

Cliffs End Farm, Ramsgate, Kent

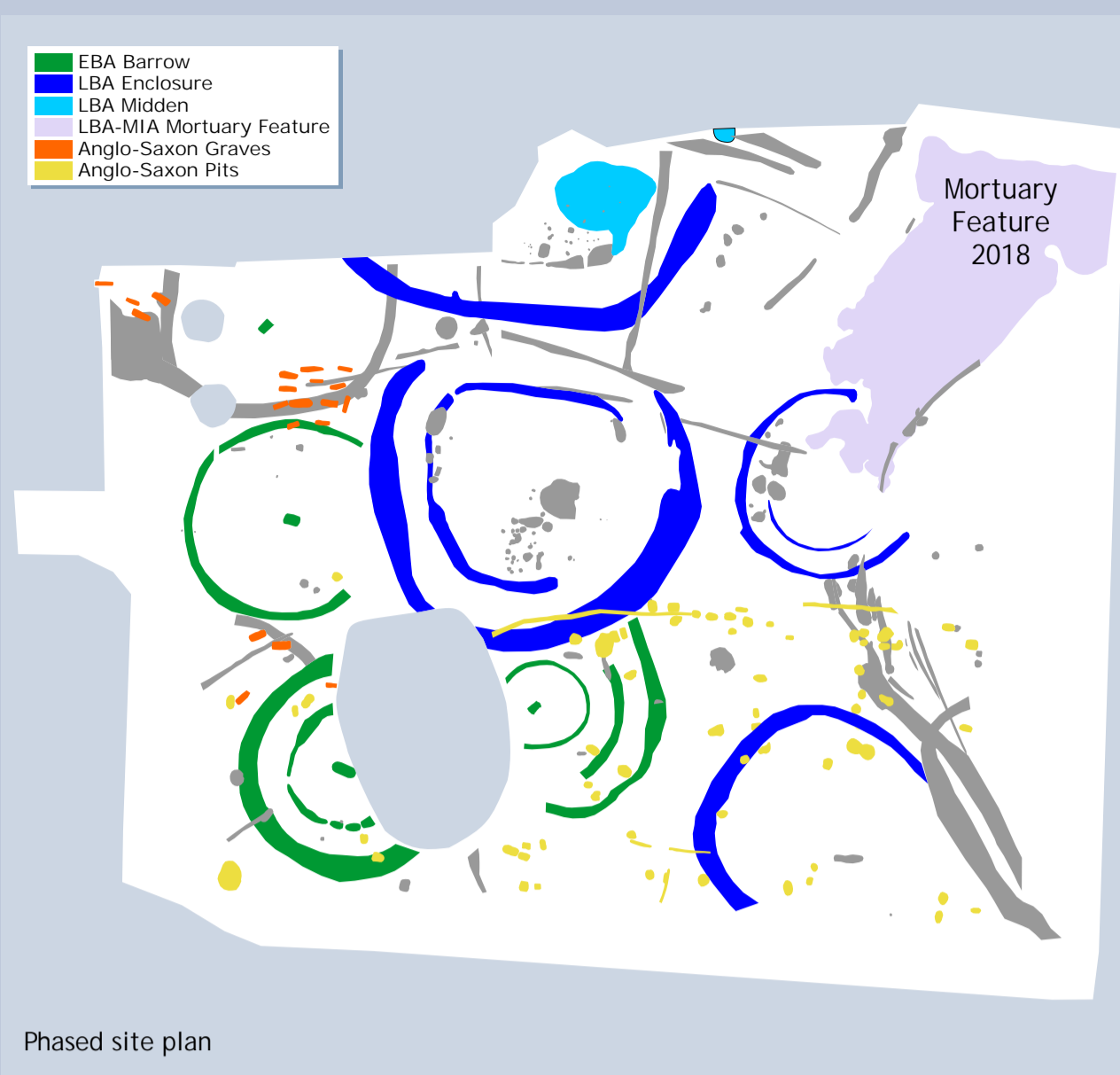
Prehistoric Mortuary Deposits



The Site

Cliffs End Farm is situated on the southern edge of the Isle of Thanet, Kent, overlooking Pegwell Bay. The excavations, undertaken in 2004-5 in advance of housing development, exposed a c 1 hectare area extraordinarily dense in features of a ritual nature. The main archaeological features included:

- Early Bronze Age - 4 round barrows; 3 with evidence for a central four-post structure and one with a central grave containing flint tools (bone lost due to soil acidity (brickearth))
- Late Bronze Age - 2 midden pits, containing some 'curated' materials including human bone; 2 horseshoe-shaped enclosures, one with associated post-holes and small pits some of which contained placed deposits; a possible trackway; boundary ditches and three pits dug into one of the round barrows
- Late Bronze Age - Middle Iron Age - a large (40 x 15 m, max. 1.5 m deep) irregular shaped feature (2018) in the north-east corner of the site (an unknown proportion of which fell outside the area of excavation) performed a mortuary function
- Early Anglo-Saxon - 24 inhumation graves (most bone lost due to soil acidity) including a group of 12, mostly containing items of weaponry (assumed male), centred around a grave which contained jewellery (notably amber and glass beads, assumed female)
- Mid Saxon - 69 pits, many of which contained dense layers of shellfish and occasionally burnt sandstone, possible evidence of feasting - though one also included a contemporaneous human skull (deposited as dry bone)

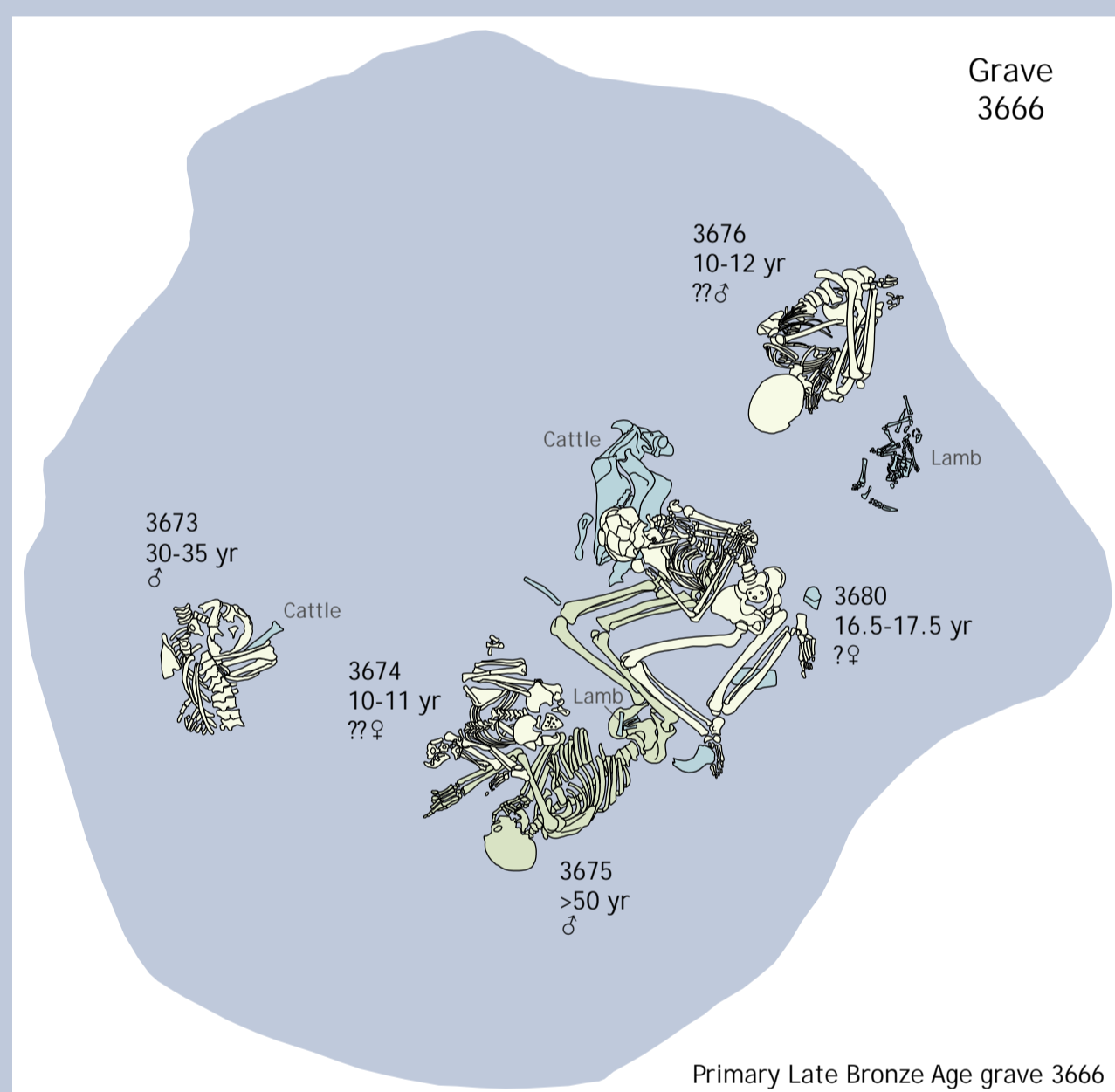


Dating

Preliminary dating during excavation of a human bone sample from the area of - the then undiscovered - grave 3666 gave a date of 2865±29 BP, 1190-920 cal BC, corroborating the date suggested by the residual pottery. Subsequently, an extensive radiocarbon dating programme was undertaken on human bone samples from a range of deposits which, while still to be refined, has shown two major periods of mortuary-related activity in the Late Bronze Age and Middle Iron Age.

All the deposits - articulated and disarticulated - from the primary communal grave 3666 are of Late Bronze Age date, as is one of the articulated skeletons and all the disarticulated bone recovered adjacent to the grave. The remains of 2 burials, one adjacent to 3666 and one in the central area of 2018, appear to be Early Iron Age, as does disarticulated bone from the central and southern parts of 2018. A central, east-west line of burials was made in the Middle Iron Age.

Human Bone from one of the two midden pits also produced a Late Bronze Age date, in keeping with the dating indicated by the artefactual material recovered from the feature.



The prehistoric human bone

The prehistoric assemblage comprises articulated skeletons (13 *in situ* inhumation burials), partial, semi-articulated remains (one individual), and disarticulated bones and fragments largely derived from the mortuary feature 2018 and the midden pits 2028 and 2469.

Analysis is not yet complete but a minimum of 27 individuals is represented, the majority of which (17) appear to be Late Bronze Age. The table below gives a summary of the age and sex distribution within the articulated bone assemblage. A minimum of 13 individuals is represented amongst the disarticulated material (almost all Late Bronze Age). The current figures include at least 9 adults (including 7 males and 1 female) and 4 immature individuals (including 1 infant, 2 juvenile/subadults and 1 subadult). The majority of the bone was recovered from feature 2018, but the remains of at least 3 adult males were excavated from the midden pit 2469.

The proportion of immature individuals (c 44%) is unexpectedly high and the age distribution within that group is relatively limited with only one individual of <10 yr and most (75%) falling within the subadult range (13-18 yr). Only one elderly adult (>50 yr) was identified, a male forming the central figure (3675) within the primary communal grave 3666. This individual was one of two who showed evidence for sharp weapon trauma, in this instance in the form of a series of fatal blows to the back of the skull, one of which shows very slight signs of healing (see plate below).

Phase	No. ind.	Immature	Adult
Late Bronze Age	6	2 Juveniles (c 10-12 yr) 2 subadults (c 14-18 yr) ??females	2 males (c 30-35 yr & > 50 yr)
Early Iron Age	2	1 subadult (c 13-18 yr) ??female	1 ?female (c 30-40 yr)
Middle Iron Age	6	3 subadults (c 14-17 yr) inc. 2 ?males	3 females (c 29-40 yr)

Articulated human remains: age and sex by phase

Mortuary Rite

Mortuary evidence from the Late Bronze Age (particularly for the disposal of the unburnt corpse) is relatively sparse both locally and nationally (Mays and Anderson 1995, 375, 380), rendering the recovery of the remains a potential 17 individuals from one site of major significance. The Middle Iron Age is similarly poorly represented in broad archaeological terms within Kent and the recovery of dated skeletal remains will play an important role in current research being undertaken on the period in the county.

Analysis of the material from Cliffs End is on-going and these results are preliminary but the form and nature of the deposits suggest a complex series of mortuary rites incorporating burial and excarnation, possible sacrifice and 'curation' of material. The demographic make-up of the Late Bronze Age group is unusual, with a preponderance of immature individuals particularly amongst the disarticulated remains, which may be indicative of selection. There is no evidence of *post mortem* human manipulation in the form of cut marks or deliberate fracturing, but some canid gnawing is indicated amongst the disarticulated remains and a few fragments of human bone from grave 3666 had been charred - along with animal bone from the same context - the burning being to dry rather than green bone.

Further analysis of the form and condition of the disarticulated remains, skeletal elements represented and the demographic distribution of any groupings within this data category, together with context information and data from oxygen/strontium and carbon/nitrogen isotope analysis, will be used to both reconstruct the formation processes and ascertain if different demographic/population groups were receiving different mortuary treatment, or if the observed treatments formed part of a single dynamic process.



Above: Sharp weapon trauma to skull of the elderly male from grave 3666

Left: Communal grave 3666 *in situ* remains

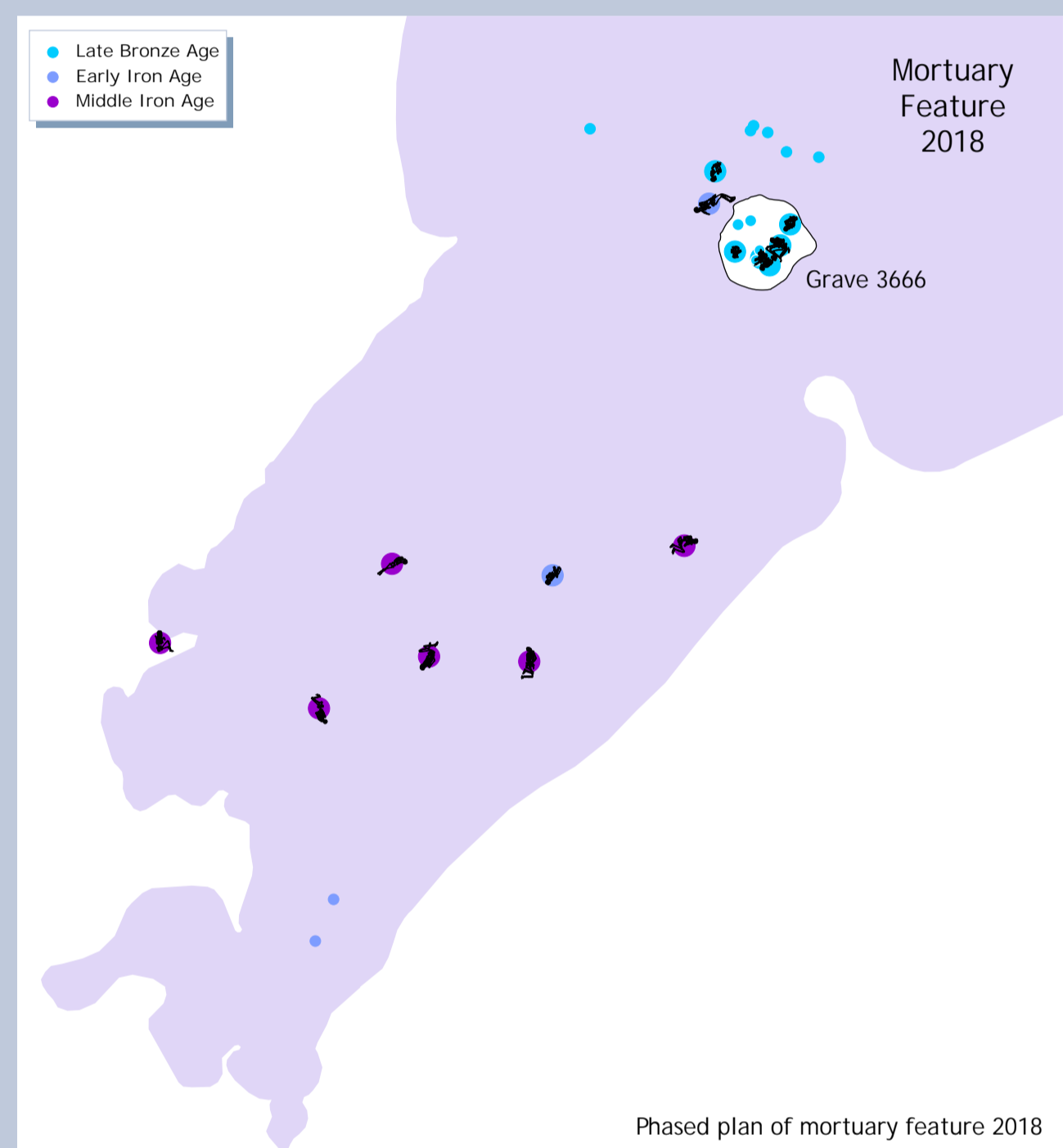
The context and form of the disarticulated bone assemblage has similarities with other Late Bronze Age sites where human remains have been recovered from midden deposits (Brück 1995; McKinley 2000; Boylston *pers. comm.* relating to Runnymede Bridge). Comparison between the material from the midden pits and mortuary feature (2018) at Cliffs End and other similar sites may further highlight the nature of the mortuary rites and formation processes of these assemblages. Currently there are no close parallels in terms of form or extent for the deposits within feature 2018, either in Britain or continental Europe...we would be delighted to hear from any colleagues who have found such deposits of Late Bronze Age date.

Acknowledgements

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References

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- Mays, S. A. and Anderson, T. 1995 'Archaeological research priorities for human remains from south-west England (Kent, East and West Sussex and Surrey)' *Archaeologia Cantiana* CXV, 355-388
- McKinley, J. I. 2000 'Human Bone' in A. J. Lawson *Potteries 1982-5. Animal Husbandry in Later Prehistoric Wiltshire* Wessex Archaeology Report 17



Mortuary feature 2018

Human bone was recovered from 98 contexts, the majority - c 86% - from within the confines of the mortuary feature 2018. Although broadly linear in shape, the sides and base of feature were uneven, suggesting it may have formed as a result of quarrying of the brickearth. The subsequent backfilling, which appears to have comprised an extended period of silting, was largely indistinguishable stratigraphically. Three broad phases were evident; a lower c 0.50 m depth of silting through which features were cut, the cuts themselves, and the silting sealing the cuts and their fills. Most, if not all of the human bone was recovered from the central and lower levels of the fill.

A large communal grave, 3666 (3.5 x 3.0 m, 1.10 m deep), lay roughly central to 2018 and appears to have formed the focus of mortuary activity. The grave contained the remains of four *in situ* burials, one semi-articulated skeleton and redeposited bone. Five individual grave cuts were observed within the fill of 2018. A further four articulated skeletons represent the remains of *in situ* deposits which could have been placed in cuts indistinguishable in excavation or the corpses may have been laid within the partially silted feature and covered with soil. Disarticulated human bone was distributed across the feature with a concentration to the north of grave 3666. The material was recovered and logged by 2 m grid square in 0.2 m spits to facilitate close reconstruction of the location of individual finds.

Artefactual material was rare in direct association with the *in situ* articulated skeletons. Abraded and fragmentary Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age pottery - possibly up to 25% of the pottery assemblage - was recovered from the feature; most from the upper levels of silting. A large proportion of the animal bone assemblage from the site derived from 2018, much of it forming articulated remains and 'placed' deposits, some (lamb and cattle) in direct association with the human remains (grave 3666 and one individual grave). The most common species were cattle and sheep/goat and very little if any of the assemblage appeared to have been reworked.

