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AYLESFORD'S BRONZE AGE CISTS AND BURIALS

PAUL ASHBEE

Sand and gravel extraction since the 1870s produced the huge pit, now a lake, which has all but obliterated Aylesford's Parish Field, northwest of the church. Already in 1883, Benjamin Harrison of Ightham referred to Mr Silas Wagon's pit '*in the drift or lake beds, near Aylesford church*' and the many palaeolithic implements found therein (Harrison 1928, 101; Evans 1897,101; Roe 1981, 204). The Parish Field was a level area, extending almost to the foot of the North Downs, the 25 ft. terrace of the River Medway (Zeuner 1964, 162). Here, in 1886, Arthur Evans (later Sir Arthur), whose father, Sir John Evans, had collected palaeoliths and pottery from this pit (Evans 1943, 280), excavated a series of Belgic graves, some well-furnished (Evans 1890; Payne 1893, 174-5), which are the basis of the Aylesford-Swarling Culture (Birchall 1965; Cunliffe 1991, 4, 134-5). In this seminal paper, there is reference to '*Some relics and interments of an earlier character*'. These are Bronze Age pottery from the eastern side of the pit and the cist-graves from the western (Evans 1890, 325-7). At a later juncture two burials, one accompanied by an axe and two daggers, were encountered and examined, although the precise sites were not recorded (James 1899). Understandably, no traces of barrows, which may have been insubstantial, were seen, as the Parish Field had been cultivated for centuries. It is likely, however, that, as for example on the Oxford gravels (Atkinson *et al.*, 1951; Whittle *et al.* 1992) crop or soil marks would have been visible, even, perhaps, to a ground observer. At that time, however, air photography was something for the future (Wilson 1982, 10).

Regarding the Bronze Age pottery, Evans (1890, 325) made the following observations:

(a) '*...fragmentary remains of rude British pottery of the usual kind, ornamented with finger-marks and nail scratches, and of coarse, hand-made, or imperfectly baked materials*'

(b) '*Sufficient portions of one pot exist to show its form, which is that of an*

ordinary British drinking-vessel, such as are from time to time discovered in our round barrows. It was decorated in the "pie-crust" style round the collar'
(c) *'The remains of another larger pot, now in the Maidstone Museum, reveal the usual form of the British cinerary urns of the Bronze Period.*

Sadly this pottery cannot be located, although there is the inherent possibility that (a) and (b) may lurk among the unprovenanced material in the Ashmolean and British Museums. The last (c) has not been found in Maidstone Museum. As far as can be hazarded from these descriptions, the first (a) consisted of pieces, in the rusticated tradition, of coarse beaker ware (Smith 1965, 80; Clarke 1970, 334; Harrison 1980, 79), the second (b), because of the term *'drinking vessel'* (*'drinking cup'* used by Colt Hoare (1810) and Thurnam (1871, 388)) was clearly a beaker (the term introduced by Abercromby, 1904, 324). The *'pie-crust'* decoration may denote the use of finger-tip and -nail indentations. For example, they could be compared with the rusticated beaker from Dover (Clarke 1970, 334, 435). However, the comment *'usual form of the British cinerary urn'* is vague and thus the most that can be said is that it was perhaps a collared urn, presumably of the South Eastern Style (Longworth 1984, 38, Fig. 31). It is possible that it is among the unprovenanced examples of the series listed by Longworth (1984, 292-3), ten of which are from Kent (Longworth 1984, 216-7).

It seems likely that two of the cist-graves (Evans 1890, 325-7) were discovered prior to 1886 and that their description is from details provided by workmen, supplemented by observations after scrutiny of the example taken to Maidstone Museum and of that set up near the pit's office. They would appear to have been in a line, from north-east to south-west, and were about 30 ft. apart, and constructed of slabs of tufa and sandstone. Tufa is a soft calcareous stone from springs and streams in the Hythe Beds and chalk valleys in which water sometimes flows. It is easy to fashion while it hardens after exposure. There were potential sources at no great distance from Aylesford (Bennett 1907, 8; Gallois 1965, 31-2; Tester 1988). The sandstone slabs are likely to have been from the Greensand (Millward and Robinson 1971, 12). Of similar character, they were about 2 ft. 4 ins. in length, 1 ft. 6 ins. in breadth and 2 ft. in depth. Only the third to be found was recorded in any detail. The bones were fragmentary. Regarding these cists, Evans (1890, 326) made the following comments:-

(a) *'The roof slab of No. 1...contained a hole large enough for the insertion of a man's hand. This was probably itself of natural origin...the slabs of this cist are now in the Maidstone museum.'*

(b) *'Of the bones...I was only able to obtain those from No. 2'*
(c) *The third cist was discovered in the spring of 1889. It was 3 feet beneath the surface, and lay slightly to the north-west of the others. Its mean height was about 2 feet, its breadth 1½ foot, and its length 2 feet 4 inches. It consisted of five larger slabs and one smaller piece, all of the same rough travertine that was employed in the other cists, with the exception of one of the two end slabs, which was of sandstone. The roof was formed of two pieces, and within was a skeleton much decayed, but which seems to have been in the same contracted posture, its head facing south-east. This cist has been carefully set up, under Mr Wagon's superintendence, near his office at the entrance of the pit.'*

Evans (1890, 326) said that '*These cists were of very similar character, and were in each case formed of slabs of a crumbly kind of travertine, in two instances a slab of sandstone being also introduced.'*

As Evans (1890, 325) observed, the cists each contained a skeleton *'in a contracted attitude'*, the usual form of Beaker burial (Harrison 1980, 84). For the most part the bones do not seem to have been in a poor state of preservation. Those from Cist no. 2 were examined by Arthur Thomson (1858-1935), later Royal Academy Professor of Anatomy, who, via the School of Medicine, established anthropological teaching at Oxford. He said that they were:

'...those of a woman from seventeen to twenty years of age, and 5 feet 1 inch in stature. The skull is markedly dolicocephalic, the index being 65, or perhaps less, denoting great length as compared with width. The skull seems to attain its greatest width a little above and behind the ear. The forehead is relatively high and narrow, the orbits somewhat square in form. From an examination of the bones of the leg (Facets are visible on the inferior margin of the tibiae and corresponding portions of the astragali)...the individual had led an active life, and either made use of the feet in climbing or habitually rested in a squatting position ... a slight flattening of the tibia, indicative of excessive development of some of the muscles of the calf.'

In his report, Sir Arthur Evans (1890, 326) said, of Cist no. 1, that *'...the slabs of this cist are now in the Maidstone museum'* and, regarding no. 3 that *'This cist has been carefully set up under Mr Wagon's superintendence, near his office at the entrance of the pit'*. The cist slabs given to Maidstone Museum were available in the chapel, when Norman Cook, then Sub-Curator and Keeper of Archaeology, compiled the archaeological gazetteer of Kent during the later 1920s and early 1930s. They had vanished when a new inventory of the collections was made in 1960-61 and it was hazarded that they had been lost during the war years (Kelly 1992, 404). R.F. Jessup (1930,

116) observed that '*One of the cists has been re-erected half-way up the bank on the southwest side of the old office in the sand-pit, while another preserved in Maidstone Museum is distinguished by having a cover slab perforated by a small hole...*' It was seen, as described, on the bank, at the rear of the old office, by the present writer in 1933 and L.V. Grinsell (1936, 179) mentioned it when he visited the area to see the stone-built long barrows. It was still in position at the outset of the 1939-45 war but a visit in 1946 revealed that it had been removed. It had been taken to Croydon and set up in the garden of W.H. Bennett, a member of the Croydon Natural History and Scientific Society. After his death it was found by his house's new owner and presented to Maidstone Museum (Accession no. 39.1983). This was reported by David Kelly (1992, 404) together with a photograph taken in 1899. Meanwhile the whereabouts of the slabs of cist no. 1 remain a mystery.

Frederick James, F.S.A., Curator of Maidstone Museum from 1891 to 1902, and formerly secretary and archaeological assistant to General Pitt Rivers, in Cranborne Chase (Bowden 1991, *passim),* read a paper, illustrated by lantern slides, regarding the burials, one furnished, found in 1898, to the Society of Antiquaries of London on 23 March, 1899 (James 1899). While digging away the brown loam mantling the river gravels, the workmen encountered the human skeleton (no. 1). No trace of a barrow, it was claimed, existed, although, as said at the outset, a much reduced mound in the Parish Field might have escaped notice. The notebook entry, written when James visited the site, was as follows:

> *'Human skeleton found at a depth of 5 feet 4 inches beneath the surface in Parish Field, Aylesford, in Mr Wagon's gravel pit. It had been apparently buried upon its right side with the skull on the south-west, the bearing along the length of the skeleton being East 18° N. The knees were slightly drawn up. The skull had been removed, together with some of the limb bones, before I arrived. The light patch in the view* (a reference to a photograph) *represents burnt earth, all below the interment. The soil immediately above was dark brown mould mixed with small flints in which were fragments of burnt wood. Very narrow seams of burnt earth occurred throughout. At the bottom of the grave pit was a thin spreading of burnt earth and wood ashes. The grave from N.E. to S.W. was 8 feet long and 4 feet wide, its limits being distinctly indicated against the gravel at the sides.'*

Nothing was found in the grave although beneath the skeleton there were burnt animal bones, wood and some grains of wheat. The pieces of *burnt* wood were examined by W. Carruthers F.R.S., Keeper of the Botanical Department, British Museum (Natural History) and were

all of willow (*Salix* L.). It is tempting to consider these pieces as the remains of wickerwork, for such coffins are not unknown in Beaker graves (Harrison 1980, 29-30; 91) but equally they might well have been the shreds of wood of an erstwhile planked structure (Ashbee 1978a, 7). Carruthers had identified specimens of wood from the excavations in Cranborne Chase (Gray 1905,18). Pitt Rivers (1898, pf. 21) considered him '*Our best English authority on the subject*'.

Frederick James was able to enlist yet another friend from Cranborne Chase, namely Dr J.G. Garson, Lecturer in Comparative Anatomy at the Charing Cross Hospital Medical School, in London, to examine the skull and limb bones of the skeleton from this Aylesford grave (Gray 1905, 18). His report was detailed:

> *'Some twenty-six different measurements have been taken of this skull, which is well formed. Its height is below the average: the result of this is probably to increase the length and breadth some-what to make up for the deficiency. In general outline it is coffin-shaped, very broad in the posterior parietal region as compared with the anterior frontal. The outline of the forehead is sloping backwards. This appearance is exaggerated by the fulness of the frontal sinuses which would have presented a much more ragged form had the skull been that of an older person. The canine teeth are strongly marked, and their sockets are prominently marked on the maxillary bones. The lower jaw is of medium development, the chin is pointed and bifid in front, the angle being more acute than usual. On the teeth is a well-marked deposit of tartar, a characteristic feature of many of the Bronze Age skulls. The estimated statue is 5 feet 7¾ inches. The long bones are well formed. From the state of the skull and teeth, the age of the individual is well defined as 20 years at the time of death.'*

At this time the craniological notions developed by Thurnam (Piggott 1993), *'Long barrows - long skulls; Round barrows - Round or short skulls'* obtained and Garson made apposite comment:

> *'The skeleton as a whole corresponds in character to those of the Bronze Period, best known to us from Round Barrows.*
> *In those characters in which the Aylesford skeleton does <u>not</u> agree with the Bronze Age Period it would seem to show a tendency to the appearance of those of the earlier people than to any races of subsequent date, and it may be that the individual may have inherited a strain of Neolithic blood, though the evidence in this respect is slight and the characters referred to might have been less marked had he lived to a more mature age, when fully adult age had been attained.'*

Frederick James recorded that prior to his seeing this burial in the ground, at Aylesford, the skull and limb bones had been removed. This all too often happens before a chance discovery can be viewed

and examined. Furthermore, in his general account he mentions a piece of bronze that appeared when the grave pit was excavated. He was, because of his decade with Pitt Rivers, an experienced excavator (Gray 1905, 21), and thus one is, when reading this account, perplexed at his reticence, for it is puzzling that this burial, and the tufa cists, encountered at an earlier juncture, were all without grave furniture. The retention of antiquities by those who have come upon them in the ground is not unknown. Indeed, the possible beaker reported by Arthur Evans could have been taken from one of the cists. It is likely, however, that James, who did much for Maidstone Museum, had to exercise a considerable reticence in all his undertakings because of the all-pervading interferences of the influential George Payne, Secretary and '*Chief-Curator*' of the Kent Archaeological Society (Bowden 1991, 165). This meant that he was unable to be overtly critical regarding the shortcomings of the discoveries in Silas Wagon's pit at Aylesford.

Another burial (no. 2) was found, about 500 yards to the east of no. 1, and James said that '*No description of the human remains... possible owing to the fragile state in which they were found the whole falling to pieces on exposure to the atmosphere*'. These fragmentary bones were allegedly from the base of the gravel, 15 ft. from the surface and on the top of the Folkestone Beds. Inordinately deep graves are not unknown (Grinsell 1941, 102) in chalk. Such a grave would have been almost impossible to dig in the friable river gravels at Aylesford, and could have collapsed even before use. James, however, said that '*The bones had been taken out, or rather had fallen out of the side of the cliff before my arrival, so that I had to depend entirely upon the word of the workmen as to the depth beneath the surface*'.

He continued '*The bronze implements* (two flat daggers and a flat axe, to be commented upon below, were illustrated by a photograph, with a scale in inches) *were found with the bones, and sufficiently indicate without further comment, the age and character of the interment. It will be noticed that three fragments of limb bones, the humerus, ulna and fibula, are stained green through having been in close proximity to the implements.*'

These bones, displayed with the bronzes in Maidstone Museum during the 1930s, showed that they may have been far from fragile. It may well be that the daggers were close by the arms of the corpse and that the axe, hafted when deposited, was by the legs. R.F. Jessup (1930, 116) noted this interment, the axe and daggers, and said that these, together with '*...part of a skeleton, are now in Maidstone Museum*', and added that '*It seems from the meagre account that there was no mound over the grave*'. It is likely that James, after the

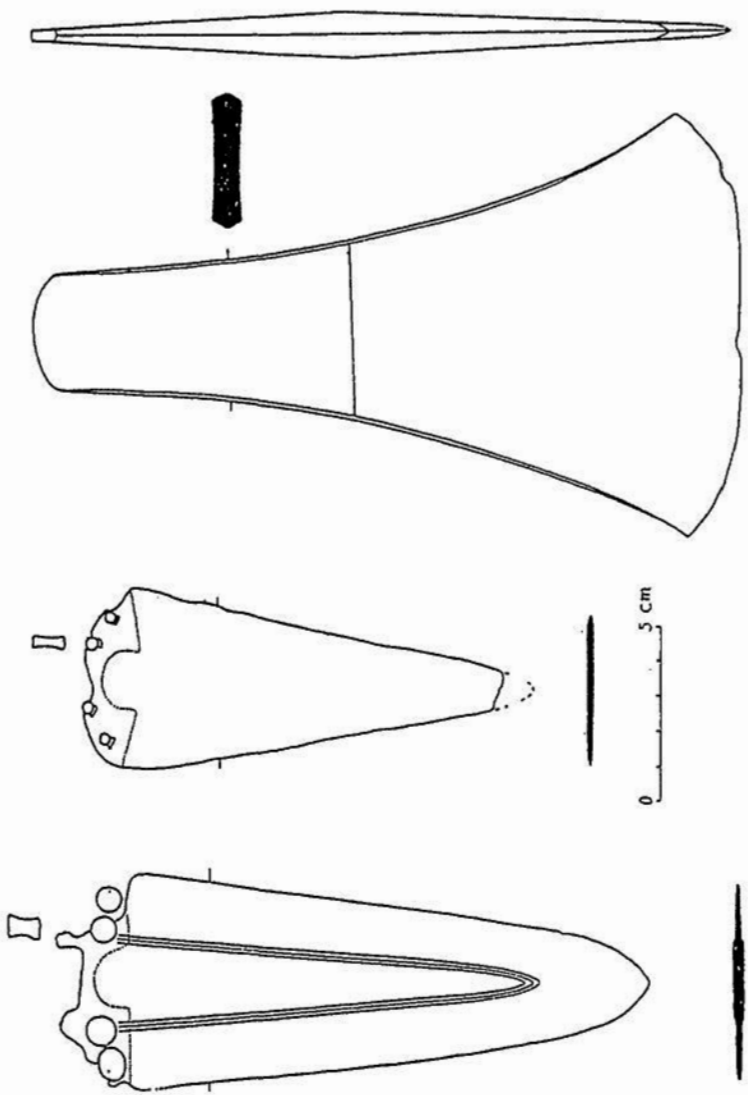

Fig. 1. Grave Group from Aylesford, recovered by Frederick James (Maidstone Museum). Left, the grooved dagger; centre the flat dagger (compare with Fig. 2). The axe has slight, hammered, side flanges. (Scale in cm.)

initial discovery he investigated, established a rapport with the workmen, who, as the pit developed, were paid on a piece-work basis for the gravel dug out and graded. It says much for his diplomacy that he was able to secure this important group of bronzes for his museum, despite the ambiguities surrounding their discovery.

Jessup (1930, 97) included the group in his pioneer study of the Early Bronze Age in Kent saying that:

'The Aylesford flat axe was found in an inhumation burial together with two knife daggers (Fig. 1)*...One is but 5.25 inches long and has probably been ground down considerably; this dagger is plain, but the larger, length 6.7 inches, is decorated with incised lines.'* Two years previously the daggers had been included in the *'List of Flat Riveted Knife Daggers from England and Wales'* compiled by Cyril Fox and W.F. Grimes (1928). This was the basis of a distribution map (Fox 1933, 18) which, more than anything, illustrated the work of the 'openers' of barrows in Wessex, Derbyshire and Yorkshire (Marsden 1974). Stuart Piggott mentioned flat riveted daggers in his seminal paper (1938, 59) on the *Early Bronze Age in Wessex*, including Aylesford's examples on his distribution map.

In the 1950s A.M. ApSimon (1954) defined the daggers from the Wessex barrow graves as an earlier, *Bush Barrow*, series followed by later ogival *Camerton-Snowshill* forms, which, in mainland European terms belong to the Reinecke A1 and A2/B1 divisions (Ashbee 1960, 165; Piggott 1963, 84). The Aylesford axe, notable for its narrow butt and expanded cutting edge, was considered an *Hiberno-Scottish* form. The accompanying daggers were thought of as derived from or related to *Wessex* six-riveted daggers (ApSimon 1954, 56). J.J. Butler (1963, 200-1; 242), in his study of Bronze Age connections across the North Sea, saw the flat knife dagger from Aylesford as a Middle European Unětice model and called attention to a virtually identical blade from Bargeroosterveld (Fig. 2), in Holland (Glasbergen 1956, 191, ff; Clarke, *et al.* 1985, 149, 4.83). Meanwhile the spectroscopic analyses of *Wessex* culture bronzes had been undertaken (Britton 1961; 1963), an enterprise which included the Aylesford axe and daggers. Tin content and arsenical copper confirmed their place within the sequence.

Comprehensive typological studies led Peter Harbison to call attention to Aylesford's grooved dagger when examining the material of his *Frankford-Killaha-Ballyvalley* period in Ireland (1969a, 23) while the axe was seen as similar to, but not identical with, those of his *Type Killaha,* in the same period (1969b, 77). These groups are equated with ApSimon's *Bush Barrow* phase (1969b, 83, fig. 6). The *Hiberno-Scottish* nature of Aylesford's axe was not disputed. Further broad comprehensive typological considerations led Sabine Gerloff

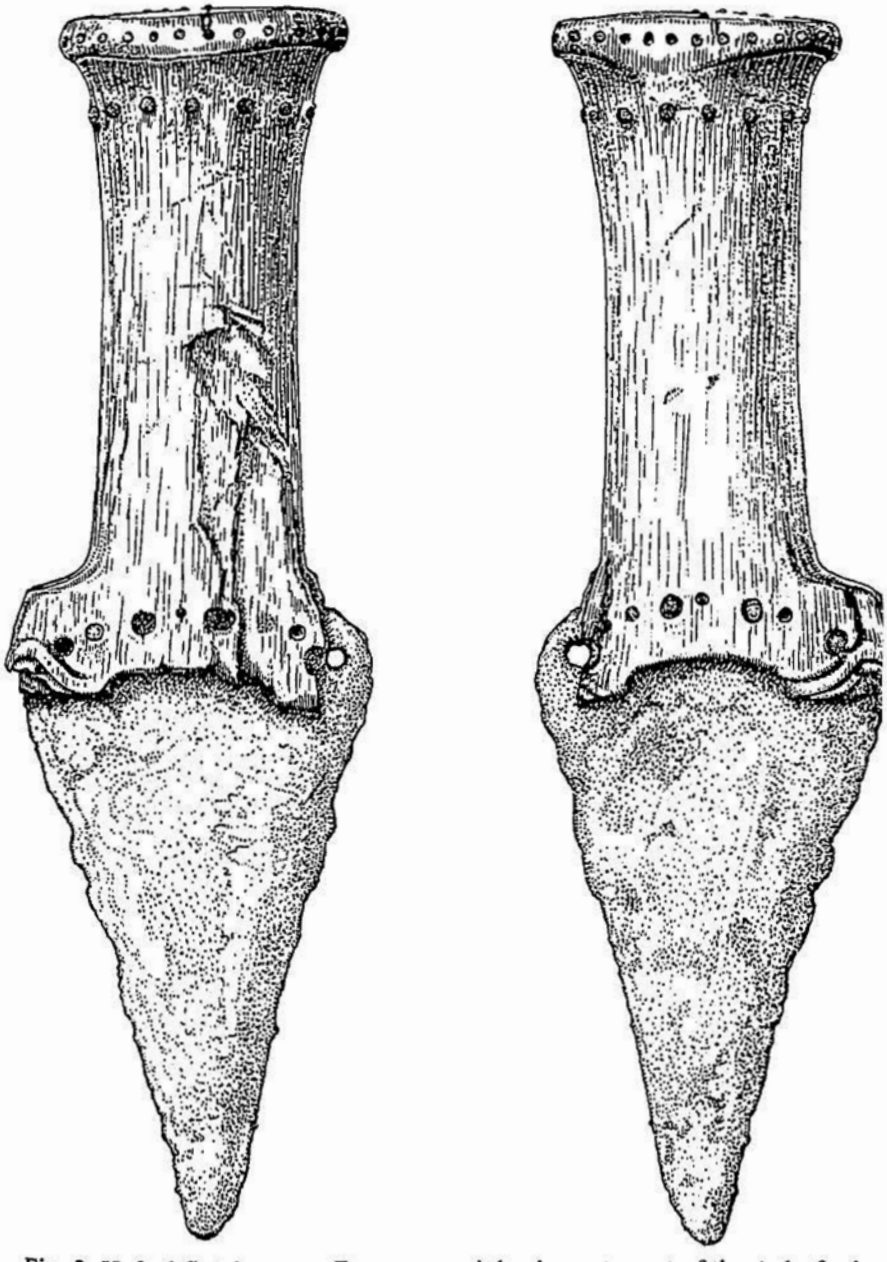

Fig. 2. Hafted flat dagger, a European mainland counterpart of the Aylesford example, from Bargeroosterveld, Drenthe, The Netherlands (*after W. Glasbergen*) (Scale 1:1)

(1974, 60-1) to see Aylesford's flat dagger as an element of her *Type Masterton*, while the grooved example was one or her modest *Aylesford Group*. They were seen as hybrids between flat and grooved *Wessex* blades. As her work was concerned with daggers, the characteristics of the axe were not pursued. More recently Colin Burgess (1980, 76) has used the Aylesford axe as definitive of a *Ballyvalley-Aylesford* stage within his *Mount Pleasant* period of the third millennium B.C.

Aylesford's cists and the burials seem likely to have been beneath barrows, levelled by the progressive cultivation of the Parish Field. Kent's Bronze Age barrows (Ashbee and Dunning 1960; Grinsell 1992) have been largely destroyed by later settlement and cultivation. Apart from some early excavations, notable for their order (Woodruff 1874; 1877), the barrow-opening of the nineteenth century (Marsden 1974) passed the county by. Nonetheless the numbers, especially upon the chalk of east Kent, may have been much larger than is commonly thought. An aspect of Kent's earlier Bronze Age barrows is the *Wessex* material, faience beads, slotted incense cups and certain biconical urns (Ashbee and Dunning 1960, 53; Champion 1982, 32). This is a context in which Aylesford's axe and daggers can be placed.

The Aylesford area, close by the Medway's passage through the chalk of the North Downs, cannot but have been possessed of especial qualities. Preceding the earlier Bronze Age burials were the massive stone-built long barrows on Blue Bell Hill (Ashbee 1993), while at a later juncture there are the numerous gold objects recovered from the Medway (Pretty 1863; Roach Smith 1874; Taylor 1980, 81-2), where they had been consigned to the water (Ashbee 1978b, 194; Bradley 1990). Aylesford's richly furnished Iron Age burials (Birchall 1965, 243; Cunliffe 1991, 134-5) were adjacent to the tufa cists while the locality was overlooked by a Roman temple on Blue Bell Hill (Lewis 1966, 124, 126; Detsicas 1983, 145). Associated earthworks, or even timbered enclosures, may have lined the Medway on its low, well-drained, terraces. These will have long since been destroyed by gravel extraction although fragments could have survived beneath the industry of the west bank. Kent may well have had discrete territories (Cunliffe 1982, 48, fig. 5) with roots in earlier times. Aylesford, by the Medway, would have undoubtedly have been a focal domain.

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