

# Early Anglo-Saxon

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## National overview

The transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England remains a key issue in British archaeology. Recent fieldwork and research has provided more information on this topic, calling into question some aspects of previously accepted accounts. Archaeological evidence, for this period, as for others, continues to increase as a result of commercial excavation and metal-detecting. Major issues are the analysis and interpretation of this new material and establishing more precise dating for the fifth-seventh centuries AD. Progress is being made on these issues, with significant input from research in the Eastern Region.

The chronology of the fifth century is becoming clearer. Both “Roman” and “Saxon” activity can be identified in the fifth century, overlapping chronologically in the first half of the century and possibly later, although not necessarily in the same geographical region. Continuation of coin use into the early decades of the century has been argued on the basis of the distribution of clipped silver *siliquae* as well as the occurrence of a few hoards, including the Patching hoard, deposited later than 461AD (Bland et al. 2014, White et al. 1999). A major hoard in the eastern counties is the Sandridge hoard, found by a metal-detectorist in 2012 on private land to the north of St Albans. This is one of the largest hoards of Roman gold coins found in the UK, consisting of 159 gold coins, the latest issue of Honorius (St Albans museum web page).

Continuing manufacture and use of pottery in a Roman tradition into the fifth century has also been identified, including at Baldock, Hertfordshire (Fitzpatrick Matthews 2016, Gerrard 2016). The chronology of the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement in the eastern region has been clarified through the analysis of the cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham, Norfolk (Hills and Lucy 2013). This demonstrates that most of the cremations at Spong Hill were buried during the fifth century AD, with the cemetery in use from the early decades of that century. The main use of Spong Hill was earlier than most furnished Anglo-Saxon inhumations in England, and partly contemporary with continental sites such as Issendorf and Schmalstede, rather than being later. This contradicts the traditional start date for substantial Anglo-Saxon presence in England, ultimately derived from Bede, of the mid fifth century. Regional variation within England is very clear. Early to mid fifth century pottery and artefacts are found in small numbers across southern and eastern England, especially in Kent and the Upper Thames, and some key coastal sites such as Rendlesham (Scull et al 2016) and Mucking (Lucy and Evans 2016). However, the main focus is in eastern England around the Wash. The modern counties of Norfolk and Lincolnshire, with parts of the East Midlands and southern Yorkshire, show a density of both excavated cremation burials and metal-detected finds which is of a different order of magnitude to that elsewhere in England.

A new chronological framework for seventh century Anglo-Saxon burials has also been established on the basis of Bayesian modelling of C14 dates together with artefact typology and seriation (Hines and Bayliss 2013). This suggests that furnished burial came to an end before the end of the seventh century, which has prompted re-examination of the numismatic evidence which appears to show furnished burial continuing later. It is arguable that the chronology of sixth century is the period now in need of detailed consideration, especially in the light of questions raised by archaeological scientists about the impact of the Justinianic plague and a possible dramatic climate event in 536AD. The forthcoming publication of the cemeteries from Eriswell, Suffolk, will contribute to this.

Several recent projects have begun to address the problem of the “grey literature”, using databases drawn from ADS as the basis for research. One of these projects, carried out by Prof John Blair at Oxford, focussed on Anglo-Saxon settlement. This appears to relate especially to the metrology of middle Saxon settlements (Blair 2013). Another Oxford project, “English Landscape and Identities”, has taken a longer term and more geographically selective approach, and its results are not yet fully available. The EngLAID maps show the dense distribution of recent commercial excavation across England (EngLAID web page). The case studies for this project do not include one on the early medieval period in the eastern region but some of their findings will have implications for our region. A project which is directly relevant to this section is the “Fields of Britannia” carried out at Exeter, available as a published book and online database (Rippon et al 2015). This drew especially on palaeoenvironmental and historic map evidence of the history of landuse during the first millennium AD which demonstrated significant continuities in landscape use from Roman to early medieval. Another comprehensive and accessible project is “The rural settlement of Roman Britain” carried out by Reading University and Cotswold archaeology. This is a review of the excavated evidence for its stated topic, including much evidence from the eastern regions. It is now nearing completion, with the database available online at ADS and the first of a projected series of books now published (Smith et al. 2016). The sections on the later Roman period are directly relevant to the early medieval period. Chronologically there was a peak of farming settlements in use during the second century AD, with decline thereafter especially in the fourth century (Smith et al. 2016 fig.12.16). Fewer sites in most regions were occupied in the later period, and there were changes in architecture and the morphology of settlements and an increased focus on cattle exploitation. The apparent decline in settlement and population seen during the fifth century may have been partly the continuation of a trend begun while Britain was still part of the Roman empire. Causes for this decline may have included climatic and political instability as well as external threats or actual invasion. Few of the sites occupied in the late Roman period can be shown to have continued in use into the early Saxon period. Taken together, the Roman Settlement and the Fields of Britannia projects show the considerable scale of settlement in Lowland Britain in the Roman period, and also the regional and chronological variation which need to be taken into consideration in any discussion of continuity and change from Roman to Saxon. In the eastern regions specifically publication of the excavations of the Roman sites of Billingford, Norfolk (Wallis 2011) and Heybridge, Essex (Ashwin and Tester 2014) has shown little continuity from Roman to Saxon occupation at those sites.

The extension of the Portable Antiquities Scheme across England has produced a very large database, to which the eastern counties contribute considerably. Norfolk and Suffolk have been recorded in several annual PAS reports as the most productive counties for metal detected finds and treasure, reflecting the long tradition of liaison with metal-detectorists in those regions, while Essex has reported a high number of treasure finds. Early medieval finds represent 4-5% of the reported finds. Several PhD theses have drawn on this material, demonstrating concentrations of many types of early medieval artefacts in the east. These include Toby Martin on cruciform brooches and Kathrin Felder on girdle-hangers, for the fifth-sixth centuries (Martin 2015, Felder 2014) and for the mid and Later Saxon periods Rosie Weetch on Carolingian metalwork and Jane Kershaw on Scandinavian metalwork (Kershaw 2013, Weetch 2014).

The density of settlement during some parts of the first millennium AD, as indicated by metal-detected finds and by commercial excavations, is far greater, especially in eastern England, than had previously been appreciated. The scale of some excavations is so large that it is

possible to see the history of a whole piece of landscape, in some cases showing dense occupation, in others periods of abandonment. This demonstrates considerable regional variation. Regions with significant density of evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement include the Vale of Pickering in Yorkshire, where geophysical survey has found clusters of grubenhauser at 2km distance (Powlesland 2006) and Norfolk, where the main sources of evidence are finds from metal detecting and fieldwalking (Chester-Kadwell 2009, Fleming 2016, Rogerson forthcoming). On the other hand, the absence of Anglo-Saxon settlement in area excavated in advance of the construction of Stansted airport was noted in the 2011 review. To this can be added the results of large scale and ongoing excavation in and around the city of Cambridge in advance of development. This has produced much evidence for later prehistoric and Roman activity, but very little for early Anglo-Saxon. South of the city there were scattered structures and burials of Middle Saxon date but little if anything recorded from the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century apart from a few poorly recorded old finds (CAU webpage, Evans et al. 2008, Evans et al forthcoming). The same picture is repeated to the north west of the city, where a large area was investigated as a whole, producing prehistoric and Roman settlements and burials but no definitely Anglo-Saxon features, despite being adjacent to the known site of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Girton (CAU web page). Further away, into the fens, the Roman port of Colne Fen, near Earith, came to an end and was not succeeded by any identifiable Anglo-Saxon activity (Evans et al. 2013). In Cambridgeshire and Essex, therefore, there were landscapes which were very much occupied and exploited from the last centuries BC to the fourth century AD but then remained almost empty until modern development began in the twentieth century.

### **Roman/Anglo-Saxon transition**

The national account above has been driven substantially by eastern region projects, partly set out in the previous section. Here some major projects, of national and international significance, are discussed in more detail.

At two sites, Mucking, Essex, and Spong Hill, Norfolk extensive older excavations have received further analysis and publication (Lucy and Evans 2016, Hills and Lucy 2013) . Mucking ,on the Thames estuary, was a multi-period site excavated in the 1960s and 70s with occupation ranging from the Bronze Age to the Early Saxon period, including substantial prehistoric and Roman phases of occupation which have only recently been fully published (Lucy and Evans 2016). The presence of granaries and evidence for large scale pottery production indicate this was a place with an economic function in the later prehistoric and Roman period, probably not a high status residence, although possibly with some element of ritual importance. Evidence for Roman occupation declines after the mid third century but there is late fourth century pottery, much of it coming from Anglo-Saxon structures. Lucy argues that this suggests the initial Anglo-Saxon settlement took place within a continuing local context of Romano-British activity. Even the later Anglo-Saxon settlement and cemeteries for which the site is best known are located to some extent in relation to the pre-existing Roman enclosures, most notably cemetery two, placed neatly between two Roman rectangular enclosures (Lucy and Evans 2016 fig.5.20). As the excavator, Margaret Jones, argued, Mucking is a strategic location, controlling the Thames estuary. The initial settlement of Anglo-Saxons may have taken place within a framework of continuing local officialdom, but it certainly becomes a place dominated by the material culture, and presumably the actual presence, of incomers.

At Spong Hill, in central Norfolk, a prehistoric and Roman settlement was succeeded by a large Anglo-Saxon cemetery, excavated in the 1970s, published in a series of reports 1977-94. Renewed research has now produced a detailed account of the social structure and

chronology of this site (Hills and Lucy 2013). At Spong Hill the latest Roman ditches were partially filled in by cleared vegetation before the Anglo-Saxon cemetery came into use (Rickett 1995, 41). There does seem to have been separation between the two phases of activity and a significant cultural break in the nature of use, from settlement to cemetery, but not a long period of abandonment of the site. The new chronology of the burials depends firstly on the relative sequence of material from Spong Hill, using stratigraphic relationships between burials and correspondence analysis of associated finds and pot decoration motifs. This internal sequence has been compared with later Roman and migration period chronologies within Britain and on the continent. Phases A and B include the majority of the cremations, with no inhumations, and occupy all of the cemetery area, with groupings of similarly decorated pots probably reflecting family plots. The latest phase, C, shows a contraction of burial to the north-eastern quarter of the cemetery, where both cremations and inhumations were buried. The earliest phase, A, started before the middle of the fifth century. For much of the fifth century Spong Hill was a large cremation cemetery, providing a burial place for a region within central Norfolk. In its final phase, C, late fifth-early sixth century, it became a small mixed cemetery with indications of social hierarchy in the ring ditches around some well-equipped inhumations.

Two new fieldwork projects at Rendlesham, Suffolk, and Oakington, Cambridgeshire, have contributed significant new information. Rendlesham, has long been identified as the “*villa regalis*” mentioned by Bede in connection with the kings of East Anglia. The site has suffered in the past from the illegal unreported use of metal-detectors, resulting in theft of unrecorded artefacts. The landowner responded by calling in Suffolk archaeology service, who organized a comprehensive and fully recorded survey by local detectorists working with archaeologists. They found thousands of artefacts, many dating to the sixth-eighth century AD, including evidence for manufacture and use of gold, silver and copper alloy artefacts, and also Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Merovingian and Byzantine coins (Scull et al. 2016 figs.3, 8-10). This was followed by geophysical survey and small-scale excavation, which has demonstrated the existence of a major late Roman and early medieval centre which might be comparable with southern Scandinavian central places such as Uppakra or Gudme. This is the first such site to have been recognized in Britain. A key point is that it was already significant in the late Roman period, so that Scull argues its “exceptional character in the sixth-eighth century was rooted in its earlier status under the late Roman empire” (Scull et al. 2016, 1601). This seems to have been a focus of elite activity in both periods, which could mean either that it was an early target for takeover or that the local leaders joined forces with incomers and adopted their material culture. Either way this remains a place with long distance contacts across Europe and a centre for production of high status artefacts, a site of international significance in the first millennium AD and, in terms of research into that period, today also.

Oakington is a village north of Cambridge, the location of a recently excavated early Anglo-Saxon cemetery and also a Middle and late Anglo-Saxon settlement. Excavations have taken place in 1994 (Taylor et al 1997), in 2006/7 and most recently, 2010-2014, by Oxford Archaeology East and the University of Central Lancashire (Sayer et al 2011, Sayer and Dickinson 2013). By the end of the final season in 2014 124 human skeletons had been excavated in 113 graves: the site is notable for the number of multiple graves. The cemetery included a higher proportion of sub adult burials than is usually recorded, and also burials of women who appeared to have died when pregnant or in childbirth (Sayer and Dickinson 2013). Oakington and other Cambridgeshire sites have contributed to a pioneering genetic study, where ancient DNA was sequenced and whole genomes were analysed for a series of skeletons from Oakington, Hinxtton and Linton (Schiffels et al 2016). Samples were taken from four female graves at Oakington. The burials contained similar assemblages and did not

appear culturally different, however, analysis of their genomes showed this to have been a genetically mixed community, with local and immigrant ancestry. This contradicts the conclusion of some earlier genetic research that incoming Anglo-Saxons replaced the indigenous British population. It also does not appear that the two were distinguished in burial, nor, if their burial dress was what they had worn in life, were they distinguished by dress. A mixture of local and incomer seems a common sense result, consistent with much of the existing archaeological evidence. However, this is a small sample, which needs to be expanded and tested in different parts of England before general conclusions can be drawn about the population as a whole.

## **Landscape and Settlement**

The Roman Rural Settlement and Fields of Britannia projects both reviewed the history of settlement in the eastern region as well as the rest of England. A thesis by Fiona Fleming (Fleming 2016) is a detailed analysis of Roman to Saxon settlement in Norfolk, building on the earlier research by Mary Chester Kadwell (Chester Kadwell 2009) and also drawing on the fieldwalking projects of Andrew Rogerson (Rogerson forthcoming).

The well-known settlement sites of Mucking and West Stow have both been the subject of recent research. At Mucking, Essex, the relationship between the latest Roman and earliest Anglo-Saxon phases has been reconsidered (Lucy and Evans 2016). At West Stow, Suffolk, one of the reconstructed houses burnt down and this was excavated, as a contribution to understanding the effects of fire in archaeological deposits (Tipper 2012).

Rendlesham is the most significant settlement site to have been investigated since 2011. Metal-detecting and geophysical survey together with limited excavation indicate this to have been an extensive and long-lived settlement, a central place with a main focus of use from the late Roman to mid Saxon periods. The concentration of precious metal artefacts and production, and coins, indicate high status activity including production and exchange (Scull et al 2016).

There are frequent references in the grey literature to the excavation of early-mid Anglo Saxon structures, usually identified through the presence of sunken-featured buildings containing animal bones and undecorated hand made potsherds, not always identifiable as early rather than mid-Saxon in date. Recent excavations include Harston Mill, a multi-period site south of Cambridge, excavated and now published by Archaeological Solutions (O'Brien 2016). The early Saxon phase of this site included three sunken featured buildings and a number of other structures pits and enclosure ditches. In Essex, near Langford, at least seven post built and two sunken featured buildings were excavated by OAE (Gilmour 2015). The most substantial recent settlement excavation was at Kentford near Newmarket, Suffolk, where at least sixteen, possibly eighteen, early Anglo-Saxon sunken features buildings and two, possibly three post-built halls were found (Suffolk CIC webpage). Other sites tend to be smaller, for example at Stanford Rd Shefford, where three sunken featured buildings were found by MOLA Northampton, with some evidence for textile manufacture (Taylor 2014). Test-pitting in a number of eastern county villages by Access Archaeology Cambridge has produced some early Saxon pottery, indicating early Saxon activity in or near existing villages (ACA webpage).

There is a pressing need for a review of the evidence for early/mid Anglo-Saxon settlement in the eastern counties and nationally, along the lines of the Roman rural settlement project.

## **Burials**

Early Anglo-Saxon burials continue to be discovered and published. The analysis of the Spong Hill cemetery has provided a chronological framework for cremation cemeteries of the fifth century. Further cremations have been recovered at Lackford from the cemetery excavated and published by Lethbridge in 1947 (Lethbridge 1951). Publication of the major cemeteries at Eriswell is in preparation. Two PhD thesis on aspects of the artefactual material are already available (Nicholas 2016, Peake 2013). The final Eriswell report will provide a research focus for the cemeteries of early-mid sixth century date, such as those already published for cemeteries at Flixton (Boulter and Walton Rogers 2012) and Tittleshall (Walton Rogers 2013), and new discoveries in and around Cambridge (North Stowe; Hatherdene Close Cherry Hinton; North Ely; Fordham Rd Soham) and elsewhere ( eg Hyderabad barracks, Colchester; Hockcliffe, near Leighton Buzzard, Beds; Watton-at-Stone Herts; Stanton, Upthorpe Rd, Suffolk; several sites in Norfolk). Additional burials have also been found near previously recorded cemeteries (e.g. Flixton, Coddendam, Eriswell, Boss Hall, Ipswich, all in Suffolk). Several of these cemeteries are on the same sites as Roman enclosures, in some cases (Hatherdene Close, Ely North, Fordham Rd Soham) burials appear to be located with reference to the Roman ditches. The cemetery at Tranmer House, Sutton Hoo, has been fully published, adding a significant chapter to the history of that site. Just over thirty burials, inhumations and cremations, are dated mainly to the later sixth century, immediately before the well-known barrow cemetery (Fern 2015).

Seventh century burials have also been discovered and reported in the press, mostly because of unusual associated finds, but are not yet fully published. These include: the Trumpington bed burial with gold cross (Evans and Lucy forthcoming); Barber's point near Snape, burials and settlement site, possibly monastic (Meredith and Jenman 2014); Exning, near Newmarket with parts of horse trappings, blue glass fragment and unusually large spearhead; Diss, Norfolk, a single burial with an elaborate gold and garnet pendant; Stoke Quay, Ipswich, burials within ring ditches and settlement evidence close to later medieval church and cemetery. Also possibly 7<sup>th</sup> century is a burial from Chilton Leys, Stowmarket, with an iron bowl or cauldron, knives and possible miniature weapons. Other burials and an SFB were also found at this site (Haskins 2013). Aldham Mill, Hadleigh, Suffolk, is an example of the phenomenon of reuse of Bronze Age burial mounds in the seventh century (Beverton et al 2013)

## **Finds**

Numerous finds of this period from the Eastern counties continue to be reported to PAS. The assemblage from Rendlesham dwarfs other finds, but many others are of interest. Notable amongst these are a series of bracteates from Binham (Behr 2010, Behr and Pestell 2014). These represent the first hoard of gold bracteates from England and one of the largest finds of early Anglo-Saxon gold. They are argued to represent an early Anglo-Saxon central place, part of a network of such sites around the North Sea. Also from Norfolk, from near Burgh Castle, is a copper alloy figure of a rider (Hills and Ashley forthcoming). Several figurines are now known from Norfolk and Suffolk, (Pestell 2012). Pottery of continuing Roman tradition has been identified in burials at Baldock (Fitzpatrick-Matthews 2016).

## **Coins**

The publication of a volume in the "Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles" on early Anglo-Saxon gold coins and Anglo-Saxon and continental silver coinage of the North Sea area, 600–760 has provided greater precision to the dating of those coins (Gannon 2013). The incidence of coins in graves has been recently reviewed, showing a difference between the earliest coins, used

as grave-goods, sometimes mounted as pendants, and later coins included, rarely, as currency (Scull and Naylor 2016).

### **Assessment of progress on research topics proposed in 2011**

Roman/Anglo-Saxon transition:

Significant progress has been made in this area, see above. Continued investigation of Rendlesham will yield significant further information. More widely, review of recent discoveries of both settlement and cemeteries is needed to provide a firm basis for further research.

Settlement and social organisation:

Publication of Roman phases of Mucking. Rendlesham project. Partial excavation of many settlements

Population studies, demography: Oakington genome.



## Future Research

Further research in all areas highlighted above is to be hoped for and encouraged.

In particular:

1. The project at Rendlesham has great potential, it is to be hoped funding is secured to continue work.
2. The publication of Eriswell, including chronological analysis, will provide a focus for reassessment of the many small groups of fifth/sixth century inhumations recorded from the region.
3. The fragmentary evidence for early/mid Anglo-Saxon settlements scattered in many Grey Literature reports needs to be reviewed and brought together systematically, following the model of the Roman Rural Settlement project.
4. Cemeteries consisting mainly of sixth century inhumations have been partially excavated in recent years. This material needs to be brought together and synthesized.
5. Dialogue between archaeologists, historians and scientists should be developed further, especially in the context of recent advances in extractions of ancient DNA.
6. Seventh century burials as evidence of the character and progress of conversion to Christianity