

Introduction

This work is the result of an extensive investigation into the post-mortem treatment of non-cremated human remains in the Iron Age (c.800BC–c.AD60) of what is now eastern England.

It aims to be a holistic summary of the available data, gathered from excavation reports, existing syntheses, grey literature, and HERs, analysed using osteological and archaeological methodologies. The human skeletal material has here been divided into three broad treatments (inhumations, articulated bone groups and disarticulated remains), each representing a set of unique and complex post-mortem processes.

This project explores chronological and regional trends in post-mortem treatment in eastern England using a large-scale approach to the data and the study region, and multi-disciplinary methodologies to ensure a more holistic analysis of all the available material. This in turn means the project provides a better, more accurate understanding of funerary/mortuary practices in the Iron Age. The methodological approaches allowed for the osteological, archaeological and taphonomic re-analysis of human remains deposits, mitigating the impact that out-dated interpretations can have on the data. The way in which the dead became disarticulated is a key debate within the discipline (see section 2.2.3), and the material under study here, examined holistically, has furthered this debate and provided a comparative dataset for other regions of Britain.

1.1. The research landscape

The changing interpretations of the dead in Iron Age Britain are discussed in detail below (section 2.2), but briefly, there have been consistent developments in thought surrounding the disposal of the dead for this period. The predominant treatments are inhumations in settlements or cemeteries, disarticulated remains, partial individuals and cremations (LIA). Inhumations in pits, now identified extensively across the country were once seen as the casual, almost lazy deposition of the dead; and the frequent finds of disarticulated and incomplete human remains were seen variably as the result of cannibalism, disturbed graves, dismemberment or excarnation (For example, Richardson, 1951:131; Pitt-Rivers, 1887:11,16; Dunning, 1976:116–7; Cunliffe 1974:316; Walker, 1984:443; also see Hill, 1995:11). Many of these views have been challenged, but there is still debate as to the meaning of pit burials, the inclusion of the dead within settlements, and what these rites tell us about Iron Age society (Sharples, 2014, Harding, 2016; Carr, 2007:449).

Likewise the method and meaning of complete or partial disarticulation (Evans et al., 2016a; Madgwick 2008; Booth and Madgwick 2016) is still being sought, as are social interpretations of the fragmented and manipulated dead.

This book does not focus on cremation burials, despite their increasing prevalence towards the later Iron Age in the southeast. Cremation burials do form a notable part of Iron Age funerary practice, especially in areas with Aylesford-Swarling traditions and in instances of mixed-rite cemeteries, but they have been subject to a great deal of study already (for example Fitzpatrick, 2007; Harding, 2016; Lamb 2018; Stead, 1976). Their inclusion would therefore extend the scope of this research by some magnitude while offering little in terms of novelty or development. Cremations are not wholly excluded though, they are discussed where contextually relevant throughout, and considered in the discussion.

The need for large-scale study of published material and grey literature has been signalled for some time, in order to better understand the complexities and variability of Iron Age mortuary evidence (Pope and Ralston, 2011:407). The area of Wessex (broadly Hampshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and parts of Somerset) has received a great deal of attention in this regard, but such a tradition is absent from parts of eastern England; a point that was raised in regional research agendas (Oake et al, 2007:4; Brown and Glazerbrook, 2000). By 1979, over a quarter of all excavations on Iron Age sites had taken place in Wessex (Hill, 1995:7). Developer-led archaeology has balanced this in the last 20–30 years, but the scholarly weight has not quite caught up (*ibid*,7–8; Brück, 1995:251), and regions such as eastern England are lacking in research attention.

1.2. Geographical and chronological boundaries

The study region consists of eight modern counties—Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and Kent (Fig. 1.1). Six of these constitute the administrative region of the ‘East of England’. Lincolnshire was included as the northern border is formed by the Humber river, a natural divide, and on the northern bank of the river is Yorkshire—a region well-studied for the Arras burial tradition. Kent is included as it sits partly on the east coast, coupled with its inclusion in the Aylesford-Swarling zone of pottery and cremation burials. Its proximity to the continent also provides an opportunity for comparison with areas further north. The counties here are used for ease of understanding

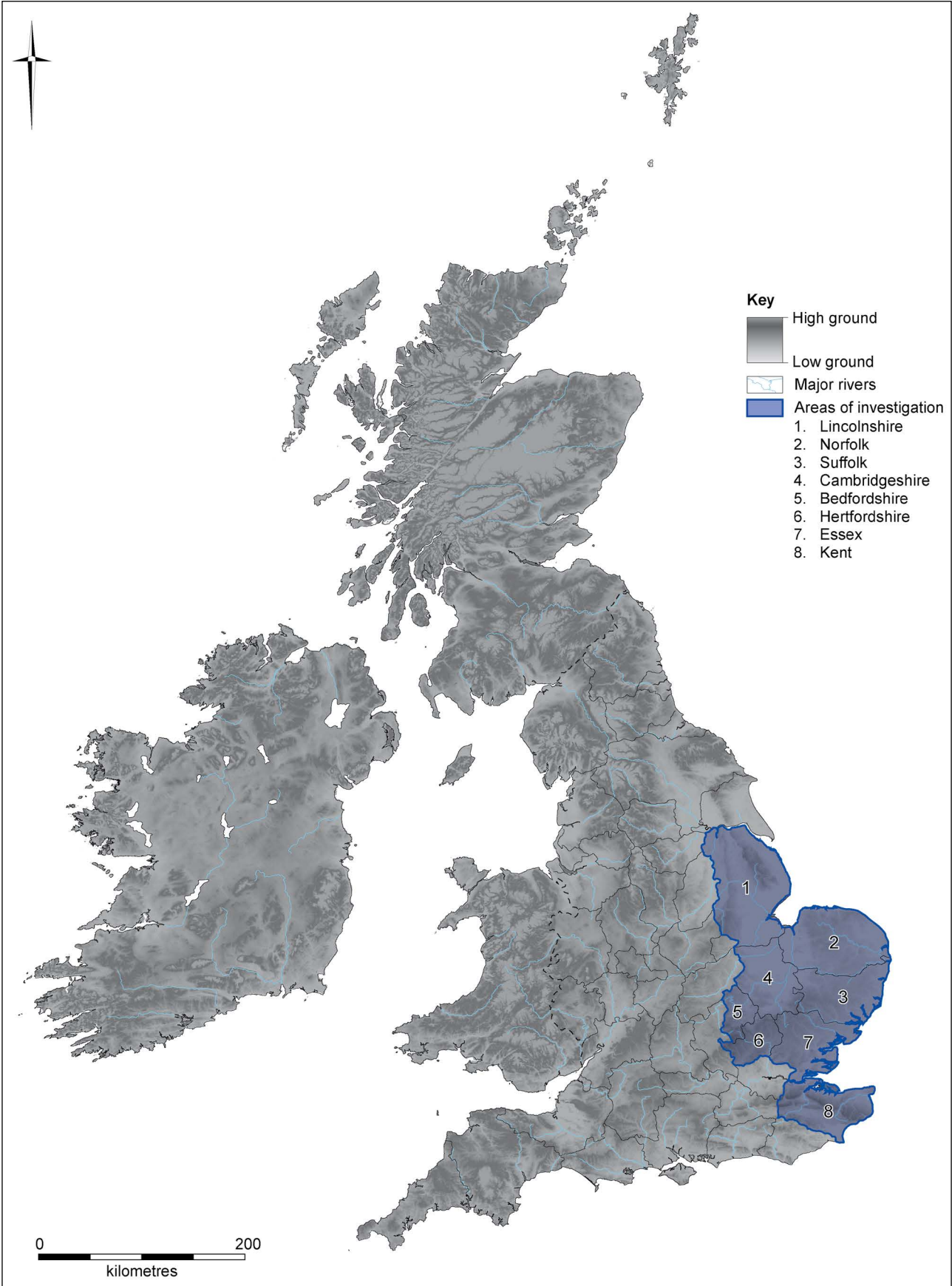


Figure 1.1. Map showing the region under study (blue). Source: Laura Hogg and Author.

and are modern divisions with no impact on Iron Age society. Likewise while ‘England’ is used in the title and in the text, it should be understood that this too is a definition that would not have existed in the Iron Age, and is only used here to define the study boundaries.

There is debate as to the degree of isolationism in Iron Age Britain, but the general consensus is that, in the Early and Middle Iron Age at least, Britain was very different to the societies across the channel, and there is little sign of cultural exchange — Britain withdrew ‘into a state of isolated paranoia which rejected external contact’ (Sharples, 2014:154). The Arras burials in Yorkshire are a convincing exception to this, but even they show evidence of insular native innovation (O’Brien, 1999:1; Harding, 2016:20), and the LIA cremation traditions have also been seen to vary from their continental forebears (Sharples, 2014:154; Crummy et al, 2007:453). Webley (2015) has recently put forth a convincing argument for more regular, sustained continental contact, but there is no clear consensus. With that in mind, while continental connections are discussed where appropriate, no great attempt has been made to place British Iron Age burial practices into any European context.

The project covers the whole of the established Iron Age period (c.800BC–AD43), plus the years until the Boudiccan revolt c.AD60. No distinction is made between the earliest Iron Age and the Early Iron Age, as unaccompanied burials and the radiocarbon plateau make more precise subdivision difficult, and there are consistencies between the LBA and EIA that prevent a clear ‘period cut-off’. The conquest period years were included as the ‘Romanization’ of Britain would not have occurred overnight, and most people dying between AD43 and AD60 would have lived through the pre-conquest period. The effect of Roman/continental influence on Britain is visible in many facets of society in the years leading up to AD43, especially in the southeast, through the introduction of coinage, changes in material culture, and the formation of Oppida. As Booth et al (2011:243) have pointed out, many rural settlements are occupied continuously through the conquest period, and the ‘dividing line of AD 43’ is ‘archaeologically meaningless’. Including the conquest period years within the study has allowed for a more accurate overview of changing practices in burial customs and means that individuals with date ranges straddling the AD 43 conquest date can be included.

1.3. Large-scale data and its boundaries

Evans (2012) has previously pointed out issues inherent in ‘flagship-site’ models; that over-reliance on singular (albeit important) sites can lead to unrepresentative interpretation of new data. The massive increase in material being uncovered due to developer-led archaeology — thousands of interventions every year (Evans, 2012:296; Yates, 2007) must be dealt with in ways beyond referring to and comparing with established type-sites. Evans

points out that what we now have in British archaeology is ‘a challenge of numbers’ (*ibid*, 295). Large-scale investigation of these interventions may identify patterns and parallels hitherto unseen, by removing implicit comparisons to ‘flagship-sites’ and viewing the region as a whole. Even if no new trends are discerned, then large-scale examination of material provides more statistically valid support for existing theories and paradigms. This attitude has also been explored by Brown and Wade (2000:2) and Oake, (2007:7) in research agendas for the east — ‘the analysis and synthesis of existing information is of equal or greater value than just digging new sites’. Champion (2011:239) likewise, has discussed the value of large-scale projects in interpreting Iron Age pit depositions — ‘a proper understanding of...pit depositions in general, will only be possible with the analysis of a larger sample of sites from the region’.

The data here represents the vast majority of all recorded non-cremated human remains from the entire Iron Age in this region. All identifiable inhumations, articulated bone groups, disarticulated bones/fragments and any other forms of unburnt bone have been collected for analysis. The data has been gathered from existing earlier syntheses, from excavation reports, monographs, edited volumes, articles, grey literature (the ADS) and HER data, as well as through primary contact with commercial units and local authorities. All avenues have been explored to gather as complete a dataset as possible. However, there will doubtless be material that has been missed, or sites that have been reported on after data collection was complete; datasets are static, the archaeology is not. While not every single find can be included here, it still represents the most complete picture of the non-cremated burial archaeology for this region thus far, and it should be representative of regional, and perhaps wider practices.

The value of skeletal material for understanding a population — their health, their demographic makeup, their cultural and societal choices — cannot be understated; something again expressed by the Iron Age research agenda and others (Haselgrove et al, 2001:C2.3; Redfern, 2008b:282; Hinman, 2004:54). So many Iron Age human remains deposits are fragmented, disarticulated and comingled, and the value of such material has only recently been highlighted (e.g. Craig et al, 2005; Madgwick, 2008). Re-examination of excavated human remains therefore has the capacity to greatly enhance our knowledge of Iron Age funerary practices, and beliefs about the dead (Redfern, 2008b:282). Failure to reassess and re-examine existing human remains data means an over-reliance on out-of-date cemetery reports, stalling further interpretation (*ibid*, 282). This project has sought to correct these issues, through combined archaeological and osteological methodologies.

There are human remains that have been deliberately excluded from the data, as the recorded information on

them did not meet comparative standards. Skeletal remains were excluded on the following criteria:

1. Insecure dating, where there is no way to confirm an Iron Age date, even contextually
2. Insufficient recording, where the number of individuals or bones present is unknown, or no basic demographic data could be discerned
3. Empty graves, where 'grave like' features are found but with no secure evidence for the presence of human remains. Where 'sand bodies' are present, or bone in adjacent graves, then all are included

Sites and material that have been excluded from the main body of data have been recorded in Appendices 2 and 3 and are referred to in-text but are ultimately excluded from any statistical analysis.

1.4. Geological factors in bone preservation

The British Geological Survey (BGS 2021) interactive map shows the bedrock and surface geology deposits across Britain. Large bands of white chalk affect much of Norfolk and parts of every other county under study, with sections of sand, silt and clay on the east coast (Fig. 1.2). Strips of clay-based geology run in a NE-SW direction through Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, with another band in Suffolk and Essex (Fig. 1.2). The surface geology is much more complex, but with variable unsorted till covering large areas, while silts, clays and brickearth encompass Kent, and more clay, silt and sand is present in Lincolnshire than elsewhere. Cranfield University's (2020) Soilscape map shows a much greater prevalence of acidic loamy soils in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex (with some clayey loam deposits also). Even in the 1930's poor soil conditions in Norfolk and Suffolk were known affect bone survival (Clarke, 1939:18-19). Both Kent and Lincolnshire have very varied soilscape, but acidic soils are more common in Kent, which has still produced large numbers of skeletal remains (Chapters 4-8). Much more of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire is covered by clayey soils, and yet inhumations are all but absent until the LIA for Hertfordshire (Chapter 6). The effect of soil pH on bone preservation is well established (Gordon and Buikstra, 1981:569), with acidic soils directly correlated to poorer bone preservation (*ibid*, 569; Kibblewhite et al, 2015:250). Chalk soils can result in poor preservation, while clay soils vary depending on the acidity (Baxter, 2004:43; Kibblewhite et al, 2015:250) and slightly base soils (e.g. lime-rich, found in parts of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and western Essex) often result in excellent preservation (Pokines and Symes, 2013:76). The extent of water flow through the soil, the temperature, the burial depth, bone size and maturity, and microenvironment of the grave can all have a discernible effect on bone preservation (*ibid*, 77; Gordon and Buikstra, 1981:569; Katzenberg and Saunders, 2008:81). With that in mind, while geological variation is an important factor in bone preservation here, especially in Norfolk and Suffolk, it is not the only explanation for

the distribution of human remains seen in the following chapters. Preservation issues will nonetheless be considered throughout.

1.5. Aims and objectives

The project has two main aims. Firstly, to create a more complete picture of funerary and mortuary practices in this part of the country, allowing for more accurate large-scale patterns in treatment to be elucidated. Secondly, to update and bring to light assemblages with unpublished, incomplete or outdated data, and make the wealth of material in the study region more accessible to future researchers. In doing so, the overall corpus of data is increased, and our understanding about the lives, deaths and post-mortem treatment of Iron Age people is improved.

More specifically, the research will identify regional traditions in inhumation practices, or a lack thereof, and discuss their meaning to Iron Age people, through extensive analysis of the contextual, archaeological and osteological data. This objective emerged from the pit-burial developments discussed below (section 2.2.2.), and the widely-held position that much of the population is archaeologically invisible (see also section 3.2.6 and Chapter 8).

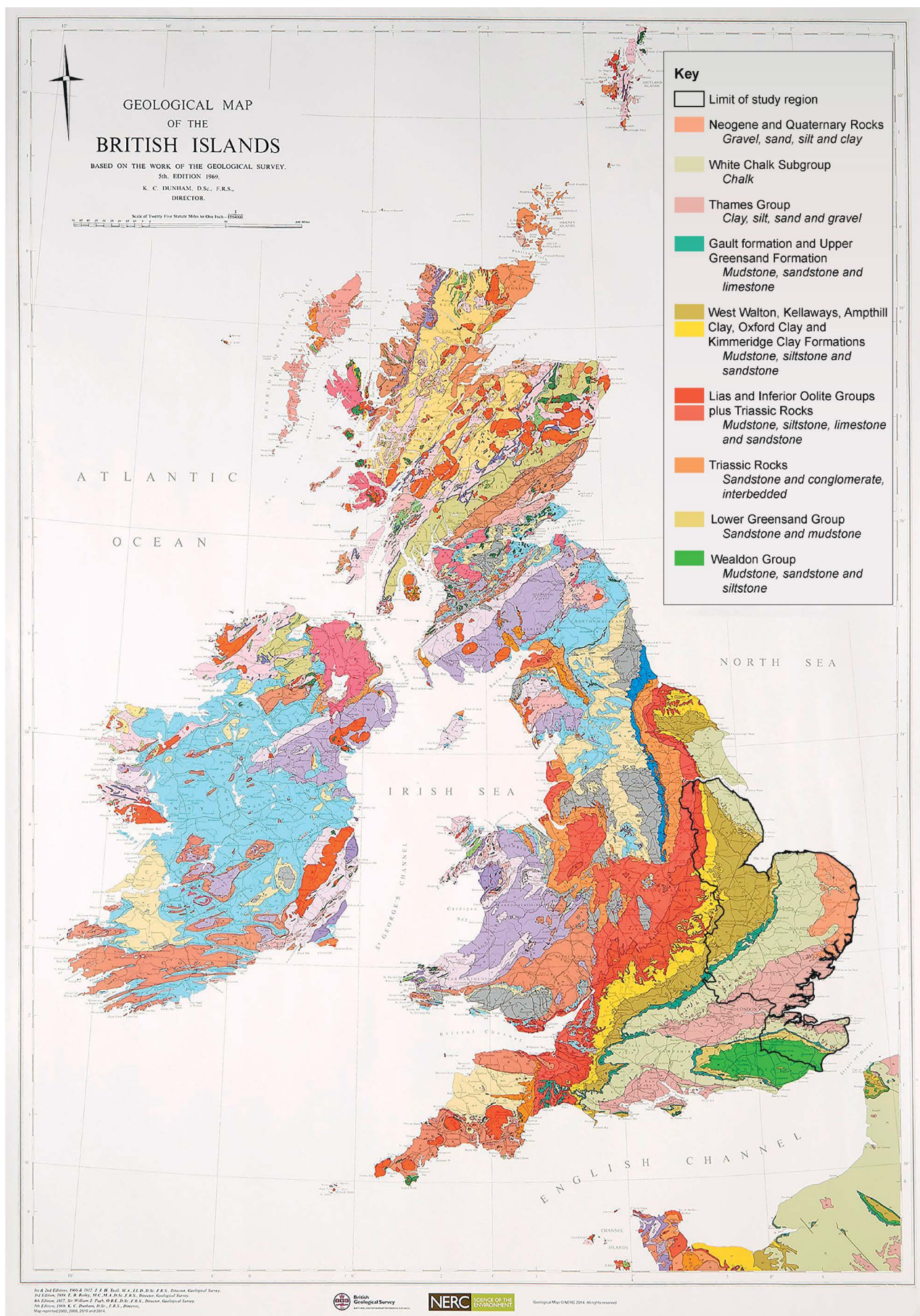
Additionally, the research will further the debate over excarnation practices and their meaning (see section 2.2.3.); the ways in which human remains came to be disarticulated are examined, and the ways in which they are manipulated and interacted with by the living are discussed. This will be met through the analysis of bone taphonomy of disarticulated remains (Chapter 8), which can identify patterns in post-mortem treatment, and through the archaeological and osteological analysis of the partial deposits, articulated remains and bone bundles (Chapter 7), to see if they are connected to the disarticulated material.

1.6. Structure of the work

Chapter two sets this project in its theoretical and interpretive framework, assessing the contributions of previous research and serving as a discussion of theoretical themes and concepts pertinent to the work.

Chapter three lays out the materials and methods utilised in the project. As this research combines osteological analysis, taphonomic analysis and funerary/mortuary archaeological theory, multiple methodological approaches are used where appropriate.

The results chapters (4-8) are divided by deposit type and chronology—Chapters four to six concern the inhumation burials, for the EIA, MIA and LIA respectively, Chapter seven the partial deposits, bone groups and bone bundles, and Chapter eight covers the disarticulated remains. Chapters four to six are subdivided using comparative criteria (e.g. site type, skeletal position, depositional



context) and cross-referenced throughout. Chapter seven is approached differently due to the small sample, and so each are divided into interpretive categories, with more detailed summaries in Appendix 2. Chapter eight outlines the disarticulated remains data in detail, and taphonomic markers present on the bones are recorded and cross-referenced for patterns in treatment (e.g. exposure and excarnation).

The final data chapter (Chapter 9) draws together all the available osteological information to assess the validity of the data as a sample population, and discuss demography, population health, and trauma among the skeletal material.

The discussion follows (Chapter 10), bringing together connected themes throughout the preceding chapters and answering the research questions set out above, before the conclusion (Chapter 11).

Three appendices support the main body of the monograph:

- 1 —Raw datasheets and coding system for all data
- 2 —Expanded data summary for the partial deposits (see Chapter 7)
- 3 —Excluded inhumations