The Marlow Warlord:
An Early Medieval Sentinel Burial of the Middle Thames

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University of Reading

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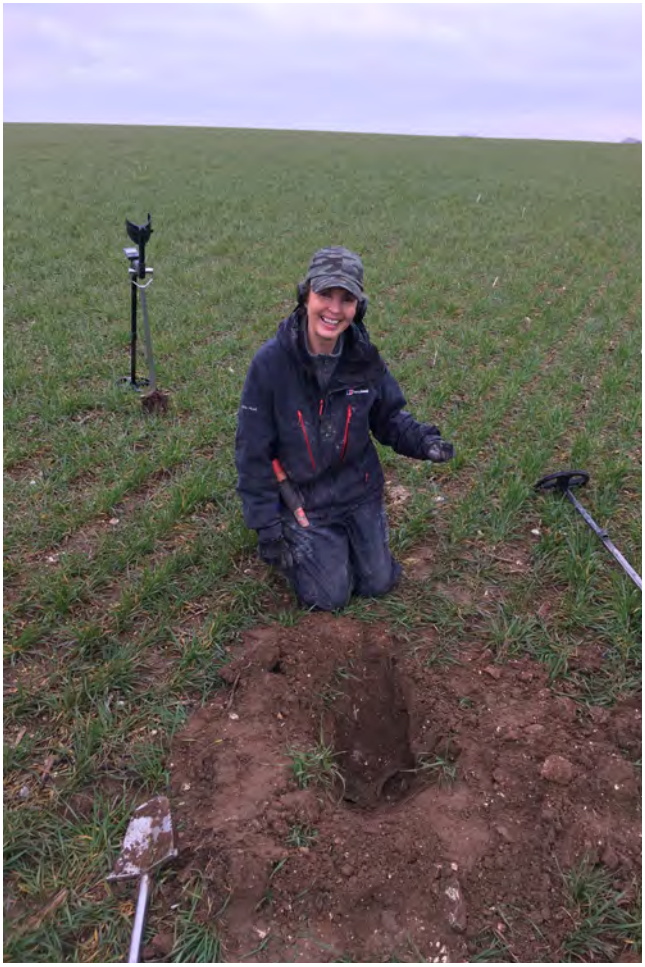


Sue Washington - Original Finder

James Mather - Maidenhead Search Society

Initial Discovery by Detectorists

The discovery and subsequent excavation of the Marlow Warlord exemplifies the important results that can be gained through fruitful collaboration between archaeologists and metal-detectorists. The burial was originally discovered in spring 2018 by Sue Washington during a visit by members of the Maidenhead Search Society to farmland occupying high ground overlooking the Thames valley close to the Buckinghamshire town of Marlow (The anonymity of the site has been preserved in accordance with an agreement of the landowner who has very generously donated the grave goods to Buckinghamshire Museum.)

The initial signal was given by two circles of metal uncovered 6 inches below the surface of the plough soil which on further enquiry turned out to be the rims of a pair of substantially intact bronze vessels. As a responsible detectorist, Sue immediately notified her local Finds Liaison Officer (Arwen Wood) who, with along husband Edwin (also a F.L.O.) conducted a targeted excavation to recover the bowls. Due to their fragile condition the bowls were lifted in soil blocks, the extraction of which revealed a pair of iron spearheads and a fragment of human bone, indicating that the context in question was an Anglo-Saxon furnished burial of evidently elite status.

The complete investigation of this important burial rests upon the timely intervention of James Mather, a long-time member of the Maidenhead Search Society with a track-record of collaborating with archaeologists, most notably in the recovery of the Viking silver hoard from Watlington, Oxfordshire. Soon after the bowls and spears were recovered, James approached the second author, an early medieval specialist at the University of Reading's department of Archaeology, with a view to securing archaeological expertise to conduct a full-scale excavation of the burial. A magnetometer survey was initially undertaken in the spring of 2019 to situate the burial in a wider archaeological context, followed by a four-week excavation in August 2020. The latter was conducted by staff and students from the University of Reading, under the direction of Dr Thomas, assisted by volunteers from local archaeological societies and members of the Maidenhead Search Society, including the original finder, Sue Washington.

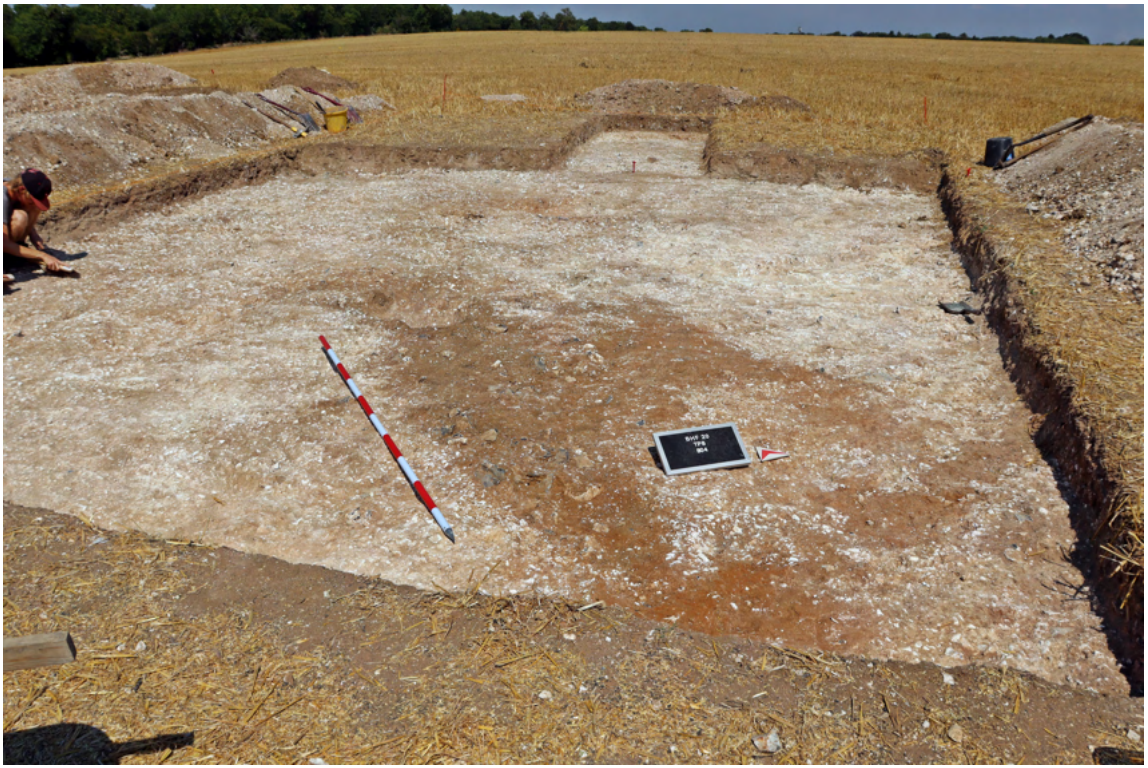
View of grave prior to excavation with backfill of PAS intervention removed

Fully excavated grave showing boat shaped profile

The 2020 Excavation

Trial trenches were initially excavated in the landscape around the burial to investigate anomalies revealed by the magnetometry survey. These were found to be of geological derivation or else related to medieval quarrying activity, demonstrating the strong likelihood that the Marlow Warlord was an isolated burial rather than being part of a larger cemetery. Thus established, remaining time and resource was expended on the total investigation of the burial.

A 5m2 trench was opened up over the location of the burial revealing a north-south orientated grave cut with a distinctly boat-shaped outline. The upper surface of the grave was covered with a dense array of flint nodules of local geological derivation, evidently purposefully deposited as a capping. The flints were found to lie directly over the skeleton of the deceased individual and the accompanying grave goods. Combined with the effects of repeated ploughing, this disposition resulted in the skeletal remains suffering a high level of fragmentation from crushing. The definition, recording and lifting of the skeleton and associated grave goods followed the Updated Guidelines to the Standards For Recording of Human Remains (CIFA 2017), with additional guidance being provided by Mary Lewis, Professor of Human Osteology at the University of Reading; detailed measurement of selected skeletal elements was undertaken in the field due to the high level of bone fragmentation. A flexible approach was taken to the recovery of grave goods, the most intact being lifted individually as discrete objects and the most delicate and/or fragmentary being lifted as soil blocks which applied to the sword and scabbard ensemble and the glass vessel.



View of grave prior to excavation

Burial exposed from South

Recording the burial

The Marlow Warlord

An initial osteological assessment of the burial was provided by Professor Mary Lewis. This was followed by a more thorough programme of analysis by an undergraduate student, Lotte Proctor, under the supervision of Dr Ceri Falys who helps to deliver the department of Archeology's MSc in Professional Human Osteology.

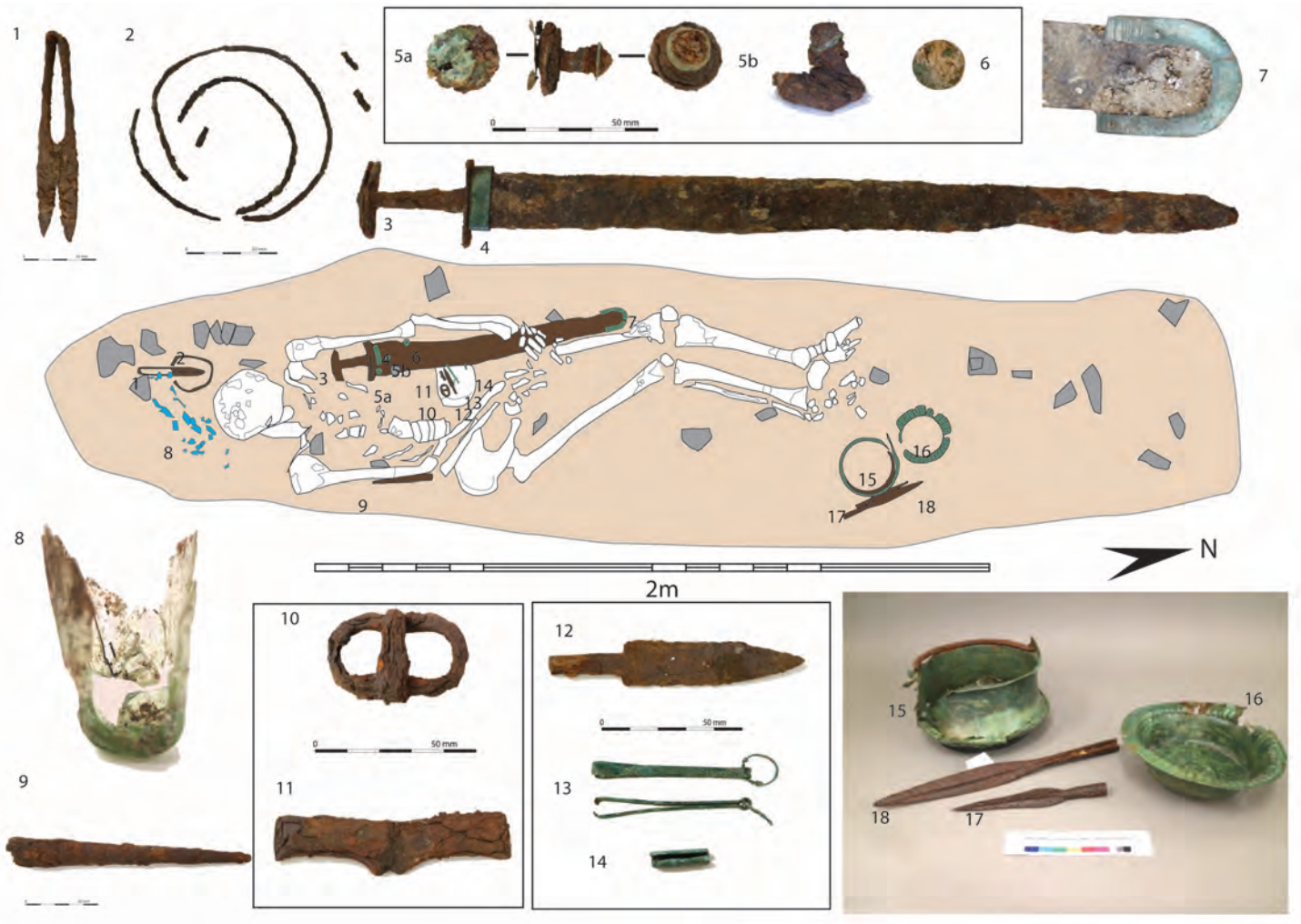
While constrained by the highly fragmented nature of the skeletal remains, the results of the analysis have proved crucial in reconstructing an identity for the Marlow Warlord. The size and morphology of the skull and pelvis indicate that the deceased was a male, an attribution since confirmed by DNA analysis. His estimated age at death is 46+ years based on the joints of the pelvis and the presence of arthritis in the hips and spine.

One of the most distinctive features of the Marlow Warlord is his tall stature estimated at around 193cm ± 5.15cm (or in the range of 6'2"-6'6") on the basis of measured elements. The average height for men during the early medieval period was approximately 5'7".

He was very probably right-handed as indicated by the comparative robustness of skeletal elements on that side of the body and the presence of stronger muscle attachments, especially the muscles of the right forearm that turn the lower arm. This is accompanied by further signs of strenuous activity, including very broad proximal ends of the femora caused by excessive mechanical loading and evidence for well-healed trauma on the inside of his left shin.

The study also identified skeletal-muscular markers that might be expected from prolonged periods of horse riding, although this is a very new area of research and the attribution must remain tentative.

The Marlow Warlord

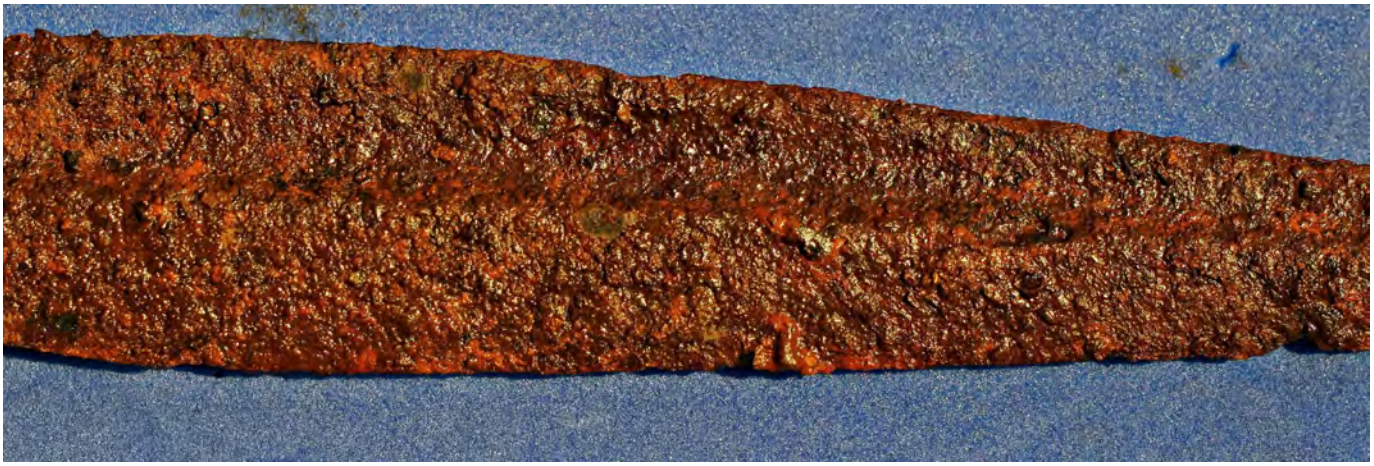


Grave goods and grave plan

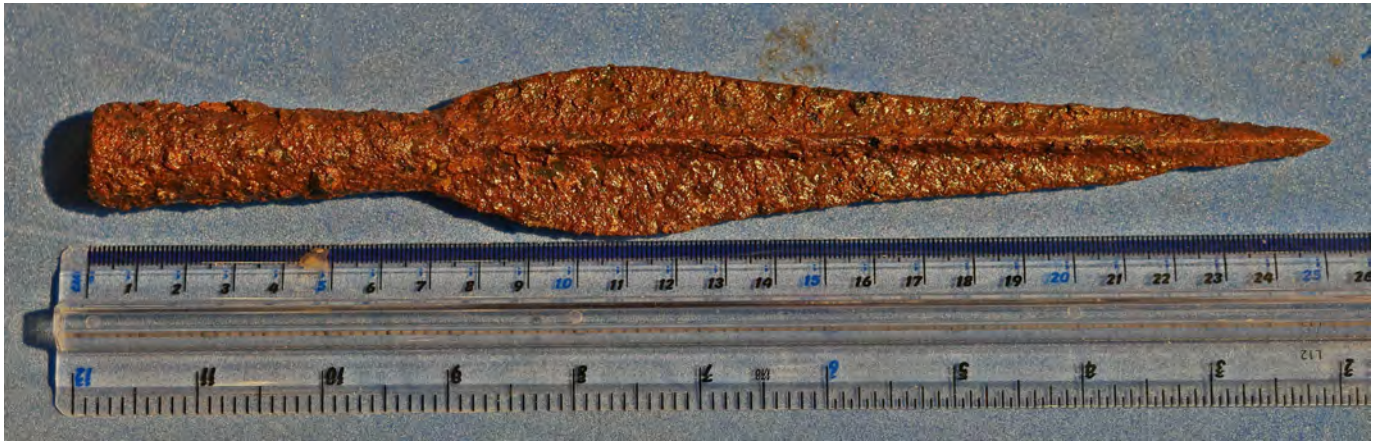
Inventory of Grave Goods

1. Iron shears
2. A pair of circular iron bands
3. Sword with iron and horn hilt fittings in a wooden scabbard
4. Copper alloy scabbard mouth-band
5. Composite iron and copper alloy scabbard studs (5a & 5b)
6. Copper alloy disc
7. Copper alloy scabbard chape
8. Glass beaker, Kempston type, crushed and highly fragmented.
9. Iron spear ferrule/butt-spike (associated with 17)
10. Iron buckle, Marzinzik type 1.7b
11. Iron fire-steel
12. Iron knife
13. Copper alloy tweezers
14. Open sided copper alloy tube
15. Bronze cauldron
16. Bronze bowl
17. Iron spearhead, Swanton type I2
18. Iron spearhead, Swanton type B2

Large spearhead



Large spearhead: detail of fullering



Small spearhead

Spearheads

Two spearheads were found during the initial PAS excavation in 2018. Spears are the most commonly found weapon in early Anglo Saxon burials and, whilst it is most common to find just one spear in a burial, where two are found together they are often mismatched with one head being larger than the other.

They were both located on the right hand side of the body with the points at the foot of the grave. The placement to the right of the body is normal in burials of the early Anglo Saxon period but placing the spears 'upside down' with the spearheads by the feet is unusual and is sometimes cited as being evidence of a continental (or, more specifically, a Frankish) influence (Harrington and Welch 2014).

Early Anglo Saxon spearheads are usually categorised using Swanton's typology (Swanton 1973). The smaller of the two spearheads is of type B2, a leaf-shaped type which has a very pronounced mid-rib on both sides of the blade, giving the spearhead a very distinctive cross section. The socket is fully welded and there is a substantial amount of wood from the spear shaft remaining in it. An example of this type of spearhead was found in a weapons burial at the Roman fort at Richborough, dating to the late 4th or early 5th century and another was found in an early 5th century burial at Dorchester-on-Thames. Both are thought to have belonged to Germanic soldiers who served in some capacity in the late Roman military and the evidence suggests that this style, which is most commonly found in cemeteries along the course of the Thames, falls out of use by the beginning of the 6th century.

The larger spearhead is of Swanton's type I2 and is also very distinctive. It is broadly symmetrical with an even curve to the blade from socket to tip and is both corrugated (so that the cross section is 's' shaped) and fullered, meaning that the smith who forged it has spread the iron by reducing its thickness. This results in a spearhead that is lighter than it might otherwise be for its size and which uses less raw material. The socket is split rather than forged closed like the smaller spearhead. Whilst examples of this type are not found in contexts earlier than mid 5th century, the earliest examples do date to the second half of the 5th and it seems to go out of use by the mid 6th century.

During the 2020 excavation of the burial, a pointed iron ferrule was discovered beside the upper right arm. This would have been fitted to the other end of the shaft of the larger spearhead. The distance between the ferrule and the spearhead is c. 240cm, which gives us an approximate length of the whole spear, assuming that nothing shifted in the grave. The average length for a spear of this period is about 200cm.

Small Spearhead
24.5cm long
3.5cm at its widest
2cm socket internal diameter

Large Spearhead
44cm long
4cm at its widest
2.1cm socket internal diameter

Intact beaker from Kempston

The base of the beaker reconstructed
© Drakon Heritage & Conservation

Glass fragments from the beaker
© Drakon Heritage & Conservation

Glass Beaker

There were a large number of glass fragments in the burial, clustered at the northern end of the grave and clearly from a glass vessel of some type which had been placed near to the head. Pieta Greaves (Drakon Heritage and Conservation LLP) was able to assemble some of the many fragments (joining them together with Paraloid B72 restoration adhesive) enough to demonstrate that it was a conical beaker of the 'Kempston' form, a type that is found in early Anglo Saxon contexts dated from the late 5th until the mid-6th century.

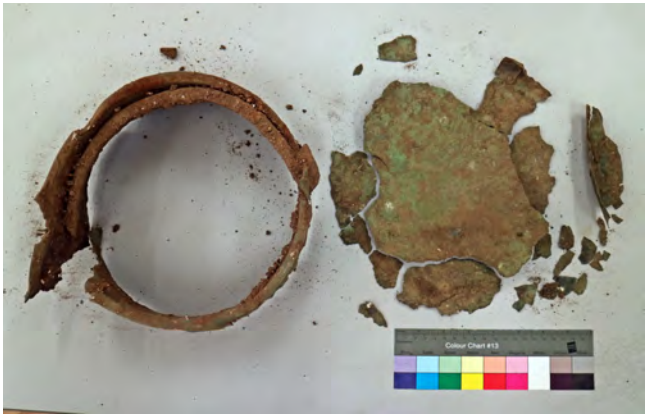
It was not possible to add any of the remaining fragments to this reconstruction, but some of them show the bands of trailed glass that were wound horizontally around the upper end of beakers of this type as decoration.

The glass is all one colour, a very light green, and extremely thin in some parts, particularly those fragments that come from near the mouth of the beaker. This light green colour is typical of glass found in the very earliest of Anglo Saxon contexts and the delicacy of the glass is a testament to the skills of the maker. Like all glass of the early Anglo Saxon period, it was blown and, once formed to the right form and decorated, a punty rod was added to the base and the glass cut from the blowing iron. Then the rim was fire formed to shape and smoothed.

The glass itself is of the low magnesia, low potash 'natron' type, the same as that commonly used by Roman glassmakers in Britain. It may have been obtained by recycling Roman glass (vessels or windows), by using raw stock still to be found in Britain or from freshly imported material originating in the eastern Mediterranean. Analysis of other, similar beakers found in Britain indicates the latter, suggesting that there was a trade in raw glass in the 5th and 6th century that stretched all the way from Britain to the Levant.

Of the 14 different types of early Anglo Saxon glass cone beakers identified by Vera Evison in "Catalogue of Anglo Saxon Glass in the British Museum" the Kempston type (classified as 'Group 26') is the most frequently found. The 10 examples in the collection of the British Museum come from all over England, with finds from Kent, Sussex, Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Somerset, Lincolnshire. There are also examples from Yorkshire and Dumfries, with the total number of known finds currently exceeding 50. Although similar beakers are found on the Continent and it has been suggested that they are imports from the well known glass producing centers of the Rhineland, the comparatively high volume of finds and the fact that some of them come from very early contexts makes a strong case for them being produced in England, possibly Kent.

Perlrandbecker before reconstruction
(PAS CC BY)



Westlandkessel before reconstruction
(PAS CC BY)

Westlandkessel after reconstruction

Perlrandbecker after reconstruction

Spin-marks visible on the Perlrandbecker base

Copper Alloy Vessels

The two copper alloy vessels were the first objects to be revealed during the initial excavation led by Arwen Wood (Buckinghamshire Finds Liaison Officer) in 2018. In fact, were it not for the vessels, the burial might not have been discovered at all. When Sue Washington first picked up the signal, it was so strong that it was thought that it might be from a modern lump of metal. Fortunately Sue decided to investigate further, revealing the rims of the vessels some 15cm below the surface, at which point she contacted Arwen.

As the excavation commenced, it became obvious that both vessels were in a very delicate and fragmentary condition and that block lifting of both would be required to prevent further degradation. This was carried out successfully and Arwen was able to obtain funding to allow for the conservation of both. This (along with the conservation of all of the other items from this and the subsequent excavation) was carried out by Drakon Heritage and Conservation LLP who were able to reconstruct both vessels.

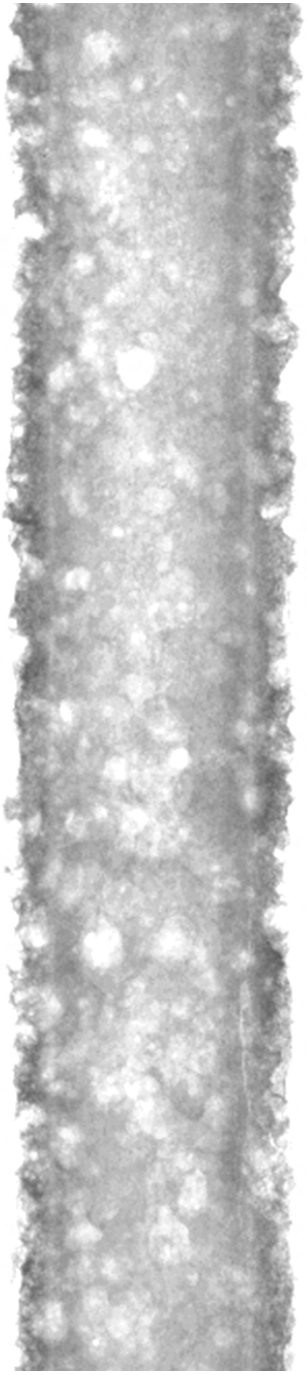
The smaller of the two is circular, relatively shallow with a foot ring and repousséd beaded rim, a form sometimes referred to as "Perlrandbecker". These bowls, whilst not common finds in England, are widely distributed with examples from the South East (Kent, Surrey, Sussex,), East Anglia and the East Midlands. At least three of these were found in burials which also contained swords and other weapons but they are more usually found in richly furnished female burials, such as Grave 20 from Buckland (Evison 1987). The are thought to be of Continental manufacture, possibly from the Rhine or Meuse valley regions as this is where the majority of examples are found, in contexts dating from the late 5th to early 7th century (ibid.). Marks on the base and on the outside walls show that it was formed by being spun on a lathe rather than being raised by hammering.

The larger vessel is a deep cauldron with a distinctive carinated base and triangular ears in to which an iron handle is fitted. Copper alloy cauldrons of this type are one of the forms of "Westlandkessel" (named after the Vestlandet/ Westland region of Norway, where they are most commonly found)), more specifically a type 2C according to Hauken's typology (Hauken 2005). Examples are known from all over Western Europe and Scandinavia, with the highest concentrations being found in Norway (112 examples, including two which were found with Perlrandbecker very similar to the one from our burial) and Germany (34 examples). Hauken lists 10 examples from early Anglo Saxon context including two (at Morning Thorpe and Sawston) which were found with Perlrandbecker. As with the Perlrandbecker, the cauldrons are thought to come from workshops in the Rhine or Meuse valley and their widespread distribution perhaps indicates that they were much sought after as status symbols across a variety of Migration Period and Early Medieval cultures. The example in the grave of the Marlow Warlord was clearly both a much valued and well used object; it had been repaired at least once prior to it's deposition. The type 2C Westlandkessel form was in use from the early 4th century until the early 6th.

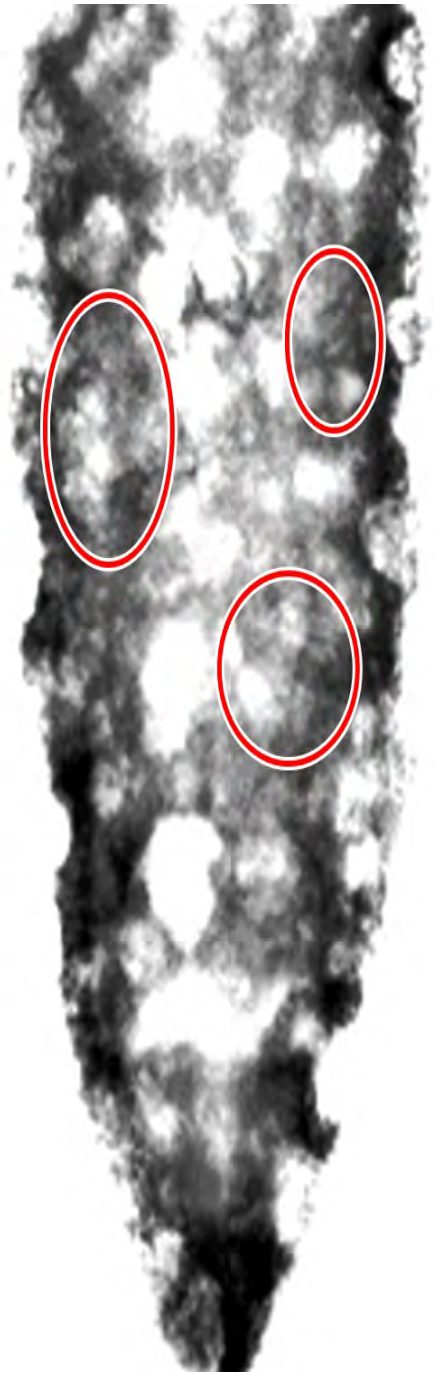
Perlrandbecker
28cm diameter
8cm tall

Westlandkessel
23.5cm diameter
14cm tall

Sword before and after conservation



X-ray showing weld lines
(©Historic England)



X-ray showing twisted rods
(©Historic England)

Sword

Swords are the only objects to be found in early medieval burial contexts who's only practical purpose is martial. Spears and archery equipment could be used for hunting, axes for woodworking, knives for a variety of purposes but swords were designed specifically for warfare. As such, they are also associated with power, prestige, wealth etc and so the inclusion of a sword in an Anglo Saxon burial suggests that those who selected the grave goods wanted to demonstrate that the person being buried (and perhaps, by extension, themselves) were important figures in their society.

Whilst some swords from the period were obviously hugely valuable, with hilt fittings made from silver and gold, embellished with garnet cloisonne or fine filigree work, even those with simpler fittings would still be costly objects that would have been valued as treasured possessions and gifts of great worth and meaning. This is because the sword blade itself, forged from multiple elements, required a great deal of skill, effort and raw materials to produce.

All blades in the early Anglo Saxon period consisted of several rods of iron which would be heated in the sword-smith's hearth and then forge-welded together to form the core of the blade. This would then have another piece of iron with a higher carbon content welded to it to create the cutting edge. This rough blade would then be hammered and then filed to its final shape; a long, two edged sword with a slight taper along its length.

In many if not most cases, the iron rods that made up the core of the blade would be twisted along their length before being forge-welded together. When the surface of the blade was ground back during the shaping process, the different twists in the rods would create a pattern in the blade. This process is known as pattern-welding and iron made in this way is said to be pattern-welded although in recent decades it has also become known, erroneously, as 'Damascus Steel' (true Damascus Steel is actually a very different material).

Because swords which have lain in the ground for more than 1500 years tend to be heavily corroded, it is usually impossible to tell if the blade is pattern welded but this can often be revealed by x-raying the blade. However, even with x-ray, it can be difficult to get a clear image of the pattern as there are so many variables to consider. Our blade was x-rayed by Historic England and the results were, at first glance, disappointing, with no pattern being discernible. Fortunately, some post-processing of the images revealed evidence of the blade's construction, showing that the core of the blade consists of 4 bars each made up of at least two iron rods. Each of these bars is twisted for at least some of their length, with the resulting pattern probably being a simple herringbone. Around this core is wrapped a cutting edge made up of at least two layers, the weld lines between these layers and the core being clearly visible. These weld lines are still visible on the tang, the part of the blade that passes through the hilt. Further analysis of the blade is being undertaken which will hopefully reveal more about it's structure and possibly even the metallurgy of the iron used.

With a total length of 87cm , blade length of 75cm and maximum width of 6cm, the Marlow blade is very close to the average dimensions for a sword of the 5th or 6th century.

Hilt fittings

Pommel cap and upper guard

Pommel cap and upper guard

Hilt Fittings

The study of hilt fittings on swords of the early medieval period is important as they can sometimes give us a good idea as to both where and when a sword was manufactured. Usually consisting of a lower guard, grip and upper guard, many sword hilts (or at least the majority of those which have been excavated) were made entirely from organic material which usually leaves little or no trace after centuries in the ground. Some however, particularly those found in burials of seemingly important individuals, have one or more metal elements.

The most frequently found of these metal fittings is the pommel cap, the part that sits on the top of the hilt assembly and it is this piece that can be the most useful in determining the period and culture from which the sword originated. Over the course of the 6th and 7th centuries, pommel caps became highly decorative works of art executed in silver or gold which demonstrated the skill of their makers as well as the wealth or status of those who's swords they adorned. Their original purpose was more functional, serving as a block of metal, usually cast copper alloy, over which the end of the blade's tang was peened, thus holding the hilt assembly itself together firmly.

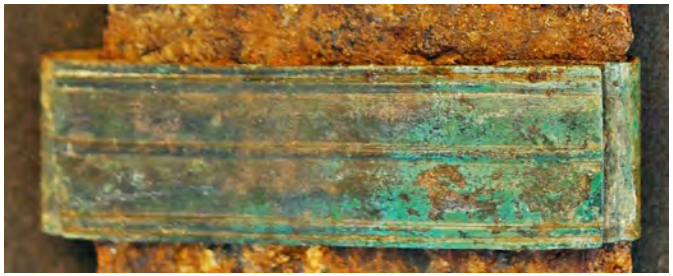
The other metal elements that are sometimes found on sword hilts are plates which were fitted to the upper and lower guards. The guards themselves were usually made from bovine horn, a tough, plastic material that is capable of absorbing impact without shattering. Metal plates were sometimes riveted to one or both faces of these guards, both to provide additional resilience and to add decoration to the hilt.

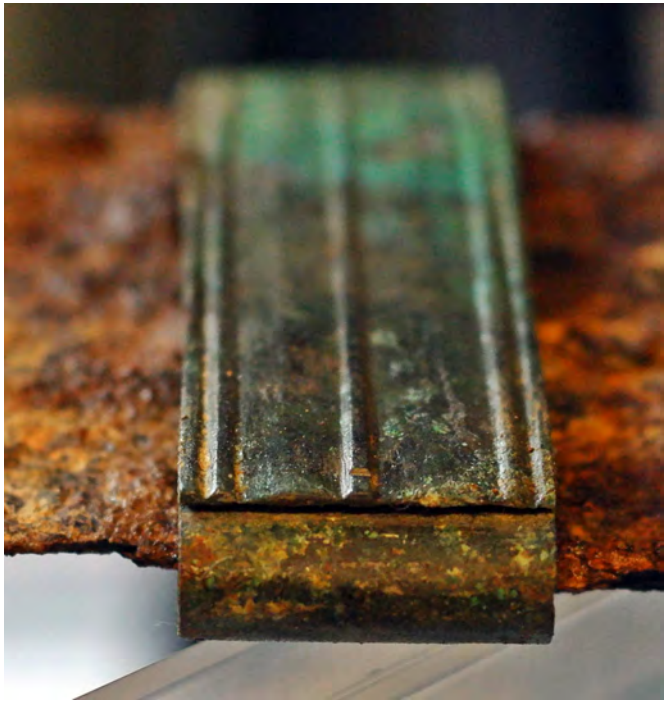
The Marlow sword has all of these additional metal elements. Two guard plates sandwich both the upper and lower guards, joined together by two rivets, and the pommel cap serves as a both a decorative element and a peening block. There are a number of things that make the Marlow hilt fittings particularly interesting.

Firstly, all of the metal elements are made from iron. Whilst remains of iron pommel caps are rare but not unknown from early Anglo Saxon contexts, there are no other swords from the 5th or 6th century with guard plates made from iron. This may of course be due to corrosion having destroyed other examples but there is no evidence of them in the legacy marks of the hilt materials frequently found on the remains of swords.

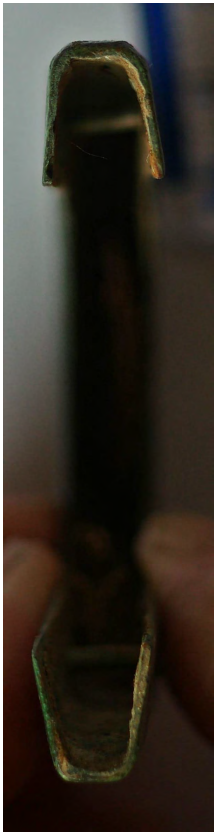
Secondly, the forms of the different elements are unusual. The plates fitted to the lower face of organic guards are usually tray-shaped in which the guard itself sits but the Marlow plates are all flat, something which is seemingly unique in a pre-7th century context in Britain. We do find examples of flat plates in Western and Northern European contexts, usually on swords from the early 6th century and earlier and mostly from Scandinavian contexts.

Lastly, the form of the pommel cap. Although corrosion has taken part of one arm and obscures some surface detail, it is still possible to establish that it is of the "Holmegard-Kragehul" type. These low, boat-shaped pommel caps almost certainly originate in Denmark in the mid-5th century and they are very seldom found elsewhere except for Britain, where a few stray detectorist finds have been recorded. Most of the surviving examples are made from cast copper alloy, the one from Marlow being the best example of an iron version found to date. This style of pommel cap falls out of use in the early 6th century.





Mouth-band



Chape

Scabbard and Fittings

Although little survives of the organic elements now, we know that the scabbard was made from two laths of wood (probably willow or poplar) which were hollowed out to make a cavity for the blade, joined together and then covered in skin product, probably bovine leather which was stitched up the back. During conservation, a small piece of the linen thread used to stitch the leather was discovered at the chape end. The cavity was probably lined with sheep fleece which would serve to cushion the sword blade and hold it in the scabbard. The scabbard may have been decorated using the foundation moulding technique, in which the leather covering is moulded over a design on the face of the wooden core. In some cases the design was carved into the wood but simple designs were sometimes created by gluing cord to the wooden core and moulding the leather over that.

The scabbard would have been suspended from either a waist belt or more likely a baldric worn over the shoulder. Two small iron and copper alloy studs (SF15 and SF17) were probably part of the suspension mechanism, with the studs being fixed to the scabbard and then fitting into slits in the belt or baldric.

It is unusual to find metal scabbard fittings of any kind in early Anglo Saxon sword burials. In Esther Cameron's survey of 250 such burials, she records 37 mouth-bands,17 chapes and only 5 instances of a chape being found without a mouth-band. That means that, based on that sample, a combination of scabbard and chape occurs in only about 5% of sword burials.

Both the mouth-band and the chape are made from copper alloy which may have been gilded in parts. An XRF study is scheduled which may allow us to determine the specific composition of the alloys and will also confirm if there is any gilding present.

The mouth-band was made in two parts. The decorated front panel features five longitudinal ridges and was seemingly cut from a longer strip of cast copper alloy. This decorated panel was brazed to a longer strip of plain copper alloy which encircles the rest of the scabbard. The shape of the mouth-band gives us both the maximum width of the scabbard (7cm) and also the cross section of the scabbard, which was an elipse. This form of mouth-band was in use throughout Western Europe from at least the second half of the 5th century and continued throughout the 6th century.

The chape was cast in one piece, is roughly horseshoe shaped and fitted around the tip of the scabbard. It was held in place by two small copper alloy rivets that were still in situ when excavated. The back of the chape is plain but it has decoration on its front face, in the form of multiple longitudinal lines across both arms. This decoration is deliberately asymmetrical. A mark on the base of the chape shows that it once had a small knob-like protrusion but this was seemingly missing at the time of burial, broken off perhaps by a blow to the front of the chape by a straight, v-shaped blade which also left a very clear mark on the front face of the chape. The chape is angular in profile rather than being rounded.
Chapes of this type are usually found in Scandinavia, particularly Denmark, in contexts which date to the second half of the 5th century. It is a very unusual type to find in Britain.

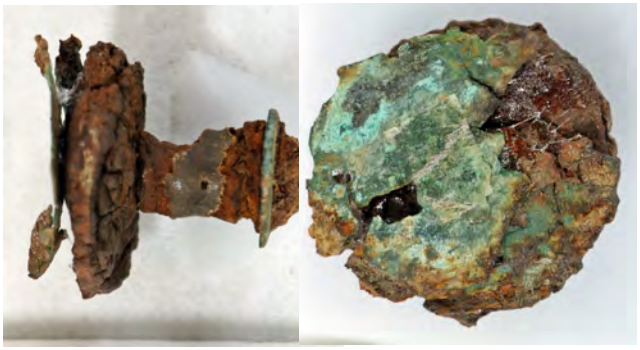
Copper-alloy tweezers

Iron buckle

Iron shears

Iron knife

Iron bands



Iron and copper alloy studs

Iron fire steel

Other Finds

Scabbard studs - Two disc-headed studs of iron and copper alloy. The studs themselves are made of iron. Both have the remains of a copper alloy washer close to one end and one of the studs has the remains of a copper alloy cap on its head. The location of this pair of studs indicates that they were associated with the sword scabbard, probably serving as part of the mechanism which held the scabbard itself to the belt or baldric from which it was suspended. The studs may have been fixed to the scabbard, passing through holes in the suspension strap or they may have held two elements of the suspension strap together, creating a loop into which the scabbard fitted (Mortimer and Bunker 2019). Height - 2cm

Iron bands - Fragments of curved, D-section iron bands were found at the head of the burial. Whilst it's not possible to determine how these pieces fitted together and how many objects they represent, their curvature, profile and their position in the burial make it possible that they are from a small bucket or situla. Small wooden buckets, bound with metal bands, are frequent finds in well furnished early Anglo Saxon burials. Most are bound with copper alloy bands but iron banding is also well evidenced, becoming more common from the mid-6th century (Cook 2004)

Tweezers - A pair of copper alloy tweezers, suspended from a twisted wire ring, also of copper alloy. The tweezers were cast, most likely using the 'lost wax' method where a master model is carved and then wrapped in clay, leaving a vent hole. Once the wax is melted out and the clay dried, molten metal can be poured into it to create the object. This particular pair is well made, with chamfered edges and simple line decoration. Tweezers are common finds in well furnished early Anglo Saxon burials and the assumption is that they were used for personal grooming. They are seemingly more commonly found in male burials (Hines and Bayliss 2013). Length - 8.5cm

Fire Steel - This iron object was used in conjunction with a flint to start a fire. This particular style is not commonly found in early Anglo-Saxon contexts but is seen in continental burials of the late 5th century. One example from the Frankish cemetery at Rhenen (grave 834) was found with a pair of tweezers and a knife very similar to our own examples. That burial dates to the mid/late 5th century (Wagner and Ypey 2011). In some cases, fire steels were mounted on the outside of a small purse, thought to contain flints and tinder. Its location on the body in association with other small objects makes it likely that this object was either in a pouch or mounted on one. Length - 8.3cm

Knife - A small iron knife, single edged, with a short tang. Knives of this sort are ubiquitous in early Anglo Saxon burials of all genders and ages. The short tang would have been inserted in to a handle of organic material, either wood or bovine horn. It's small size and location in the burial makes it likely that it was contained in a pouch along with the tweezers and fire steel. Length - 10cm

Shears. A pair of iron shears, found above the head in close relation to the iron bands. It is possible that the shears were placed in to the vessel that the iron bands belonged to. In a broad study of Anglo Saxon graves and grave goods (Hines and Bayliss 2013) shears were found to be much more common in female burials, presumably for use in textile production. Their size probably precludes them from use for personal grooming. Length -19cm

Buckle. An iron, kidney-shaped buckle with iron tongue, of Marzinzik type 1.7b. It was found in the same area as the small knife and fire steel so, whilst it is possible that it is a buckle from either a waist belt or sword belt, it may also have been used as a closure for a pouch which contained the other two items. Buckles of this type were in use from the mid 5th to early/mid 6th century. Width - 4.5cm

The Marlow Warlord in Context

The Marlow Warlord opens a fascinating window on the cultural environment of southern England, and river Thames specifically, in the immediate post-Roman period. By way of a conclusion, we here offer some provisional reflections on the issues raised by this discovery and their implications for understanding the role played by funerary practices in the rapidly evolving social conditions of the early Anglo-Saxon age. The immediate archaeological context for the Marlow Warlord is provided by the small number of well-furnished weapon burials known from the fifth century, the majority of which – Dorchester (Oxfordshire), Guildown (Surrey) and Mucking (Essex) – fall within the catchment of the river Thames (Blair 1994).

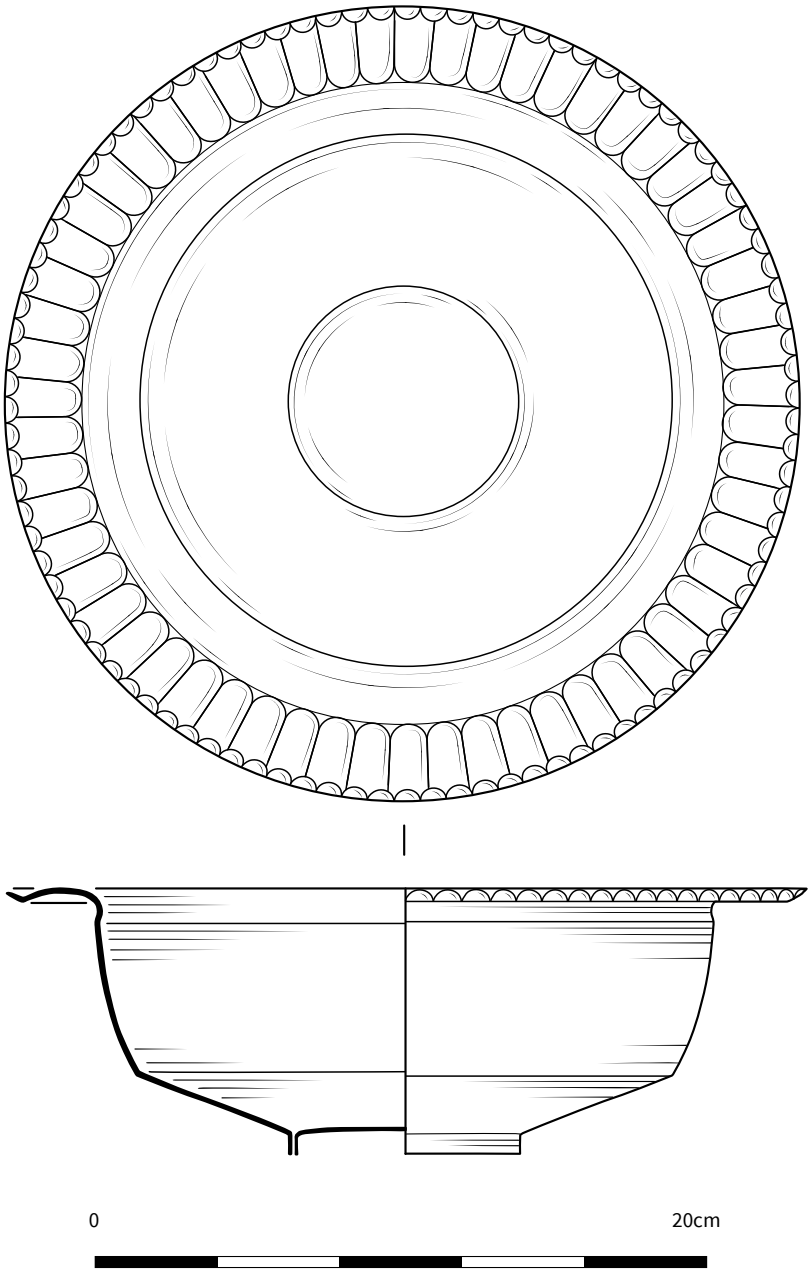
In contrast to the comparative standardisation of the sixth century, these burials display an unusually diverse range of weaponry, variously influenced by continental Frankish, Scandinavian, Late Roman imperial and perhaps even native British cultural traditions. Different armament sets were evidently circulating in southern England at this time, the conscious selection of which likely proclaimed powerful messages of cultural affiliation and ancestral legitimation. As with much else at this culturally fluid time, the language of martial identity in the fifth century was spoken in varied tongues. Even the absence of a shield in the burial (a striking omission for anyone familiar with the martial panoply of the early medieval warrior) is not unusual in the context of sword burials of the late 5th and early 6th century. In a study of 163 burials which contained swords, shields were absent from 68. Even allowing for losses prior to excavation (due to ploughing or other disturbance) or errors in the record, the absence of a shield in a sword burial is noteworthy but not exceptional. At a time when Lowland Britain can be thought of as a melting pot of different cultural influences, traditions and rites, the Marlow Warlord burial (which contains items which have their origins in numerous Northwestern European cultures) can be seen as a microcosm of that.

Beyond this immediate context, the Marlow Warlord bears comparison with a broader corpus of so-called Anglo-Saxon 'sentinel burials', combining rich assemblages of weaponry and other grave goods with commanding topographic locations overlooking territorial frontiers (O'Brien 2008). We currently lack a full understanding of the landscape context of the Marlow Warlord, however, sufficient work has been undertaken to demonstrate the likelihood that this was indeed an isolated burial or, at the very least, a spatially segregated grave, in which the deceased had been specifically laid out to face hostile 'British' territory on the north side of the Thames. As such, the Marlow Warlord can be regarded as a quintessential expression of the sentinel burial tradition, a practice which may have been motivated by contemporary conceptions that the ancestral dead could influence the world of the living, in the current context to guard and protect the contested borders of territories (O'Brien 2008; Semple & Williams 2015).

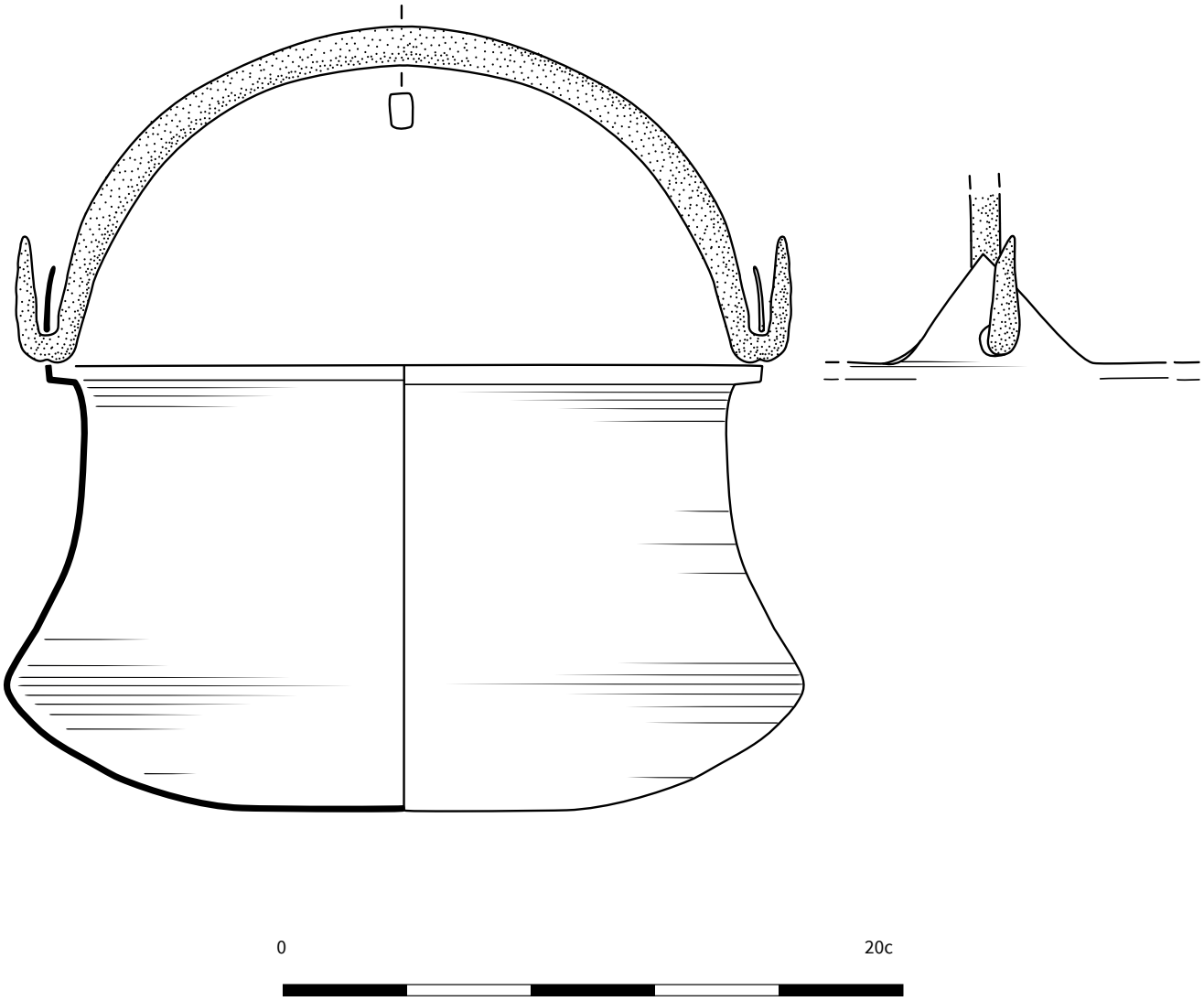
While other examples of the sentinel tradition, not least the 'princely' barrow burial at Taplow, a mere 7km downstream from Marlow, offer useful analogies for our find, we should not stretch the comparison too far as these belong to the later and very different world of later 6th-7th-centuries permeated by the emergence of regional kingdoms and the spread of a new Christian ideology.

The Marlow Warlord is of key importance in demonstrating that the sentinel burial tradition, a high investment funerary practice with distinct symbolic and cosmological underpinnings, has deeper, more persistent roots than hitherto imagined. It is of considerable interest that such a precocious expression of this tradition should emerge from the Middle Thames whose role as an enduring cultural and political frontier spanning millennia is amply attested in both historical and archaeological sources (Booth et al. 2007). Whoever he was, the identity of the Marlow Warlord and the community which he served, must have been closely tied to the realities of life within this febrile border territory, as with all such liminal 'borderlands', a life laced with conflict and danger, but also rich opportunities.

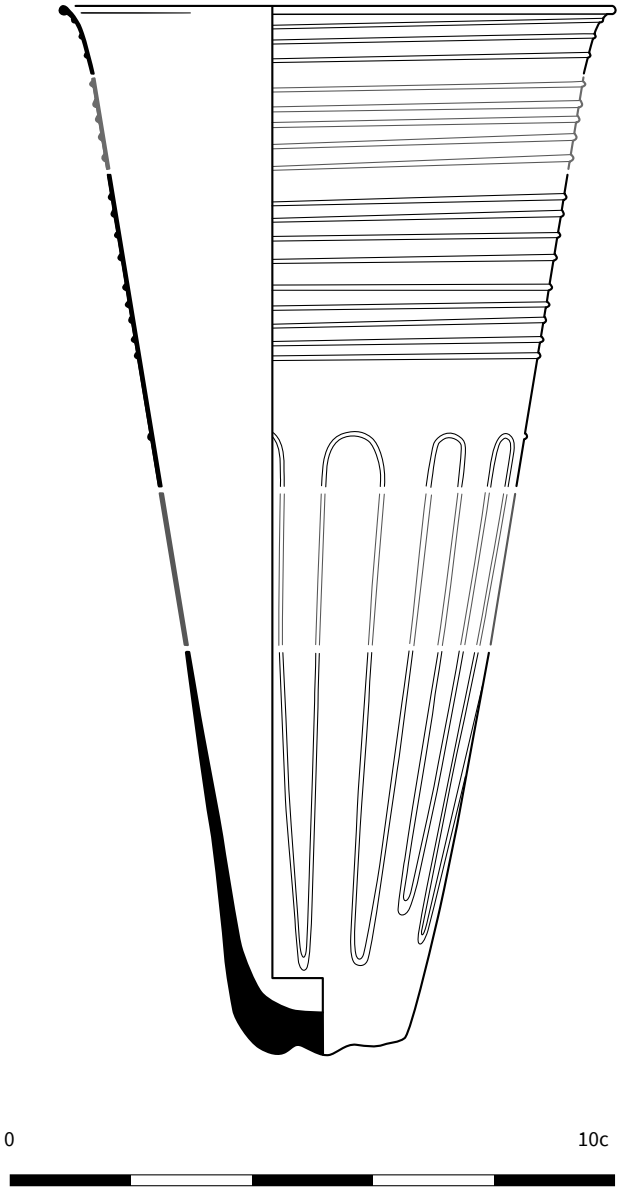
Thames Valley landscape, looking towards Cookham which sits between Marlow and Taplow



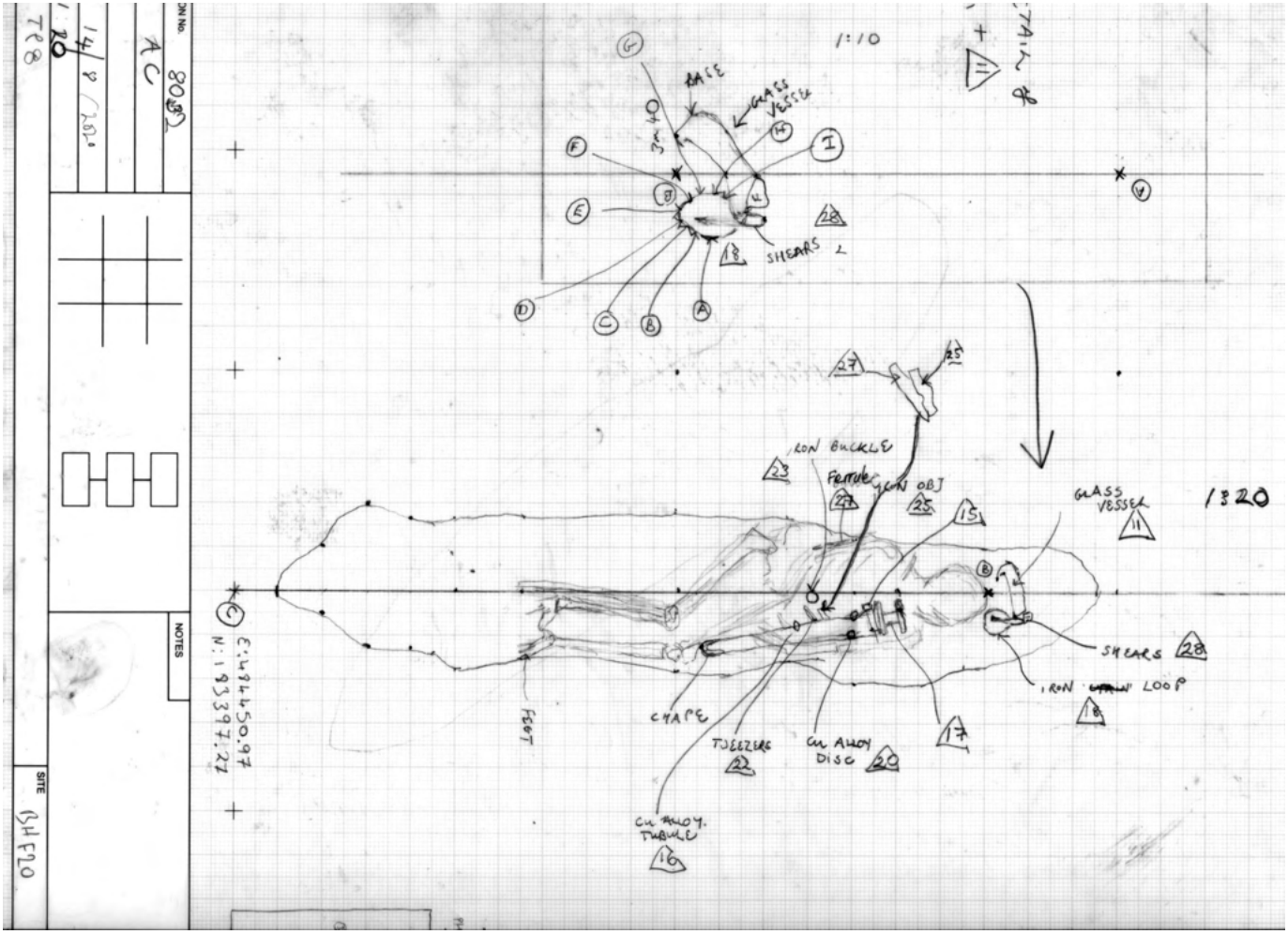
Reconstructed Perlrandbecker



Reconstructed Westlandkessel



Reconstructed Glass beaker



Plan drawing of the Marlow Warlord grave made during excavation

Acknowledgments: Gabor Thomas

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Portable Antiquities Scheme used under Creative Commons license - Cover image, Perlrandbecker before reconstruction and Westlandkessel before reconstruction.

Historic England - Sword x-rays.

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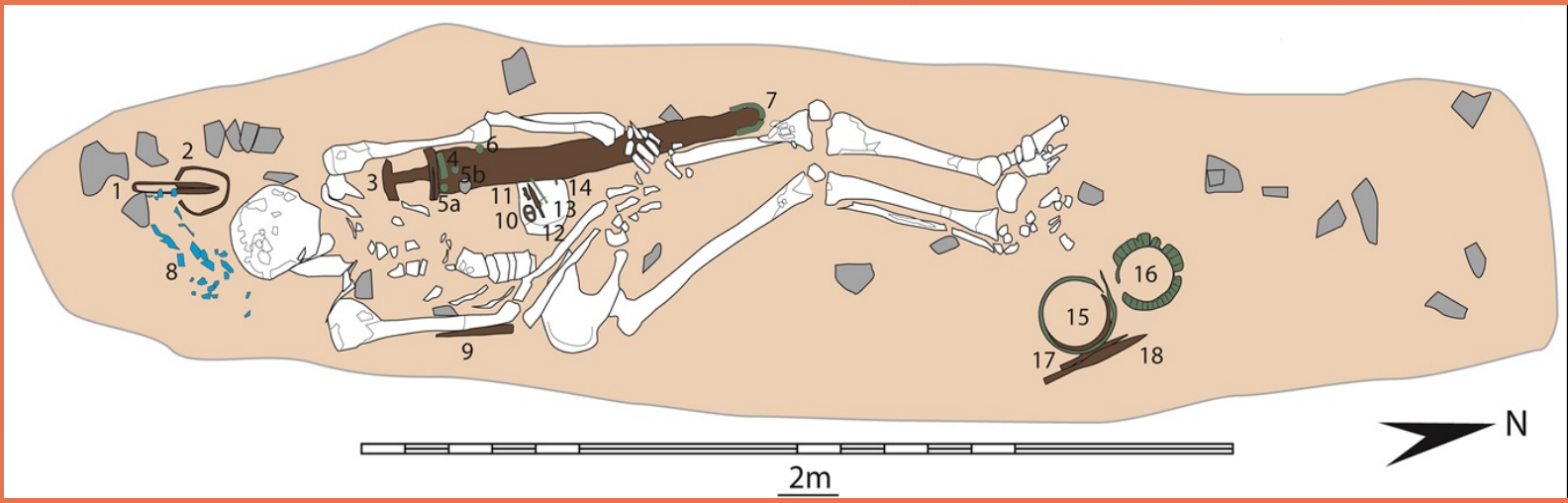

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