

## Chapter 14

# The Early Medieval Period: Research Agenda

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### 14.1 Nature of the evidence

The Solent-Thames area represents a disparate group of counties, covering a range of geographical and geological areas, and with variable links to historically attested administrative and political territories (see Chapter 13). Different counties have traditionally had different levels of significance in wider Anglo-Saxon studies, with Winchester and *Hamwic* perhaps the best known of all sites in the region. In this respect, development-led archaeology has been a useful counterweight over the last twenty years or so to the tendency of academic research to focus on places perceived as particularly important. Even so, coverage remains partial and development is concentrated in the most economically active and urbanised areas. The surveys carried out from the 1970s to the 1990s provide a valuable baseline for understanding some of the less explored and more rural parts of the region, and the increasing interest in landscape archaeology may also contribute to a more even coverage. Much progress has been made in the publication of archaeological reports in the region, but numerous outstandingly important excavations remain unpublished; as a consequence, the development of the research agenda for the region is constrained by our inability to integrate some of its most significant archaeological data.

Regionally, the borders of the Solent-Thames region present particular problems. The Thames represents an exceptional corridor which cannot be fully explored in this study, though the publication of the Thames Through Time volume dealing with the Roman and Early Medieval periods mitigates this issue (Booth *et al.* 2007). The Ouse, by contrast, is split between three separate English Heritage regions. Equally, the extent to which London had an impact on the relevant counties in this region cannot be explored within the Thames Solent boundaries, and the important coastal archaeological resource of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight is cut off from its neighbours to the east and west. There clearly remains much scope for continuing cross-boundary studies. Nevertheless, it is also true for this period, as for others, that the drawing together of what are, geographically and territorially, disparate counties offers interesting research opportunities.

There is a relatively low level of data from the early medieval period, which makes direct comparison with earlier and later periods difficult. The remains of this period may be particularly ephemeral and hard to

predict, and the exploration of sites and landscapes of this period should continue to be a high priority when opportunities arise. This should include the gathering of palaeo-environmental and palaeo-economic data to support consideration of the significant inter-regional variation. Palaeo-environmental scientists, archaeologists and documentary historians need to pool information rather than work in isolation, and compare and contrast interpretations derived from proxy palaeo-environmental data, landscape archaeology and documentary sources.

Nevertheless, the drawing together of what are, geographically and territorially, disparate counties offers a number of specific research opportunities, as listed below:

- 14.1.1 This is an area made up of regions normally kept separate in geographical and regional studies, providing an opportunity to compare data across these regional boundaries.
- 14.1.2 This is a period that remains relatively under-represented and poorly understood in the archaeological record across much of the region, and remains a high priority for investigation when opportunities arise.
- 14.1.3 The region offers a good opportunity to compare land-based and water-based transport in the early medieval period.
- 14.1.4 There are significant differences in the levels of research and data collection across the region, making research in those areas that have been least-well served a high priority for further research.

### 14.2 Inheritance

The ending of Roman Britain is viewed as a significant break in British history, but the archaeological evidence from this area suggests that the Romano-British way of life did not come to an abrupt halt. Documentary sources offer a picture of aggressive Anglo-Saxon conquest of the area, and several excavated sites in the region are key in elucidating the evidence. The Solent-Thames region has played a significant part in framing our interpretation of the ending of Roman Britain, and

here, as elsewhere, continuing exploration of the Roman/Anglo-Saxon interface remains a priority. Issues to be addressed include:

- 14.2.1 Establishing the identity of the group using the new culture, building on current work on isotope evidence and DNA analyses, and with particular attention to extending studies to include Roman-period skeletons
- 14.2.2 Establishing if, when and how villa estates ceased to function
- 14.2.3 The use of environmental evidence to identify possible change from specialised farming to a generalised approach.
- 14.2.4 The identification of the extent to which there was continuity of use between Romano-British sites and Anglo-Saxon
- 14.2.5 Identifying and exploring the extent to which Romano-British agricultural practices persisted into the Anglo-Saxon period
- 14.2.6 Arriving at a better understanding of the relationship – economic, political, social – between incoming Anglo-Saxons and surviving Romano-British communities across the region.
- 14.2.7 Carrying out detailed comparison of the settlement patterns and of the chronology of change in different activities between the Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods
- 14.2.8 A review of existing evidence to identify areas with material culture overlap and areas without, with particular reference to the reasons for the abandonment of Silchester

### 14.3 Chronology

There are a number of key chronological research questions relating to the early medieval period in the Solent-Thames region in particular. Recent initiatives to carry out systematic radiocarbon dating programmes on burials both nationally and locally will contribute much-needed new insights, but at the time of writing the significance of this work for the regional archaeological resource remains to be assessed. The traditional reliance on pottery for dating is problematic for this period, and the difficulties of identifying mid Saxon sites in particular from artefactual evidence have been highlighted in Chapter 13. The refinement of existing artefact-based chronologies remains a high priority for the region, supported by the systematic use of scientific dating techniques, in order to test and refine existing chronological models. Single radiocarbon dates are much less

useful than sequences of samples that permit the use of Bayesian modelling, and the advice of specialists should be sought on sampling strategies. Areas to priorities include:

- 14.3.1 The date of earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement and the degree of overlap with Romano-British culture.
- 14.3.2 The development of better definition of chronologies within Anglo-Saxon cemeteries
- 14.3.3 Better definition and dating of pottery sequences in the region.
- 14.3.4 A review of the current radiocarbon dating evidence, particularly from sites radiocarbon dated before the early 1990s.
- 14.3.5 The identification of mid and late Saxon rural settlement

### 14.4 Landscape and land use

The region has a wide range of different landscape types, from the heathlands of East Berkshire to the woodlands of the Chilterns, the Berkshire and Hampshire downs, the gravels and riverside meadows of the Thames Valley, and the coastal environments of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. These supported a range of different activities, associated with contrasts in settlement patterns, and land use will have varied both from place to place, depending on the key resources available, and over time, with evidence for a return to mixed subsistence-level farming in the early Anglo-Saxon period, and increasing intensification and specialisation thereafter.

The region has a number of well-excavated sites with good environmental evidence, but the presence of early medieval economic evidence is highly variable and disparate both across the Thames-Solent corridor and within it, and many studies remain site-specific. Many Saxon rural settlement sites contain relatively few good contexts from which to sample, and these may be biased by the specific nature of activities associated with them, for example sunken-featured buildings. Concerted attempts should be made both to improve the available sample of this type of evidence, and to provide syntheses on a regional or sub-regional basis to inform research aims for the future. It is also clear that much can be learned by incorporating other sources of information such as evidence for field systems, trackways, enclosures and ridge and furrow, place-names, manorial and parish boundaries, charters and the records of estate rights and resources. Where opportunities arise it is clearly of great value to attempt to consider environmental data in this wider landscape context. The link between changing agricultural practice and estate structure in the mid and late Anglo-Saxon period is a particularly important area for enhanced research, and there is currently little

known about the chronology and context of the development of open field agriculture in the region.

One key theme to address is agricultural change, in all its forms, after the end of the Romano-British period. Tied in with this is the examination of changing regional specialisation in herds and in crop vs herd proportions. As with other periods, the opportunity to look at regional variation in stock composition and potentially in breeds should be objectives, possibly using isotope analysis (Sykes *et al.* 2006).

The quantity of woodland is recorded in Domesday and was clearly a major managed resource for timber, wattle, browse, pig pannage and orchards. It remained a key resource for timber for construction, the manufacture of artefacts and probably more importantly as fuel for domestic fires and furnaces. Palaeo-environmental evidence (pollen, charcoals etc) should help define the presence and location of such resources.

As in prehistory, colluvium and alluvium may mask early medieval sites and evidence, but can also contain significant evidence of the local and wider land-use via contained palaeo-environmental data. Thus site-based studies of colluvium, alluvium and riversides are integral to studying both early medieval sites and the landscape in which they reside. Economies may exploit ridges and valley bottoms differently, with possibly better pasture developing in the dry valleys upon the lush vegetation of the deeper soils. Changing agricultural practices and the management of rivers and riversides for mills and fish traps, potentially increases and changes colluviation and alluviation patterns. As the site- and activity-specific level of interpretations is often greater in more recent periods, the precise level of site taphonomy and sedimentation is often directly related to those activities. As such, detailed but targeted geo-archaeological description of basic sedimentary sequences (eg ditches and infills) can elucidate, inform and answer questions not readily addressed using basic context records and artefacts assemblages.

Given the frequency of mills and fisheries recorded in Domesday, archaeological evidence of these should be sought (eg by sieving for fish bones). Established ports such as Southampton and Porchester would have had relatively major quays (as at Poole, Dorset), and the opportunity of examining these, and the waterlogged deposits and ecofacts that might be associated, should be seen as a priority. To date no comparable sites have been highlighted on the Isle of Wight. Specific research aims should include:

- 14.4.1 The collection of more extensive environmental samples to allow detailed analysis of particular sites, and consequently to inform comparisons of environmental data across the region.
- 14.4.2 Building upon and adding to existing environmental information to identify when and where changes in agriculture and land use took place, for example evidence of

possible woodland regeneration or the introduction of new crop species.

- 14.4.3 Better understanding of the process of agricultural intensification in the mid to late Saxon period and the origins of open field systems
- 14.4.4 The significance of environmental data and information from other sources such as place names for understanding the way in which estates were structured in the mid and late Anglo-Saxon period
- 14.4.5 The use of palaeo-environmental data and enquiry to further the identification of the location and nature of woodland, including the regrowth of more extensive woodlands such as on the slopes of the Chilterns
- 14.4.6 A review of rural field systems to promote their preservation, particularly in the light of more intense pressure on land from modern agricultural practice.
- 14.4.7 Geoarchaeological studies to identify activities occurring at particular sites and site types.

## 14.5 Settlement

The region has a reasonable number of excavated settlement sites, from the early to the late period, and is particularly notable for the range of urban settlements that have been studied within it. Despite an ever-increasing dataset, however, our understanding of how settlements were organised, the way in which they functioned, and their interrelationship with other sites in their contemporary landscape context, remains limited. In this respect, the uneven distribution of archaeological research in the region remains a significant handicap, and opportunities to investigate currently poorly understood areas should be a high priority. The recording and interpretation of settlement sites needs to move beyond the simple cataloguing of relatively well understood building types to consider how evidence for other types of structures, settlement organisation and function might be recovered.

Important examples of increasingly specialised site types over the mid Saxon period have come from this region. The question of changing settlement form at this time should now be pursued in the light of recent reassessments of the nature of this transformation (see Chapter 13), and the possibility of very significant levels of regional variation. In particular, we should be aware that settlements of the mid and late Anglo-Saxon period may not have the clearly visible and diagnostic buildings characteristic of the early Saxon period. Late Saxon rural settlement and agricultural change is particularly poorly understood in the region compared with other parts of the country.

The region has good preservation of late Saxon remains in numerous urban centres, both large and small, which represents a nationally-important resource for the continuing study of the origins and development of towns into the medieval period. As with rural settlement, recent trends in academic thinking in this area are tending to emphasise the complexity of urban development, as the functions of towns diversified and their economic relevance, at least in our region, only slowly increased. The archaeology of small towns remains under-researched in the region and more work is needed to understand how they developed alongside their better-documented and larger contemporaries.

For all settlement types, at all stages in the early medieval period, there is a clear need for better dating information to enable us to understand the chronology and processes of change. As has been noted above, the systematic recovery of samples for programmes of radiocarbon dating using Bayesian modelling should be pursued where opportunities arise, and more work is needed to refine our understanding of the dating of artefacts.

A number of these research priorities can be addressed in part through the enhanced study of environmental remains. Study of waterlogged plant assemblages should be conducted in urban Saxon centres throughout the Solent-Thames region. Even evidence recorded in small interventions, provided site recording is of an adequate standard and environmental assessment and analysis is thorough, has the potential to contribute to wider issues of interpretation. These include better definition of the character and diversity of urban centres, of larger trade markets and of economic networks.

The importance of defining both urban and rural economies is that they are clearly directly interrelated, and studying the detail of town economies cannot be completed without a good comprehension of the rural economies that supply them. With rare exceptions, little use has been made of palaeo-environmental and palaeo-economic data to investigate these questions. Key themes for future research have been identified as follows:

- 14.5.1 A review of settlement patterns and land use is needed, particularly as regards the apparent concentration of settlement on gravel terraces in the Thames Valley
- 14.5.2 There is a need for more detailed studies of landscapes at a scale comparable to the Whittlewood research project, and a search for appropriate areas should be undertaken. This would also allow for regional comparisons of settlements.
- 14.5.3 More work is needed on the dating of settlements, using scientific dating methods where suitable samples are available
- 14.5.4 More work is needed on the way in which

Anglo-Saxon settlements were organised and functioned

- 14.5.5 More information on settlement change and village formation in the mid to late Saxon period in particular is required to test existing possible models.
- 14.5.6 Pollen analysis and environmental analysis needs to be carried out as a routine part of site excavation, to look at changes in diet for example.
- 14.5.7 The region's archaeological resource is important for the study of urban origins and development, and this should remain a regional priority
- 14.5.8 Settlement patterns require further study in areas of dispersed settlement such as the Chilterns. There is currently only limited information available about the region's upland areas in general.
- 14.5.9 More emphasis is needed on comparison of patterns of production and consumption to shed light on the relationships between rural, specialised and urban sites

#### **14.6 Social organisation, economy and subsistence**

Anglo-Saxon settlement sites, particularly those without the more readily identifiable sunken-featured buildings, are ephemeral, and settlement morphology, particularly for the middle and later Anglo-Saxon periods, is still under dispute. Problems of identifying sites are exacerbated by lack of dating evidence. Among the avenues of study that require attention are the following:

- 14.6.1 There is an increasing awareness that so-called 'productive sites' need further study and investigation: our limited knowledge of these is evidence that our current understanding of economy and exchange in the middle Anglo-Saxon period is inadequate. The Thames-Solent area has a significant part to play in understanding middle Anglo-Saxon economy and exchange, through looking at the distribution of sceattas and the centrality of the upper Thames as a magnet. For this we can compare the recent work by John Maddicott on links between Droitwich and London and the rise of the kingdom of Mercia (Maddicott 2005)). The visible patterns of travel and exchange between the Cotswolds and the Thames, and the direct link for continental trade northwards through Hamwic to the Thames



- Valley, are important phenomena that need studying.
- 14.6.2 The distribution of all artefact types needs to be examined in relation to these axes of exchange, in order to determine which (if any) were moved along them, and by what means and mechanisms
- 14.6.3 In view of the increasingly important role played by cemeteries in identifying population movement, health, and ethnicity, scientific investigation of skeletal material, and in particular dating, stable isotope and DNA investigation, should be prioritised for both previously excavated and new skeletal material.
- 14.6.4 Investigation should include that of evidence for origins and diet through stable isotope analysis.
- 14.6.5 Evidence is needed to allow recognition of estate centres (consumption) and specialist production sites, both of which would be expected within a 'multiple estate' model.
- 14.6.6 Domesday records many watermills. Their date of establishment and, in particular, the number of mid-Saxon examples, needs to be determined.
- 14.6.7 The possible relationship of these dates to the intensification of agriculture and the establishment of open fields should be considered.
- 14.6.8 Archaeological evidence for specialised production (eg vineyards recorded in Domesday) should be sought.
- those associated with the post-Conversion period, means that there is a real need to date known unaccompanied burials, which may well be Anglo-Saxon. It is possible that there are many more excavated unfurnished Anglo-Saxon cemeteries than are currently recognised.
- 14.7.2 There is a serious research need for a radio-carbon dating project on skeletal material from this region on the lines of Dawn Hadley's dating project for the Northern Danelaw.
- The bulk of the region's churches will have had pre-Conquest origins, though this is not reflected either in surviving fabric or in Domesday entries. A co-ordinated framework for identifying opportunities for archaeological work at church sites (groundworks, maintenance, installation of heating etc) is important, so that no opportunity to investigate sites is missed.
- 14.7.3 Clarification of the demise or survival of late Roman Christianity and paganism into the 5/6th centuries should be sought.
- 14.7.4 Understanding of the significance and cultural context for the re-use of earlier sites for burial and other ritual activity needs to be improved.
- 14.7.5 Evidence for Anglo-Saxon pagan religious practice other than in burials eg 'shrines', ritual embedded in daily life (as often suggested for later prehistory) needs to be identified.
- 14.7.6 The nature of middle-late Saxon religious sites, including better identification and understanding of the characteristics of early minsters and monasteries, requires further work.

### 14.7 Ceremony, ritual and religion

The Solent-Thames region has been of major importance in the study of burial practice for this period, including the transition to Christian rites. However, the evidence from cremations has not been studied as carefully as that from inhumation graves, and the purpose and meaning of the late Anglo-Saxon charcoal burials remains uncertain. No substantive evidence for pre-Christian ritual sites has been found. This period saw the reintroduction of Christianity and the establishment of minsters and a parochial system. While there has been much work on minsters, few churches have been proved to have a pre-Conquest foundation date and the number of standing structures is limited, although Wing is a splendid example. There are many issues that would benefit from further work:

- 14.7.1 Recent excavations and better understanding of Anglo-Saxon burial patterns, especially
- 14.8.1 There is very little evidence for early medieval activities along the Thames waterfront, though recent open area excavations at

### 14.8 Transport and communications

The location of Anglo-Saxon settlements on or close to the known lines of Roman roads suggests that many, although not all, of these continued to play an important role in transport and communication in the later period. Waterways were also important lines of communication, although not enough is known about this in a cross-channel and coastal context. The extent to which rivers were navigable is also unclear, although evidence for alterations to channels, waterfront activity and structures has been found in a few areas. More work remains to be done for all of these topics, as follows:

Dorney in Buckinghamshire hint at the possible importance of the waterfront in the Middle Saxon period, away from the main known areas of dense settlement. There is a need to focus on gathering evidence from the Thames waterfront.

- 14.8.2 Further work is needed on understanding the fate of Roman roads in the early medieval period.
- 14.8.3 Cross-channel and coastal communications along the south coast require investigation.
- 14.8.4 Whether the Upper Ouse was navigable prior to the construction of mills along it needs to be determined. This of necessity requires more research on riverine vessels of the Anglo-Saxon period.
- 14.8.5 If possible the late Saxon road network should be reconstructed.

#### 14.9 Material culture

A number of coin hoards have been found across the region and finds from metal detecting are adding coins and other metal artefacts to the record, particularly for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Goods found in inhumation cemeteries have demonstrated that during the early part of the period the population was in general relatively wealthy, with access to luxury imported goods such as Rhineland pottery. The princely burial at Taplow was exceptional, but it is possible that other rich burials may still be found. For the later period the main evidence for material culture comes from excavations of urban sites, particularly Oxford and Winchester where there have been extensive excavations over many years. There is much more than can be learnt about material culture in relation to society and as a possible dating tool. Key avenues of enquiry include:

- 14.9.1 The systematic classification and dating of artefacts, in particular to help understand Middle Anglo-Saxon patterns of trade, travel and economy.
- 14.9.2 Rectifying the current uneven implementation of Archaeology Inventory Projects.
- 14.9.3 Further ceramic studies to identify and understand patterns of variation within the Solent-Thames region.

#### 14.10 The built environment

Understanding of urban development in the region has been based on piecemeal excavations, and there is a need

for a proactive approach to urban research. In the same way, a regional understanding of late Anglo-Saxon domestic settlement is lacking. There are precious few examples of excavated late Anglo-Saxon rural houses across the region. These issues can be addressed through:

- 14.10.1 Reassessment of the current evidence for Anglo-Saxon towns in the region to identify further research priorities.
- 14.10.2 More research into what late Anglo-Saxon domestic buildings looked like.
- 14.10.3 The identification of regional variations in domestic buildings.
- 14.10.4 The prioritisation of evidence for Anglo-Saxon occupation on medieval sites with documented Saxon antecedents. Where such evidence appears to be lacking, the reasons for this also require fuller investigation.

#### 14.11 Warfare, defences and military installations

Important new work on later Anglo-Saxon defences is taking place at Wallingford. The Wallingford project emphasises the previous lack of coherent study of later Anglo-Saxon burhs and their defences. The region has a number of important later Anglo-Saxon defensive structures, in particular the *burh* of Sashes, still presumably preserved under spoil. Research themes include:

- 14.11.1 Further research on other early medieval defensive structures in the region, following the Wallingford project model.
- 14.11.2 A review of the linear earthworks in the region.
- 14.11.3 Further consideration of roads and herepaths from both documentary and archaeological evidence.
- 14.11.4 The identification of pre-Viking Age defensive sites.
- 14.11.5 The exploration of the impact of the establishment of burhs on their hinterland, and their possible role as drivers for the re-organisation of estates or intensification of production.
- 14.11.6 Investigation of undocumented burh-like fortifications (eg Newport Pagnell?).
- 14.11.7 Detailed recording of evidence for defensive networks of beacons, lookouts, strongpoints etc recognisable around burhs.

### 14.12 Legacy

The Conquest provides a clearly dated political event to mark the division between the Early and Later Medieval periods, but in terms of settlement, landscape and administration there was no significant change. The majority of settlements and parishes were already in existence by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, and the large administrative units created survived into the later 20th century. The development of these structures during the Early Medieval period requires more systematic study.

- 14.12.1 The extent to which the processes of nucleation of villages, formation of open fields, development of a system of local churches began in this period needs more investigation.
- 14.14.2 A more thorough search is needed for evidence of Anglo-Saxon occupation on 'medieval' sites without documented Anglo-Saxon antecedents.

### 14.13 Specific problems in the region and particularly the Isle of Wight

There are a number of specific problems in this region, relating to publication and the identification and protection of sites, for which a strategy is required. The Isle of Wight remains an under-studied resource, which should be addressed by:

- 14.13.1 Further study of the status of the Island and its relationship with the South coast in this period.
- 14.13.2 Investigation of the use of the coastal inlets on the Isle of Wight in comparison with those of the Hampshire coast.
- 14.13.3 Further investigation of estate links between Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.