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A Late Iron Age Helmet Burial from Bridge, near Canterbury, Kent

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with contributions from

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A rare find was made in 2012 when a metal-detectorist on land near Bridge, a few miles south of Canterbury, Kent, recovered a copper alloy brooch, other metal items, and a quantity of burnt bone contained in a near complete, probably imported Gallic, helmet of Iron Age type. Excavation was undertaken to ascertain the immediate context of the helmet, confirm that it represented a cremation burial, and determine if it formed part of a larger funerary deposit. The helmet and brooch suggest a burial date in the mid-1st century BC *and the apparently isolated cremation burial, of a possibly female adult, can be broadly placed within the Aylesford–Swarling tradition; the helmet taking the place of a more usual pottery cinerary urn. Cropmark evidence suggests that the burial was made within a wider landscape of Iron Age occupation.*

Keywords: Iron Age, cremation burial, helmet, Aylesford-Swarling

INTRODUCTION
(Andrew Richardson)

In autumn 2012, Mr Trevor Rogers was searching with a metal detector. A signal led him to a large copper alloy bowl-shaped object containing a copper alloy brooch, a small spike, some sheet metal fragments, and a quantity of burnt bone. Fearing illicit removal if he left the finds in the ground, Mr Rogers carefully lifted the container, the brooch, the spike, and a single bone. He dropped a bag of lead weights into the shallow excavation to allow relocation of the find-spot and took the finds home.

On inspecting the objects, the finder recognised that the 'container' was a nearly complete helmet and that this and the associated brooch appeared to be of Iron Age type. Realising the significance of such a discovery, he contacted the present author, who visited him on 13 October and confirmed his identification. The finds were reported to the coroner, the Finds Liaison Officer for Kent, and the Treasure Registrar. They were recorded in the Portable Antiquities Scheme database as PAS no. KENT-FA8E56 and allocated the Treasure no. 2012/T726.

Given the significance of the discovery, it was clear there was a need to investigate the find-spot archaeologically to provide a secure context for the finds. With the kind permission of both the landowners and tenant farmer, it was possible to arrange for this to be carried out within days of the reporting of the finds.

THE BURIAL
(Keith Parfitt)

Figure 1 shows the location of the find-spot (NGR TR 1749 5476), which lies on the western edge of the modern parish of Bridge, just over 1 km from the parish church, and 3.7 km south-east of the late Iron Age settlement and Roman regional centre at Canterbury (*Durovernum Cantiacorum*). The site stands at about

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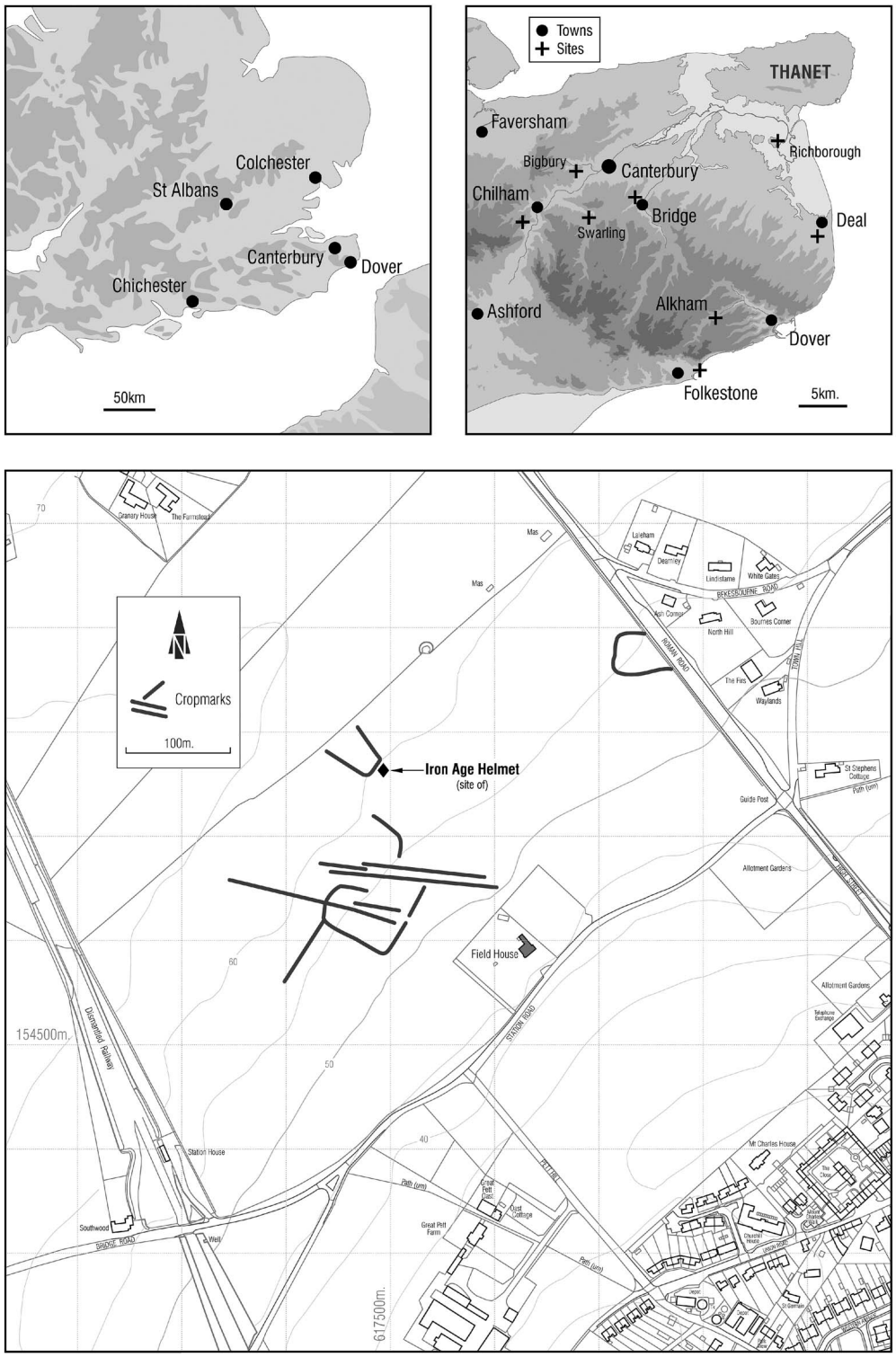

Fig. 1.
Location map

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Fig. 2.
General view of the excavation, looking south-east, showing the burial pit (centre). Scale 50 cm

58 m OD and is located at the top of a long south-east facing slope which here defines the western side of the valley of the Little Stour river. The line of the main Canterbury–Dover Roman road (Margary 1967, Route 1a) lies around 300 m to the north-east.

In an unfunded, one day operation on 27 October, 2012, an excavation of about 2 × 2 m was opened by hand using volunteers drawn from the Canterbury Archaeological Trust and Dover Archaeological Group (Fig. 2). This was intended to ascertain the immediate context of the helmet, confirm that it represented a cremation burial, and determine if it formed part of a larger funerary deposit.

The plough-scored surface of the natural chalk was revealed at a depth of 0.35–0.50 m below present ground level. It was sealed by a thin sub-soil layer of orange–brown clay, overlain by about 0.30 m of modern ploughsoil. Cutting in from the top of the ploughsoil, Mr Rogers' original recovery pit was identified as a roughly circular hole about 0.35 m across. Removal of its filling yielded a quantity of cremated bone and a few small fragments of copper alloy sheet.

At the base of the pit, the lower half of the helmet's oval outline was still preserved as a perfect cast in the surrounding undisturbed soil. In places, this outline was stained green from the copper alloy composition of the helmet, and there were fragmentary remains of copper alloy sheeting on the base. The helmet outline measured 0.18 × 0.20 m. It was apparent that it had originally been buried inverted and orientated north-north-east by south-south-west. Mr Rogers had observed that the projecting rear neck-guard lay towards the north.

At the level of the chalk, careful cleaning around Mr Rogers' excavation revealed the truncated outline of the original burial pit (visible in the centre of Fig. 2). As surviving, this was roughly circular in plan, 0.35–0.38 m in diameter, and about 0.20 m deep into the chalk. Its sides were generally steep but in the north-eastern quarter they were more gently sloping. The base was fairly flat. Thin fragments of corroded copper alloy sheet rested directly on the base of the pit and these appeared to represent a missing part of the helmet, implying that it had been laid directly on the bottom of the cut.

The original soil filling of the feature remained largely intact on the western side of the burial pit. It consisted of a brown clay loam containing frequent small chalk lumps. Careful excavation and subsequent wet-sieving of this yielded nothing of special interest, with no charcoal or cremated bone recovered.

The overall form of the original burial may be reconstructed with some confidence. A small, shallow circular pit had initially been dug in the natural chalk, into which the inverted helmet had then been placed. It was positioned in the eastern half of the pit, orientated north-north-east by south-south-west, with its projecting rear neck-guard towards the northern end. A quantity of cremated human bone had been placed within the helmet just before or just after it was put into the ground. The bone was probably contained in a cloth or leather bag/container, closed by the brooch. The pit was then backfilled and left. Centuries later, the area came under the plough, eventually causing some damage to the rim of the buried helmet.

FINDS
(Julia Farley)

Helmet

The helmet (Fig. 3) is of a simple, almost hemispherical design, oval in plan, with a shallow-angled projecting neck-guard at the rear. It fits most closely into Pernet and Feugère's lighter Coolus type (Feugère 1993, 84; Pernet 2010, 119–21) or Russell Robinson's Coolus A (1975, 28–9). It appears to have been beaten from a single sheet of copper alloy. The bowl is smooth, plain, and undecorated. At the edge, there are two parallel lines of incised cabled decoration running around the circumference: one follows the edge while the other

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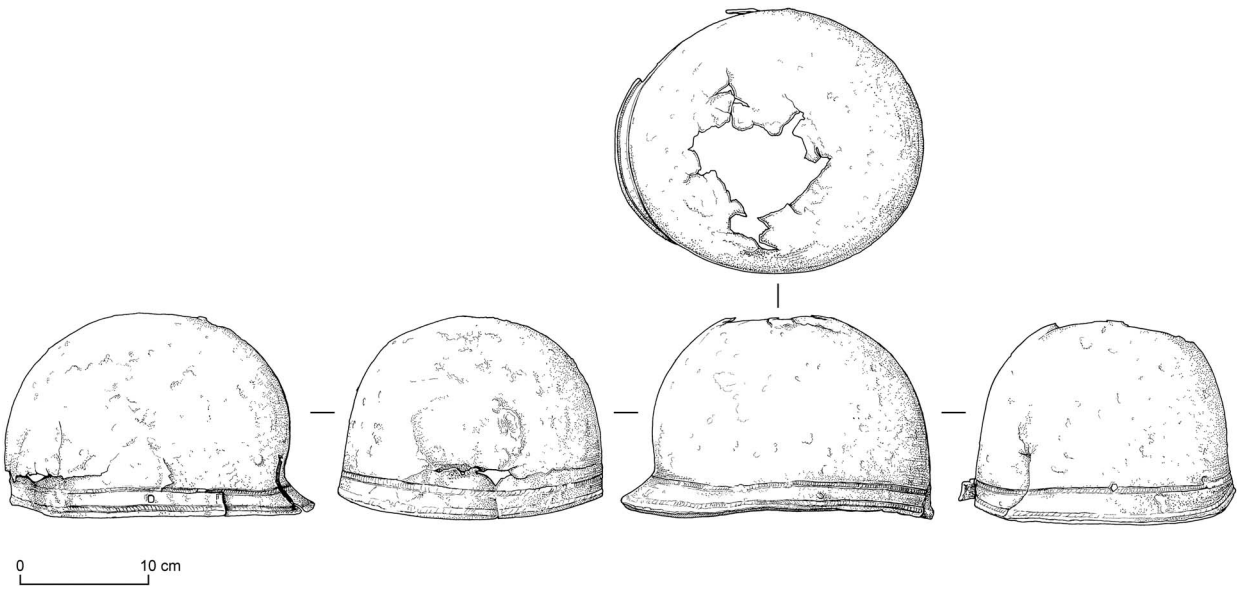

Fig. 3.
The helmet. Drawn by Craig Williams, image © Trustees of the British Museum

runs above it, following the line of the bowl. There is a circular hole pierced through each side, between these bands of decoration. This type of helmet was not normally fitted with cheek-pieces (Pernet 2010, 116; Russell Robinson 1975, 29), so the holes were most likely intended for the attachment of a chin-strap. There is an additional square hole somewhat crudely pierced at the back of the helmet, through the decoration on the neck-guard. This is a common feature on helmets of this type, and may have been used as a third point of attachment for the chin-tie, or for a carrying-ring or organic carrying-loop.

Damage to the edge of the helmet bowl was probably caused when it was struck by the plough. There is also an area of damage at the top; additional fragments of copper alloy sheet recovered during the excavation appear to fit into this area, and it is likely that the helmet was complete when it was deposited.

Measurements: Circumference immediately above neck-guard: 625 mm; Maximum remaining height: 145 mm; Length (front to back): 233 mm; Weight: 539.4 g

Very few Iron Age helmets are known from Britain, and all tend to be unusual types. One group composed of bronze bands probably represent forms of ceremonial head-dress rather than conventional helmets: examples include the unusual 'crown' from grave 112 at Mill Hill, Deal, Kent (BM P&E 1990,0102.24; Stead 1995); a lost antiquarian find from Leckhampton, Gloucestershire (*ibid*., 75); and fragments from the Hounslow, Middlesex, hoard (BM P&E 1864,0502.15). A Romano-British example comes from the temple at Hockwold, Norfolk (BM P&E 1956,1011.1). An Iron Age burial including a mount now interpreted as another type of priestly head-dress comes from Newnham Croft, Cambridge (Stead 1995, 81–3). Another group of helmet-like head-dresses identified by Stead (*ibid*., 83–4) are also most likely ceremonial in nature: these include antiquarian finds from Ogmore Down, Bridgend, Glamorgan, now lost, and Cerrig-y-Drudion, Conwy. If these head-dresses and similar 'crowns' are excluded, four Iron Age helmets are known from Britain. Three are unique: the horned helmet dredged from the Thames near Waterloo in central London (BM P&E 1988,1004.1); the Meyrick helmet, of unknown provenance (BM P&E 1872,1213.2), which appears to be an indigenous interpretation of a Roman military type (MacGregor 1976, 89–90, no. 189); and a highly fragmentary example recovered with the hoards from Snettisham, Norfolk (Jody Joy, pers. comm.). The fourth helmet is the only example from Britain comparable to the Bridge find: a Coolus-Mannheim type from a Late Iron Age inhumation burial in North Bersted, Sussex (Treasure no. 2008/T449). The grave

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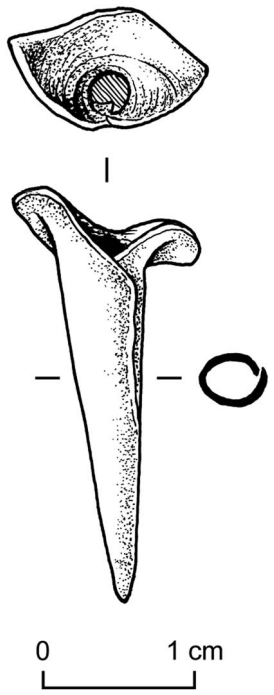

Fig. 4.
The spike. Drawn by Craig Williams, image © Trustees of the British Museum

is unpublished, but has been provisionally dated to around 50 BC.

The Bridge helmet is more widely paralleled on the continent, including a river find from Belleville, site finds from the *oppida* at Vielle Toulouse and Agen, and the grave finds from Sigoyer (Pernet 2010, 118, fig. 84, pl. 79, 90, & 159). The *oppida* finds came from contexts dated 75–50 BC at Toulouse and 50–25 BC at Agen, while the tomb at Sigoyer probably dates to the early 1st century BC.

The attribution of these helmets is problematic; they have been assigned to both Gallic (Pernet 2010; Russell Robinson 1975, 28–9) and Roman traditions (Schaaff 1988, 322–3; Feugère 1994, 42–3). Nevertheless, all well-attested examples are from Gaul (Pernet 2010, 119), where they are also found in pre-Roman contexts. It is most likely that the Bridge helmet was manufactured in Gaul.

Spike

A small spike (Fig. 4), formed from a piece of copper alloy sheet rolled into a simple point, was recovered with the helmet. It shares the same greenish patina, but does not appear to relate to any of the three holes pierced through the helmet's rim. It is possible that it fitted into the damaged area at the apex of the helmet bowl, functioning as a crest holder. Nevertheless, this interpretation is problematic, and cannot be demonstrated with any certainty. Helmets of the type used in this burial were not normally fitted with knobs, spikes, or crests, nor is this spike of the same design as those seen on other contemporary helmets, such as the Montefortino type, which feature fully-developed knobs. If this spike had been used to adorn the top of the helmet, it would have been a very unusual modification. It is equally possible that the spike is unrelated to the helmet, or served a different, unknown purpose.

Measurements: Length: 27.1 mm; Weight: 1.8 g

Brooch

The well-preserved copper alloy brooch (Fig. 5) has a slightly expanded wire bow, with lozenge-shaped cross-section, decorated on the front with vertical parallel lines. It has a symmetrical two-coil spring and external chord. The catchplate is damaged, but was originally framed, with a single central bar.

Measurements: Length: 89.1 mm; Width of bow: 4.2 mm; Width of spring: 13.1 mm; Weight: 11.3 g

The brooch is Mackreth Type 'D 1.a', Feugère 2b. The bar across the framed catchplate is unusual, but is seen on contemporary types, such as the 'Stead' type brooches with bulbous central moulding on the bow (Feugère 8b; Mackreth Type 'Late La T 1.a1') and the brooches from the Chilham Castle mirror burial (Stead 1998). The Bridge brooch, although missing the diagnostic bulbous bow moulding, otherwise exhibits many similarities to these brooches, including a two-coil spring with external chord. These features are more common on British than continental finds (*ibid.*, 346), suggesting that the Bridge brooch is most likely an insular product. The closest British parallels are from the Westhampnett cemetery in West Sussex (Fitzpatrick 1992). Following the Westhampnett dating, Mackreth (2011, 21) dates this type to 90–50 BC, whereas Feugère (1985, 189), based on the evidence from southern France, suggests a slightly later date of 75–25 BC.

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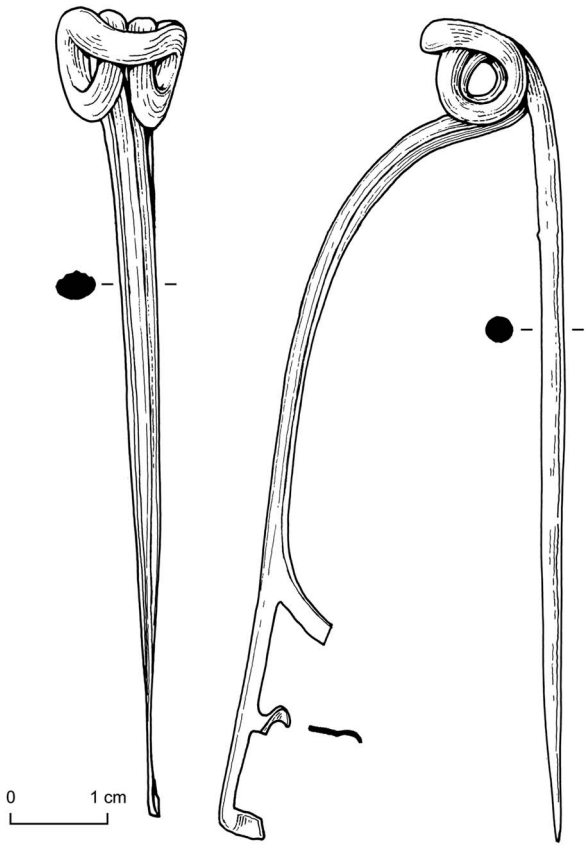

Fig. 5.
The brooch. Drawn by Craig Williams, image © Trustees of the British Museum

HUMAN REMAINS
(Daniel Antoine)

Examination of the human remains was carried out at the British Museum. The remains found within the helmet were very fragmented and the cremated bone has been reduced to small pieces, most of which are less than 30 mm in size. Larger fragments are rare, with few in the 30–50 mm range and hardly any over 50 mm. It is difficult to ascertain how much of the skeleton survived the cremation and was collected, but all parts of the body are well represented, including the hands, feet, upper and lower limb bones, vertebrae, ribs, and skull. Despite the small fragment size, it was possible to identify numerous elements based on their morphology. The bones are fully developed, no parts of the body appear in duplicate and the amount of preserved bone represents what would be expected from one skeleton, all of which indicates that these are the remains of a single adult individual. A skull fragment (frontal bone, right supraorbital margin) suggests that this person's forehead was flat and upright, and part of the sciatic notch of the pelvis indicates a wide angle, both of which are female traits. Unfortunately, no other diagnostic areas have survived and, with so few indicators, the sex can only be tentatively assigned as female. Overall, the information gathered from the cremated bones indicates the helmet held the remains of a single adult individual, possibly female.

DISCUSSION
(Keith Parfitt, Andrew Richardson, Julia Farley, Rachel Pope, & Christopher Sparey-Green)

The Bridge helmet and brooch suggest a burial date in the mid-1st century BC. The cremation burial can be broadly placed within the Late Iron Age Aylesford–Swarling tradition, characterised by the deposition of burnt bone in pottery vessels (or occasionally in wooden buckets with metal fittings), often accompanied by brooches and other objects. This tradition is evidenced locally by the type-site at Swarling (Bushe-Fox 1925), just over 5 km to the west, and the small cemetery at Alkham near Dover, 15 km to the south-east (Philp 1991). Both sites included burials in buckets with metal fittings. At Chilham Castle, 11.5 km west of Bridge, a cremation in a pottery vessel was accompanied by a copper alloy mirror and two brooches closely resembling the Bridge brooch (Parfitt 1998).

In the case of the Bridge burial, the inverted helmet seemingly provided an alternative to the more typical pottery cinerary vessel. The helmet did not form part of a larger burial deposit and no other interments lay immediately adjacent. Apparently, the burial was either an isolated one or part of a dispersed cemetery with widely spaced graves.

Recent satellite imagery demonstrates the presence of a complex of cropmarks in adjacent parts of the same field (Fig. 1), which are indicative of ancient habitation nearby. To the north-east of the helmet burial, apparently cut by the Roman road, is a sub-rectangular ditched enclosure, possibly of Bronze Age or Iron Age date (Kent HER ref. TR15 SE114). To the south-west, a more extensive complex includes a west-north-west to east-south-east aligned ditched trackway, with several phases of ditched enclosure arranged on either side of it (Kent HER ref. TR15 SE117). Slightly detached from the main group, further

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up-slope to the north, is another small rectilinear enclosure. The burial would appear to have been located immediately outside its south-eastern ditch.

No dating evidence is yet available but the general form of the trackway/enclosure complex would be entirely consistent with a Late Iron Age–Romano-British date. The excavated cremation burial may thus have been placed on slightly higher ground, overlooking a contemporary settlement. The discovery of a stray potin coin of the Kentish Primary Series (*c.* 150–100 BC), 30 m to the south-west of the burial, provides some further evidence for Late Iron Age activity in the immediate area.

The Bridge find also falls firmly within a setting of Late Iron Age occupation focused around Canterbury. At Canterbury itself a riverside settlement and/or shrine pre-dated the establishment of the Roman city, whilst to the west lies the major hillfort of Bigbury (Blockley 1989). Fieldwork in the vicinity of Bigbury has revealed a series of extensive earthworks which may suggest that the hillfort was only part of a more extensive territorial *oppidum* (Sparey-Green 2012). In addition, excavations in 2012–13 about 2 km north of Canterbury's city centre have revealed an extensive Iron Age complex situated on high ground overlooking the Great Stour valley. This appears to date from the Early Iron Age down to the mid-1st century BC and includes areas of settlement, industrial activity, and cremation burial (Ross Lane, pers. comm.).

Together, these sites of the lower Stour valley represent a significant focus of settlement within the wider Late Iron Age landscape of south-eastern Britain. Indeed, east Kent's role as an area of contact and exchange between the culturally related inhabitants of north-eastern Gaul and the insular power bases of the Aylesford–Swarling complex north of the Thames is clear, and has been recently underlined by the excavation of a major coastal trading and production site at East Wear Bay, Folkestone (Parfitt 2013, 26–30).

Since the 19th century the Bridge area has been linked to the British campaigns of Julius Caesar, particularly the push inland on the first night of the 54 BC campaign, the crossing of the Lesser Stour being seen as the site of the first encounter with British forces on the following morning (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, V, 9). With a landing place near Walmer, the Bridge area could easily lie on the route of a march from the coast but, in the absence of positive evidence for the movement of Caesar's forces, this is only hypothetical. There are no British parallels for the use of a helmet as a cremation urn, and this unusual facet of the Bridge burial, along with the mid-1st century date, could lead to the supposition that it was an interment in the aftermath of conflict. This type of helmet was used by both Roman auxiliaries and their indigenous allies and enemies during the Gallic Wars. Nevertheless, the use of a local burial rite, and the suggestion that the individual could be female, argue against the possibility that this burial was directly associated with Caesar's forces. The helmet is merely an object of approximately the right period, unusually re-used as a burial container.

The possibility that the cremated individual may be female is interesting, since the majority of sexed Iron Age burials incorporating weaponry and martial accoutrements have been found to be male. Whilst a martial identity may typically have been male in Iron Age Britain, it was not exclusively so (Pope & Ralston 2011). Middle Iron Age cemetery evidence in East Yorkshire includes several counter-examples, including possible female R163 at Rudston cemetery, with sword and shield, R3 (also at Rudston) with healed cuts to her face, and a speared female at Wetwang Slack (Stead 1991; Giles 2008; Dent 1983, 125). Three additional burials from Rudston which feature weapons or defensive items such as shields as grave goods (R57, R148, R182) show evidence of contra-indications in the sexing by the osteologist (Mel Giles, pers. comm.; Stead 1991, 194, 204, 208). Iron Age women were not necessarily excluded from martial activity, with increasing osteoarchaeological evidence for active female involvement in combat situations towards the end of the Iron Age (Redfern 2008; Western & Hurst 2014).

Helmets such as the one from Bridge can also be understood as part of a wider repertoire of Iron Age head-gear. Iron Age burials associated with head-gear are unusual, but at least two show ambiguity in the sex of the deceased. The individual from the contemporary inhumation at North Bersted, Sussex, which includes the only close British parallel for the Bridge helmet, is considered male, but two earlier British inhumation burials with potentially ceremonial (rather than overtly martial) head-gear are of somewhat ambiguous sex. At the La Tène C sites of Mill Hill, Deal, Kent and Newnham Croft, Cambridge – which together share brooch parallels – the former individual is considered male with 'feminine characteristics', and the latter – with beautifully-decorated bronze armlet and three brooches, one coral-decorated – was

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originally believed female, and subsequently male (Anderson 1995; Whimster 1981). While these ambiguities lie in the modern archaeological evidence rather than necessarily reflecting the gender of the deceased in life, along with the Bridge burial they highlight the possibility that head-gear of a variety of forms was considered an appropriate accoutrement for both men and women in Iron Age Britain.

The head and hair were an important locus of power in Iron Age culture (Aldhouse-Green 2004; Armit 2012). Human representations, although rare, often emphasise the head, and objects such as helmets and head-dresses which framed the head and face may have been an important mechanism for signalling power and authority. Whether the individual buried with the Bridge helmet was male or female, and whether the helmet belonged to the deceased or the person or people who laid them to rest, the helmet itself can be understood to have wider symbolic connotations, perhaps as a symbol of power, as well as being a piece of defensive military equipment.

The most plausible explanation for the presence of an imported Gallic helmet alongside an insular brooch type, as part of a cremation rite with strong local parallels, is that this exotic object had been incorporated into a variation of an established burial rite. This suggests that the deceased or their mourners were members of the local community. The presence of this helmet in a Kentish grave highlights the connections being forged across the channel at a time when life in south-eastern England was undergoing a period of dramatic change. There are many ways the helmet could have come into the possession of a member of the local community in Kent. The 1st century BC was a time when new contacts and connections were opening up in south-east England: a time of war, but also a time of travel, communication, and change. Mercenaries from Britain probably travelled to join the fighting in Gaul, and it is possible that the Bridge helmet could have belonged to a British or Gallic warrior who fought in Gaul, against the Romans or even alongside them, eventually bringing the helmet with them to Britain. The helmet could also have been a gift, or acquired through trade. Even if the helmet was not directly connected to the Gallic Wars, its military significance would have been apparent to those involved in the burial rite, and the choice of this unusual cremation vessel would have emphasised a powerful, and most likely martial, aspect to the identity of the deceased or their kin.

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RÉSUMÉ

Inhumation à casque de la fin de l'âge du fer à Bridge, près de Canterbury, Kent, de Julia Farley, Keith Parfitt, et Andrew Richardson

Une rare trouvaille fut faite en 2012 lorsqu'un amateur de détection de métaux découvrit sur des terres près de Bridge, à quelques kilomètres au sud de Canterbury, Kent, une broche en alliage de cuivre, d'autres articles en métal et une certaine quantité d'os brûlés contenus dans un casque quasi complet de type âge du fer, probablement importé de Gaule. Des fouilles furent entreprises pour établir le contexte immédiat du casque, confirmer qu'il représentait une inhumation à incinération, et déterminer s'il faisait partie d'un dépôt funéraire plus conséquent. Le casque et la broche donnent à penser à une date d'inhumation du milieu du 1er siècle av.J.-C. et cette inhumation à crémation, apparemment isolée, peut-être d'une femme adulte, peut en gros se replacer dans la tradition d'Aylesford–Swarling; le casque occupant la place plus couramment tenue par une urne cinéraire en céramique. Des témoignages de traces dans les cultures donnent à penser que l'inhumation se déroula dans le cadre plus étendu d'un paysage d'occupation de l'âge du fer.

ZUSSAMENFASSUNG

Eine Helmbestattung der späten Eisenzeit aus Bridge bei Canterbury, Kent, von Julia Farley, Keith Parfitt, und Andrew Richardson

Ein seltener Fund wurde im Jahr 2012 gemacht, als ein Sondengänger auf nahe der Ortschaft Bridge gelegenem Land, wenige Meilen südlich von Canterbury, Kent, auf eine Fibel aus Kupferlegierung stieß, die zusammen mit anderen Metallgegenständen und einer gewissen Menge verbrannter Knochen in einen nahezu vollständigen und wahrscheinlich importierten gallischen Helm eines eisenzeitlichen Typs eingebracht waren. Eine Ausgrabung wurde durchgeführt um das unmittelbare Umfeld des Helmes zu erkunden, um zu bestätigen, dass er eine Brandbestattung repräsentierte, und um festzustellen, ob er Teil einer größeren Begräbnisstätte war. Der Helm und die Fibel legen ein Datum der Bestattung in der Mitte des 1. Jhs. v. Chr. nahe, und die scheinbar isolierte Brandbestattung eines möglicherweise weiblichen adulten Individuums kann allgemein der Aylesford-Swarling-Tradition zugerechnet werden, wobei der Helm die Stelle einer eher üblichen keramischen Leichenbrandurne einnimmt. Bewuchsmerkmale lassen vermuten, dass die Bestattung innerhalb einer umfangreicheren eisenzeitlichen Siedlungslandschaft erfolgte.

RESUMEN

Un enterramiento en casco de finales de la Edad del Hierro de Bridge, alrededores de Canterbury, Kent, por Julia Farley, Keith Parfitt, y Andrew Richardson

En 2012 un prospector con detector de metales realizó un hallazgo peculiar cerca de Bridge, algunas millas al sur de Canterbury, Kent, al encontrar una fíbula de aleación de cobre, otros objetos de metal, y una gran cantidad

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de hueso quemado en el interior de un casco casi completo de la Edad del Hierro, probablemente de importación gala. Se llevó a cabo una excavación para establecer el contexto inmediato del casco, confirmar que representaba una cremación, y determinar si formaba parte de un depósito funerario mayor. El casco y la fíbula sugieren un enterramiento datado a mediados del siglo I BC y la cremación, aparentemente aislada, y posiblemente de un adulto femenino, puede asignarse de forma genérica a la tradición Aylesford-Swarling, ocupando el casco el lugar comúnmente asignado a la urna funeraria de cerámica. Las líneas de arado sugieren que el enterramiento se produjo dentro de un paisaje más amplio de ocupación de la Edad del Hierro.

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