

ARCHAEOLOGY

# Sutton Hoo Bone Not Bone

► THE FRAGMENT believed to be bone—the only trace of bone found in the archaeologically very important Sutton Hoo ship burial in Britain—is not really bone at all, it is indicated by Dr. H. Barker of the Research Laboratory, British Museum, London, in a report to the journal, NATURE (Aug. 26).

The Sutton Hoo burial is important be-

cause of the wealth of treasure in gold, coins, and delicate cloisonne jewelry as well as such imported items as silver dishes from Byzantium, gourd drinking cups from as far away as the south of France and a helmet from the Baltic coast of Sweden.

This burial, dated between 650 and 670 A.D., has puzzled archaeologists for two reasons. First, the "grave furniture" shows it to be a pagan grave in a pagan burial place, and yet there is reason to believe that the grave is that of one of the East Anglian kings, all of whom were devout Christians. There are also crosses and other clear signs of Christianity in the grave itself.

Another puzzle is the fact that when first excavated, no sign of a body was found.

Was this burial in an 80-foot rowboat on the east bank of the River Deben, in Suffolk, merely a public monument to a king? Did his body receive Christian burial somewhere else in consecrated ground?

The new finding from the research laboratory of the British Museum does not seem to throw any new light on this question.

Key to the deception of what was thought to be a piece of bone lies in the acidity of Sutton Hoo soil which does not favor the preservation of human bones. Chemical analysis of the "bone" showed it to be essentially a hydrated ferric phosphate containing only traces of calcium.

Dr. Barker visualizes the formation as taking place in this way:

While the acid of the soil would dissolve bones, the diffusion of corrosion products from nearby iron fragments in the structure of calcined or burned bone would, by the deposition of insoluble ferric phosphate, form a cast of the original bone. Thus the fragment found in the grave was not of unburned bone, as originally supposed, but actually an insoluble product from burned bone formed by contact with corroding iron under acid soil conditions. Dr. Barker's report does not indicate that

there was any evidence that the original bone was human or that any indication was found that a cremated body was buried in the grave; the early Christians opposed cremation because it was believed that the body should be buried whole to favor resurrection.

Science News Letter, October 7, 1950

GENERAL SCIENCE

## \$225,000 for National Science Foundation

► WHEN President Truman signed the \$17,000,000 supplemental appropriations bill, \$225,000 became available for the first year's operation of the new National Science Foundation. Originally designed to stimulate research in the more peaceful aspects of science, the Foundation may now find itself concerned with wartime jobs.

One of its jobs will be to keep a roster of the nation's scientific, technical and engineering personnel. This roster will be invaluable in case of an all-out mobilization. In addition, the Foundation might possibly be given the job of drafting scientists and engineers in the event of war.

Science News Letter, October 7, 1950

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