

Medieval Cemetery 3-J-20

Location

Cemetery site 3-J-20 was situated at the top of the hill limiting the southern edge of the settlement 3-J-19. The hill, a large outcrop of bedrock, is the highest point on the eastern side of the island. The surface of the outcrop was uneven, the rock being much fractured by erosion processes. Rock splinters and gravel that had been eroded from the outcrop, in-filled the undulations within it.

The site prior to excavation

The site, approximately 6m north-south by 10m east-west, occupies the whole of the summit of the hill (Welsby 2003, 14). It contained five medieval inhumations, all of which had been robbed. Four of these burials had been marked by red-brick monuments, one was within a rectangular, stone-built structure. The disturbance suffered by the red-brick monuments was such that their original dimensions and form were lost. They were simply discrete piles of brick with an associated brick spread amongst which were some of triangular shape (Welsby 2003, 75, cat. no. 46, fig. 4.3).

The rectangular structure had survived to a greater degree. The lowest course of the stones comprising the structure survived in its entirety with a second course present in places. The stones used were sub-rectangular and 200 – 600mm in size, fitted closely together forming walls with flat outer faces and which averaged 500mm thick. The walls were built directly onto the bedrock, with protrusions of the bedrock being incorporated into them in places. The structure was aligned north north east – south south west and was 5.5m wide and 9.5m in length. Surrounding the structure was a spread of rubble from the upper courses. Similar stones as well as red-brick fragments, pottery sherds and pieces of human bone were spread across the interior of the structure.

Work on the site was undertaken to allow a better understanding of the stone-built structure. The structure had suffered a degree of collapse over time and the burial within it had been robbed. On account of those factors, the archaeological investigation was primarily a clean up exercise to expose the remains of the original structure.

Results

After removal of the robbing and collapse debris, several structural details became apparent (Figure 1, Plate 1). As previously noted, the structure was built directly onto bedrock and its interior had a very irregular surface formed of bedrock protrusions and natural gravel deposits. No remains of a surface built over this natural horizon were present and it is assumed that no surface had ever been provided. A second detail of note is that there was no entrance through any of the walls of the structure. It is possible that an entrance did exist with a raised threshold, but there is no evidence to support this. The small amount of stone rubble present on the site suggested that the walls

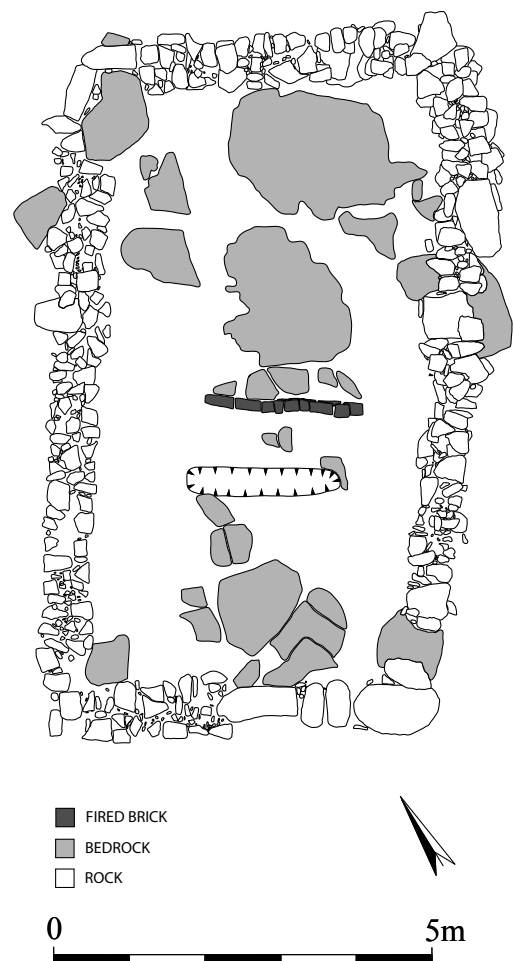


Figure 1. Plan of the rectangular stone structure, the grave cut and the remains of the associated fired brick monument (scale 1:100).

may not have been much higher than they were at the time of excavation.

Within the south south west side of the structure, a little off-centre, was the grave cut. This was aligned east south east – west south west, had straight sides and rounded ends. It was cut into the compacted gravel and bedrock



Plate 1. General view, looking south south west.

natural and was 2.05m in length, 390mm in width and had a depth of only 300mm. The robbing of the grave had removed almost all the skeletal remains it contained, therefore, the burial attitude is unknown.

The grave cut was flanked on its north north east side by a single line of red bricks $300 \times 150 \times 60$ mm in size surviving to two courses in height (Plate 2). The line of bricks was presumably all that remained of the grave monument and its exact form can only be speculated upon. What is clear is that the remains comprising its northern side were at a distance of 1m from the centre of the grave cut. Assuming the grave cut was central to the monument, the monument would have had a width of 2m or more. No other example of a red-brick monument of this size was present on Mis Island.



Plate 2. Remains of the red-brick grave monument, looking south south west.

The positioning and alignment of the grave and the rectangular stone structure displayed a clear association. They were presumably constructed as one event and formed a single entity. The funerary nature of the site suggests that the outer stone structure was an addition to the grave monument, rather than it having been constructed for a separate function. The low stone walls which comprised it would have formed a perimeter around the central red-brick monument.

Conclusions

The position of the site on the highest point of the eastern side of Mis island was not an obvious location for a cemetery. The vast majority of the medieval graves on Mis Island were cut into soft silt/sand deposits, in this location it was necessary for them to be cut into bedrock and compacted gravel, a much more difficult undertaking.

The location on the hill top also gave very limited space for a cemetery, thereby also limiting the period of time it could be used. This would however, have afforded the cemetery a certain exclusivity, perhaps being reserved for people of an elevated social standing or perhaps being a family plot. This desire for exclusivity may explain why it was felt worthwhile to dig graves into bedrock rather than into the lower lying alluvial deposits. The rectangular stone structure and associated grave monument presumably reflect the elevated social standing of the deceased

whose final resting place it marked. Being on a high point, the monuments on the site and especially the stone structure would have been visible from a large proportion of the island (Plate 3).



Plate 3. General view across site, illustrating the view of the surrounding area to the south south east.