

## **The man, the grave and the antique arrow: Bronze Age warrior found clutching heirloom**

The grave of an early Bronze Age man, who was buried holding an 'antique' arrowhead in his hand, has been found on Salisbury Plain during a programme of new track building by the military. Also found nearby was the top of a Bronze Age ritual shaft that could be up to 30m deep.

The man, who died aged about 30-35, has been radiocarbon dated to between *c* 2000-1800 BC. In his hand, however, was a mid-late Neolithic arrowhead already several hundred years old when he was buried. It had been burned. Its inclusion in the grave suggests it was a valued possession - though why it was valued remains a tantalising mystery. Was it a chance find, accorded magical properties because of its antiquity? Or was it an heirloom, handed down from generation to generation because of its role in a significant past event? We will never know.

The burial was in fact the upper skeleton of a pair - one above the other in the same grave. The grave had been redug for the second burial, but the precise alignment of the two suggests the second burial followed closely on the first. The position of the first had not been forgotten. Both were male, the lower aged about 40. Why were they buried together? Were they perhaps brothers, or comrades in arms?

The grave, between Tilshead and Chitterne in the west of Salisbury Plain, lay on the outside edge of a ring ditch, which possibly once surrounded a barrow. It appears the two men were buried as close as possible to a 'primary' burial inside the ring, according to excavator John Hawkes of AC Archaeology. The remainder of the ditch lay off the line of the new military track, however, and was not excavated.

The Bronze Age shaft was found a few miles west of the burial. A large circular pit about 5m across was found to funnel down to a central circular pit, about 1.5m across with vertical sides. This central pit - or shaft - was not excavated. However, from what was revealed, the feature appears identical to a shaft excavated on the Plain in the 1960s at Wilsford Down.

That extraordinary feature proved to be 33m deep, and no wider than 1.5m all the way down. Finds from near the base included middle Bronze Age pottery, amber beads, bone pins, a bone needle, pieces of worked wood including fragments of a bucket, and some human and animal bone. The site has been interpreted as either a well, later backfilled with domestic rubbish, or a ritual shaft for communicating with the underworld - or perhaps both.

The most astonishing aspect of these shafts, however, is the way they must have been built. They were cut through solid chalk; and with no room to swing a pick or even bend down, diggers were presumably lowered by rope face-down into the dark, airless, dangerous shaft. Other recent discoveries on the Plain include a new late Bronze Age/early Iron Age settlement on a ridge next to Battlesbury hillfort; and, from the same period, a row of seven complete animal carcasses - including cattle, sheep and goats - laid end to end along a ditch.

[British Archaeology, no 51, February 2000: News www.britarch.ac.uk](http://www.britarch.ac.uk)