

Early Anglo-Saxon Period Research topics and priorities

Settlements

The region would benefit from a detailed study of the changes in settlement types and forms over time during the early, middle and late Anglo-Saxon periods, highlighting some of the distinctive changes which take place.

Acquisition of greater data, together with more sophisticated analytical techniques, would increase understanding greatly, focusing in particular on intensive study of settlement patterns through time, spatial analysis of such settlement within a chronological framework, quantification of population density and mobility, definition of non-urban, proto-urban and urban settlement.

Characterisation of settlement forms and functions should be achieved through intensive fieldwork including fieldwalking, metal-detecting, geophysical survey and trial trenching.

Settlement diversity models should be developed based on size, status and function and should be tested via sample excavation of each category of site to produce building density data, artefact assemblages, ecofact assemblages and samples for radiocarbon dating

Are there regional or landscape-related variations in settlement location, density or type?

The role and dating of the extensive linear earthworks and dykes requires further study.

Regional differences in Early Anglo-Saxon settlement have not been fully explored or explained.

Analysis of the distribution of artefacts recorded by the PAS or recovered by fieldwork could help in establishing relative settlement distribution, densities and cultural links.

There is still a problem with identifying A-S sites. Further work with aerial photographs might be helpful, possibly using known settlement sites as a template for identifying settlement patterns. The A-S period is poorly represented in NMP data due to the problem of recognising features of this date. Further work needs to be done regionally and nationally to clarify the morphology of settlement sites of the Early to Middle Anglo-Saxon period.

Identification of a 'Little Ice Age' in the 5th to 7th centuries suggests this was a period of greater crisis than had previously been appreciated.

Roman to Anglo-Saxon transition

There is a need for synthesis on a regional basis of sites which span the Roman to Anglo-Saxon transition. At present it is not known whether the general trend is for continued occupation, for shifting settlements or for deliberate destruction. What happened in Hertfordshire from the C5th onwards is still obscure.

It is possible that some of the many Roman rural sites mapped by the NMP could have continued into the Anglo-Saxon period. At present any Anglo-Saxon activity is generally indistinguishable from the Roman or earlier features; however a better understanding of site morphology, together with metal-detecting finds, fieldwalking and ultimately excavation, could provide confirmation of a later date.

What was the impact of new settlement on the indigenous population?

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Cemeteries

In order to more fully understand life expectancy and ethnic origin we need to locate and excavate cemeteries with short lifespans and good bone preservation

The refinement of radiocarbon dating through Bayesian modelling, and the application of oxygen isotope analysis to human bone in order to date and plot population movement should be more widely explored.

Cemeteries consisting mainly of sixth century inhumations have been partially excavated in recent years. This material needs to be brought together and synthesized.

Dialogue between archaeologists, historians and scientists should be developed further, especially in the context of recent advances in extractions of ancient DNA. Methods such as isotopic and aDNA analysis can make significant contributions to our understanding of ethnic origins, identity, health and diet in Early Anglo-Saxon populations.

Seventh century burials should be reassessed as evidence of the character and progress of conversion to Christianity.

Identification of plague bacillus in some burials suggests this was a period of greater crisis than had previously been appreciated. Scientific analysis of human remains will help better understand health and disease at this time.

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.

Regional difference in Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have not been fully explored or explained.

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Economy

There is a need to determine the extent of agricultural specialisation and surplus production by sampling the entire hierarchy of post-Roman sites. Priority should be given to the detailed examination of good animal bone and charred cereal deposits.

The development of Anglo-Saxon fieldscapes needs further investigation. How far can the size and shape of fields be related to the agricultural regimes identified? To what extent are Roman field systems reused?

The Anglo-Saxon pottery industry is still not properly understood. A regional assessment of evidence for local production centres would be useful. Early to middle Anglo-Saxon fabrics need to be identified. It is also necessary to consolidate and publish the information we already have.

Rural production centres for pottery should be targeted for excavation.

Craft production: there is a need for a much larger rural assemblage of artefacts to study distribution of product types.

Woodland management in the Early Anglo-Saxon period requires further study to better understand how this resource was exploited and the impact this had on the economy.

The main communication routes through the region need to be established. This would include main routeways, secondary routes, valley corridors, rivers and marine transport. It would act as a base for information on the distribution of site types by period and contemporary environment. Particular issues include: river management, identification of ports and harbours, the role/reuse of existing infrastructure (Roman roads and canals) in shaping the new landscape.

Links with north-west Europe need to be further examined, and whether ethnicity and regional contacts can be traced.

The details of material culture need to be studied, including careful examination of technological innovation, the adoption of new materials and practices, the production of specialised manufactures and the pattern of artistic influence.

Regional differences in the Early Anglo-Saxon economy have not been fully explored or explained.