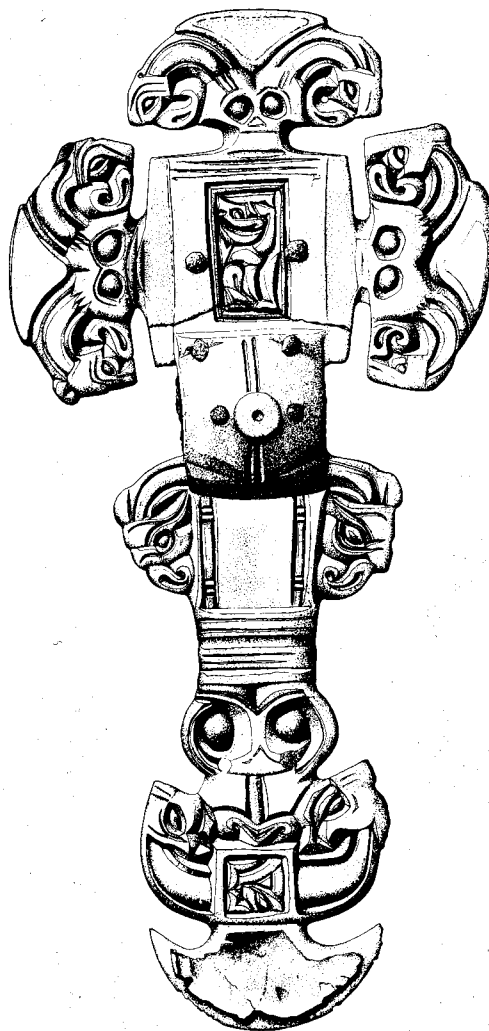

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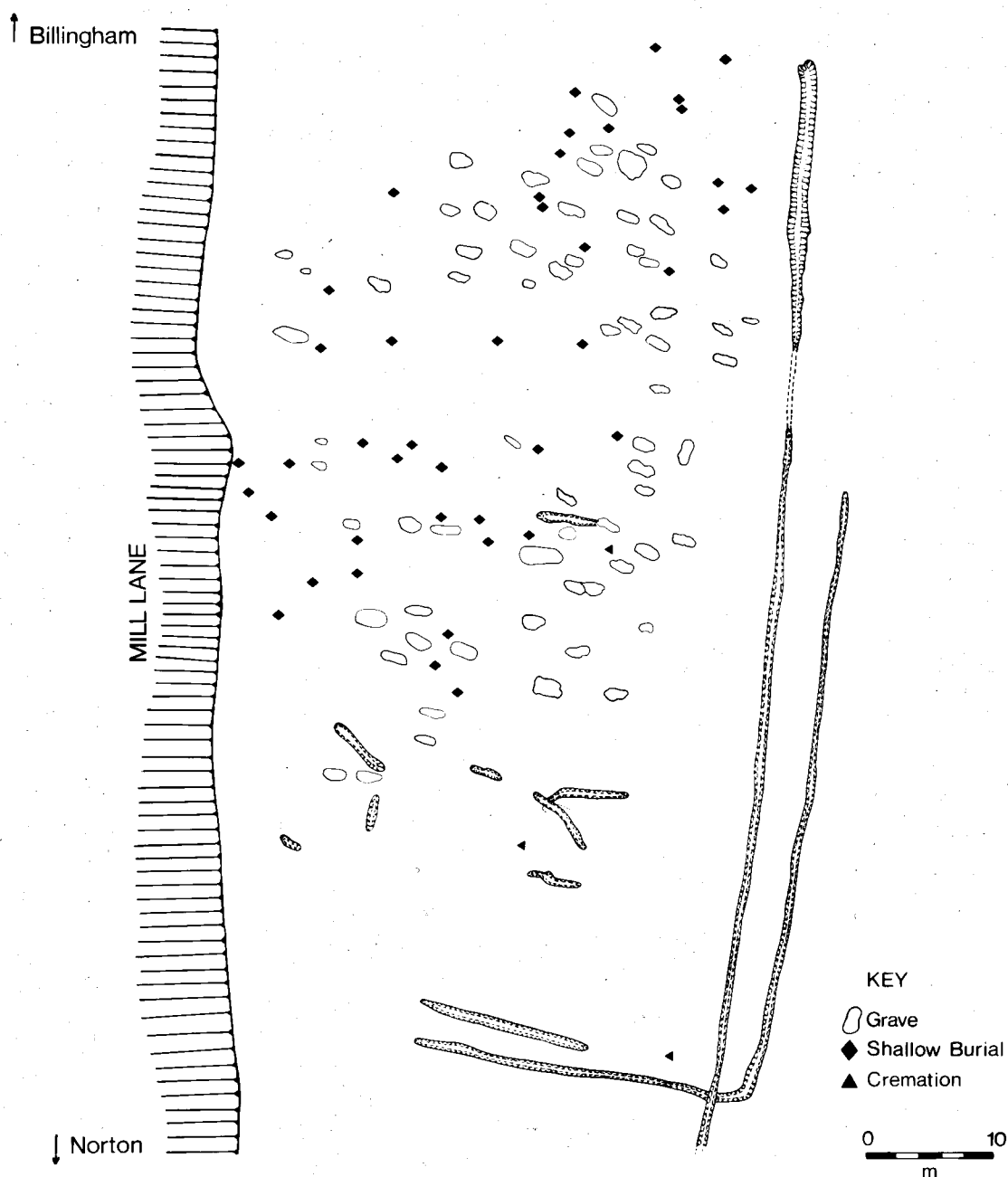
Norton Saxon Cemetery



Gilded cruciform brooch

In the summer of 1982 school children playing beside Mill Lane, Norton, unearthed human bones and jewellery from a shallow grave. The burial was that of a woman aged between 25 and 35 years who had been buried with personal possessions which included a bronze brooch and glass and amber beads. These finds date to the sixth century A.D. and the discovery was that of a pagan burial. Excavations by Cleveland County Archaeology Section in 1984 revealed that this burial was part of a much larger pagan cemetery. Two seasons of excavation uncovered evidence for a large and wealthy community living in Norton during the sixth century. The cemetery contained a total of 120 burials, including three cremations.

The Cemetery



Plan of the pagan cemetery

Excavation showed that the Saxon cemetery was situated within an area which had already been marked out by ditches which were probably the remains of earlier, Romano-British, field boundaries. The ditches formed the southern and western boundaries of the cemetery, whilst the marshes of Billingham Bottoms formed a natural boundary to the east. On the north side the cemetery was bounded by the trackway now known as Mill Lane, which, even then, appears to have linked settlements on either side of the Billingham Beck. The burials can be divided into two groups; some graves were aligned in rows north-south whilst others had a slightly different orientation. This careful layout of the cemetery suggests that each grave originally had some kind of marker. The burials appear to have been made over a period of between 50 and 70 years from the middle of the sixth century.

Thanes, Churls and Slaves

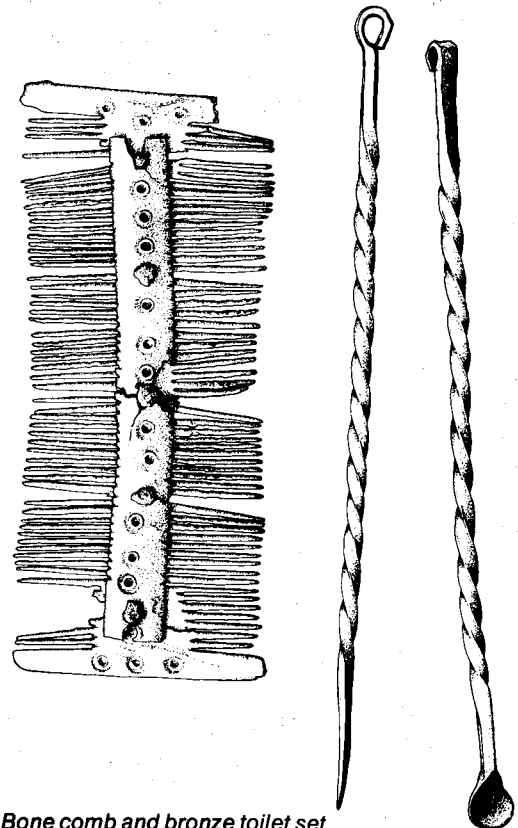


Warrior burial

Most of the objects found in the graves were personal possessions. Male burials generally had fewer grave goods than females, although the objects represent the social range from thanes (freemen), whose shields were buried with them, to churls (peasants), who had spears. Some poorer burials may have been those of slaves, whose possessions amounted only to an iron knife. One male burial had a spear and a bucket in the grave. The bucket was made from staves of yew and was bound with four decorated bronze bands, it contained a cow's vertebra, the remains of food or an offering to the gods, and it is a very rare find. On the evidence of possessions, there were five thanes and ten churls in the Norton cemetery; the others, then, may have been slaves.

Womenfolk

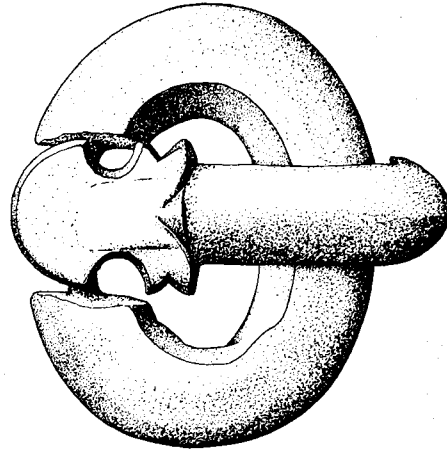
All except one of the female burials had grave goods. The dead were clothed when buried, and some were wearing bronze belt buckles, brooches and sleeve clasps. The woman also wore glass and amber beads, elaborate brooches and, occasionally, sets of iron keys which hung at the waist. Other objects placed in the graves included earthenware pots, bronze toilet sets with tweezers and pins, and bone combs. One young girl had a pair of fine silver bracelets. A single burial was unusual in that it lay face down and had no grave goods; some archaeologists have suggested that bodies found in this position may have been buried alive. There were several child burials in the cemetery, including one infant buried with a female. Some of the female possessions are rarely found in the north of England, including a Frankish buckle of a kind usually found in Kent.



Bone comb and bronze toilet set

Saxon Norton

The excavation of the Norton Saxon cemetery has revealed for the first time in the north of England the complete plan of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery. The results of the excavation suggest that there was a large and prosperous settlement established in Norton by 600 A.D. It is still not known, however, whether this was a successor to a Romano-British settlement, or a community of later 'in-comers'. Detailed scientific analysis of the bone has yet to be completed, but preliminary study reveals that the Norton Saxons were quite tall and healthy, although some did not live to old age.



Frankish silver plated buckle

Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are rare in the north of England; Hob Hill (Saltburn) being the only known local site. In the tribal area of Bernicia north of the river Tees, large pagan cemeteries were unknown before the Norton excavations. The known Bernician burials were either single rich inhumations or large cemeteries with few gravegoods. The evidence from Norton shows that large and wealthy societies were established in the north by the sixth century. Analysis is currently being undertaken to determine where the Norton finds were made, and this may reveal patterns of trade across England and the continent.

It is likely that the cemetery was associated with a nearby settlement, but this has yet to be found. A search of the immediate area of the cemetery, using geophysical equipment, failed to find any traces and it may be that the settlement lay to the west, in the area of Norton Green and the church.

The excavation was undertaken by Cleveland County Archaeology Section with the assistance of a Manpower Services Commission Community Programme. Much of the land is in the possession of Cleveland County Council; finds from the remaining area have been placed in our care on long loan from Mr and Mrs L Smith.

See the exhibition in Norton library for further information about the excavation and a display of the finds.



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County Archaeology Section is part of County Leisure Services.
