

16 A new boat burial from the Snape Anglo-Saxon cemetery, Suffolk

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Abstract

The second boat grave to be excavated in the Snape Anglo-Saxon cemetery, Suffolk, contained the soil-stain of a 3 m logboat. This paper describes the methods used to excavate and record the stain, the details of the boat's construction, and the body and grave-goods contained within the boat. It ends with a consideration of the significance of the find for the understanding of the origins of the rite of boat burial in England.

Background

The Snape Anglo-Saxon cemetery lies at grid reference TM 4059, in the north-east corner of the modern parish of Snape in Suffolk, 7 km inland from the North Sea at Aldeburgh and 2.5 km north of the present course of the River Alde. The site has long been known to students of both maritime and Anglo-Saxon archaeology for the excavation in 1862 of a mound containing a ship burial (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 114-40). The grave had probably been robbed, but enough remained and, equally important, was recorded by the excavators, to show that the ship was c 14 m in length and 3 m in beam, of clinker-built and riveted construction and that it had eight strakes a side. The finds from within the ship indicated that it had contained a male burial of high status, dating in all probability to the second half of the 6th century and thus predating the mound 1 ship burial at Sutton Hoo (Werner 1971, 197-8).

While digging the ship and other mounds in the same area, the 1862 excavators also found a number of cremation burials, which made it clear that the ship burial was part of a much larger pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery. However, despite other later finds, such questions as the precise character, the state of preservation and the size of this cemetery remained unanswered, while agricultural activity and the subsequent enclosure of part of the area in a garden meant that, by 1951, even the location of the 1862 ship burial was no longer certain (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 115). For these reasons, it was decided in 1985 that further excavation was needed, if only to assess the suitability of the site for preservation.

For the past four years, therefore, there have been annual seasons of excavation on the site, organised by the Snape Historical Trust and the Suffolk County Archaeological Unit and directed by the author. These have concentrated on the total excavation of an area of 17 x 20 m, lying immediately adjacent to the presumed site of the ship burial, as deduced from the accounts of the 1862 excavation (Bruce-Mitford 1974, 121). This area has been found to contain 21 inhumation and 17 cremation burials of the second half of the 6th and early 7th centuries AD (Filmer-Sankey 1987). The subsoil is sandy, with few stones and a high acid content. This means that human bone only survives in close proximity to metal, although the position of the skeleton can usually be deduced from a 'sand silhouette' of the body.

On the other hand, organic preservation is unusually good, with such features as coffins being traceable from a high level within the grave.

During the September 1987 excavation season, one grave (excavation number 0328) was seen to be unusually long and narrow (3.70 x 0.80 m). After c 0.20 m of the fill had been removed, a V-shaped stain of a dark brown colour and an organic texture normally associated on the site with the decayed wood of coffins, appeared at the eastern end (Fig 16.1, + 71). It was only after a further 0.08 m of grave fill had been removed and the stain, now extended, was planned again (Fig 16.1, + 63), that it was realised that this was best interpreted as one end of a small boat.

If this were indeed a small boat grave, it would be the fourth pagan Anglo-Saxon boat burial to be found in England, and thus a find of considerable significance. Since the stain had appeared at a level well below that of potential plough damage, it was decided that further excavation of the grave should be postponed until advice and finance had been sought, in order to ensure excavation to the highest possible standard. The grave was accordingly covered with a plastic sheet and was backfilled, along with the rest of the site, until September 1988, when excavation recommenced.

The method of excavation and recording of grave 0328

At this stage it was not certain that the stain was indeed that of a boat. Nor was there any way of knowing whether, even if a boat, the stain would be sufficiently well-preserved to be understood. Accordingly, it was thought best to adopt a flexible approach to the excavation of the grave. It was decided to begin by excavating it (like all other graves on the site) in plan, removing everything including the stain. This would minimise the danger both of fabricating a non-existent boat and of missing important features.

The grave was therefore lowered in 10 mm horizontal spits. The surface was planned (at 1:10) and photographed at a maximum of every 50 mm, or more frequently if necessary. This method of excavation called for very precise excavation and recording, but it did allow the gradual development and extension of the stain to be accurately followed (Fig 16.1). At the eastern end, where it had first showed, the stain was up to 20 mm

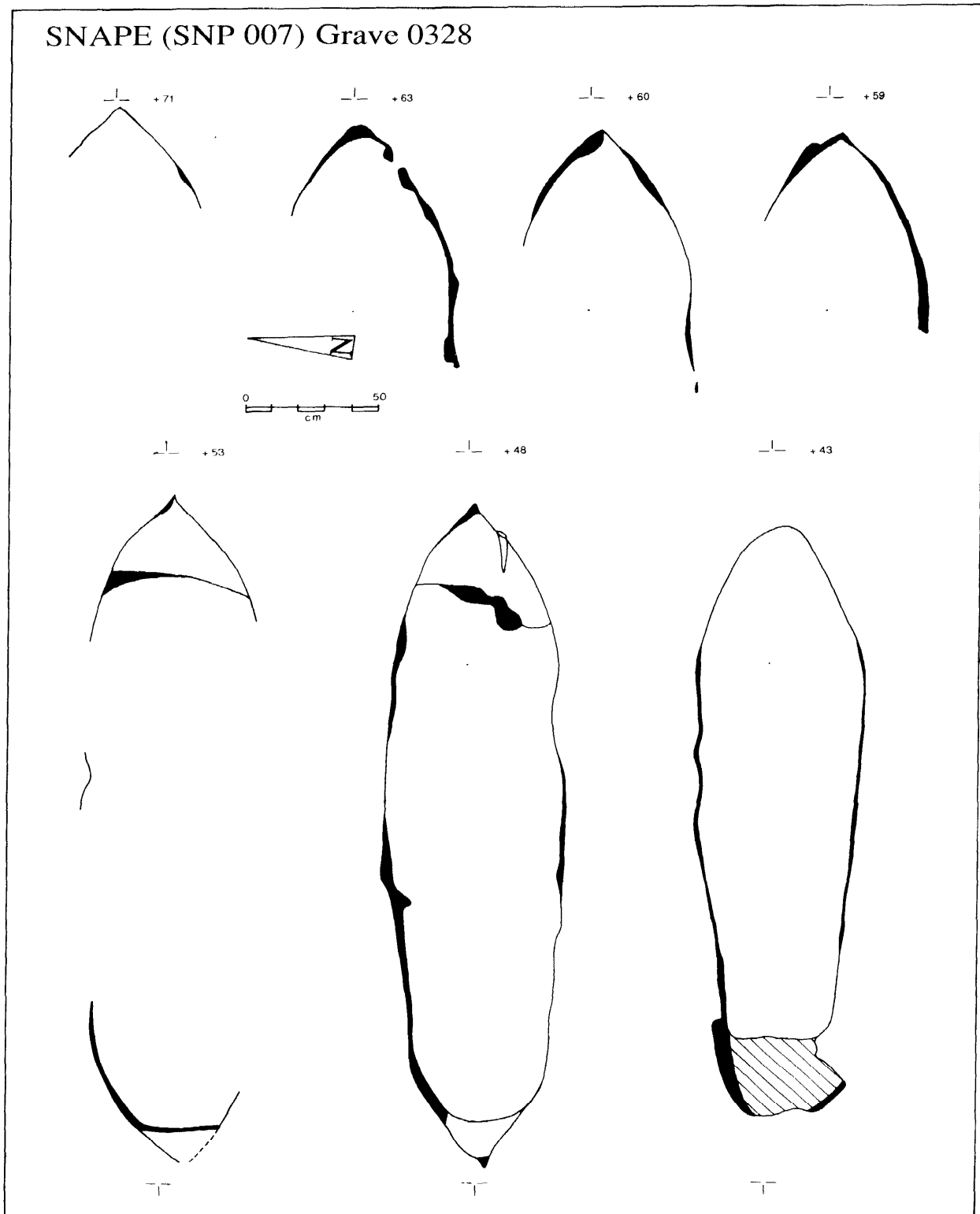


Figure 16.1 The Snape boat: plans of developing stain. Figures refer to height in centimetres above 15 m contour line. (Drawing: Author).

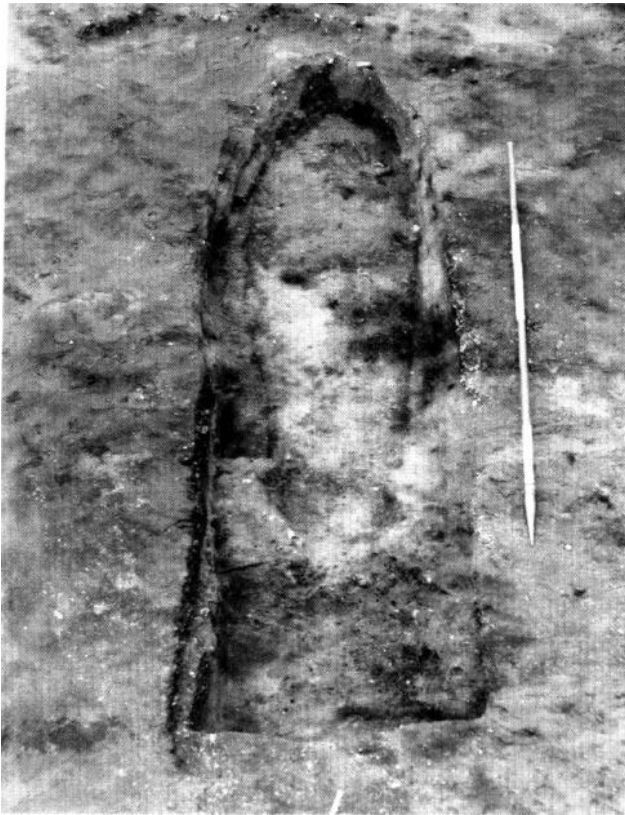


Figure 16.2 Stain at level +43, with north to the left. Side stains show particularly clearly, as does the difference between the length of the boat and of the grave at the west end (nearest the camera). (Photo: Author).

thick and was considered to be sufficiently strong and well-preserved to allow it to remain upstanding, while only the fill from inside it was removed. In all other areas the stain was either too thin or else did not exist at all and excavation in plan was rigorously adhered to. In many areas it was found that, even where there was no actual stain, the edge was visible as a contrast between the more orange fill outside, and the grey-brown fill inside, the area of the stain.

At a depth of c 0.50 m, the stain began to narrow and turn in to a flat bottom (Fig 16.1, + 43; Fig 16.2) and it became clear that excavation in plan was no longer suitable to pick up the details of the base. The stain in most areas remained extremely thin so that even 10 mm spits would risk losing important information. Accordingly, excavation in plan was abandoned and an alternative method adopted. The remaining fill, together with the traces of the body and the grave-goods, which lay in the bottom of the boat were therefore recorded and removed (see below), so that the base of the stain was fully revealed. Once this had been done, the upstanding area at the eastern end was excavated, also in 10 mm horizontal spits, but with plans at 25 mm intervals, in order to capture the changing outline of this, the best preserved area of the stain (Fig 16.3). Finally, vertical sections at 50 mm intervals were cut along the entire length of the stain, until it had been totally excavated.

At the end of this process (which took one excavator and one recorder 21 days) we were left with seven main plans of the upper levels of the stain, eight detailed plans of the eastern end, and 54 sections across the base (Fig 16.4). Recording by photogrammetry had been impossible, on account of the method of excavation. However, by combining the plans and sections, it has been possible to produce a similar effect which enables the reconstruction of a complete section of any part of the stain.

Figure 16.5 shows a long section and a representative selection of cross-sections, together with a composite plan of the highest surviving levels of the stain. It is this information which must be used to interpret the precise form and function of the wooden object which left this suggestively-shaped stain in the sand of Snape.

The interpretation of the stain

In interpreting this stain, it is necessary to distinguish between the form of the stain, as it survived and was excavated, and the form of the original wooden object. For it is clear from the cross-sections that the pressure of the earth on the decaying wood has in some places distorted (and even destroyed) the lines of the object and this makes the task of reconstructing the original shape difficult. Thus the stain survived to a length of 3 m but the object would probably have been a little longer, since it is likely that the line of the top would originally have continued at full height, rather than following the line of the surviving stain, which drops to a height of only c 0.05 m near the western end. Its maximum surviving width was 0.70 m and this probably represents roughly its original width, since the actual grave cut is only 0.10 m wider. Its maximum surviving depth was some 0.40 m. It is also clear that the cross-sections have suffered from the weight of earth from above. This would have had the effect of flattening the base, thus tending to give a more squared profile than was originally the case (Bruce-Mitford 1975, 347). The fact that this object contained no metal fittings at all, combined with its narrow width in relation to its length (length:breadth ratio 4.3:1) and an apparent tendency to taper towards the west end, indicates that it was of dug-out construction, made from a single hollowed-out log.

Although the stain as it survived and was recorded is indisputably boat-shaped, the nature of its survival, as a dark brown sandy line, means that it cannot be proved that it was a boat, rather than, say, a boat-shaped coffin or even a trough. Nevertheless, all the indications are that it was an actual logboat. McGrail, in his work on logboats in England and Wales, dealt with the problems of distinguishing a logboat from among the various other uses to which a hollowed-out log may be put and he put forward six conditions, with the suggestion that at least two should be satisfied before a logboat is claimed (McGrail 1978, 19). In the case of the Snape stain, three of those conditions (i: that it is found in or near a (former) watercourse; ii: that it is associated with other nautical artefacts; and vi: bark and sapwood have been removed) cannot be applied because of the nature of the survival and of the secondary use as a coffin. The remaining three conditions are, however, all met. Thus (v) it is greater than 3 m in length, (iii) it does have at least one end shaped in one of the well-documented logboat shapes and (iv) it does have fittings which are normally associated with logboats. Even by itself, this would indicate that it was indeed a boat, rather than a trough or purpose built coffin. When taken together

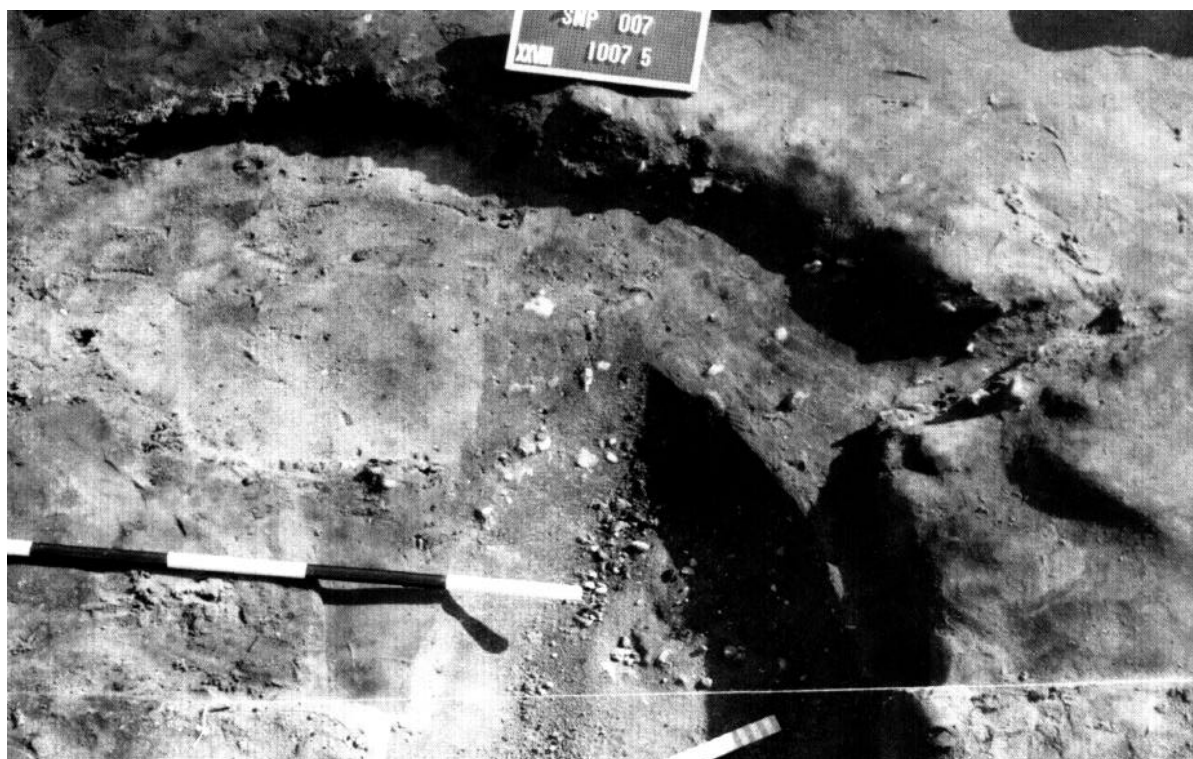


Figure 16.3 Vertical view of east end of the stain at level +43. The protruding 'fin' shows as a dark triangle. (Photo: Author).

with the fact that it comes from an area, indeed a site, where boat burial is known to have occurred at this period, its identification as a boat seems wholly justified.

The bow and stern seem to have been similarly formed, with, appearing towards the waterline, a distinctive 'fin' (Fig 16.1, + 53; + 48; Fig 16.3). The evidence as to which end was which is contradictory and may indicate that the boat could be used in either direction. Thus the slight tapering of the log indicates that the western, narrower end was the bow (McGrail 1978, 86). On the other hand, if the grave fits the pattern from Sutton Hoo and Valsgårde, where the head of the

corpse always faces the stern, then the bow is the eastern end (see below). This end, which showed from the very start, was far better preserved than the west end, which only became visible 0.10 m from the base and was, even then, obscured by iron-pan. The reason for this differential survival may be that the east end, pushed much more to the head of the grave and apparently supported by a turf, was more protected from the pressures of the earth.

No traces of any internal fittings were noted in the main body of the boat, but, at either end, a curved stain was clearly visible inside the line of the end. This was

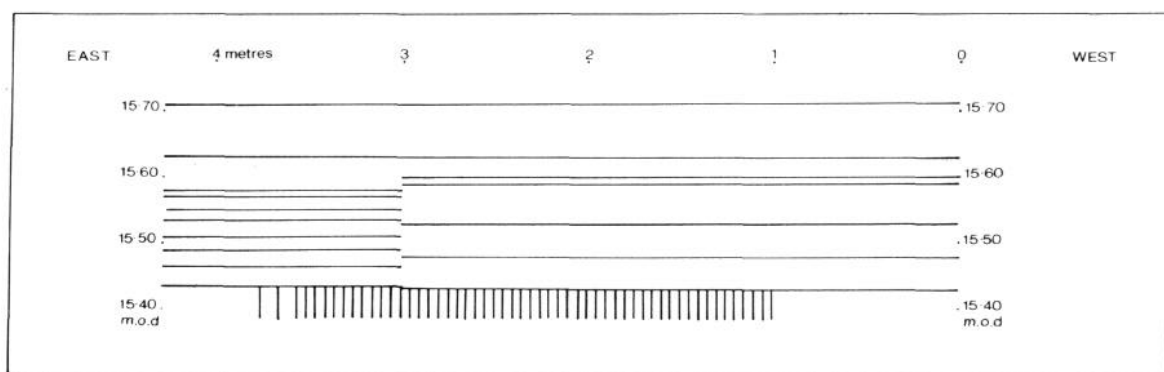


Figure 16.4 Diagram to show locations of plans (—) and sections (I) used in reconstruction of the stain (Fig 16.5). Vertical scale 1:10, horizontal scale 1:40. (Diagram: Author).