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Aardvarchaeology

with MARTIN RUNDKVIST



800 Years Of Human Sacrifice In Kent



Posted by [Martin R](#) on June 10, 2013

(23)

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Late Bronze Age sacrificial pit: three murdered people and the head of a cow

[British Archaeology](#) #131 (July/August) has a feature by Pippa Bradley that caught my interest. It's about a Wessex Archaeology dig in 2004-05 at Cliffs End farm in Thanet, a piece of north-east Kent that was an island up until the 16th century when silting finished connecting it to mainland England. What we're dealing with here is ritual murder, some pretty strange disposal of the dead and ancient Scandinavian migrants.

Use of the site begins in earnest with six ring-ditch barrows during the Early Bronze Age (2200-1500 cal BC). These were poorly preserved and yielded few interesting finds. People then leave the barrows in peace for several centuries and don't return to the site in any serious way until the Late Bronze Age shortly before 1000 cal BC. And that's when the weirdness starts. Three round enclosure ditches are dug and re-dug, slighting five of the barrows. The ditches were found to contain household refuse, episodic feast remains and a burial or skull deposit (all shared with various pits inside the enclosures). And the smallest barrow gets slighted from another side by a continuous complex of at least 36 pits, some of them bearing evidence for re-cutting and re-use. The uncovered part measured 29 by more than 52 m. Here's where the weirdness turns to horrors.

Respectful Late Bronze Age burial in England is typically urned cremation in closely clustered cemeteries. The treatment of the bodies deposited in the Cliffs End pit complex is strikingly deviant. Basically what they're doing here is killing people and livestock, manipulating their remains ritually,

often exposing them on site for a time, and finally inhuming them in pits. Bone preservation is perfect, leaving it all too clear what is going on. And it goes on for 800 years, well into the Middle Iron Age about 200 cal BC. A three-century hiatus during the Early Iron Age, I speculate, may be covered by the part of the feature that hasn't been excavated.

At least 24 people end up in sacrificial pits between 1000 and 800: males and females, ages 6 to 55. One large pit sees the following sequence (image above):

1. Redeposited human bones and two new-born lambs
2. Woman over 50, killed by sword blows to the back of the head
3. Another pair of lambs
4. Cow's head, two children and a teenage girl
5. Cattle foot and bag containing dismembered man, 30-35
6. More redeposited bones from people who died before the pit was dug (see below)

Some of the disarticulated bones from this pit are partly charred or gnawed by scavengers or show a patination typical of temporary deposition in a nearby midden. The excavators apparently interpret the animal parts and certain small artefacts in the pit as grave goods, but to my mind nothing in the pit should be seen as a respectful burial: human bodies, livestock and artefacts are all sacrificial gifts to some particularly blood-thirsty deity. The artefact finds are mainly pottery, but also a rare and interesting lead weight and part of a bone balance. Weights and balances are indicative of trade and a grasp of mathematics, but are also important tools when composing metal alloys such as the period's all-important bronze. Scandinavian weights of the same era take the shape of little female statuettes wearing paired torque neck rings, and we find the paired torques as wetland sacrifices.

Iron Age practices in the sacrificial pit complex are less intense and intricate: over a period of three centuries, eight people get buried whole and seven disarticulated bone bundles are deposited. One young man is buried on top of half a horse. The bone bundles bear signs of scavenging by dogs.

Who were these people then? Could anybody at Cliffs End get roped in for sacrifice and be denied respectful burial at the whim of the local druid? Historical and ethnographic accounts suggest that this is unlikely. Small low-tech societies have a strong sense of in-group versus out-group. If you don't get your urn in the clan's urn field in this era, it's highly likely that you are simply not a clan member. And here's where stable isotopes come in, a fantastic data source that sees more and more use in interpreting bone finds. Among the questions isotopes can answer today are main food sources and geographical area of residence.

Andrew Millard of Durham University analysed all suitable teeth from 25 individuals. Here's the geographical breakdown of the sacrificial victims' area of origin:

- 36% local
- 32% southern Norway or Sweden
- 20% western Mediterranean
- 12% indeterminate

The reason that you do more than one tooth from the same individual is that teeth form in sequence during gestation, childhood and adolescence. If you move or change your diet during that period, this

shows up in the isotope ratios of whatever tooth your body is making at the time. This gave particularly interesting results in the case of an old woman whose disarticulated skull was redeposited in the Late Bronze Age charnel pit discussed above. She was born in Scandinavia, moved to northern Britain as a child, lived a long life and finally ended up as a prop in a religious ritual on Thanet.

More than half of the victims are foreigners. And though more than a third are locals, we don't know if their parents were locals as DNA hasn't been done yet. Who travels like this in the 1st millennium BC? Certainly not tourists. Traders do travel, but for a community dependent on long-distance bronze deliveries, it would not be a sustainable strategy to ambush and kill the traders – never mind that these were in all likelihood well organised and armed. My guess is that we're dealing with slave raiding and slave trade. Goods travelled, and one valuable commodity was slaves. All valuable commodities were appropriate as sacrifices to the gods when that time came.

In the case of the well-travelled old woman, I imagine her being taken from her tribe in southern Norway by Scottish slave raiders, growing up in Scotland, and then being traded on maturity to a Kentish tribe with odd religious practices. She probably gives birth to more slaves there (perhaps a few of the recovered individuals with local isotope signatures) and lives most of her adult life at Cliffs End. Not as a member of the clan, but as property of a clan member. And then comes that final Beltane feast out by the barrows.

Check out Wessex Archaeology's [on-line exhibition on Cliffs End!](#) A monograph is in press: Jacqueline McKinley et al., *Cliffs End Farm, Isle of Thanet, Kent: a mortuary & ritual site of the Bronze Age, Iron Age and Anglo-Saxon Period with evidence for long-distance maritime mobility.*

Keywords: [bronze age](#), [iron age](#), [kent](#), [sacrifice](#), [slavery](#)
(23)

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1. [#1 800 Years Of Human Sacrifice In Kent : Archaeology News from Past Horizons](#)

June 10, 2013

[...] Read the full piece on this fascinating study on scienceblogs.com [...]

2. [#2 800 Years Of European Slavery and Human Sacrifice In Kent | toolwielder](#)

June 10, 2013

[...] by Martin R on June 10, 2013 (0) Share on email More » Late Bronze Age sacrificial pit: three murdered people and the head of a [...]

3. [#3](#) Glen Power



Waterford, Ireland

June 10, 2013

This is a fascinating article and really sheds light on our ancestral heritage. Excuse my ignorance – I’m not an archaeologist – but what is a double torque? It is mentioned that they are typically associated with wetland habitats. Did these early peoples have different rituals for different habitats that were in their vicinity? Again, excellent article and well written!



4. [#4 Martin R](#)

June 10, 2013

Thanks Glen! A torque is an open neck ring, often with great big terminal knobs. I’ll change “double torque” to “a pair of torques” for clarity. Yes, these people are very particular about what sort of landscape location is a proper setting for a certain ritual. Cf. the Arthurian Lady of the Lake.

5. [#5 Never Yet Melted » Human Sacrifice in Kent](#)

June 10, 2013

[...] Scienceblogs: [...]



6. [#6 ACW](#)

WA state, USA

June 10, 2013

Interesting study with the DNA. My British born-mother had her DNA tested. Her Irish mother’s maternal dna has been in Ireland for hundreds of years it seems. We got mostly all Irish matches with a smaller number of Norwegian matches. Perhaps another Scandinavian slave connection.



7. [#7 Murrel Jones](#)

Marmot Burrow, Southern Germany

June 10, 2013

Interesting site ! Some of the details are similar to iron age sacrificial deposits and “special” cemeteries in France and Germany. The site monograph will surely be fascinating to read.



8. [#8 Martin R](#)

June 10, 2013

No DNA analyses so far! But with bone preservation like that, there should be a good chance of getting them done.



9. [#9 Lanark](#)

Scotland

June 10, 2013

In the case of the well-travelled old woman, I imagine she and some of her slave-raiding Scandinavian tribe sailing over to Scotland (probably Fife) and taking some Scottish slaves to try and sell to the weird Kentish tribe with the odd religious practices.

The slave boat arrives in Kent. but the Scottish captives escape! Revenge! After slaughtering most of the Kentish tribe and Scandinavian slavers (but before heading back home) the Scots have a barbeque with the Kent tribe's sheep and cattle before building funny dioramas with the slaughtered corpses and left-over bits of animals for a laugh. The Scots then get bored and leave the remnants for the crows and head back to Scotland (on the Scandinavian's boat) for the annual Kilmartin shindig.

The Kentish and Scandinavian survivors bury their loved ones and the animal bits. They have to rebuild their lives and because the escaping Scots had stolen their boat, the Nordic survivors couldn't get back to Copenhagen. The well-travelled woman settles in Kent with the survivors and gives birth to children there (perhaps a few of the recovered individuals with local isotope signatures). She lives most of her adult life at Cliffs End.

It is probable that she bred regularly with Kent local men as well. Not as a member of the clan, but as an exotic Abba-esque treat for the Kentish fellows and she probably liked the attention too. The survivors of her own slave raiding party didn't mind either as sharing her around was a kind of pay-off for being allowed to settle there. Finally when the well-travelled but pretty much worn-out, well-travelled old woman breeder had passed her sell-by date she was retired and polished off at that final Beltane feast out by the barrows.



10. [#10](#) Kevin

June 11, 2013

Thank you for the vivid picture-painting, Martin. I'm awed by the evidence that these ancient people were so well-traveled, willingly or no. Surely your Scottish slave-raiders would have had something larger than the glorified canoes depicted in the Scandinavian rock carvings? Something maybe like the Greek penteconter?

The sacrifices are horrific, but I'm reminded of all those engravings of 17th century towns and maps with a gibbets at the crossroads as though public sacrifice in a quasi-celebratory manner and subsequent exposure of the victim was a normal part of life. Only the strange interpolation of animal parts makes this seem so bizarre and different.



11. [#11](#) Birger Johansson

June 11, 2013

While the Polynesians did well with canoes, bronze-age boats were capable, despite not using nails in the construction. There are even cases of similar style between a carving in Spain and a carving in scandinavia, one images abronze-age sailor with a skill for rock carvings as well (although it is hard to make conclusions from only one example).



12. [#12 Martin R](#)

June 11, 2013

Good point, Kevin. All customary manipulation of dead bodies is in some sense ritualistic. And the death penalty was in some recent periods explicitly intended at least in part to placate God.



13. [#13 Sean M](#)

June 11, 2013

I am intrigued by slighting the EBA barrow complex. I wonder whether this was passive (“that is the best place for these sacrifices, so lets build the precinct there ... the spirits there must be gone by now”) or active (“lets tear down the tombs of the ancients to show the new god that we mean business!”)? I suppose that finding more sites like this might help to explain it.

I will have to track down that issue in hard copy.



14. [#14 Birger Johansson](#)

June 11, 2013

(OT) Another bronze-age site:

“Mysterious monument found beneath the Sea of Galilee” <http://phys.org/news/2013-06-mysterious-monument-beneath-sea-galilee.html>



15. [#15 Randolph](#)

illinois

June 12, 2013

And what Mediterranean folk were paddling about that area at that time? Phoenicians? Carthaginian traders or refugees from the Punic Wars?

16. [#16 6.11.13 ... 800 Years Of Human Sacrifice In Kent – She was born in Scandinavia, moved to northern Britain as a child, lived a long life and finally ended up as a prop in a religious ritual on Thanet ... | Dennard's Clipping Service](#)

June 12, 2013

[...] via 800 Years Of Human Sacrifice In Kent – Aardvarchaeology. [...]



17. [#17 Martin R](#)

June 12, 2013

Sean, the slighting is literally tangential. To my eye they are cozying up to the venerable barrow, not expressing contempt for it.



18. [#18](#) Neil Howlett

June 12, 2013

Thanet is still separate from the mainland, or at least that's what the Vicar used to tell me. Was it a liminal location where trade was possible because it was outside the control of those on the mainland? Any long distance trade would be dangerous, so would that make sacrifice more likely? Finally, the range of items seems very diverse?

19. [#19](#) [We really do get along a lot better nowadays.](#) | Patos Papa

June 15, 2013

[...] via 800 Years Of Human Sacrifice In Kent – Aardvarchaeology. [...]



20. [#20](#) Birger Johansson

June 15, 2013

(OT) Lost medieval city found in Cambodia by Lidar <http://phys.org/news/2013-06-lost-medieval-city-cambodia.html>



21. [#21](#) dustbubble

Just off Dere Street

June 16, 2013

It does rather look like what would be the “unconsecrated” bit of say, a mediaeval cemetery, minus the infants.

Criminals, foreigners and other deviants. Any witches in there?

Persons who crucially lacked surviving kin, or at least any mean and powerful enough to exact revenge for all the grim and undignified murder and playing-about with the corpses. Dug out of the midden indeed!

My pal, who was brought up in Broadstairs and Ramsgate (on the “island”) reckons even the shallowest-draught prehistoric boats could have come to grief on the [Goodwin Sands](#), en route to somewhere much nicer (i.e. anywhere else; their words!) and that some of these unfortunates fell into the hands of the banjo-strumming locals.

The Sands sit right across the inviting sandy bay that these “burials” are at the head of, in fact block it off almost completely, and have an impressive wreck-list.

<http://www.kenthistoryforum.co.uk/index.php?topic=8604.0>

22. [#22 Martin R](#)



June 16, 2013

Haha, “playing-about with the corpses. Dug out of the midden indeed! ... banjo-strumming locals”! 😊

23. [#23 Martin R](#)



June 16, 2013

One group of people who would have been interested in Britain were bronze casters looking for a tin source. But trade contacts had been ongoing for millennia. Let’s say someone in NE Spain buys a slave child from Corsica and trades it on north to the guys with the tin.

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