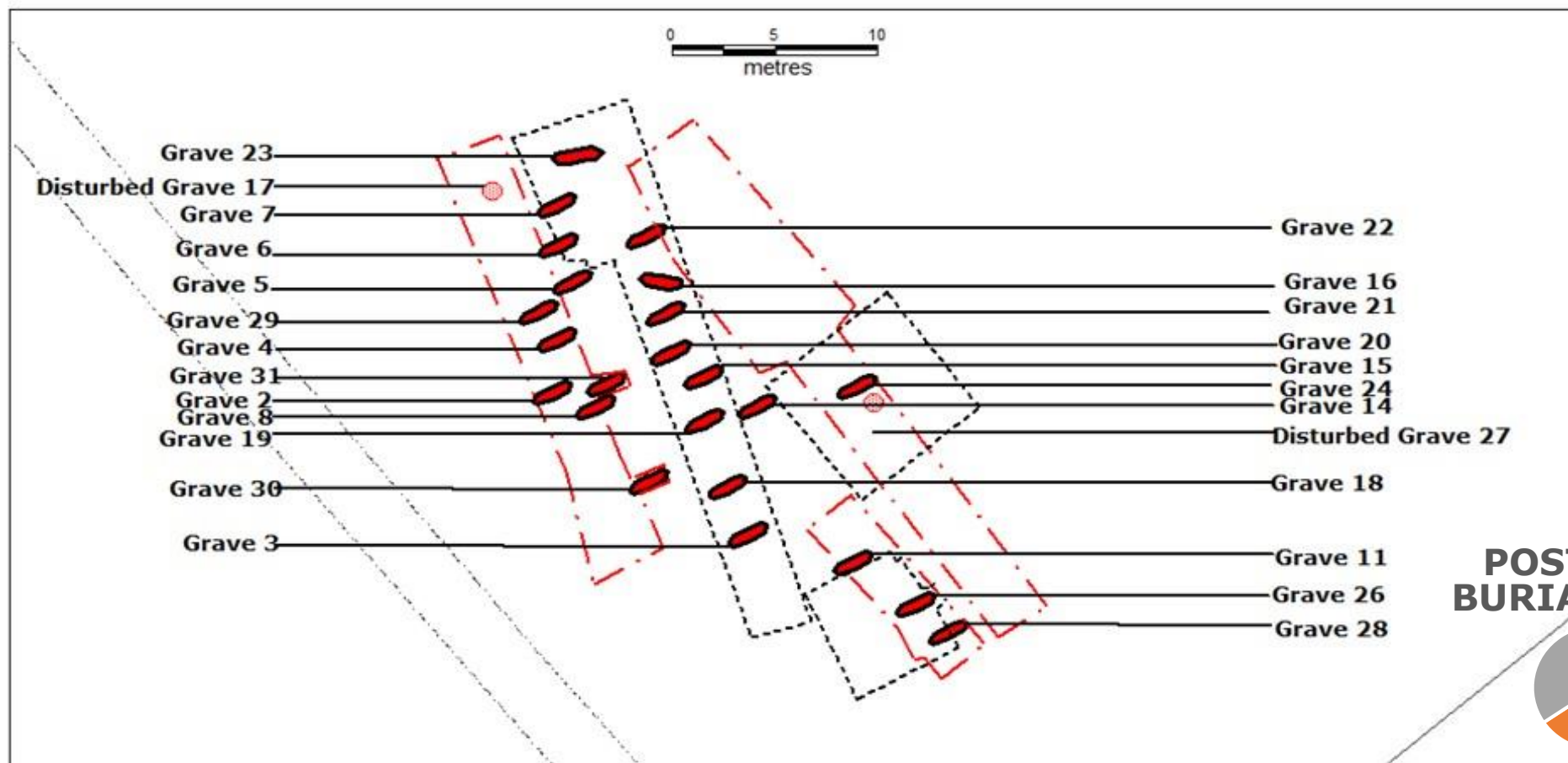
Post Roman and Early Anglo Saxon Cemetery Nether Heyford



In 2003 two metal detectorists located fragments of a sword and brooch associated with two 2 skeletons. One was an 8thc crouched male sword burial, aligned west/east, which cut through an earlier 5thc female burial. These were excavated by Northamptonshire Archaeology, after which CLASP excavated some test pits and located another 6 burials in the surrounding area. Further excavations have taken place since then, the latest being in 2021.

The burial ground contains 2 cemeteries covering 3 different phases of internment. The earliest cemetery is 5thc, approx. 420 – 480 AD. Here 25 burials dating to the 5thc were uncovered, composed of males, females and children and all aligned west/east or east/west. Those with heads at the western end generally had no grave goods, those with heads at the eastern end all had grave goods. These alignments may indicate that although there were Christian traditions and beliefs at the time there were differences in the burial rituals as indicated by the grave goods, or lack of. The male burials were all stone lined and capped, with the men being laid on their backs. The women's graves were not stone lined. Those with grave goods were placed on their sides (usually the left). If they had no grave goods they were usually on their backs, sometimes with their arms or legs crossed. The differences in the burials seems to reflect the social structure, both the relationship between men and women but also female relationships.

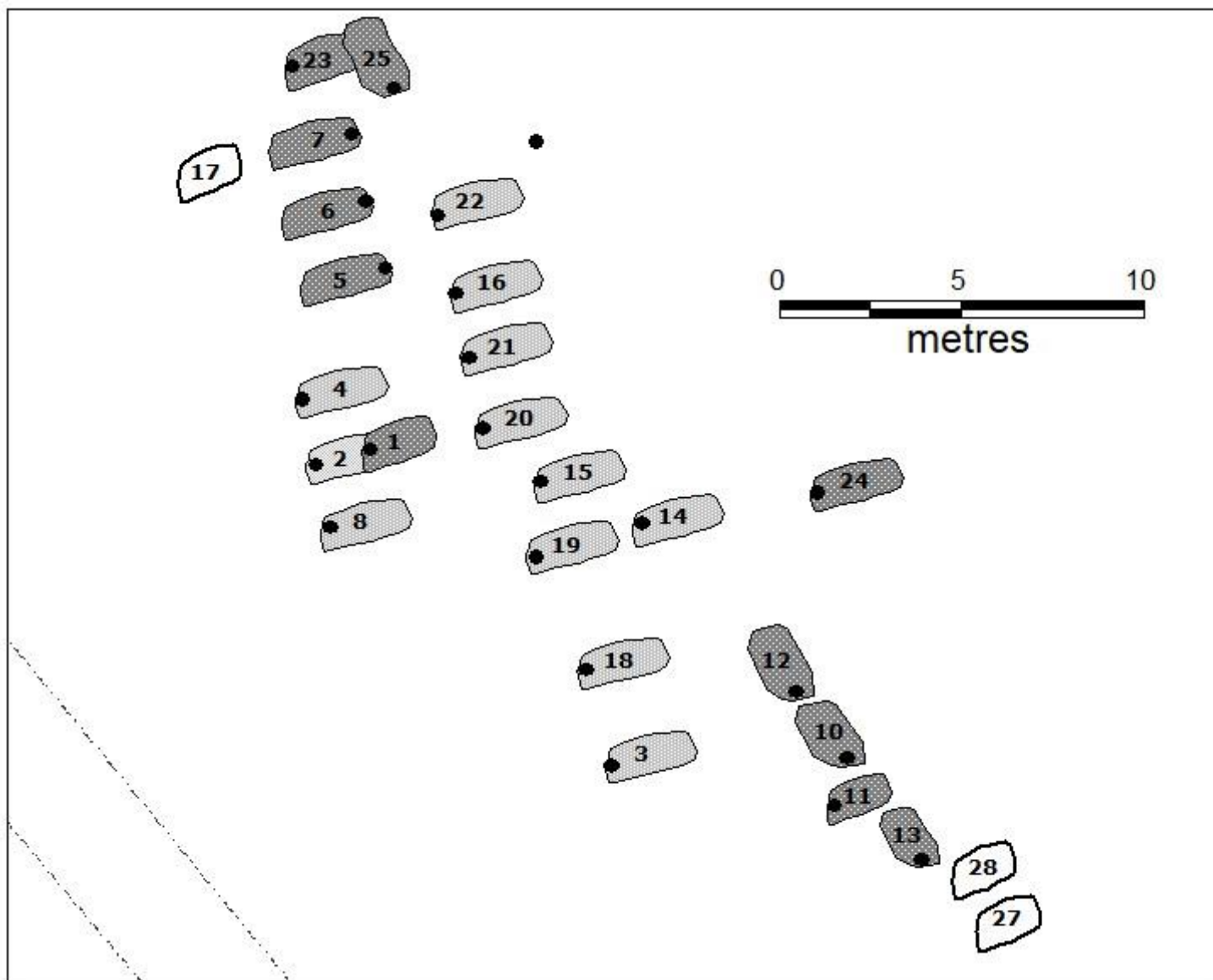
Post Roman Inhumation Cemetery 5th AD Alignments & Grave Number



■ Male ■ Female ■ Juvenile/Infant

Post Roman Inhumation Cemetery 5thc AD
Head Orientation & Absence/Presence of Grave Goods

Dark Grey (Grave Goods), Light Grey (No Grave Goods)



The graves are predominantly female, which could be for any number of reasons. Perhaps the limited number of male burials could reflect those lost in warfare or they could have had more than one partner, or women could have come from outside the area to increase the number of females, bearing in mind that one female was of Scandinavian (Danish) origin.

The cemetery indicates different burial rites and traditions. Some of the individuals may have come from abroad, bringing different burial practices with them. In the post Roman period outsiders were often brought in to defend the local administrative centres. This cemetery was on the edge of the Catuvellauni administrative region, although this was an Iron Age Celtic tribe, the Romans used existing administrative structures instead of developing new ones and these were still in place. Mixed burial rites would indicate that the newcomers were absorbed rather than acting as invaders. The existence of children and family groupings also points to integration.

The graves within the cemetery were systematically organised, with the burials being evenly spaced and laid out in lines. Given the time frame – 50 years approx. – the earliest phase of the cemetery was in use for more than one generation. This also implies a level of administrative organisation based around a community grouping which could have been related to the late Roman villa estate.

There is a break in usage of around 100 years between the first and the second cemetery. Both cemeteries potentially could have been as a result of immigration. The first, following the withdrawal of the Romans, when outsiders arrived – possibly feudal tenants – to defend the area.

The second period of use for the cemetery is during the later 6thc and early 7thc. Four burials were excavated, all of which were aligned south/north, male, with shields and spears. The alignments plus the grave goods suggest pagan burials.

The Anglo Saxon settlement of Britain occurred between the mid 5th to early 7th centuries and during this time seven Anglo Saxon kingdoms were established with their own cultural identity, later to be consolidated into 4 kingdoms, one of which was Mercia. The second usage of the cemetery coincided with the expansion of Mercia, which became one of the most powerful of the Anglo Saxon kingdoms. The cemetery is situated in the middle of this region known as Mercia, which covered what is now known as the Midlands and whose capital was based in Tamworth. Mercia converted to Christianity at the end of the 7thc, later than the other Anglo Saxon kingdoms, which would explain the pagan burials in the cemetery. These particular burials could have been expeditionary forces during its time of expansion.

One of the first burials to be found, that of the 8thc crouched burial with a sword, is a later burial but could have been a warrior making a statement by using a visible site near to Watling Street with far reaching views over the area.

Grave goods can tell us a lot about the social structure and way of life. All the males had personal knives – useful for cutting or eating and possibly defence – along with some of the women. Some had forks also used for food. The women with grave goods tended to have

jewellery reflecting a continental origin, indicating the existence of trade or if they were immigrants, they may have brought it with them. One male had grave goods including a spear, shield boss and a copper alloy strap end with associated belt clasps located on the hip and shoulder. Both the spear and shield boss are dated to the 5th c. Another male burial from the later cemetery had also been buried with a spear and shield boss. The sword in the 8th c burial obviously belonged to a warrior, and had a welded steel edge on one side of the blade. One of the 5th c female burials was face down in the grave and had no feet which may have been cut off prior to death. One grave contained a young woman complete with perinatal foetus who had probably died in child birth. There were no examples of multiple interments in any graves.

The main learning points from this site are, in terms of the earlier cemetery, the extent of the organisation demonstrated through the alignment of the graves and that it was in use for more than one generation indicating a social structure. It was used by a community with knowledge of the placing of the graves being passed down to the next generation. This community was open to outsiders, as isotope analysis shows that one individual came from Scandinavia, and there may have been others.

Another learning point is evidence of the traditions and beliefs surrounding burial practices. Within the earlier cemetery alignments were west/east or east/west implying Christian burials but those with heads at the eastern end all had grave goods. It may have been a time when practices were changing from pagan to Christian or different practices may have come with newcomers. There were also differences between male and female burials indicating differences in social status.

Finally, although the answers to many of the questions posed by the results of the excavation are not clear, the site is useful to consider in terms of the wider context and its contribution to the national database.

Grave 26



Grave 29





Some artefacts found on the site:



Saucer brooches with glass bead jewellery



Shield boss



Belt buckle



Bone pins



Sword



Tweezers and belt