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The shale stud from the Bronze Age Cremation Cemetery, Cefn Cwmwd

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The stud (SF 438, 3012, Fig. 8.10:1) is roughly circular in plan and waisted in profile, with one slightly domed surface that must have been the outside of the object, and a slightly smaller, flatter surface that must have constituted its inner side. Both of these surfaces have a narrow faceted edge.
The maximum diameter is 23.9 mm; the diameter of the inner surface is around 19.8 mm (18.7 where chipped); the diameter at the waist is 14.3–14.7 mm; and the maximum thickness is 13.4 mm.

The upper and lower surfaces have been carefully smoothed, but the waisted area between them (which would not have been seen when the object was in use) still retains numerous marks from the tool (probably a knife) used to shape it. The dome has a very low sheen.

The object had not been burnt and is not heavily worn: the tool marks on the waisted area are clearly visible, and there are also faint striations along the edge facets, plus very faint striations on the outside of the bottom surface, that relate to the object’s shaping through abrasion against a material such as fine sandstone. The only signs of wear are a darkening of colour (and enhanced smoothing) around the facets of the outer and inner surfaces. There are a few small ancient flake scars, including one on the edge of the outer surface that may well have been caused during manufacture. There are also faint superficial scratches, representing damage, probably ancient.

The material is a compact laminar blackish-grey shale, with brownish tinges on its surfaces that may be due to contamination from the adjacent sediment. On the domed surface there are a couple of dark brown natural inclusions that may be of pyrite. The stone’s composition was analysed by S. Kirk at National Museums Scotland, using semi-quantitative X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. This confirmed that the material was an iron- and carbon-rich stone – definitely not jet. In macroscopic appearance the material resembles Kimmeridge shale, but without further analysis it would not be prudent to suggest this firmly as a source. Analysis of other Welsh Early Bronze Age black jewellery by Mary Davis (Sheridan & Davis 1996) has shown that non-jet materials have indeed been used elsewhere in Wales.

Discussion

This item is clearly recognisable as a class of Early Bronze Age artefact that is known from a few sites, mostly in Yorkshire (e.g. Fylingdales (of jet) and near Peak: Elgee 1930) but also in Wessex (e.g. Preshute (‘Manton’ barrow), Wiltshire, of baked clay: Annable & Simpson 1964, no. 201). One, of baked clay, is also known from the Brenig cemetery (Lynch 1993, 130). That some, at least, of these studs had been used as ear studs is strongly suspected by the pair of Whitby jet examples found in the area of a young person’s head at Wharram Percy, Yorkshire. The fact that only a single example has been found at Cefn Cwmwd need not negate a similar interpretation; it may be that a pair had been divided as the grave goods were added to the cremated bones, or else the stud may have been a labret (i.e. lip stud). Other commentators (e.g. Annable & Simpson 1964) had suggested that they could have been dress fasteners; if used in such a way, they would have had to have been fastened tightly by a cord and used as toggles. It seems more likely, given the location of the Wharram Percy pair, that these items had been jewellery rather than dress accessories.

It is clear that the Cefn Cwmwd stud had not accompanied the body on the pyre. It must have been added to the cremated bones at the time of interment.
Fig. 8.10 Cefn Cwmwd: small finds