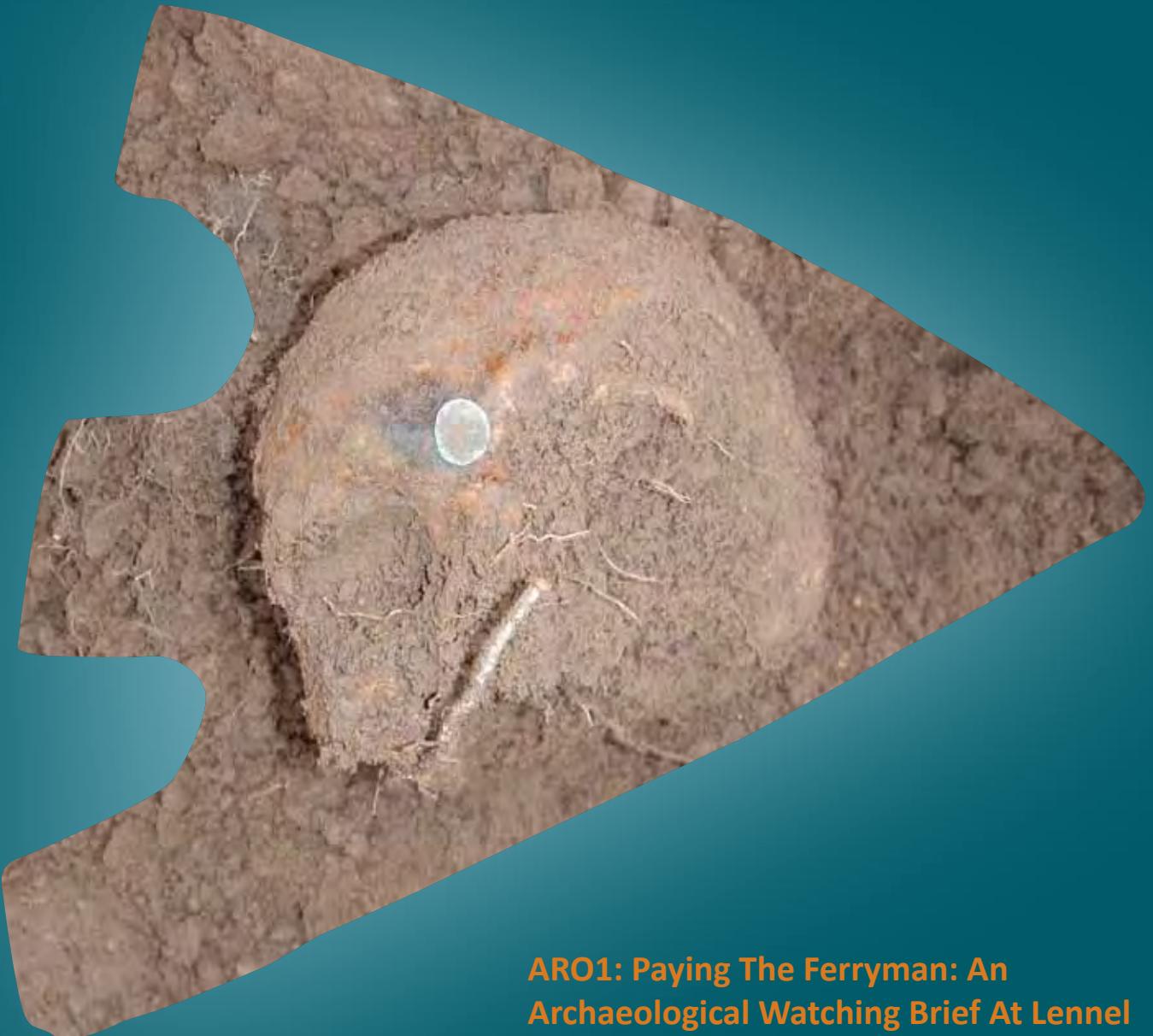


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ARO1: Paying The Ferryman: An Archaeological Watching Brief At Lennel Church, Coldstream

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Summary

An archaeological watching brief was undertaken by GUARD Archaeology in March and April 2011 during emergency stabilisation works to the bank of the River Tweed at Lennel Churchyard near Coldstream in the Scottish Borders. The watching brief encountered five articulated human skeletons, all buried in an extended supine position with the head towards the west, consistent with traditional medieval and post-medieval Christian burial practice. The watching brief also encountered numerous disarticulated bones and associated grave furniture. The most significant find was a well worn Scottish Copper Farthing, which was found on the forehead of a disarticulated skull. The coin was identified as a copper farthing of James III, issued c.1466-70, an example of the later fifteenth century Scottish copper 'Black Money' and confirmation that Lennel Churchyard was used for burial in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Staining on the skull suggested that the coin had been originally placed there during burial and may indicate that the tradition of paying for the afterlife passage of souls was practised in the Scottish Borders at this time.

Background

Lennel Old Parish Church graveyard is on the north bank of the River Tweed, to the south of Lennel, near Coldstream in the Scottish Borders NGR: NT 8574 4117 (Figure 1). Lennel Old Parish Church has its origins in the twelfth century but was ruinous by 1705 and was replaced by a church in Coldstream, which became the parish church in 1718 (NMRS: NT84SE 17.00; SBC HER 1070005; HB No: 4067). There was formerly a village called 'Lennel', which may have stood to the east of the medieval parish church although nothing but the ruins of the latter remains to mark the site of the village (NMRS: NT84SE 21; SBC HER 1070005). The 'mansio' of Lennel is mentioned in charters at the end of the eleventh century.

The ruins of the Old Parish Church are a B Listed building. Only the west wall containing rectilinear windows, remains to any great extent. The church has been encroached upon for burials by the surrounding graveyard and gravestones have been inserted in all the walls.

Given these records, the Scottish Borders

Council Archaeologist considered that there was potential for the emergency stabilisation works to the bank of the River Tweed at Lennel Old Parish Churchyard to encounter archaeological features and finds. GUARD Archaeology was therefore commissioned by Scottish Borders Council to undertake an archaeological watching brief during the emergency stabilisation works, in order to ensure that any surviving archaeological remains encountered during the works were recorded to an appropriate level.

The Archaeological Watching Brief

GUARD Archaeology undertook the watching brief between 4 March and 5 April 2011. Beneath the turf, the 0.3 m thick topsoil of mid-brown silty loam with frequent roots, was encountered across the site. It was found overlying light reddish brown silt with occasional pebbles, 0.6 m deep, within which was found disarticulated human bones as well as several broken grave slabs.

Five articulated skeletons were identified beneath this mixed layer in the centre and west parts of the emergency stabilisation works area. Each skeleton was found in a supine position with the head towards the west (Figure 2). Only in association with two of the skeletons (Skeleton 3 & Skeleton 5) were identifiable grave cuts apparent; the grave of Skeleton 3 was 0.5 m wide by 0.4 m deep and approximately 1.8 m long while the grave of Skeleton 5 was 0.5 m wide by 0.3 m deep and at least 1.25 m long. Each grave fill comprised loose mid-brown sandy clay. Several coffin nails and shroud pins were recovered along with the articulated bones of each skeleton.

During the watching brief, a background scatter of artefacts was identified, mainly comprising coffin nails and some occasional coffin handles and shroud pins. The most significant artefact found was a coin associated with a disarticulated skull encountered in the mixed layer (Plate 1). It was located in the area above Skeleton 2 (Figure 2).

The coin was examined by Dr Donal Bateson, Reader in Numismatics at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, who reported that though the coin was in poor condition with little detail visible, it was identifiable as a copper farthing of James III, issued c.1466-70, an example of the later fifteenth century Scottish copper 'Black Money'.



Figure 1: Site location.



Corrosion had, however, left so few details visible that it was not possible to ascribe it to a particular farthing issue.



Plate 1: Disarticulated skull with coin in situ

Discussion

During the initial phase of works, the watching brief encountered several disarticulated human bones and grave slab fragments. Two of these grave stones had inscriptions 'RN' on their top face. They were rectangular and seemed to derive from the same monument. Disarticulated human bones were mostly found in the western part of the watching brief area within the mixed layer, particularly concentrated within an area where a grave slab with '168.' inscribed on it was recorded. However, this area had also received modern intrusions, including a plastic bottle.

In the second phase of work, five articulated skeletal remains were discovered beneath the inhumation layer, at a depth of c. 1 m. All of them were supine and extended with the head towards the west (Figure 2), consistent with traditional medieval and post-medieval Christian burial practice. All but Skeleton 1 were adult skeletons. Skeleton 1 was a sub-adult, probably a child. Skeletons 2 and 4 were indeterminate in sex but Skeletons 3 and 5 were possibly males based on some of the sexual dimorphic traits on the cranium and pelvis and the general robust appearance of the skeletons (Buistkra and Ubelaker 1994). There was no evidence of pathological conditions in any of the skeletons.

Of particular interest was the recovery of a coin, associated with a disarticulated skull. The coin had stained the forehead of the skull, suggesting

that it may have originally been placed there. This act may have been similar to the universal tradition of putting coins on the eyes of the deceased to keep the eyelids closed or as fare for the dead in the afterlife. The latter is probably the most likely explanation in this case, and derives from the ancient Greek pagan tradition of paying Kharon the ferryman who rowed the dead across the River Styx into the underworld (www.theoi.com/Khthonios?kharon.html).

Conclusions

The watching brief monitored the removal of the topsoil and subsequent mixed layers to the required depth of the emergency stabilisation works. The partial remains of five articulated human skeletons were recorded, along with disarticulated bones, including a skull which was associated with a late fifteenth century Scottish farthing. The arrangement of the articulated skeletons was consistent with medieval Christian practice. The location of the coin upon the forehead of a skull not only confirms that Lennel Churchyard was used for burial in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century but may demonstrate that the tradition of paying for the afterlife passage of souls was also practised in the Scottish Borders at this time.

Location of Archive

The finds have been reported to the Treasure Trove Unit, and the documentary archives will be lodged with the National Monuments Record for Scotland at the RCAHMS, Edinburgh.

Acknowledgements

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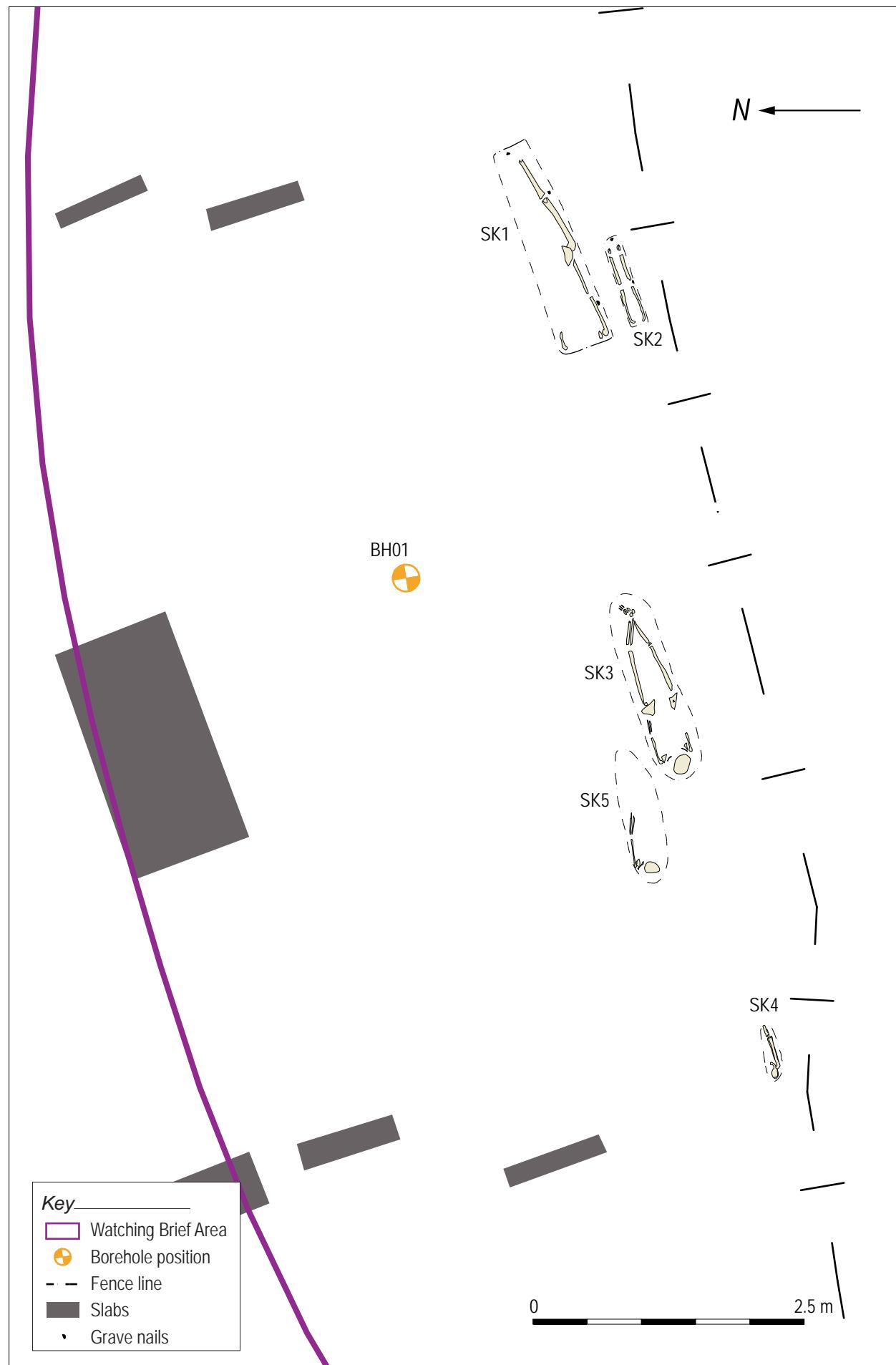


Figure 2: Plan of graves.



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