

EXCAVATION OF TWO SAXON BURIALS BENEATH CHAPEL ROAD, SOUTHAMPTON (SOU 630)

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ABSTRACT

Two articulated human burials were excavated within the southern end of Middle Saxon Hamwic, to the south of St Mary's churchyard. Residual bone from at least two other individuals was recovered. Radiocarbon dates suggest these burials belong to the eighth to tenth centuries. They provide important dating evidence for the existence of St Mary's Church at this period.

INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Unit of Southampton City Council carried out an archaeological watching brief on behalf of Engineering Design Services of Southampton City Council during the installation of parking-ticket machines. Human bone was found at one location, in Chapel Road, and an excavation was carried out in accordance with the Burial Act of 1857. The works were funded by Engineering Design Services of Southampton City Council.

Site location and topography (Fig 1)

The site lay within the known area of the Middle Saxon settlement of Hamwic, immediately to the south of the precinct wall of the churchyard of St Mary's Church at SU 42124111. The church is assumed to be a Middle Saxon foundation, and acted as a mother church to the Southampton area (Hase 1994, 53–5), and burial ground to the parishes of medieval Southampton. The churchyard appears to have changed little since about 1596 when it was recorded by John Speed on his map of Southampton published in 1611.

The natural land surface has been obscured by modern urban developments, but the area is fairly level, approximately 3 m OD, with a slight

slope to the River Itchen to the east. Within the churchyard the ground is considerably higher. The geological survey map (Ordnance Survey, 1973) shows the site to lie on valley gravel, although other excavations in the area show that brickearth lies above the gravel in the Hamwic area (Morton 1992, 20).

RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATION

Introduction

The trench and context numbers were issued in sequence for the entire project (Fig 2). The Chapel Road area was assigned the identifying area number 16. Trenches for a ticket machine (16B), a paved area in the roadway (16A), and a connecting spur (16C) were dug on the north side of Chapel Road (Fig 1). Three post-pits for signposts were also dug, two on the north side of Chapel Road (16D and E) and one on the south side (16F).

Phase 1. Early soil horizons

Layer 112, in Trench 16C, a yellowish brown, sandy clay with a few flecks of shell and daub, was the earliest deposit exposed. Its top was at 3.18 m OD, but it had been truncated by later cut features. It was probably disturbed natural brickearth, and probably the same as layer 059 in Trench 16B.

Phase 2. Stake holes

Two small stake holes, 116 and 118, cut the Phase 1 layer. Their centres were 0.97 m apart,

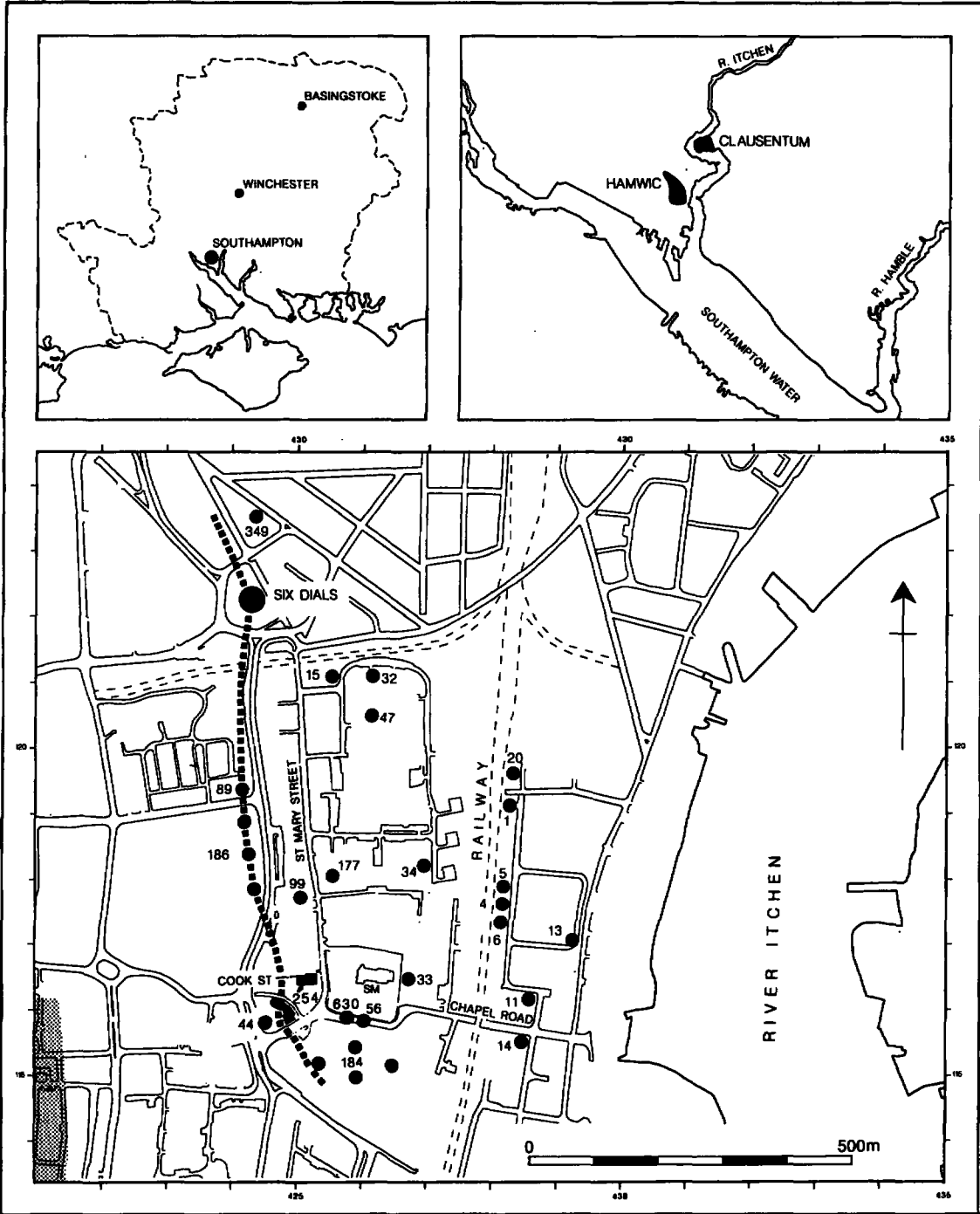


Fig 1. SOU 630: location of the site in relation to other archaeological investigations in the area. 'SOU' prefixes are omitted from the site numbers. SM is St Mary's Church. The stippled area represents part of the medieval walled town. The line of squares marks the approximate western limit of Hamwic.

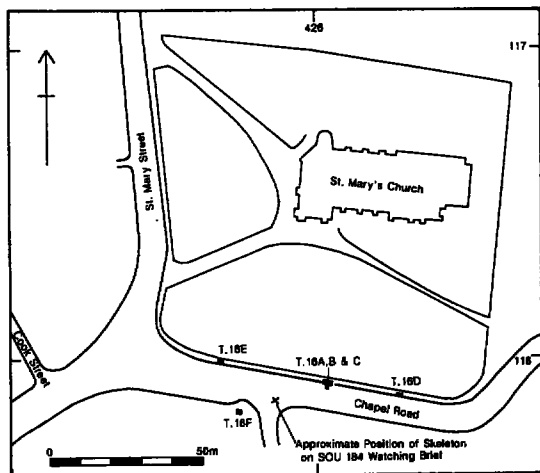


Fig 2. SOU 630: trench location plan.

and lay on an approximately east to west axis. No finds were recovered. Given the small area excavated, it is not possible to ascertain their purpose or date, other than they pre-date the Phase 3 burial.

Phase 3. Cemetery

Inhumation 115 (Fig 3)

Grave 113, containing inhumation 115, was oriented east to west. The north, south, and west edges had been removed by later disturbances. The eastern terminal was quite steep, with the

base at 3.07 m OD. The grave fill, 114, surrounding the skeleton, was a brown silt loam. It contained seven fragments of redeposited human bone. This suggests that grave 113 was not the first burial in the area. One sherd of Middle Saxon pottery was found, which provides a *terminus post quem* date. No obvious grave goods were found.

A partially articulated, supine and extended inhumation, 115, lay in the grave, with the skull at the west end. It had been severely disturbed by later features, and some of its bones were found in later disturbances. In particular, most of its right side had been removed by feature 108 (Fig 2). The skeleton has been identified as belonging to a female aged 30 years or older.

A sample of bone submitted for dating to The Oxford University Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit gave an uncalibrated date in radiocarbon years BP (Before Present–AD 1950) of 1215 $\pm$ 45. This has been calibrated using the Oxford University calibration curves, and indicates that the individual almost certainly died in the date range AD 676–AD 895, and probably within the period AD 769–AD 883 (Table 1).

Bone report by J I McKinley

Condition of bone; good

Stature; 159.3cm $\pm$ 3.72cm

Sex; female

Age; older mature/older adult (30 years +)

Pathology; Pathological lesions noted were mostly degenerative changes (largely age related) to various bones, and periosteal new bone indicative of fairly minor non-specific infection. It showed degenerative

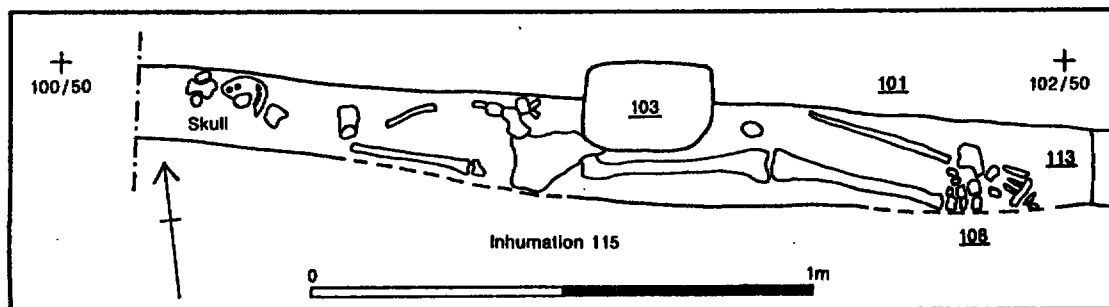


Fig 3. SOU 630: plan of inhumation 115.

Table 1. Calibrated radiocarbon date ranges (in *anno domini* years) with confidence and probability ratings for the bone sample from inhumation 115 (OxA-5448).

Calendar year range	724–734	769–883	676–895
Confidence %	68.2	68.2	95.4
Probability	0.07	0.93	1.00

changes in the form of areas of pitting and/or osteophyte (new bone) formation in the right ankle bones, right hip, lower spine, and right distal humerus (NB many of the bones of the left side were missing). Lesions (exostoses) at tendon and ligament insertions in the lower limb were probably also formed in response to age related wear-and-tear. None of the lesions were severe. A right fifth metatarsal showing signs of periosteal new bone recovered from a modern context was probably from inhumation 115. It was in association with a small sinus indicative of infection within the medullary cavity of the bone. Other lesions were probably in response to a minor soft tissue infection.

Inhumation 107 (Fig 4)

The edges of grave 106 were not defined within the confines of the excavation, but its base cut the fill of grave 113 at 3.15 m OD. The grave fill, 105, was a brown, sandy silt loam. It contained eight fragments of human bone and one small sherd of Middle Saxon mixed-grit tempered pottery.

A partially articulated, oriented, supine and extended inhumation, 107, was found in grave 106 (Fig 3). It had been deposited with the skull

to the west, though it was not present. The grave had been disturbed by modern features, and the absence of the skull was probably due to these later disturbances. Inhumation 107 had been laid above the earlier grave 113, and was centred slightly to the east of it. It has been identified as being a male aged about 25 to 30 years.

A sample submitted for dating produced an uncalibrated date in radiocarbon years BP (Before Present–AD 1950) of 1065 $\pm$ 45. This has been calibrated using the Oxford University calibration curves, and indicates that the individual almost certainly died in the date range AD 888–AD 1024, and probably within the period AD 949–AD 1014 (Table 2).

Bone report by J I McKinley

Condition of bone; rather degraded

Stature; 173.79cm $\pm$ 4.66cm

Sex; male

Age; younger mature adult (25–30 years)

Pathology; Periosteal new bone indicative of fairly minor non-specific infection was noted in the right clavicle and one medial rib shaft.

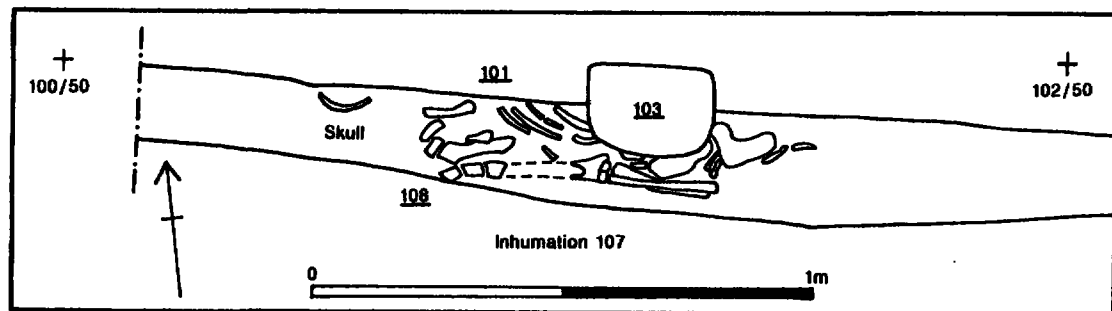


Fig 4. SOU 630: plan of inhumation 107.

Table 2. Calibrated radiocarbon date ranges (in *anno domini* years) with confidence and probability ratings for the bone sample from inhumation 107 (OxA-5447).

Calendar year range	898–916	949–1014	888–1024
Confidence %	68.2	68.2	95.4
Probability	0.18	0.82	1.00

Residual finds

Redeposited finds were recovered from fills of later features. These included eighteen sherds of pottery datable from the Middle Saxon to the post-medieval periods, and 162 residual fragments of human bone.

Unarticulated human bone by J I McKinley and M P Smith
Redeposited, unarticulated, human bone was recovered from grave fills 105 and 114, and modern contexts 102 and 104. It represents a minimum of two additional individuals, an adult, possibly female, and a juvenile/young sub-adult of uncertain sex. An area of pitting in a parietal vault recovered from context 102 is indicative of some form of infection.

DISCUSSION

These burials are the first evidence that St Mary's has been used as a burial ground since the Middle Saxon period. Before this new find the only evidence for dating St Mary's was a single sceat from the third quarter of the eighth century found in 1838, and it was considered that no new evidence could be forthcoming given the probable continuation of burials for another 1000 years (Morton 1992, 50).

The Chapel Road burials show that the St Mary's graveyard formerly extended further south than the present southern precinct wall, an argument that is supported by an undated burial which was found to the southwest of Trench 16C (Fig 1) during a watching brief on the *Deanery* development, SOU 184 (Garner 1988). The edge of the cemetery perhaps lay along the present south edge of Chapel Road where Saxon pits were found in SOU 56 (Morton 1992, 38).

About 200 m to the southwest of St Mary's Church a Middle Saxon cemetery was found at

Cook Street, SOU 254. The St Mary's cemetery is not thought to be part of a larger cemetery including the burials found there (Garner 1994, 122). The period of burials at Cook Street appears to have been relatively short-lived, the burials are thought to date from the first half of the eighth century. It was argued that St Mary's cemetery was later rather than two contemporary burial sites being so close to one another. The dating of a burial to the period AD 769–AD 883, and it was not the first burial on the site, on the fringe of St Mary's churchyard could be evidence that the core of the graveyard is considerably older, and possibly contemporary with that at Cook Street. Assuming a burial area symmetrically arranged around the church, a graveyard of considerable size in the Middle Saxon period is indicated. This provides evidence of St Mary's dominance as the mother church, not only to Hamwic but to the surrounding area (Hase 1994, 53–5).

The later burial can be dated to the Late-Saxon period, probably within the period AD 949–AD 1014. This is useful evidence that St Mary's continued as a place of burial, and presumably as a standing building, and enables one to argue more strongly that it is the unlocated church at *Hamtuna* granted by King Edgar to the novice Wulfhida (Esposito 1913, 17) in the third quarter of the tenth century, and probably the *myrster* at *Wic* mentioned in a grant of 1045 (Kemble 1839–48, charter 776; Sawyer 1968, charter 1012).

It has generally been assumed that Chapel Road was of Middle Saxon origin, and that it was originally a straight, gravelled street running from St Mary Street to the waterfront. The evidence for this is five layers of metalling observed at SOU 92, towards the River Itchen. It is also assumed that at its western end it was diverted some 30 m to the south by a medieval expansion of the cemetery, perhaps to accommodate victims

of the Black Death in the fourteenth century (Morton 1992, 38). Middle Saxon roads in Hamwic were generally metalled, often on more than one occasion, and no metalling was observed in the diverted part beneath Chapel Road at SOU 56 (Morton 1992, 38). If this was so one would expect to find only medieval or later skeletons to the south of the original alignment. This is obviously not the case.

The dates of the skeletons discussed here suggest the graveyard existed south of the postulated Middle Saxon road alignment by the late ninth century, some 450 years earlier than has been assumed, and had contracted, rather than expanded, by the time Chapel Road was diverted. It is possible that the road divided the graveyard throughout the Middle Saxon and medieval period, and was only established on its present line at a later date, some time after the eleventh century AD.

CONCLUSIONS

Although perhaps easily dismissed as just a further find of inhumations in the St Mary's area of Southampton these burials are important

evidence on the status and dating of the church of St Mary's, and the layout of the streets around it. Further work may well be necessary in the near future to underpin the churchyard wall and it is hoped there will be the opportunity to conduct further investigations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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