The Archaeology of Nunburnholme Wold
An Interim Report 2016

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Nunburnholme Community Heritage Project

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Introduction

Nunburnholme Wold lies on the western escarpment of the Yorkshire Wolds between the towns of Pocklington and Market Weighton in the East Riding of Yorkshire. At over 160m OD at its highest point, this roughly figure of eight shaped plateau dominates the landscape, with panoramic views across the Vale of York and surrounding valleys. The chalk bedrock here overlies the limestones and marls of the Lower Lias which outcrop to the north and west and form a spring line at the junction with the chalk which still produces plentiful fresh water.

Aerial photography in the 1970s revealed various features, in growing crops which were plotted as part of the then Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) National Mapping Programme (now Historic England) (Stoertz 1997). These included linear earthworks, ditches, enclosures and a cemetery of square barrows. The early Ordnance Survey maps showed a tumulus and the line of a possible Roman road marked as a narrow embankment running north to south across the field.

From 2012 - 2014 James Lyall of *Geophiz.biz* undertook a geophysical survey of around 50ha across the hill top, using a combination of a cart mounted 4-probe array Foerster instrument and a dual array hand held Bartington gradiometer, added to at the eastern part of the survey by Tom Sparrow and Finn Pope-Carter of Bradford University Archaeology Department with a cart-mounted Bartington Grad601 gradiometer array. Some field walking was carried out in 10m squares over 0.5ha by volunteers from Nunburnholme village, members of the East Riding Archaeological Society and staff and Archaeology students from Hull and Bradford Universities. Sherds of Iron Age, Roman, medieval and post-medieval pottery were collected.

Features revealed by the geophysical survey included a palimpsest of enclosures of at least three phases, connected by droveways, surrounding an ovoid open area of some 250x150m at the highest point of the hilltop, in the western field. The enclosure system opened out into a fan shape to the east some 300m across at its widest point which appeared to “funnel” into the ovoid open area. The open area was entered to the north, south-west and west by droveways, approaching from the valleys surrounding the hilltop.

The 2014 excavation was focussed on this enclosure complex, the ditches of which were found to contain much pottery dating from the early to later Iron Age period, together with large quantities of animal bone. Two pits were also excavated which also contained much animal bone and Iron Age pottery. Other finds from the pits included several bone needles and a miniature copper alloy axehead of later Bronze Age form (although Iron Age in date). A section was also cut across the north western droveway leading to Deepdale Head.

In 2015 the focus was on the Iron Age cemetery and what appeared in the cropmark and geophysical data to be other ritual features. Several areas were opened over geophysical anomalies. Trench BD was positioned to investigate a pair of parallel ditches which may mark out a Neolithic mortuary enclosure. A small piece of worked flint was found at the base of the ditch and a plain copper alloy ring which is probably Roman in the upper fill. Nothing was found in the two pits.

A ring ditch c. 20m in diameter was clearly visible in both the aerial photography and geophysics although in 2015 it was not possible to determine whether the feature was a Bronze Age round barrow or a hengiform feature from the later Neolithic. This feature was cut through by two linear ditches. A few sherds of pottery demonstrated some Roman activity had occurred. To the west a square enclosure was investigated, the fill of the ditch containing small Iron Age pottery sherds and parts of two small iron objects, possibly brooches. In the centre was a badly disturbed human burial of as yet unknown date. Some small pieces of Roman samian pottery were found in the upper layers above the grave.

In 2014 and 2015 several square barrows were excavated. The example dug in 2014 was found to contain an elderly male buried in the usual crouched position of the Arras Culture, with his head to the north, placed within a box-like wooden structure with the remains of a suckling pig at his feet. The burial excavated in 2015 contained skeleton of a male aged 17-22. He had also been buried in a timber structure. The forequarters of a pig, usually an indication of higher status in Arras Culture burials, had been placed across his lap. The outline of a large square barrow was also excavated, in which no central burial survived as the corpse had been placed directly on the ground surface.

The 2016 Excavation

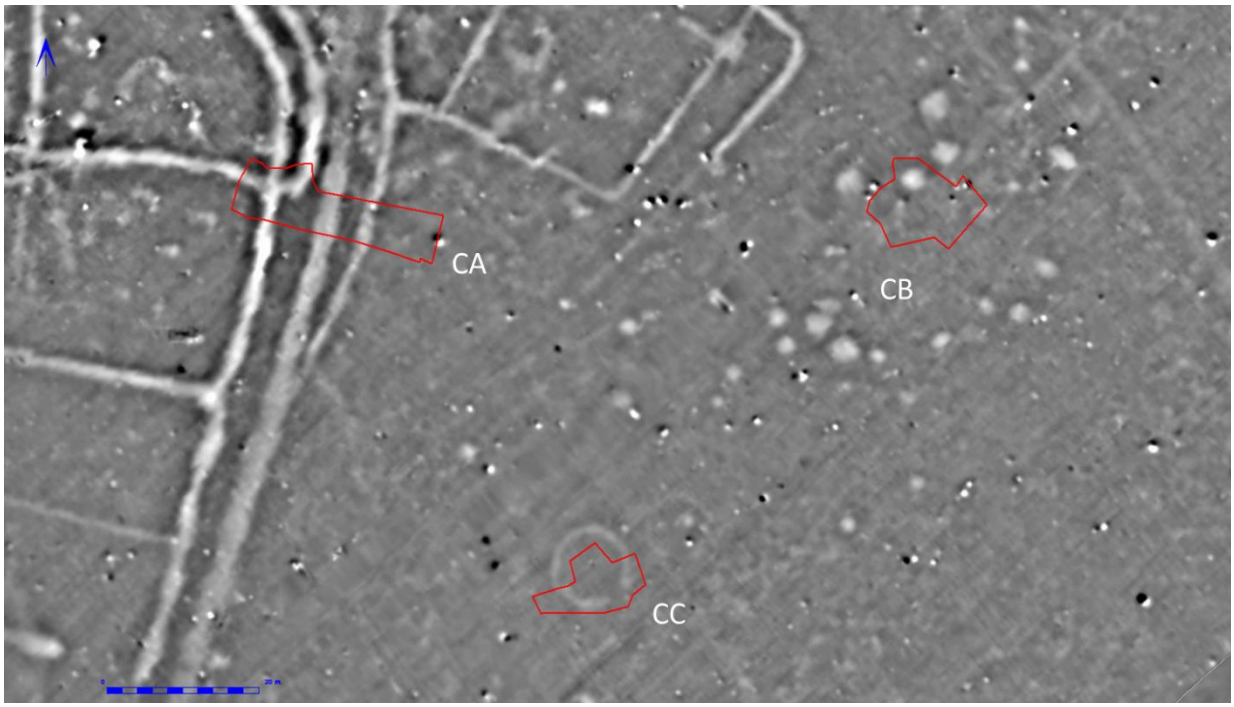

Figure 1. The 2016 excavation trenches against the geophysical surveys.

Work in the 2016 season began on the 12th September, and apart from heavy rain late on the morning of Friday 16th September, the weather throughout the excavation was fine. Three trenches were opened, each with the aim of dating the selected features appearing on the geophysical survey, and establishing any stratigraphic relationships.

The largest trench opened was Trench CA (Figs 1, 2 and 3) placed across the four linear features at the southern approach to the large ovoid enclosure. Initially it was not easy to work out the stratigraphic relationship between the ditches, but eventually it was discovered that the earliest in sequence was the north-south ditch forming the eastern edge of a series of enclosures. The ditch fills contained Iron Age hand thrown pottery and animal bones. At some stage the enclosures were re-planned and the north-south ditch was cut through by one curving round from the north to the west. The sequence of

recut ditches, began in the Iron Age, with the uppermost ditch fills containing sherds of Roman pottery.

Figure 2. Aerial view of Trench CA showing the ditches and gullies of the droveway feature and associated enclosures. (Drone photo: Steve Barker)

Figure 3. Trench CA Intersection of ditches and gullies of the droveway feature and associated enclosures.

In the centre of Trench CA the regular straight feature detected in the geophysical survey running to the east of the north-south ditch turned out to be droveway similar to that excavated in 2014. It was clear that this feature had been used for a considerable period of time, as at its base wheel ruts had cut into the chalk (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Wheel ruts cutting into the chalk gravel at the base of the droveway

The layers above the ruts contained a few pieces Roman pottery and ceramic tile. To the east were a number of shallow narrow ditches which had been recut on a number of occasions, some of which may have held a fence or palisade.

Trench CB was opened to excavate one of a series of pits visible in the geophysical survey. Over 2m in diameter and 1.5m in depth, the pit proved to be more complex than anticipated.

Figure 5. The pit in trench CB.

Figure 6. Excavating the pit in Trench CB. Note the large amount of animal bone in the tray.

It had been reopened on a number of occasions, the most noticeable feature being a roughly rectangular insertion outlined by a narrow chalk band in the south east quadrant. The pit contained much material including much animal bone and hand thrown Iron Age pottery although some pieces of Roman grey ware were found in the upper layer. The pit contained the most interesting finds from this year's excavation including a bone knife blade, a heavily damaged iron ring headed pin (Fig. 7) and a lump of slaggy material which suggested the combined working of copper alloy and iron. At the time of writing this is yet to be analysed. What was originally identified by the excavators as the tine of a set of antlers turned out to be closer inspection by a bone specialist to be goat horn with an incised line running around its tip (Fig. 7).The bone assemblage included a portion of red deer antler (Fig. 8) and an almost complete roe deer antler, together with the complete upper part of the skull of a cow at the base of the pit (Fig. 9).

Figure 7. Finds from the pit in Trench CB. (Top left) Ring-headed iron pin with broken loop. (Top right) goat horn with knife mark.

Figure 8. Animal bone and red deer antler in the lower layers of the pit in Trench CB.

Figure 9. Roe deer antler and the skull of a cow at the base of the pit in Trench CB.

It was noticeable that the bottom layers contained much charcoal and some of the bone was calcined and may have been barbecued or spit roasted. Some of the pottery was also heavily sooted on the exterior. When fully excavated the pit was found to have a flat bottom and had been excavated down to the solid tabular chalk.

Trench CC was opened over a penannular feature, 10m in diameter, clearly visible in geophysical survey (Fig. 10). It had an entrance around 2m across facing south east. This feature also had several phases of activity including the insertion of a fence or palisade as at shallow gully had been cut through the initial ditch fill (Fig 11). There was a possible posthole or shallow pit in the north western sector. Although the feature had been badly scarred by ploughing, the northern section showed brown soil a few centimetres deep under the modern plough soil, which comprised the last vestige of what had been the mound of a round barrow. No obvious central burial pit survived and it is likely that there never was one and that the interment consisted of a pot containing cremated bones. Several pieces of decorated pottery identified by Dr Terry Manby as being portions of a Middle Bronze Age collared urn were found in the fill of the gully (Fig. 12).

Figure 10. The ring gully in Trench CC. (Drone photo: Steve Barker)

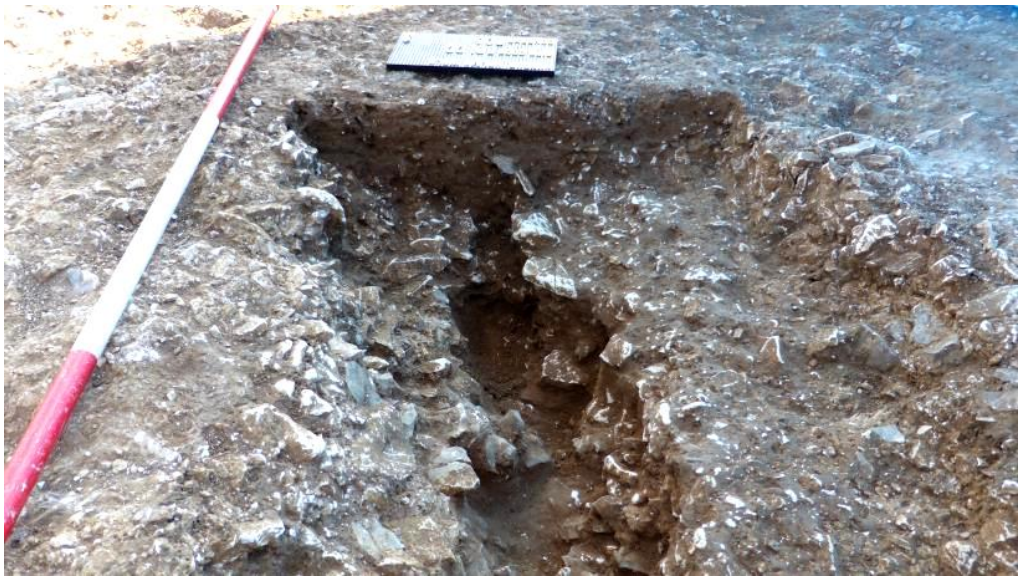

Figure 11. A section across the ring gully in Trench CC showing the possible fence or palisade slot.

Figure 12. A sherd from the rim of a Bronze Age collared urn from the ring gully in Trench CC.

Conclusions

The 2016 season proved very successful, answering the questions posed. Trench CA followed up the work done in 2014 by confirming the complexity of the large hilltop enclosure and associated droveways which seems to have begun in the early Iron Age and was remodelled on a number of occasions until the end of the Roman period. The ditches of these features contained much animal bone and pottery. The pit excavated in 2016, like those dug in 2014, was found to contain significant finds. The bone knife blade, ring headed pin, antlers and cow skull are unlikely to indicate mere rubbish disposal, but probably indicate some form of deliberate ritual deposition, a phenomenon observed on Iron Age sites elsewhere. The reopening of the pit in Trench CA during the Iron Age to make further deposits is however unusual.

The ring ditch and the fragments of decorated collared urn found in its fill, together with the hengiform feature and possible Neolithic mortuary enclosure sampled in 2015, demonstrate that Nunburnholme Wold was a ritual focus for a considerable period of time.

Reference:

Stoertz, C. (1997) *Ancient landscapes of the Yorkshire Wolds*. Swindon: RCHM (E)

Acknowledgements

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(Photos: P. Halkon unless otherwise acknowledged, geophysics plots: James Lyall).

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Videos, images and information about the dig are now available on the website of the Nunburnholme with Kilnwick Percy Parish Council

http://www.nunburnholmewithkilnwickpercypc.co.uk/heritage.html

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