

## *A Burial Mound with Culture Layers from the Early Bronze Age near Torslev, Northern Jutland*

by ERIK JOHANSEN

In the spring of 1982 Aalborg Historiske Museum excavated a small ploughed-down burial mound located in Torslev parish in the district of Øster Han (1).

The mound was one of many situated on the high, hilly moraine that extends towards the Limfjord from the north in a tongue-shaped formation and is surrounded on three sides by the raised Stone Age sea bed.



Fig. 1. Bronze dagger in wooden sheath. Length 11.7 cm. From grave 2.  
Photo Jan Slot Carlsen.

The reason why this particular grave mound was excavated – as distinct from many other mounds levelled to the same extent – was that permission had been granted for gravel extraction in the area. The mound was therefore about to be totally demolished rather than slowly but progressively destroyed by ploughing.

A small-scale unauthorized excavation of the southern side of the mound in 1967 had revealed that underneath the mound fill there was a black culture layer, whose contents of oysters, bones, pottery and flint suggested that it dated from the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (2). The unauthorized excavation was stopped as soon as the Museum became aware of it. The artefacts already recovered gave rise to plans for a complete excavation of the mound, but the limited economic resources did not permit it at the time. The excavation of 1967 was confined to the south side of the mound and revealed no graves.

The method of the 1982 excavation was obviously influenced by advance knowledge of the culture layer, and only the modern topsoil was removed mechanically. This proved to be a fortunate arrangement since the remains of an inhumation grave (grave 1) were discovered just below the topsoil in the centre of the mound. In addition to this secondary inhumation grave, a primary grave (grave 2) was also found to be intact.

### *Grave 1*

Immediately after the topsoil was removed, a faint, c. 2.5 × 1.3 m large, east-west orientated course of fill became visible in the centre of the mound. The fill was the remains – the bottom 2 to 4 cm – of an almost completely levelled inhumation grave. Considering how little was left, the finds it contained were rather surprising. During the cleansing process a bluish-violet material appeared, which was thought to be highly cor-

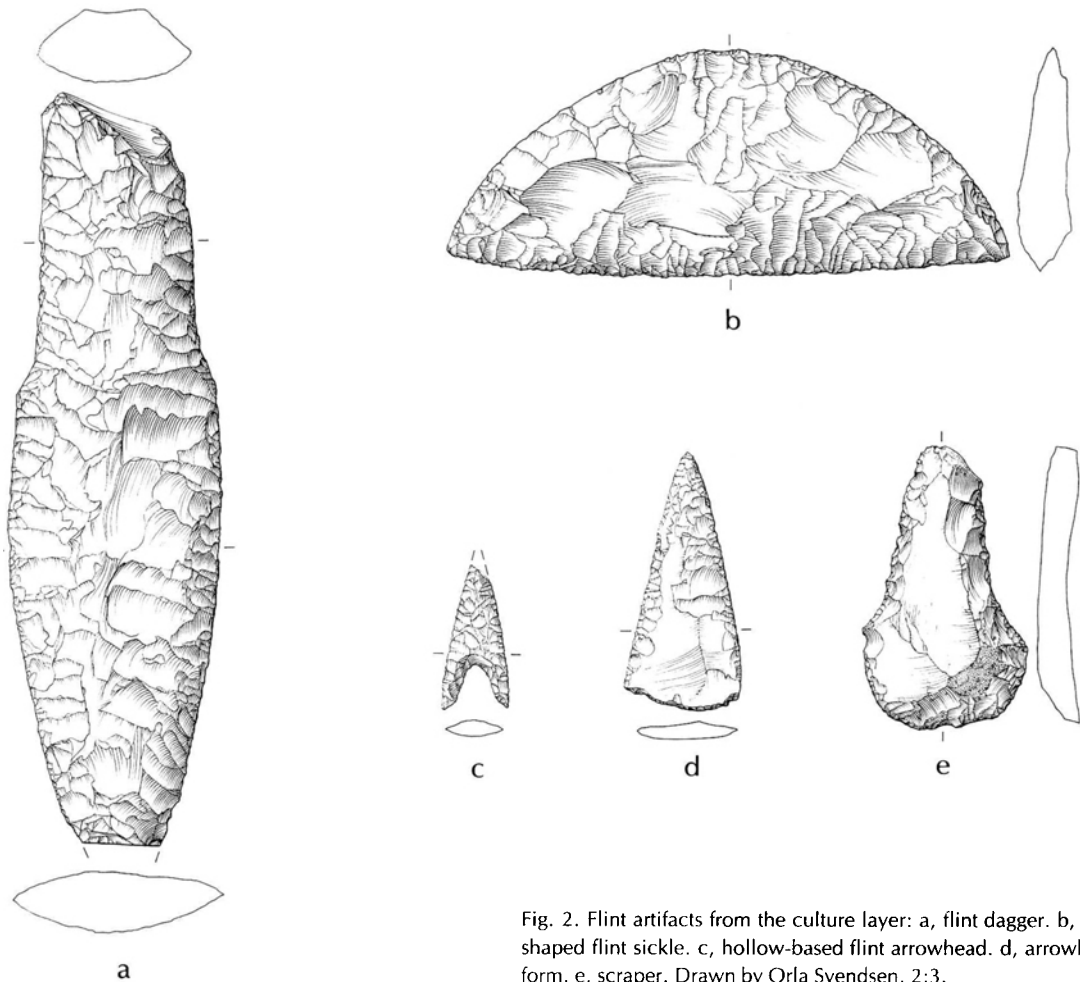


Fig. 2. Flint artifacts from the culture layer: a, flint dagger. b, crescent-shaped flint sickle. c, hollow-based flint arrowhead. d, arrowhead preform. e, scraper. Drawn by Orla Svendsen. 2:3.

roded silver and was therefore at once put in a preparation and taken to the conservation laboratory. The subsequent retrieval of the bluish-violet material showed, surprisingly, that it was not silver but the remains of a wooden shield painted blue. In addition to the blue colour the retrieval process also produced traces of red paint (3). Also recovered from the inhumation grave, and placed in a preparation, was a small amount of heavily corroded bronze, which is probably the remains of the shield boss (4). The transition between the grave fill and the topsoil contained a few potsherds, which are undoubtedly the remainder of pottery vessels from the grave, destroyed by ploughing. The pottery must be dated to some time after the beginning of the Late Roman Iron Age and indicates the age of the inhumation grave, though with the reservation that the dated pottery was not found *in situ*.

The artefacts just mentioned, combined with a local oral tradition about the discovery of “ornaments” forty or fifty years ago during ploughing of the mound, suggest a fairly well-furnished inhumation grave with a blue-painted shield from the Late Roman Iron Age. As already mentioned, the grave was a secondary one, and it would not have taken many years of ploughing for the last traces to disappear. One can only guess at the number of inhumation graves from this period, constructed as secondary graves in mounds, that have been ploughed away over the years.

#### Grave 2

The primary grave was found intact directly underneath the Late Roman secondary grave, separated from it by a thin layer of primary mound fill. It was outlined

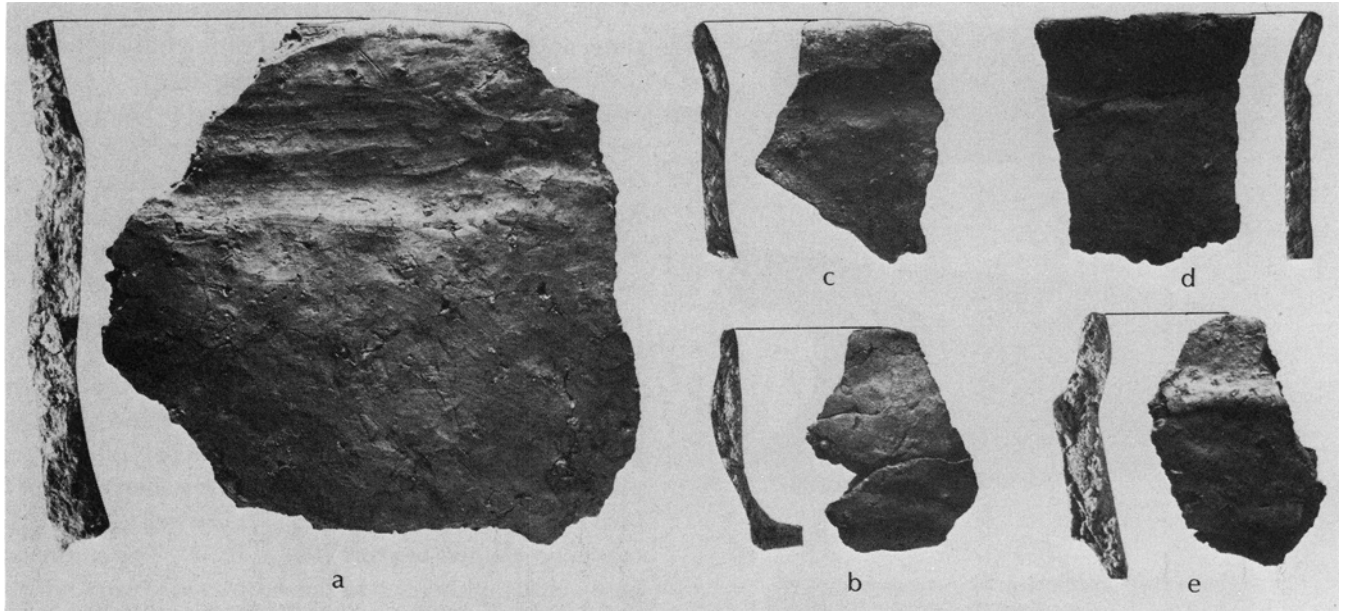


Fig. 3. Pottery from the culture layer: a, rim sherd from bucket-shaped pot; b, beaker; c–e, rim sherds. Photo Jan Slot Carlsen. Circa 2:3.

as a  $1.9 \times 0.4$  m large course of fill with rounded corners, orientated east-west. Along the edge there was a 3 to 4 cm wide, dark stripe which followed – also in cross-section – the bottom of the trough-shaped pit. The grave contained a log coffin which had crumbled completely and showed only as a dark colouring in the mound fill. The layer of stone that is often associated with log coffins was completely absent. The grave was dug slightly into the culture layer discussed below and then covered by the primary mound. A little dental enamel was uncovered in the western end of the grave, and just east of it was found the only burial deposit, an 11.7 cm long bronze dagger with a trapezoid guard. Most of the sheath, made of thin wooden plates, remained (fig. 1). The hilt, which was made of organic material and has therefore completely disappeared, was fastened to the blade with two rivets. The dagger was placed lengthwise in the grave, its hilt facing west. The location in the grave indicates that it was not placed at the belt, but rather that it was put on the chest when the burial took place.

The dagger belongs to a type which Sophus Müller identified in 1909 as a foreign small dagger and dated to his period 3 (Müller 1909: 56 ff.), a dating supported by Broholm in 1944, who however assigned it to his second period of the Bronze Age (Broholm 1944: 120 f., 212 ff.).

More recent studies have supported the assignment of these small daggers to period II (Lomborg 1959: 135 f.). Based on the dating of the dagger the log coffin can thus be assigned to the Early Bronze Age, period II.

#### *The culture layer*

As mentioned above, we knew before the excavation about a culture layer under the mound fill. As the excavation progressed, a black culture layer, up to 20 cm thick, was revealed underneath the whole of the primary mound fill. The thickness of the layer decreased towards the edge of the mound and could not be traced outside the borders of the mound. The edge between culture layer and mound fill was sharply defined throughout, with no trace of a transitional vegetation layer. It is important for an assessment of the mutual connection between the various phenomena in the mound that the construction of the mound apparently occurred very soon after the accumulation of the culture layer. When we speak of accumulation, it is because the culture layer everywhere rested directly on top of the sandy subsoil; nowhere could a buried soil be found. Whether the old topsoil was removed is impossible to determine today, but it seems likely. Although conditions were ideal, it proved impossible to detect

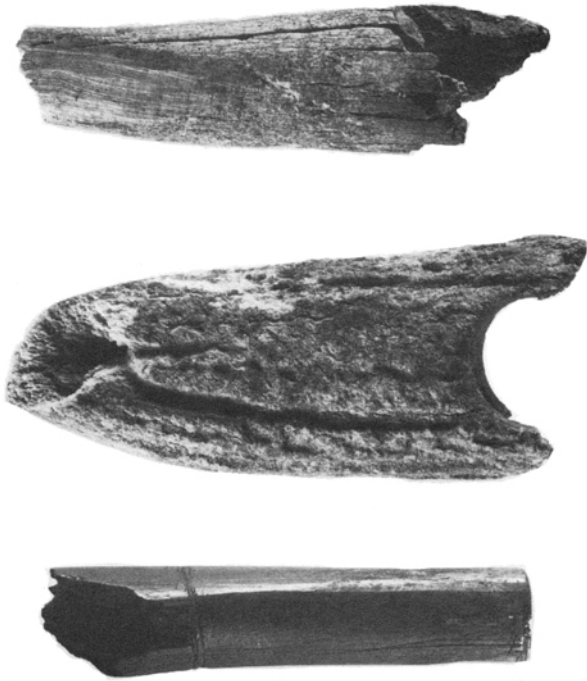


Fig. 4. Bone and antler from the culture layer. Above, fragment of antler with trimming on both sides towards the tip. Length 7.2 cm. Middle, fragment of antler with shaft-hole. Length 7.9 cm. Below, long-bone with traces of working. Length 6.5 cm. Photo Jan Slot Carlsen.

post holes or pits in the subsoil, so any building at the place must have been so light that it left no traces in the subsoil.

The layer contained flint, pottery, bones and charcoal throughout, while oyster shells were found only in the southern part. Flint is the most numerous and includes waste fragments, flints with preliminary working and chips, suggesting that the flint was worked on the site. The predominant technique is pressure flaking: the whole layer does not contain a single flake. Much of the flint retains a thick, soft crust of chalk which is identical to that found on newly quarried flint from the Late Neolithic flint mines near Aalborg. This soft, thick crust indicates that the raw flint was extracted from chalk deposits, and it may be mentioned that chalk in fact emerges at the ground nearly 1 km south of the grave mound.

The flint dagger (fig. 2, a) serves to date the layer. It is a 15.2 cm long flint dagger, type VIA (Lomborg 1973:

61 ff.). The missing point was broken off in prehistoric time, and some wear on the butt of the hilt shows that the dagger was also used for striking fire.

The dagger was found deep down in the layer and can not be a secondary intrusion. Daggers of type VI date from the early period I to late period II of the Bronze Age (Lomborg 1973: 69 ff.). This dating is not contradicted by the flint sickle and the flat-trimmed flint arrow-head (fig. 2, b-c) which were also found deeply imbedded in the culture layer, but several metres from the flint dagger (Lomborg 1960: 164ff.).

Pottery was found scattered throughout the culture layer and, apart from some potsherds lying close together, no sherds could be reassembled into larger pieces. The find includes large and very coarse-grained bucket-shaped clay vessels (fig. 3, a) as well as small, almost cup-shaped beakers (fig. 3, b) (5). The surviving base sherds all belong to flat-bottomed vessels with a slightly everted base. The bones were well preserved in the area of the culture layer containing oyster shells, but more or less dissolved elsewhere. The layer contained a fair number of bones, among them two worked antler points. One of them has a trimming on both sides towards a broken-off tip (fig. 4, above); the other has a shaft-hole. The latter must have broken at the shaft-hole and been rejected in prehistoric times (fig. 4, middle). The long-bone (fig. 4, below) has been sawn through at one end, where there is an incipient conical extension of the marrow cavity, while the opposite end shows signs of being partly sawn off. On the basis of the flint dagger the culture layer can be dated to the Bronze Age, periods I-II.

#### *Ard marks*

Already while the culture layer was being excavated it was possible to see in it very faint criss-cross marks which suggested the existence of ard marks underneath the layer. This turned out to be the case. The black culture layer had been ploughed with an ard, and the tip of the ard had drawn black soil down into the light subsoil. A complete exposure of the area showed that it had been ploughed criss-cross only once, and that only the area covered by the culture layer and mound fill had been ploughed.

The excavation in 1967 had destroyed the ard marks at the southern end because the digging penetrated c. 10 cm into the subsoil, as shown by the north-south

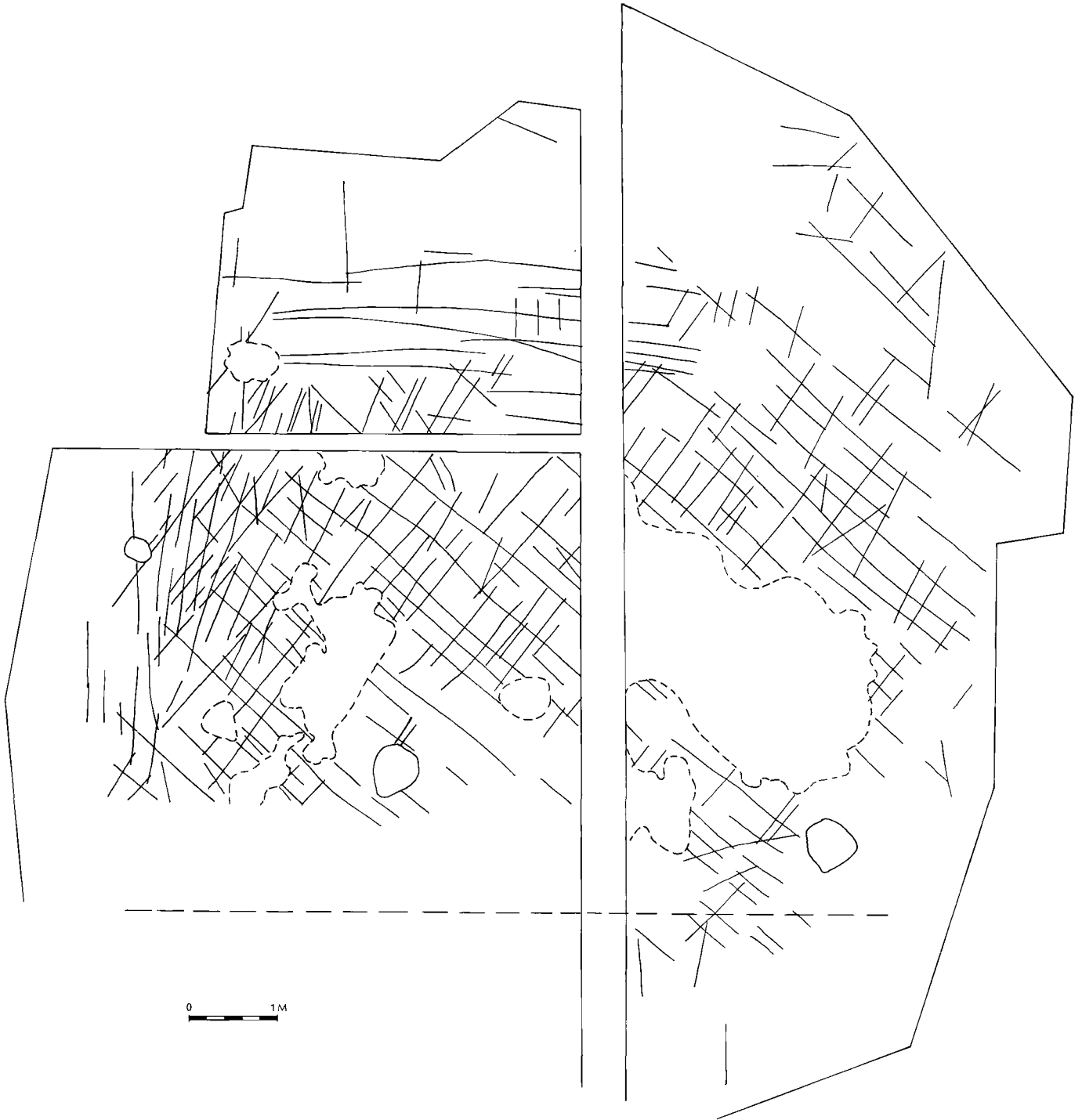


Fig. 5. Arid marks in the subsoil under the culture layer. Drawn from vertical photographs (mosaic). The blank spaces represent low depressions in the subsoil. Drawn by Jan Slot Carlsen.

section. By contrast, the ard scratches were clearly visible in the area uncovered in 1982. It was especially easy to see how the converging lines of the ard defined the ploughed area to the west and north, whereas this is somewhat harder to detect to the east and north-east (fig. 5).

The single ploughing and the intentional delimitation near the later base of the mound suggest a ritual ploughing of the area later used for a mound after a burial. In recent years a couple of constructions of this type have been investigated (S. Wiell 1976: 83 ff.), and in these cases there can be little doubt that the circular ploughing is connected with the interment. In the present case there is no regular, circular ploughing, but the conditions are nevertheless fairly similar.

At any rate, it is a fact that the ploughing took place after the accumulation of the culture layer and before the burial in the log coffin, as the area under the coffin had also been ploughed. The results of the excavation lend support to the view that the interval between these two events was probably short.

To sum up, the excavation results suggest the following course of events: the old topsoil is removed; the culture layer accumulates within the area later covered by the mound; the culture layer is ploughed ritually with an ard, once only in a criss-cross pattern, and the border lines are also marked by ard ploughing. Then the log coffin is placed in a shallow pit in the middle of the culture layer, and a mound is built over the coffin and the culture layer. The artefacts recovered and the dating given above are consonant with the possibility that these events may have occurred in rapid succession in connection with the interment, during period II of the Bronze Age.

Because of the extensive ploughing it is impossible to say whether the mound was used for burial from the Early Bronze Age until the Late Roman Iron Age.

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## NOTES

1. Aalborg Historiske Museum. File No. 946. The National Museum, Copenhagen, No. 19.
2. Aalborg Historiske Museum. No. A. 972-77.
3. The blue and red paint and the remains of the shield are being analysed. A surface of c. 200 cm<sup>2</sup> is available.
4. Information from Elmer Fabeck, conservation expert at Forhistorisk Museum, Moesgård (Århus). The remains of the shield boss is being restored.
5. Compare the pottery material from Egehøj (Boas 1983), Røjle Mose (Jæger & Laursen 1983) and Vejlbj (Jeppesen, this volume).

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