

Chapter 5

Ritual and religion in the Thames Valley

The religious beliefs and rituals of those communities living within the Thames Valley during the first millennium AD were – as is to be expected – highly variable, both geographically and chronologically. Furthermore, the complexities of religious belief and practice are such that simply recognising aspects of them in the archaeological record is fraught with difficulty, especially within largely non- or semi-literate societies.

One of the most fundamental aspects of religious expression is that of sacred space, which may be broadly defined as a place subject to a range of regulations regarding people's behaviour to it, based upon a set of beliefs in a supernatural identity. However, this can take on a huge variety of physical forms even within a single society, which may not always be distinct from secular spheres (eg see Hill 1995). In the context of this volume, recognition of sacred sites in the archaeological record is largely dependent upon known structural analogies (eg Romano-Celtic temple plan), sculptural and/or epigraphic evidence (eg altars) and perception of ritual activity. Sacred sites in forms such as temples, churches or even specific natural features are usually the primary foci of religious ritual and at least part of this ritual can often be archaeologically recognisable, for example in the form of votive offerings. Yet what we are able to see now almost certainly represents just a small fraction of past religious practice and in many instances the beliefs behind such practices remain themselves unknown.

Often the most archaeologically visible aspect of ritual is that of human burial, although this can remain quite separate from sacred space and indeed need not explicitly relate to religious beliefs at all. Yet most cemeteries and individual burials referred to in this volume display some element of structured ritual that can probably be associated with underlying cultural and/or spiritual beliefs, and in certain instances can be used as indicators of changes in society.

THE LATE IRON AGE

Shrines (Figs 5.1-5.3)

Prior to the direct influence of Rome in the mid 1st century AD, archaeological evidence for many aspects of ritual and religion in Britain remains quite ephemeral, relying upon a relatively small number of excavated sites and finds. There are a few structures dispersed across the country that have reasonably been interpreted as shrines, although

most belong to the very latest pre-Roman Iron Age and there is no convincing evidence that they were ever a widely adopted feature of native religious practice (Smith 2001, 33). In the wider Thames Valley there have been a few sites suggested as possible Iron Age shrines, although in most cases evidence for a positive interpretation is lacking.

Perhaps the most widely discussed site in this region is at Caesar's Camp, Heathrow, where a concentric rectangular building lay within a cleared area of an enclosed Iron Age settlement (Grimes and Close-Brooks 1993; Fig. 5.1). It was one of the first structures from Iron Age Britain to be interpreted as having a religious function, primarily on the basis of the resemblance of its plan to those of concentric Romano-Celtic temples (Lewis 1966, 11). Despite this, there was no definite evidence of contemporaneity between the outer and inner walls and they could have been built in separate successive stages (Grimes and Close-Brooks 1993, 336). The chronology cannot be refined more closely than mid to late Iron Age and the relationship to the surrounding middle Iron Age roundhouses remains uncertain. The general ambiguity of this building must caution against a definite interpretation as a shrine, and indeed another suggestion by Black (1986, 203) was that it may have been a funerary structure, with the outer holes holding fence posts, as opposed to supports for an ambulatory.

The most common parameter for the interpretation of Iron Age shrines is probably that of retrospective inference (ie that they lay beneath Roman temples). Such an interpretation was originally put forward for structures underlying the temple and shrine at Frilford in the Upper Thames Valley (Bradford and Goodchild 1939), although this was later refuted by Harding (1987; see Fig. 5.5). Many archaeologists also feel that there was an Iron Age shrine under the Roman temple at Woodeaton, on the fringes of the Thames Valley north of Oxford, due to the number of brooches and pins of pre-Roman date recovered on the site over the years (Goodchild and Kirk 1954; Bagnall-Smith 1995; 1998). However, although activity stretching back as far as the late Bronze Age is known at this site, a religious interpretation for pre-Roman activity remains far from certain. In particular it is uncertain if the Iron Age objects, which included the chape and scabbard of a sword, and the impression in sheet bronze of very rare coin of Cunobelin, lay within an Iron Age religious precinct or if they were deposited within the early Roman temple, as archaic offerings have been found in a number of Roman sanctuaries (Smith 2001, 156).

Another site within the Thames Valley that has been interpreted as a possible shrine is at Smith's Field, Hardwick-with-Yelford in Oxfordshire (Allen 2000; Fig. 5.2). Here a square four-post structure was surrounded by a rectangular shallow gully within which was an almost complete cow burial. The gully was cut by a later 1st-century AD ditch, and is likely to belong to the first half of that century. While a religious interpretation is far from certain, it is among the more convincing examples from within the Thames Valley itself.

There are as yet no other sites within the Upper and Middle Thames Valley for which interpretation as an Iron Age shrine has been advanced. Yet ritual activity has been identified within certain settlements and is also associated with the river Thames itself. In general it is thought that religious observance and practice in pre-Roman Britain was largely integrated within domestic spheres, and therefore often quite difficult to discern archaeologically. Nevertheless,

careful examination of the deposition and contextual associations of objects within settlements has increased our potential for discerning probable ritual activity in such environments (see Hill 1995). The tradition of structured deposition of animal remains and objects is well known on many Iron Age sites, and may in some cases represent the disposal of feast debris, although the beliefs behind such actions remain unknown. Specific deposits within round-house gully terminals, which included the largest and most complete ceramic vessels on site, have been found at the middle Iron Age settlement at Claydon Pike (Miles *et al.* 2007), while a similar phenomenon is noted at nearby Thornhill Farm (Jennings *et al.* 2004). Such structured deposits continued in the late Iron Age/early Roman phases of both sites, although the concern seems to have been primarily with animal remains, where in some instances there is evidence to suggest they were treated differently from waste from day-to-day practices.

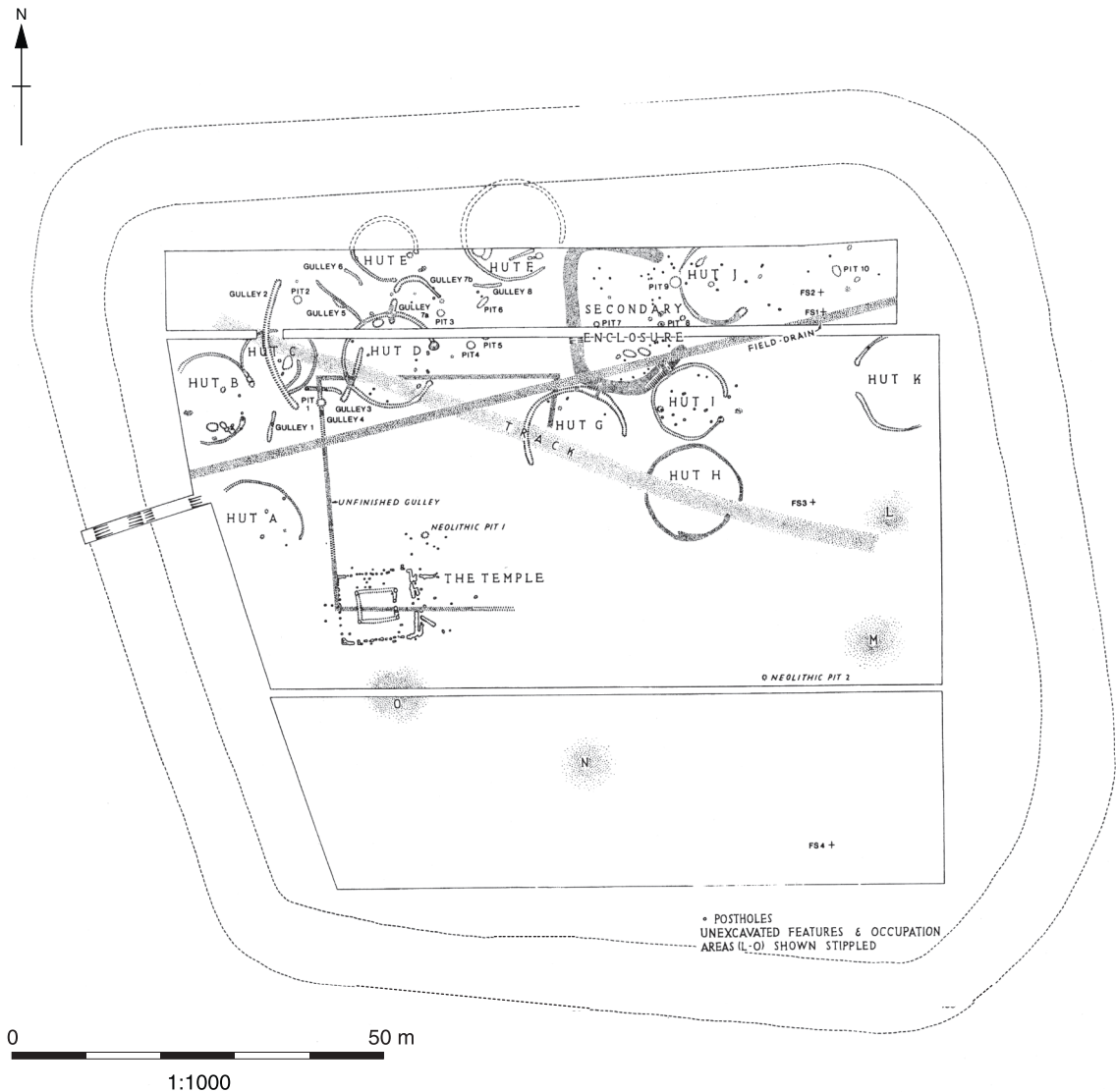


Fig. 5.1 The Iron Age 'temple' at Heathrow, Middlesex

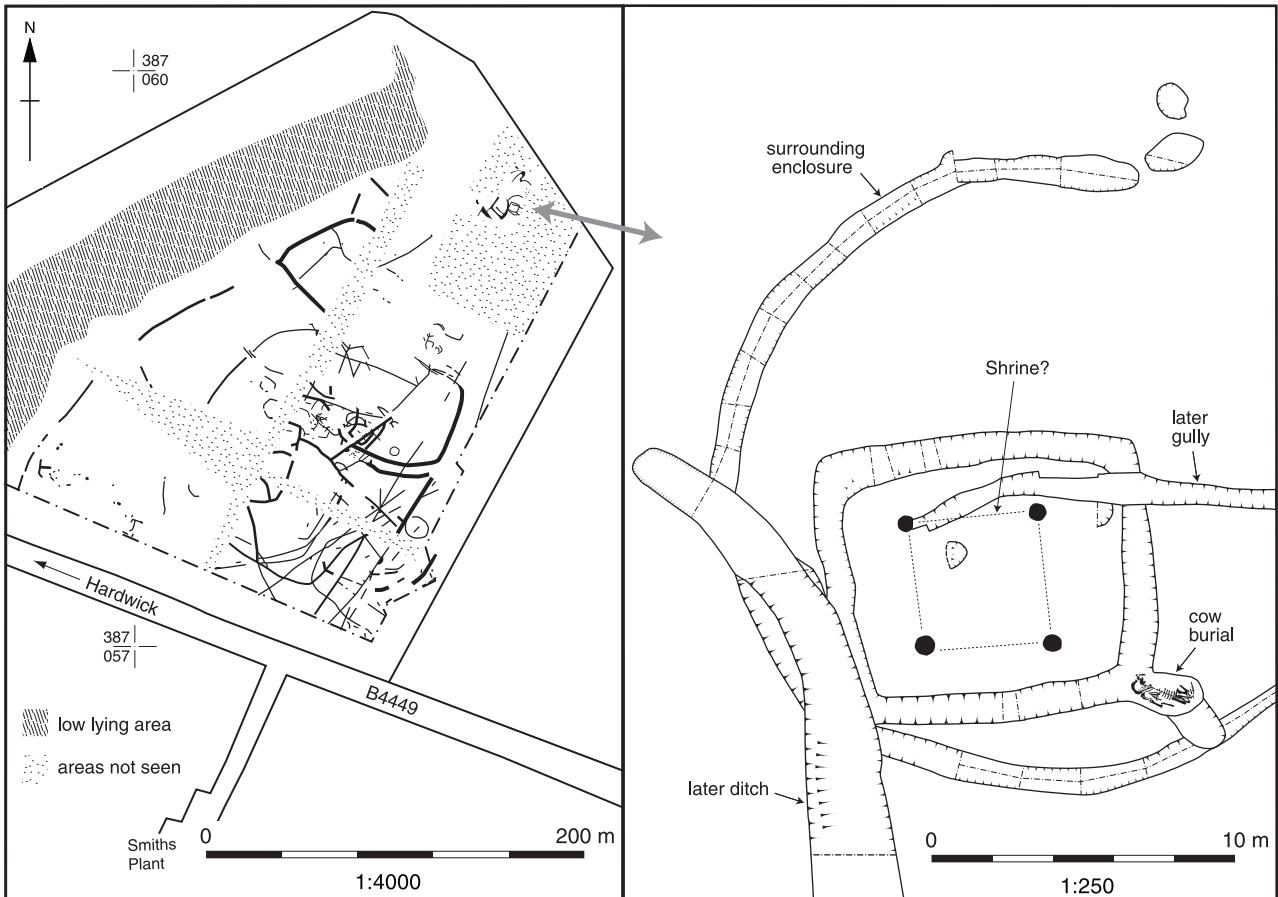


Fig. 5.2 Possible Iron Age shrine at Smith's Field, Hardwick with Yelford, Oxon



Fig. 5.3 Double horse burial from Farmoor, Oxon

Integration of ritual and domestic activity seems to have continued through into the late Iron Age and Roman period on a number of sites in the Thames Valley, as indicated for example by the double horse burial at Farmoor (Lambrick and Robinson 1979, 132; Fig. 5.3) and structured deposits at Gravelly Guy (Lambrick and Allen 2004) and Barton Court Farm (Miles 1986, microfiche 8:B7-B12). The evidence from further down the Thames is more equivocal, although in many cases this may be because only the peripheral parts of settlements were investigated and some past excavations may not have been thorough enough to note evidence for structured deposition.

River finds (Fig. 5.4)

Throughout much of the Thames Valley it is the river itself that seems to have formed a focus for ritual deposition, as noted in many previous studies (eg Fitzpatrick 1984; Wait 1985; Bradley 1998). Considerable quantities of objects appear to have been deposited in the Thames from the Neolithic and Bronze Age onwards. This may reflect its position as a long-standing border zone, as has been suggested for other rivers such as the Trent and Witham (Bradley 1998, 179; see below). The rate of deposition in the Thames seems to have changed over time, and there is some evidence for an increase in the later Iron Age (Fitzpatrick 1984, 183; Bradley 1998, 161). Furthermore, there was also an increase in the variety of objects deposited at this time and they are slightly more evenly distributed along the Thames, although still largely concentrated in parts of the middle and lower sections, especially in the vicinity of greater London. From the Bronze Age onwards, weapons had been the principal type of objects deposited in the Thames, and this continued to be the case into the late Iron Age, when there was a slight preponderance of spearheads (Bradley 1998, 186), although it must be said that dating these items is often quite imprecise. A number of swords have also been recovered for which a late Iron Age date has been proposed, with examples at Taplow in Buckinghamshire, Datchet in Berkshire, and Henley-on-Thames and Long Wittenham in Oxfordshire (Wait 1985; Fig. 5.4). Fitzpatrick (1984, 186) has suggested that military equipment was selected for deliberate deposition in watery contexts because it symbolised security, status and wealth, and it is clear that this formed part of a long standing tradition. However, an increasing quantity of non-martial items also start appearing within the Thames during the late Iron Age, including coins, currency bars and agricultural tools. Two currency bars, for example, were found in the Thames at Datchet (SMR 139), while a hoard of eight was recovered upstream at Maidenhead (SMR 275). Recent excavations at Eton Rowing Lake, Dorney, found a sequence of probable offerings within a former Thames channel from the middle Bronze Age into the Roman period,

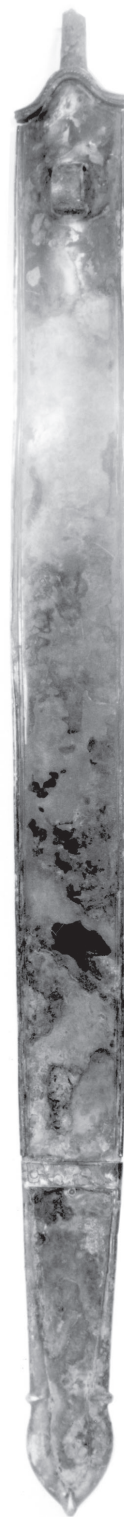


Fig. 5.4 Iron Age sword from the Thames at Long Wittenham, Oxon

including an iron scythe/billhook dating to the late Iron Age or early Roman period (Allen and Welsh 1997, 34) and very similar evidence occurs at Shepperton Ranges in Surrey (Fig. 5.23).

Most of the river deposits recovered so far have been from the middle and lower reaches of the Thames, with very little upstream of the Dorchester/Abingdon area, although two swords were retrieved from the river a little further west near Standlake (Wait 1985). This may indicate a difference in traditions of depositional practice, which would mirror many other regional differences, for example in settlement pattern (see Chapter 3). The middle and lower reaches of the Thames lie along the approximate tribal boundary between the Atrebates to the south and Catuvellauni/Trinovantes to the north (see Chapter 7). The concept of the boundary as a place of sacred liminality seems to have been very significant in many cultures (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994, 25), and this may therefore have had some influence upon the ritual deposition of objects within the Thames in this area. There is some evidence to suggest that not all parts of the Thames were regarded as equally suitable for the deposition of objects as often the same places remained in use as the locations for ritual activity over long periods of time (Jones forthcoming; see Fig. 5.23). The reasons for selecting most sites are not obvious, although some at least may have been traditional river crossings, as it is often at such points of access across boundaries that ritual activity is at its most intense (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994, 25).

Late Iron Age burial

Evidence for human burial in the Iron Age is notoriously sparse, although there have been a growing number of cemeteries of late Iron Age date excavated in certain parts of the country, such as Westhampnett in Sussex (Fitzpatrick 1997) and Baldock in Hertfordshire (Stead and Rigby 1986). Within the Thames Valley itself no major Iron Age cemeteries have yet been found, and even instances of individual or small group burial are quite rare. Excavations at Kemble near to the source of the Thames revealed three Iron Age inhumation burials in pits, associated with pottery dated from the 3rd century BC to the early 1st century AD, although they are likely to have been of middle Iron Age date (King *et al.* 1996). No contemporary settlement was noted, and late Roman and Saxon burials on the same site suggest a long-lived burial tradition. Other pit burials in the region, such as that in the Churn Valley (Mudd *et al.* 1999, 76) and those at Roughground Farm (Allen *et al.* 1993, 45) are also likely to have been of middle Iron Age date, and a rare small cemetery of this period was excavated at Yarnton (Hey *et al.* 1999). Late Iron Age burials in the Upper Thames region are very rare, with most settlements having at most a collection of disarticulated bone found in various pits and ditches, such

as at Claydon Pike (Miles *et al.* 2007). At nearby Thornhill Farm, there were also three inhumations and four deposits of cremated bone in late Iron Age to early Roman contexts, with two of the inhumations being located within enclosures (Jennings *et al.* 2004, 65). Further down the Thames Valley, the settlements at Yarnton and Gravelly Guy both contained quantities of human bone derived from late Iron Age-early Roman contexts. At Gravelly Guy there were limited numbers of whole burials and large numbers of single bones or small groups of bones, many of which were of newborn infants (Lambrick and Allen 2004). The infant burials were mostly from pits and ditches, and some may have been dumped on refuse tips, suggesting in most cases a casual attitude to their disposal after death. In addition to the four inhumations associated with this phase, there was one cremation burial of an adult, possibly accompanied by a newborn baby. A mixture of inhumations and cremations was also apparent in the late Iron Age-early Roman phase at Yarnton (Hey (ed.) forthcoming), although in general terms, the Middle and Upper Thames lies outside the main late Iron Age Aylesford Culture cremation zone. There are however a few urned cremations of this period in the region, such as those at Kingston Blount near Abingdon (Chambers 1976a) and at Watlington (Case 1958; although this could be post-conquest). In the early 19th century an inhumation of a warrior with accompanying shield and weapons was uncovered at Sutton Courtenay. This appears to have been contemporary with nearby late Iron Age cremations, although the dating remains uncertain (Whimster 1979).

A small number of late Iron Age cremation burials have also been found in the Kennet Valley further east, including two at Pingewood (Johnston 1983-5) and a single burial on the bank of the Kennet at Anslow's Cottages (BAJ 1958, 46-53). In addition, a possible late Iron Age pedestal urn was dredged from the Thames at Cookham north of Maidenhead in 1961 (BAJ 1961, 60), which may indicate that a cremation was actually deposited in the river. In general there is very little evidence for Iron Age disposal of human remains in the Middle Thames region, although at least five individuals found in the Thames at Dorney in Buckinghamshire were dated to this period, and it may have been that deposition within the river was quite a common practice (Allen 2000, 19). This would certainly account for the general lack of burials found on land, which is especially acute in the east Berkshire and Surrey parts of the Thames Valley where there is a strong tradition of riverine deposition of other objects (see above).

RELIGION IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

The quantity and variety of evidence for ritual and religion in the Roman period far surpasses that of the Iron Age, although it is quite likely that most traditional practices continued in some form. In

particular it is known that religion pervaded virtually every aspect of Roman society with no rigid dichotomy of sacred:profane, probably reflecting quite a similar situation to that within Iron Age Britain. Furthermore, deities and spirits were to be found in all locations within both societies, and so the integration of most religious practices would not have been too difficult to administer. However, many outward changes occurred during the Roman period, not the least of which was in the development of sacred space.

Sacred space and ritual deposition (Figs 5.5-5.10)

If the concept of specialised constructed sacred space was largely incongruous within Iron Age society, it certainly developed at a pace across southern Britain from around the conquest period onwards. Although a considerable variety of physical forms existed, from small simple shrines to elaborate classical temples, the most ubiquitous structural type is the Romano-Celtic temple, characterised by an inner cella and surrounding concentric ambulatory. The architectural inspiration for these buildings appears to have derived from Roman Gaul where they have been found in large numbers (Fauduet 1993), although structures such as that at Heathrow do hint at some element of indigenous influence (but see discussion above). Where excavation has been extensive enough, such temples are invariably found to be surrounded by a sacred precinct (temenos), which was in many ways the most important part of the religious complex where public rituals would have taken place. In many Romano-British sanctuaries ancillary buildings and features such as altars, pits, wells, columns and hearths have also been located, all of which would have contributed in different ways to the performance of religious ritual and maintenance of the cult (Smith 2001, 151-5). Some of the ancillary buildings may have been guesthouses and workshops providing for the needs of worshippers coming to the site, while subsidiary shrines, probably to a number of different deities, may have been set up within the complex. The use of space within sacred sites is often highly structured, and the evidence certainly suggests this was the case within Romano-British sanctuaries, both in terms of the organisation of physical features and in the deposition of votive objects (ibid.).

In the Thames Valley itself there are relatively few excavated temple complexes, although some of these were clearly of major importance. The sanctuary at Frilford is perhaps the most extensive of such sites to have been published and yet it is only in the excavations of recent years that we have begun to learn a little more about the functions and use of space within the complex as a whole (Fig. 5.5). Further north at Woodeaton was another substantial Romano-Celtic temple set within a large walled precinct, constructed on a locally prominent hillside in the later 1st century AD, possibly contemporary

with the nearby villa at Islip (Goodchild and Kirk 1954). Much of the interior of the temenos precinct remains unknown, although aerial photographs have shown circular structures flanking the northern and southern sides of the temple, the northern of which was aligned approximately with the monumentalised entrance into the complex. The area of the northern circular feature contained many animal bones and burnt patches, along with a considerable concentration of votive objects, which continued towards and beyond the entrance area (Goodchild and Kirk 1954, 28), possibly indicating the line of the main ritual pathway into the site. Possibly the most important and spectacular aspect of this site is the range of votive objects that have been recovered, which have been discussed at length elsewhere (Bagnall-Smith 1995; 1998). These finds include iconographic representations of Mars, Venus, Minerva and Cupid, as well as images of eagles and a native-style goddess (Bagnall-Smith 1995, 180-2). Other indications suggest that Mars was the primary deity at the site, including a range of bronze letters, often M and A, and a number of miniature weapons (spears, axes, a sword and possible shield), reflecting his military attributes (Bagnall-Smith 1998, 150-2). Many items of jewellery were found, which, together with the coins, are likely to have been among the more common offerings made by individuals at the site. The temple complexes at Woodeaton and Frilford had many similarities, not only in their long chronologies, which stretched to the very end of the Roman period, but also in their use of space. Both Romano-Celtic temples appear to have been surrounded by a gravelled pathway and were positioned eccentrically within substantial rectangular precincts which also contained circular buildings, probably subsidiary shrines. Furthermore both sanctuaries lay at the approximate boundaries of long-standing tribal/civitas zones (see Chapter 7), which may have been important factors in their establishment.

The only other major sanctuary of note within the Thames Valley was at Weycock Hill in the parish of Waltham St Lawrence, Berkshire, although unfortunately very little is known about it (Cotton 1956-57; Fig. 5.6). A Roman building near the crest of Weycock Hill, c 5 km east of the Thames, has been known since the 17th century and many coins and other objects have been recovered from the vicinity of the site over the years (ibid., 49). Antiquarian excavations in the mid 19th century uncovered the remains of a large (c 21 m across) concentric octagonal building (*Arch J* VI 1849, 114-23), and there is little doubt that it was a Romano-Celtic temple, a comparable polygonal temple of similar size being found at Silchester, c 25 km to the south-west (Boon 1974, 157-8). Part of a possible temenos wall was excavated in 1953 (Cotton 1956-57, 52), and it is likely that further parts of the inner sanctuary complex await discovery. The area surrounding the temple site has produced evidence for substantial Roman activity extending over 14 ha (Ford 1987,

83). In particular there was an area of occupation *c* 200 m to the south, with distinct 2nd- and 4th-century phases, the later activity being particularly intensive and including a masonry footed building (Cotton 1956-57, 57-9). To the east of this were a number of Roman wells, one of which contained a human skeleton, and furthest away was a late Roman inhumation cemetery of 30 graves (*ibid.*). Although the precise nature of this occupation is uncertain, there are many similarities to other Romano-British religious sites, notably Frilford, and it is quite possible that all of these features were related to a single long-lived sanctuary complex.

In addition to the larger religious complexes such as those described above, which would have undoubtedly served the needs of the local and wider communities, there were many smaller shrines throughout the Thames Valley, some of which we can positively identify, while others remain more ephemeral. A possible religious site lay within the 2nd- to 3rd-century aisled building complex at Claydon Pike in Gloucestershire (Fig. 3.4), comprising a concentric rectangular ditched compound facing onto an open area in the heart of the settlement. Although no internal structure was located, column parts and other dressed limestone fragments were noted in the vicinity, which may have come from a small shrine building or altar. The finds from the area do not readily indicate a religious function with the exception of a ceramic tazza, a vessel type commonly used for burning incense and found in a number of temple sites such as at Verulamium (Wheeler and Wheeler 1936, 114). A well-built circular shrine belonging to a later phase of this site was excavated *c* 70 m east of a modest late Roman villa, with which it was undoubtedly associated (Fig. 5.7). A majority of the coins from the site were found within this structure and can be regarded as votive offerings, along with a complete miniature pot deliberately buried within the cobbles and a model copper alloy axe found nearby (see below). A raised pathway led from the building, not towards the villa but northwards across a low-lying marshy area towards a trackway, and it is likely that the shrine served the needs of the local populace in addition to enhancing the status of the villa owners who were its undoubted patrons. The circular shrine from Claydon Pike invites comparison with those structures in the Frilford and Woodeaton sanctuaries (see above), in addition to a recently excavated building at Coxwell Road, Faringdon, upon the Corallian Ridge overlooking the Thames Valley (Weaver and Ford 2004). Part of a substantial masonry footed circular structure was excavated at this site and interpreted as a shrine on the basis of form and associated artefacts, which included a small number of coins, a copper alloy bracelet and an iron spearhead (*ibid.*).

At a number of other sites within the Thames Valley there is some evidence to suggest the presence of a temple or shrine, although architectural details are usually lacking. Near to the source

of the Thames at Hailey Wood Camp, Sapperton, is a possible sacred site comprising a double ditched enclosure associated with quantities of structural material and small finds (T Moore 2001), although a religious interpretation is not totally certain (Fig. 5.8). It is almost certain that the Roman towns of Dorchester and Staines would have had at least one temple, although none has yet been found. The existence of a sacred site at Dorchester is demonstrated by the well-known inscribed altar set up to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the shades of the emperors by the *beneficiarius consularis* (see Chapter 3). At Staines, a late Roman rectilinear enclosure may have surrounded a small temple as it contained a placed deposit of pottery, although this has yet to be determined (Jones and Poulton, forthcoming). Another possible shrine at the County Sports site on the western side of High Street Island comprised a round structure with a central pit containing burnt deposits including worn but nearly complete parts of a rotary quern (*ibid.*). However, this interpretation is quite tentative and the most obvious candidate for a temple or shrine at Staines is thought to be the site of the church on Binbury Island further to the north-west, which stands upon a probable artificial knoll (*ibid.*).

It is likely that most domestic houses would have contained a household shrine of some kind (Lararium), although even within villas there is only a very slight chance of being able to recognise and interpret such areas. Identification of ritual activity in this instance usually relies upon the evidence of portable objects with religious associations found within domestic contexts. Examples include the miniature scythe and small ardshare at Gatehampton Farm (Allen 1995, 125; Fig. 5.9) and a miniature bronze anchor from Barton Court Farm (Green 1986, fiche IV.6). The latter object has its only real parallel from the temple at Woodeaton and could well have been an offering connected with river or sea travel. Three broken model spears were also found at Hambleton villa, and a structure at this site was interpreted as a shrine, although positive evidence is lacking (see insert, Chapter 3). However, a terracotta statuette, supposedly of 'Juno Lucina seated in wicker-work arm-chair, nursing a baby' also came from one of the buildings on site (Cocks 1921, 198), suggesting the presence of a household shrine.

Although it has been argued that at least some of the miniature objects recovered from Roman Britain may be regarded as 'toys', as a whole they would seem to be a well established type of religious artefact and are especially prevalent in south-eastern Britain as well as over large parts of Roman Gaul (Green 1976). They occur on over 20 temple sites in Britain, including Frilford, Claydon Pike and Woodeaton, and although martial items such as axes

Fig. 5.5 (overleaf)
Feature: Prehistoric and Roman Frilford, Oxon

PREHISTORIC AND



Prehistoric settlement

A substantial area of occupation dating from the middle Bronze Age to the early Saxon period was revealed in the parish of Marcham, c 150 m north of the River Ock and 4 km south and west of the Thames. Various parts of the site have been subject to archaeological investigation since the late 19th century, and excavations are currently ongoing (Lock *et al.* 2003).

Recent excavations have revealed part of a middle Bronze Age settlement (Lock *et al.* 2002, 80), although it is not until the early/middle Iron Age that occupation becomes widespread. The dating evidence indicates a general lack of late Iron Age activity (ie early-mid 1st century AD) and so it may have been that the settlement was either abandoned or shifted location at this time.

Two of the features from this Iron Age settlement were interpreted originally as Iron Age shrines, primarily because they lay underneath later Roman religious structures (Bradford and Goodchild 1939, 1), although Harding (1987) later refuted such claims.

Excavations in 1937-8 revealed a Romano-Celtic temple and circular masonry building (Bradford and Goodchild 1939). The temple was first built in the mid-late 2nd century, and formed the focus of



Above: A selection of copper-alloy finger rings from the excavations at Marcham/Frilford

Roman temple complex

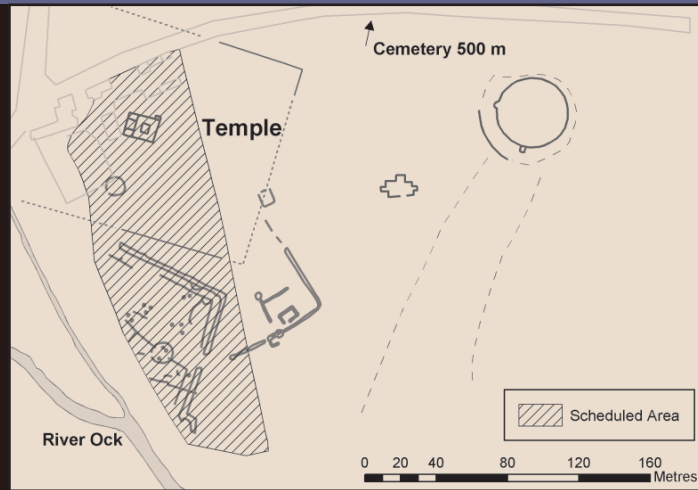
a substantial stone-walled religious precinct (temenos). It remained unaltered until the early 4th century AD when two annexes were added (Harding 1987, 14). The end of the temple's use was less secure, but the latest coins suggest a late 4th or possibly early 5th century date, which has been corroborated by recent excavations outside the temenos to the east (see below). The circular structure to the south of the temple was thought to be contemporary, although its destruction by fire signified a shorter life span (*ibid.* 15).

Few finds were recovered from the temple itself and the only feature to produce significantly more artefacts was the pathway that led up to the east-facing entrance. The only specifically votive items came from a pit within the circular building, consisting of a miniature bronze sword and shield. They appear to have been deliberately sealed in the pit during the construction of the building, probably as a foundation deposit (Bagnall-Smith 1995, 198).

Outside the temenos was a substantial religious complex (Burnham and Wachter 1990 178; Hingley 1985). It is in some of these areas to the east that recent excavations have concentrated, including a large (c

ROMAN FRILFORD

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100 m diameter) circular feature, built into a narrow palaeochannel (Lock *et al.* 2003, 90-1). This was surrounded by a stone wall, behind which was a wide low earth bank, and there was an small projecting annex to the south, possibly either a viewing platform or a small shrine. Inside was a system of drains with a large posthole in the centre. Although the exact function and development of the feature is far from understood, an amphitheatre remains the most likely explanation, undoubtedly for the performance of religious spectacle. It appears to have been long-lived, with finds spanning the 1st to 4th centuries AD.

Lying between the amphitheatre and the temple precinct was a large late Roman masonry building of uncertain function (Lock *et al.* 2003, 88). The other main area of recent excavation lay on the outside of the temenos wall just south of the entrance, where a series of masonry footed buildings, hearths and paved courtyards were located, dating from the 2nd century, contemporary with the construction of the temple (Daley *pers com.*). It is quite possible that this was an area of workshops and stalls, possibly for the provision of pilgrims who may have gathered here before entering the temple precinct.

Above, left to right:

**The arena wall of the 'amphitheatre' under excavation*

**As above, with the small projecting annexe to the South*

**Two highly decorative copper-alloy early Roman brooches from the excavations at Marcham/Frilford*

**Plan of the main features of the Iron Age and Romano-British phases*

The Roman religious complex at Frilford is of great significance, both within the context of the Thames Valley and nationally. It lay near to the main road from Alchester towards a settlement at Wantage, while another probable road branched off at the site leading towards Abingdon and Dorchester upon Thames (Lock *et al.* 2002, 80). The position of the site in the Vale of the White Horse was in the area of the tribal/civitas boundary between the Dobunni and Atrebatas, and this may have been one reason for its growth and importance throughout the Roman period.

Later Roman-Saxon cemetery

The earliest excavations at Frilford, in the late 19th and early 20th century, were of a late Roman and early Saxon cemetery to the north-west of the temple complex, which has been dated from the 4th to 6th centuries AD (Akerman 1865; Rolleston 1869, 1880; Dudley-Buxton 1920). It is certainly possible that this cemetery sequence was continuous, with Roman burial rites giving way to Germanic grave goods, although the excavation records are too poor to be certain of this. No contemporary early Saxon settlement has as yet been found in the immediate vicinity, although such occupation is well known in nearby Abingdon and Wantage (see Chapter 3).

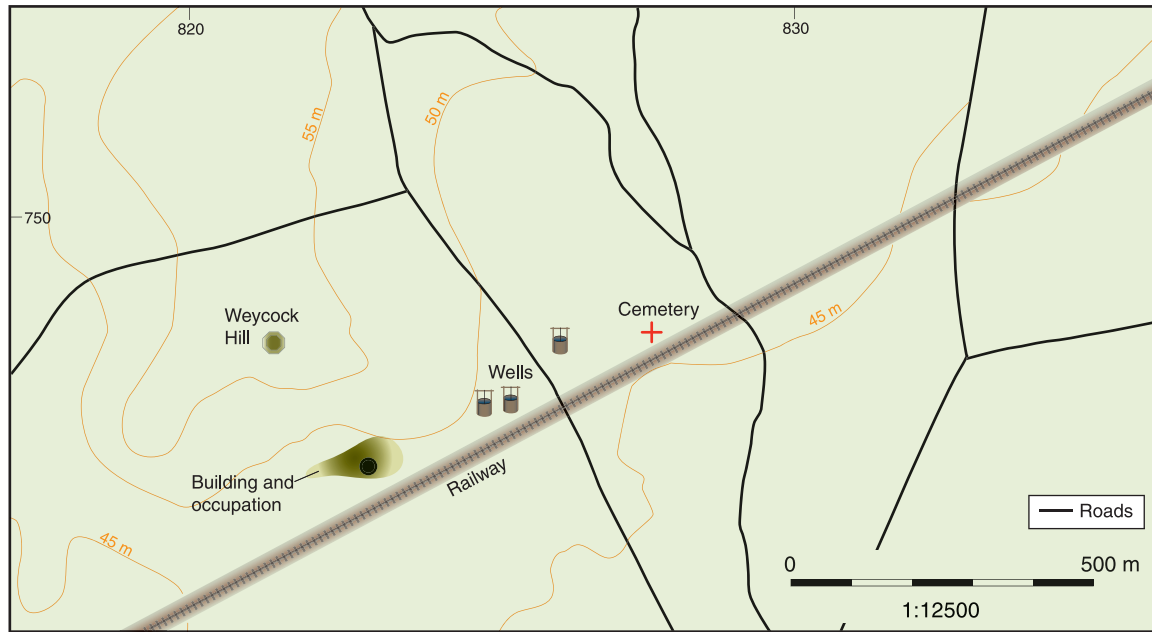


Fig. 5.6 The Roman sanctuary at Weycock Hill, Berks

and spears are most common, many other types also exist such as the miniature agricultural tools from Gatehampton and from the temple at Harlow in Essex (France and Gobel 1985). They may have been personal amulets worn by people for protection and prosperity and dedicated at the appropriate time, or possibly even made specifically to deposit at sacred sites, perhaps to fulfil a vow. Yet such items would undoubtedly have formed only a very small percentage of the general range of material used as votive offerings to the gods. Coins and items of personal adornment (eg brooches, hairpins etc) form by far the biggest class of votive object recovered from archaeological contexts such as temples (Smith 2001, 155). In many cases these objects (specifically jewellery) may have been deliberately bent or broken prior to deposition, possibly so as to ritually sacrifice them, a practice of long standing tradition (Green 1995, 470-1). The choice of object deposited during the Roman period generally changed over time reflecting the wider chronology of use (eg more brooches occur in early Roman contexts). However, some items may have held specific value intrinsic to the nature of the cult (eg hairpins have been associated with healing in many sanctuaries; Rouse 1902, 252; Smith 2001, 155) and there is also a tradition of archaic offering in some cult sites such as the fossils and Neolithic axe from the temple complex at Farley Heath in Surrey (Goodchild 1938, 23). The miniature tools from Gatehampton Farm belong to a tradition of agricultural and industrial offerings found at cult places across Britain, which include a miniature mattock and sickle from the temple at Harlow in Essex (Smith 2001, 39). Full size tools were recorded at a large number of temple sites, although their

strictly functional nature has in the past led some excavators to dismiss the idea that they may be votive offerings (ibid., 158). At Frilford a plough share was found in a feature below the Roman circular shrine (Bradford and Goodchild 1939, 13), while scythe blades have been found in wells at Appleford and Caversham associated with objects deemed to be of a religious nature (see below). It is quite probable that these items were also regarded as ritual deposits, possibly offered in return for agricultural prosperity, which was vital to the people of the valley.

The use of objects such as coins and brooches as votive offerings is so widespread within known temple sites that their occurrence in concentrated numbers in other contexts where religious structures are not apparent may also signify ritual activity. This is quite certain at sites such as Lowbury Hill situated just outside the Thames Valley on the fringes of the Berkshire Downs, where large quantities of finds were recovered from within a walled enclosure, but where no actual buildings were found (Fulford and Rippon 1995). The objects included almost 900 coins, large numbers of brooches and a number of iron spearheads, some of which were clearly for ceremonial use (Bagnall-Smith 1995, 194). Of less certain interpretation is a concentration of metalwork recovered by a metal detectorist at Leaze Farm just north of the Thames to the east of Lechlade (Miles *et al.* 2007; Fig. 5.10). The finds included 249 coins ranging in date from the Iron Age to the late 4th century AD, in addition to brooches, bracelets, finger rings and strap ends. The concentration of objects such as these is enough at least to suggest the presence of a sacred site in the

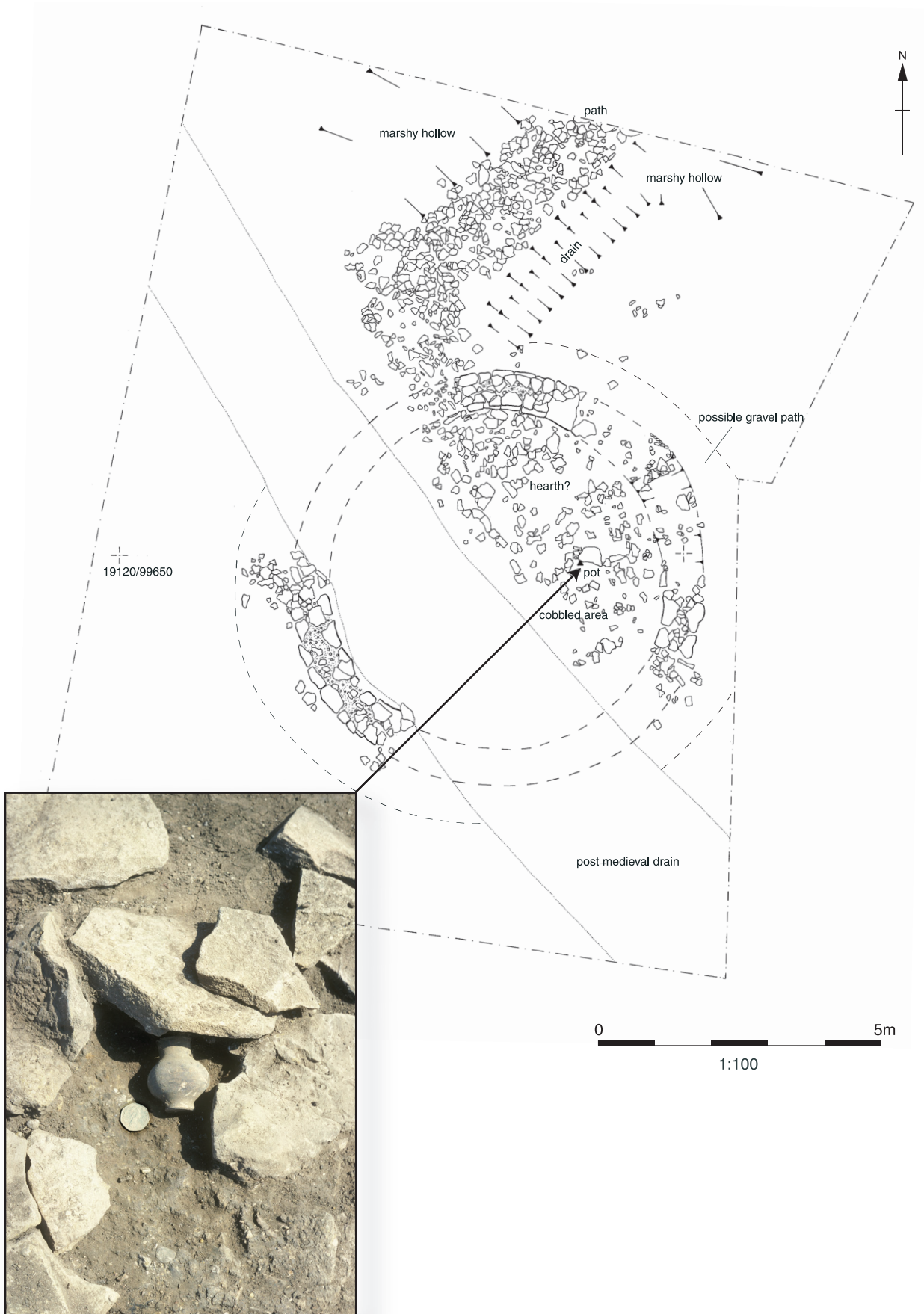


Fig. 5.7 The Roman circular temple at Claydon Pike, Glos

vicinity, possibly associated with the nearby Roman settlement shown by cropmarks at Wigmore c 600 m to the east.

Sacred sites characterised by intensive votive deposition but without any archaeologically traceable cult focus are being found and interpreted in increasing numbers, for example at Frensham and Godstone in Surrey (Bird 2004c, 80), and at Somerford Keynes in Gloucestershire (see below). They may well have been sacred places used for the

vereneration of natural features such as trees, and thus continuing native pre-conquest traditions.

Continuity of ritual practice

There is growing evidence for continuity of religious practice in terms of ritual deposition within settlement sites in the Thames Valley. It has been mentioned above that on certain Upper Thames Valley sites such as Barton Court Farm and

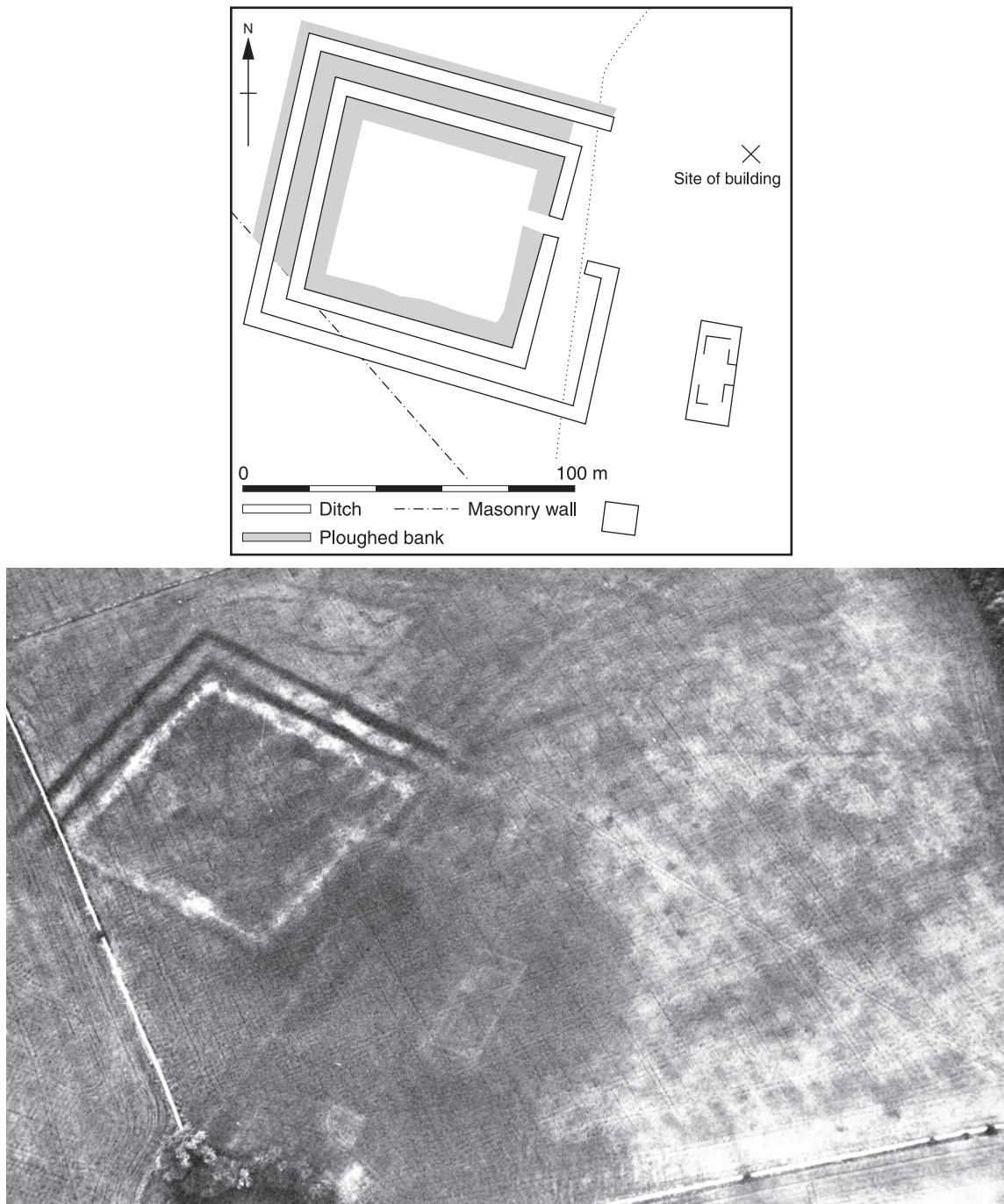


Fig. 5.8 Probable Roman temple at Hailey Wood Camp, Sapperton, Glos. (Plan after RCHME County of Gloucester Vol 1, 1976, 99)



Fig. 5.9 A miniature scythe (above) and a small ardshare (below) from Gatehampton Farm, Goring, Oxon

Farmoor the placement of structured deposits of animal bone continued from the Iron Age into the Roman period, and Scott has argued that such practices indicate that underlying belief systems probably persisted to a large degree in most if not all levels of society (1991). Further probable examples of such activity in the early Roman period were seen at Appleford Sidings in Oxfordshire, where placed deposits of objects were found at the entrance to the principal enclosure and a fragment of human skull and a complete quern were recovered from a field ditch near to an enclosure containing a cremation (see below; Booth and Simmonds forthcoming). Excavations at Eton Rowing Lake revealed a single dog burial within one of the settlement enclosure gullies, lying adjacent to a complete late 1st- to early 2nd-century pot (Allen *et al.* 2000, 99). This seems to belong to a tradition of ritual dog burials in the Roman period, with a further example being found with an accompanying flagon at Fawler in Oxfordshire (Allen, 1988, 298-300) and yet another associated with a late Roman burial at Yarnton.

River and water finds (Figs 5.11-5.12)

Ritual deposition within watery places also certainly continued into the Roman period, with a number of wells/waterholes in particular being the focus for possible religious offerings. Three late Roman waterholes in a settlement at Thorpe Lea Nurseries in Surrey, for example, contained a wealth of material that is thought to have been ritual in nature (Hayman 1998), while other ritual well deposits have been found at County Sports, Staines (Jones and Poulton, forthcoming), Caversham (see below) and at Appleford. A cone of the stone pine from a 2nd- to 3rd-century waterhole at Claydon Pike may also have been in a ritual deposit. Such objects are sometimes associated with religious practice (eg in the triangular temple at Verulamium; Wheeler and Wheeler 1936, 119), although other contexts are also known (Kislev 1988, 76). At Appleford Field, c 700 m south of the Appleford Sidings site mentioned above, a hoard of 24 pieces of late Roman pewter, along with ironwork and other objects, were recovered from a well near to the main settlement (Brown 1973a). It

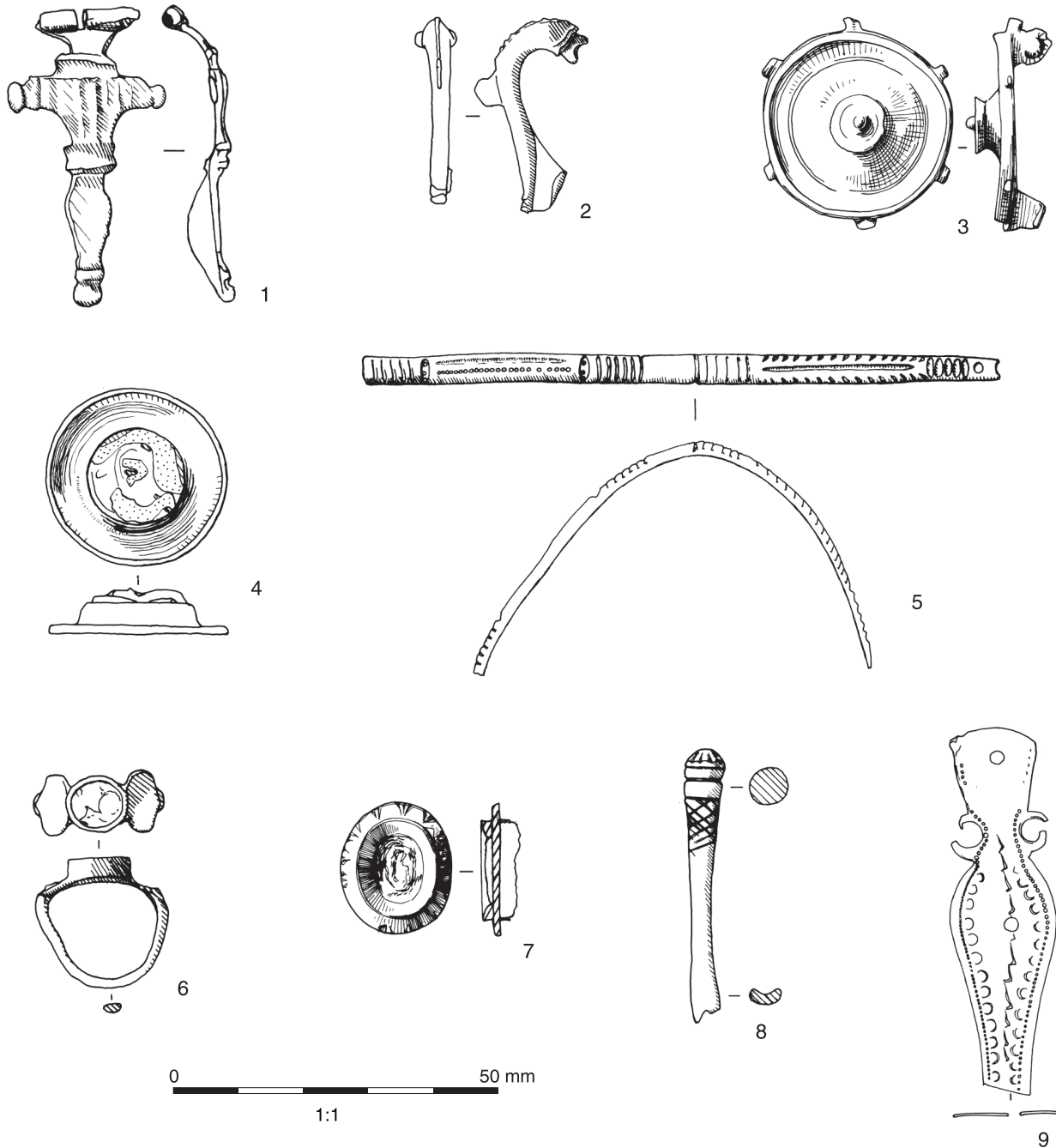


Fig. 5.10 Possible ritual finds assemblage from Leaze Farm, Oxon: (1-4) brooches, (5) bracelet, (6) finger ring, (7) silver jewellery fragment, (8) hairpin fragment, (9) late Roman strap end

has been argued that most such pewter hoards in Roman Britain may have been deposited as a result of ritual activity (Poulton and Scott 1993), and in the case of the Appleford hoard a possible Christian association has recently been suggested by Petts (2003, 126). The association of pewter deposits with ritual activity is emphasised by the discovery of 5 stacked pewter plates in a former Thames river channel at Shepperton Ranges (Poulton forthcoming a; Fig. 5.11; see also Fig. 5.23). A Roman adze-hammer was also recovered nearby, and this

particular section of the Thames seems to have been a long-lived focus for votive deposition with finds including a late Bronze Age axe, two Iron Age swords, a late Saxon sword, and two undated human skulls (Fig. 5.23).

About 4 km upstream at Abbey Meads, Chertsey was a similar concentration of objects deposited over a long period of time in a former Thames channel. This included an unusual early Roman beaker (Fig. 5.12), suggested as being made specifically for ritual purposes such as a votive offering



Fig. 5.11 Nest of five Roman pewter plates from Shepperton Ranges, Surrey (diameter of plate in foreground 378 mm). See Fig. 5.23 for location of findspot

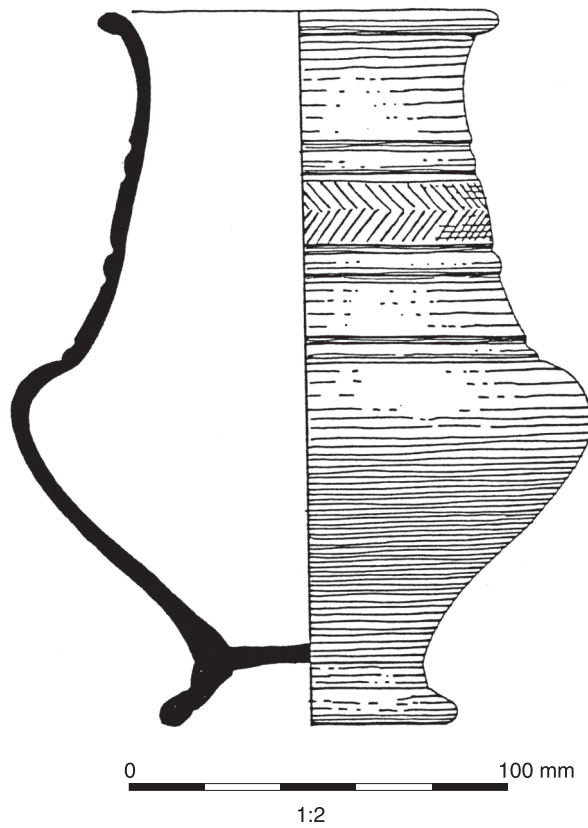


Fig. 5.12 A late Iron Age or early Roman pedestalled beaker from Abbey Meads, Chertsey, Surrey (height 188 mm)

(Jones forthcoming). At Eton Rowing Lake in Buckinghamshire there is also a tradition of riverine offerings from the Neolithic onwards, with Roman objects including a possible timber cart side, complete quernstones and a complete pot, all found in close proximity within the former Thames channel (Allen and Welsh 1996, 29).

Although in general not as prolific as earlier prehistoric deposits, there are many other examples of Roman period objects being found within the Thames, and again most are concentrated in the lower and middle reaches. Examples include a Roman spearhead found in the river at Marlow, and a number of objects recovered at Cookham, including pottery, animal bone and a pewter vessel found in 1932. Pottery vessels were recovered from the Thames at Datchet, and may have continued the tradition of offerings demonstrated by the Iron Age sword and currency bars (see above). Further upstream recorded river finds are fewer in number but include pottery at Sonning (VCH Oxon 1939, 342), a lamp tray at Reading and hoards of late 1st-/early 2nd-century coins at Mapledurham Lock just west of Reading and at Goring, the latter also including two Roman brooches and a small quantity of pottery (Boon 1954, 39). Dredging in the Thames at Benson recovered Roman pottery along with a Saxon sword and spearhead (BAJ 61 for 1964, 108), while coins, pottery and a bracelet have been found in the river at Abingdon. Certainly not all of these objects will have been votive deposits, but it is quite likely that the tradition of riverine offering did persist to some degree throughout the Roman period. Indeed throughout classical antiquity rivers were often seen as deities, and continued veneration of the god(s) of the Thames is not surprising. Furthermore, rivers in the Roman world were an important part of individuals' consciousness and crossing them was a religious act which often necessitated the provision of ritual offerings (Braund 1996, 19).

The persistence of certain ritual practices into the Roman period implies a basic continuity of population in the Thames Valley and some degree of conservatism with regard to religious expression (see Chapter 4). This may also partly explain the treatment of certain prehistoric monuments in the valley, such as at Radley Barrow Hills (Chambers and McAdam 2007). During the Roman period the larger Bronze Age barrows were still discernible as earthworks, and the fact that there was little evidence for settlement and cultivation here prior to the establishment of the 4th-century cemetery has been taken as reflecting a surviving folk memory of the ancient use of the area for ritual and burial (see below). However, attitudes were certainly quite variable in this regard, as a system of agricultural enclosures and plough marks clearly lay across the nearby Drayton Neolithic cursus, which was certainly still visible as an earthwork at this time (Barclay *et al.* 2003). In addition, the henge ditch at Devil's Quoits south of Stanton Harcourt in

Oxfordshire was filled with ploughsoil in the Roman period, suggesting that it was not differentiated from other agricultural land (Barclay *et al.* 1995, 113). As Williams (1998, 78) has recently pointed out, ancient monuments only seem to have been used by certain segments of Romano-British society in selected areas and may have served in a variety of social contexts. The choice to either re-use/respect or apparently disregard such features may have played a role in the construction and maintenance of social and political identities within Roman-British society.

Religious imagery (Figs 5.13-5.14)

Of all the objects with religious associations it is of course iconographic images that generally provide us with the best indication of specific deities worshipped at cult sites. In the Thames Valley there are relatively few iconographic images of deities apart from those from the temple at Woodeaton (see above). A large altar depicting a *Genius Loci* (spirit/god of the place) was recovered from a possible river crossing shrine at Bablock Hythe near Northmoor (Henig and Booth 2000, 42; Fig.



Fig. 5.13 Roman altar showing a *Genius* (local deity) found at Bablock Hythe, Oxon.

5.13), while reliefs of Mars and another *Genius Loci* came from the settlement at Gill Mill (Bagnall-Smith 1995, 201). From Bampton in west Oxfordshire came a small altar with a relief of Fortuna, almost certainly coming from a shrine in this area. Towards the source of the Thames at Somerford Keynes Neigh Bridge was a particularly interesting group of sculpture, with an eagle and a shield seemingly representing parts of the Capitoline Triad (Miles *et al.*, 2007; Fig. 5.14). They were recovered from a substantial curving ditch located just 100 m to the west of the Thames and may have come from a *capitolium*, a joint temple or shrine to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, although no other example of this has yet been found in Britain (Frere 1987, 313). The worship of the Capitoline Triad was especially prevalent among the army and in urban centres and indications of its presence here may suggest some official association with the site,

which also comprised a substantial aisled building, enclosures and trackways. It is possible that any shrine associated with the Capitoline Triad sculptural fragments may have replaced or even co-existed with a local religious focus near to the site, as large quantities of brooches and coins were recovered by metal detecting in the immediate vicinity. No convincing shrine buildings have yet been located and it may have belonged to the class of apparently atectonic (without a temple structure) cult sites such as Leaze Farm and Lowbury Hill (see above).

As yet no examples of religious sculpture have been found further downstream, although a number of images of deities have come from temple sites in other parts of Surrey such as Farley Heath and Titsey. Comparatively rare as such iconography is, images of deities are more commonly found on engraved gemstones (intaglios) found across the



Fig. 5.14 Eagle and shield sculptural fragments from Somerford Keynes Neigh Bridge, Glos.

Thames Valley. A particularly fine blue onyx example in a 3rd-century gold ring from near Oxford depicted the goddess Minerva, also depicted on a cornelian intaglio recently found at Cassington (Fig. 4.8), while a glass intaglio from Woodeaton showed Neptune, possibly continuing the aquatic theme demonstrated by the model anchor (Henig 1974; 1970). Not all such intaglios depicted deities, but they can provide a very valuable insight into the personal beliefs and aspirations of individuals at this time.

Christianity in the Thames Valley (Figs 5.15-5.16)

Following the emperor Constantine's adoption of Christianity in the early 4th century, the religion soon gained ground throughout much of the empire, although the depth of its establishment in Britain has been the subject of much debate over the years (eg Thomas 1981; Watts 1991; 1998; Petts 2003). Even many of the most recent arguments on this matter have been quite diametrically opposed, with for example Dark (1994; 2000) advocating a

strong, widespread and essentially low-status late Roman Christianity which continued into the 6th century, while Faulkner (2000) suggests that the religion was exclusively upper class and collapsed very quickly along with most other aspects of Romano-British society at the end of the 4th century.

These quite striking differences in interpretation are in part due to the relatively scant nature of the evidence for Christianity within Roman Britain. The historical sources are very limited when concerned with Britain specifically, although they do indicate that church organisation certainly existed during the 4th century and that it was well integrated with that of the rest of the empire. However, there is little account of the day to day lives of Christians living in the British Diocese, and so it is to archaeology that we must turn for any slight insight. Unfortunately archaeological evidence is also quite rare, especially within the Thames Valley region, and generally relies upon burials and the occasional object with Christian symbolism. Churches probably existed within most urban centres, although they are very difficult to identify as there was no consistent architectural style and many are likely to have been simple wooden buildings that would go unrecognised (Petts 2003, 85). In addition, it is quite likely that church communities would have congregated in private houses in urban contexts, and even within rural villas. However, aside from rare occurrences such as the spectacular house church at Lullingstone villa in Kent (Meates 1979, 42-8; 1987, 14-40), such places would be largely indistinguishable in the archaeological record.

There are as yet no known church buildings within the Thames Valley apart from a substantial aisled building from London interpreted as a possible cathedral (Sankey 1998), although this is far from certain. Another major urban centre at Silchester, which must have exerted influence over large parts of the Middle Thames region, had more convincing evidence for a church building in the form of a small aisled structure with an apse to the west (Frere 1975; Ford 1994). However even this building is not totally certain in either its chronology (ie the original building appears to be late 2nd century; Cosh 2004) or functional interpretation. No church building is yet known from Cirencester, the probable provincial capital of Britannia Prima at this time (see Chapter 3), and indeed



Fig. 5.15 Bronze-plated wooden bucket or stoup decorated with representations of biblical scenes, from a child's grave in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Long Wittenham (grave 93)

the likely dedication by the provincial governor to Jupiter found on the column base clearly demonstrates the continuing strength of paganism among the urban elite in this city.

The only other sources of evidence for Roman Christianity in the Thames Valley are cemeteries and portable objects. In terms of the former the difficulties of differentiating between pagan and Christian burial are well known, although probable Christian elements have been found within late Roman cemeteries at Radley (II) Barrow Hills near Barton Court Farm (Watts 1998, 22) and Queenford Farm on the outskirts of Dorchester (Chambers 1987; see below). The likelihood of a Christian community within or around the latter site is emphasised by perhaps the best known piece of Christian symbolism within the Thames Valley, a bronze-bound wooden vessel in a child's grave at Long Wittenham, upon which were depicted biblical scenes (Henig and Booth 2000, 185-6 fig. 7.4; Petts 2003, 17; Fig. 5.15). Biblical representations are very rare in Roman Britain and three scenes are shown on the vessel from Long Wittenham, the central one showing the baptism of Christ. It has been suggested that the cup may have been used as a chalice for the Eucharist (Henig and Booth 2000, 186).



Fig. 5.16 A lead tank found in a late Roman waterhole at Perry Oaks, Heathrow, under excavation

Another object from the Thames Valley that would have been used in Christian liturgy is a lead tank found within a timber-lined well at Caversham (Frere 1989, 319). The tank had four rectangular panels, all with a saltire cross in herringbone relief, and one also contained a Chi-rho, a well known Christian symbol combining the first two Greek letters for the word Christ. Over 20 such lead tanks have been found in Britain, 8 with Chi-rho symbols, and they are unique to this country. Although they were probably used in part of the baptism ceremony their precise purpose is not fully understood, and they may have had a general use as containers for holy water (Petts 2003, 99). The Caversham example had clearly been damaged by fire and was cut from the base prior to being put in the well. It is uncertain if both this and its subsequent watery deposition was a deliberate ritual act in the longstanding tradition of the region. Certainly many of the other lead tanks in Britain have been found in watery contexts such as wells and rivers, including the only other one from the Thames Valley area at Perryoaks, Heathrow, which was found near the top of a late Roman waterhole (Framework Archaeology 2006, 227-30; Fig. 5.16). This tank had been damaged or dismantled, with part of the sides and base being detached and discarded elsewhere. The association of lead tanks with watery contexts may suggest a Christianity which had incorporated certain indigenous spiritual traditions within its ritual practices.

Overall the evidence for late Roman Christianity remains quite meagre, with none at all from the Surrey Thames Valley, and only a single jet ring with a Chi-rho symbol from this county as a whole (Bird 2004a, 142). However, there must surely have been a growing Christian population in the area at this time, especially within the larger towns, as the general pattern of evidence from across the empire indicates that it was essentially an urban based religion. Petts has recently suggested, however, that it was in the small towns and among rural communities that Christianity was strongest (2003, 170), although there is little evidence for this in the Thames Valley except perhaps for the Dorchester cemetery and Long Wittenham vessel. The growth and spread of Christianity during the 4th century is still often thought to have corresponded with a decline in pagan cults, especially when imperial tolerance to paganism declined in the years AD 341 to 361 (Webster 1983; Watts 1998). However, in the Thames Valley region, as in most of southern Britain, there is little evidence for such a decline. The major temple complexes at Frilford, Woodeaton and Weycock Hill appear to have continued in use until at least the end of the 4th century AD and quite possibly longer (Smith, forthcoming). Such a chronology generally corresponds with that of other settlements in the vicinity, suggesting that it was eventually the overall economic collapse that led to structural decline in these places, and that pagan worship may have continued for some time (ibid.).

ROMANO-BRITISH BURIAL IN THE THAMES VALLEY

The treatment of the dead within Romano-British society varied considerably, presumably reflecting not only differences in wealth and status but also different attitudes to death and the afterlife. Romano-British burial practices also differed somewhat across the province, possibly reinforcing the regional distinctions noted in many other aspects of society. However, in the Thames Valley, as elsewhere, there is a general trend from cremation in the early Roman period to inhumation in the 3rd-4th centuries, although these traditions were far from exclusive and certain burial rites seem to have persisted longer in some areas than others.

Early-mid Roman burial (Figs 5.17-5.18)

As in the late Iron Age, there is a comparative scarcity of burial evidence in the early to mid Roman period, suggesting that mortuary traditions, probably including excarnation, may have persisted as before (see above; Booth 2001, 37). This is certainly the case in a number of rural settlements in the Upper Thames region such as Thornhill Farm,

Gravelly Guy and Yarnton where the burial ritual, as with most other aspects of settlement and society, continued unaltered from the late Iron Age into the early Roman period (see above). There was however a new and distinct funerary monument of the early Roman period that was thinly spread across the Upper Thames region, and which probably derived originally from southern and eastern cemeteries such as King Harry Lane, Verulamium (Stead and Rigby 1989). At Roughground Farm just north of Lechlade was a small (6 m²) square-ditched enclosure surrounding an oval of postholes, within which was a central adult cremation burial in an upright grey-ware urn dating to the early 2nd century (Allen *et al.* 1993, 53; Fig. 5.17). The burial lay 250 m east of the main settlement site and may just have been contemporary with the construction of the first villa buildings. One of the closest parallels to this site was at Field's Farm alongside Ermin Street to the north of Cirencester and just outside the Thames Valley (Lawrence and Mudd 1999). Here a much larger (c 16 m²) enclosure, dating to the mid-late 1st century AD, surrounded a central circular pit within which was a probable cremation deposit. A cropmark of similar size and shape was

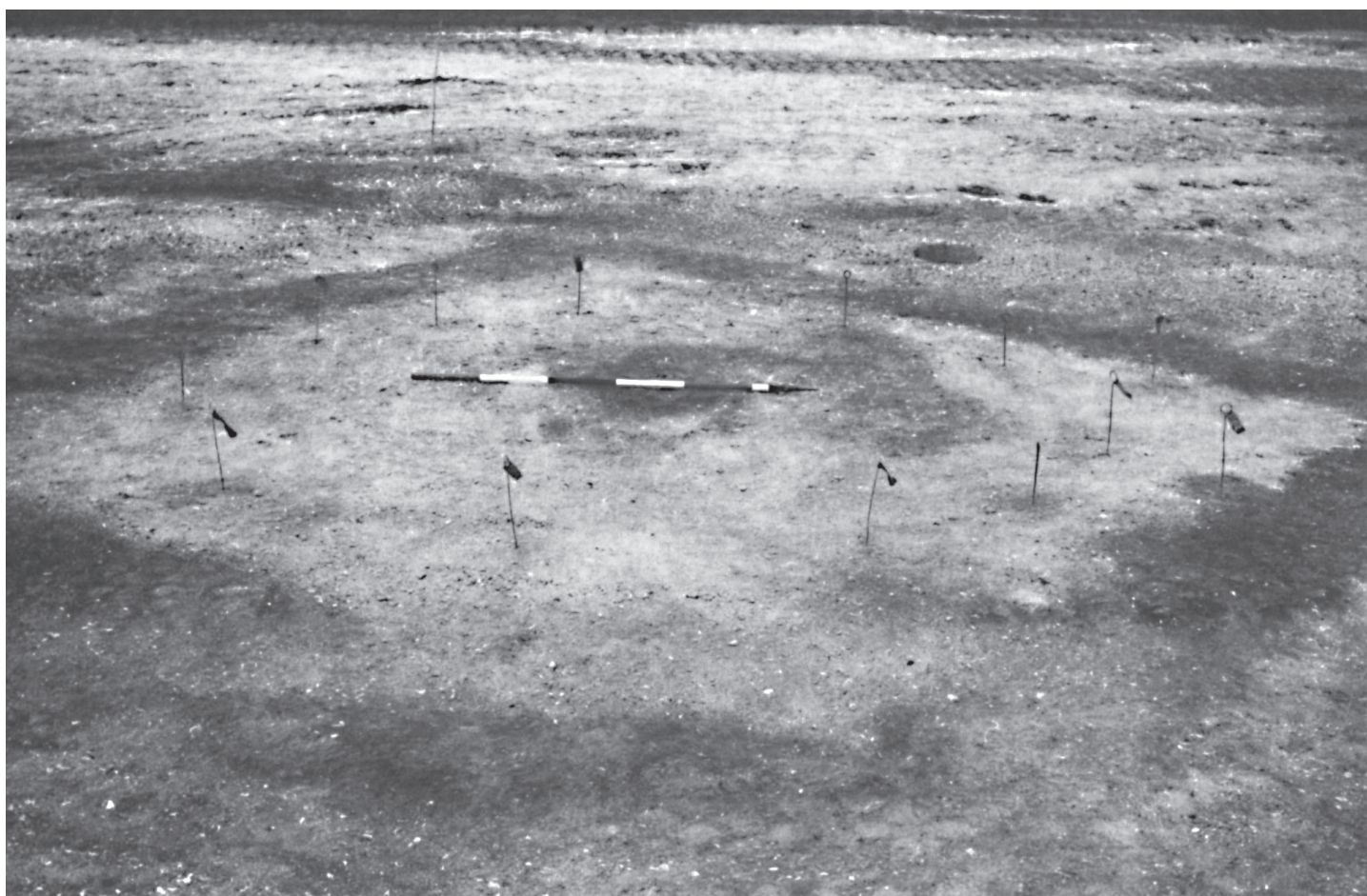


Fig. 5.17 A 2nd-century burial at Roughground Farm, Lechlade, Glos

located less than 5 km further south-east at Daglingworth Quarry (Glos SMR 4783), and may have been another mortuary enclosure. The only other site of similar form and date in the Thames Valley lies at Appleford Sidings in Oxfordshire, where a rectangular enclosure similar in size to that at Roughground Farm contained a central urned cremation (Booth and Simmonds forthcoming). This burial was also situated some distance from the main area of occupation and had the remains of possible pyre debris in part of the ditch. A complete cattle burial lay nearby, recalling the similar occurrence in the small enclosure at Smith's Field, which was interpreted as a possible shrine of late Iron Age/early Roman date (see above). Although no cremation deposit was recovered from within that feature, it may belong to the same general class of mortuary monument, the rarity of which suggests association with high status individuals. Certainly at Roughground Farm and Appleford there is evidence for high status occupation.

Elsewhere in the Thames Valley there are quite a few examples of individual or small group burials of the early Roman period, usually represented by isolated cremation urns, such as at Reading (*BAJ* Vol 31, 72), Eton (VCH Berks 1908, 6), Windsor (VCH Berks 1 1906, 219) and Clifton Hampden (VCH Oxon 1 1939, 333). These were occasionally accompanied by a variety of grave goods, as in a cremation found at Dorchester in 1866 which comprised a large urn containing glass vessels and fragments of calcined bone and pottery (VCH Oxon 1 1939, 293, pl. XIII). Extensive cremation cemeteries of early Roman date are unknown within the region, although it is possible that the Dorchester burial belonged to such a cemetery, and some cremations within inhumation cemeteries could possibly be of this date. For example a cemetery on Shooters Hills at Pangbourne was discovered in the 19th century and was said to have contained over 100 cremations and inhumations, with finds including coins, spearheads, axes, spurs and cinerary urns (*Archaeol J* 1845, 163-4). The exact nature and chronology of this site is however uncertain, and it is perhaps more likely to have been Saxon than Roman in date. At Staines a number of possible cremation burials have been recorded in the past as lying to the east of the Roman town, although the evidence for this is quite vague (Bird 2004a, 136). However, the location of cemeteries along roadsides leading into urban centres was a regular feature of Roman towns across the empire and Britain was certainly no different. This was confirmed at Staines quite recently with evidence from the Old Police Station site, where a system of ditches next to the main London road may have defined part of a cemetery (Shaikhley 1999). Two inhumations (one radiocarbon dated to AD 70-130) and three to five cremations were excavated, with grave goods including a complete samian bowl and a probable 1st-century iron spearhead. One of the cremations was particularly interesting as it may represent a *bustum* type burial (the

result of cremation on a pyre constructed above a grave pit), relatively rare across Britain, although there have been exceptional examples found recently around London (Barber and Bowsher 2000). The Staines burial comprised a pit containing much burnt material including human bone, along with unburnt grave goods such as disc brooches, fine glassware, samian dishes and a flagon (Bird 2004a, 137, Fig. 5.18). It is likely to have been mid to late 2nd-century in date, although it could have been later.

These early-mid Roman burials account for only a very small proportion of the numbers that would be expected for quite a well populated region. Where was the majority of the population buried? It seems quite likely, as noted above, that Iron Age burial practices persisted for some time, in rural areas at least, based on traditions of excarnation and watery deposition (see above). A sherd of possible Roman cinerary urn bearing a graffito was found in the Thames at Amerden in the 1890s (Wright 1977, 279; see Chapter 4), and it may have been that some tradition of riverine burial continued, as it had done for the deposition of objects.

Burial in the late Roman period (Fig. 5.19)

During the later Roman period evidence for human burial increases dramatically, especially in the Upper Thames Valley where a number of inhumation cemeteries have been excavated, including those around urban centres at Cirencester and Dorchester. Three cemeteries have so far been discovered around Cirencester, with the largest to the west outside Bath Gate comprising 453 burials dating from the early 4th century to at least the early 5th century (McWhirr *et al.* 1982). Unlike at Dorchester, many burials were aligned north-south and later graves inter-cut. These characteristics contrast with the orderly layout considered most likely to be indicative of Christian cemeteries, and may suggest that there was no large Christian population in the town, although the numbers of burials excavated so far would only represent a very small sample of the total associated with the urban centre.

Around Dorchester two major late Roman cemeteries have so far been located, at Queenford Farm (Chambers 1987; Fig. 5.19) and at Church Piece, Warborough (Harman *et al.* 1978). Both comprised hundreds of burials, although only six were excavated at the latter site, the remainder being observed from cropmarks. The Dorchester burial grounds are the only ones from within the Thames Valley itself to belong to the class of late Roman 'ordered cemeteries', with graves being regularly aligned and mostly lying within substantial enclosures (although the Staines Old Police Station site may also have been enclosed; see above). At Queenford Farm a small (c 6 x 8 m) rectangular enclosure was observed, within which was the only grave out of the whole cemetery to

contain accompanying grave goods, suggesting a higher status individual. The comparability of this feature with the earlier tradition of single burial enclosures (see above) has been pointed out (Booth 2001, 20), but it is uncertain if this represents a continuation of the same phenomenon. A lack of grave goods in other burials together with their general west-east orientation and low instances of inter-cutting suggests that this may have been at least in part a Christian community. The Queenford Farm cemetery is one of the few to have had a programme of radiocarbon dating, which points to burial continuing into the 5th or even early 6th centuries AD (Chambers 1987, 58, 63). This extends

far beyond the date range normally ascribed to most late Roman cemeteries, and would imply that the cemetery was contemporary with the earliest Saxon activity in the area around the town. Although at present such longevity of late Roman burial style seems highly unusual within the Thames Valley region, further radiocarbon dating of inhumations within other cemeteries could well produce similar results.

Much evidence for late Roman burial, in the Upper Thames at least, comes from small rural inhumation cemeteries, most of which are probably representative of a single extended family or estate group. Many are what have been termed 'backland

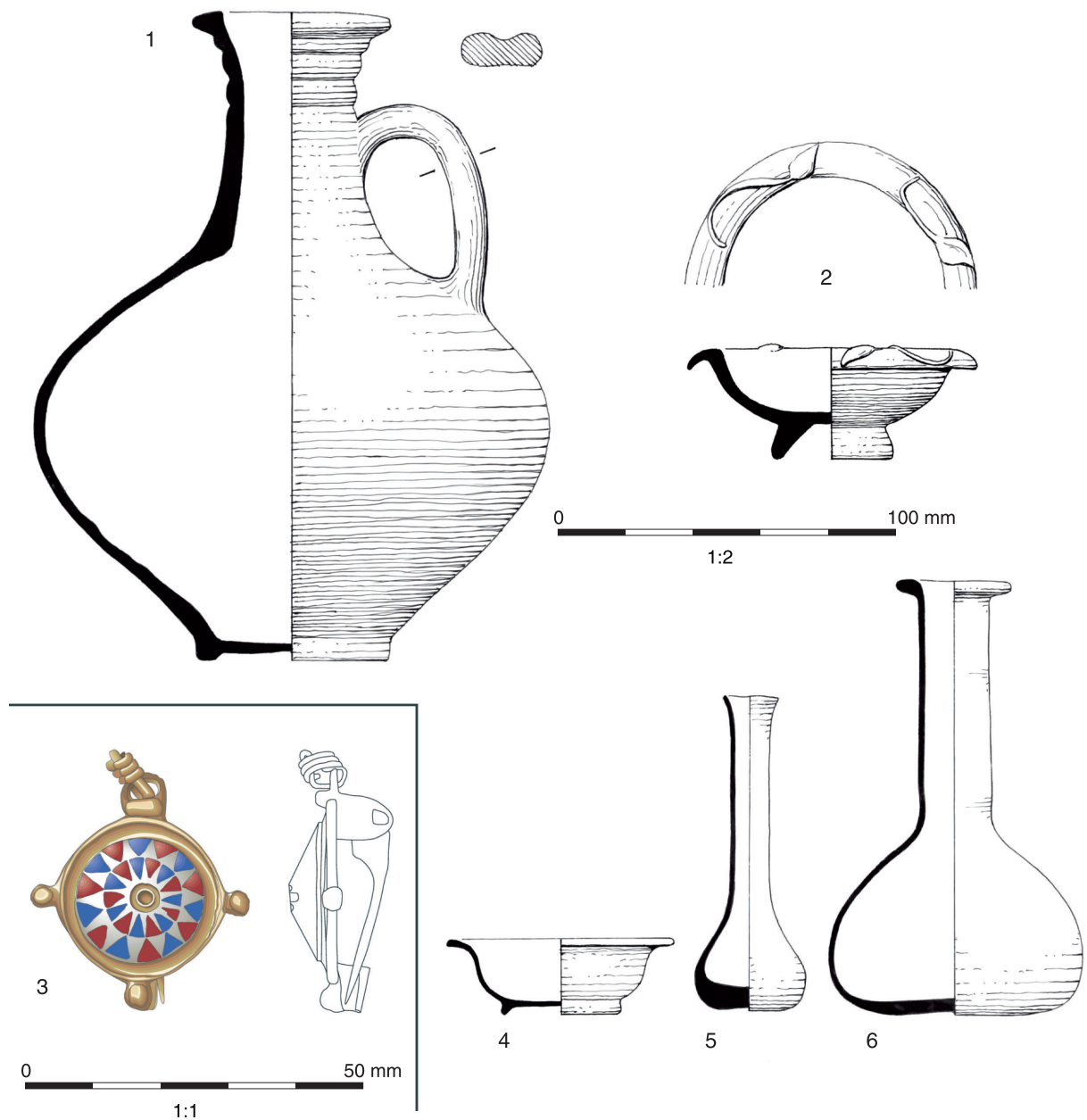


Fig. 5.18 Finds from a bustum burial at Staines: (1) Verulamium region single handled flagon, (2) Central Gaulish Samian Dr35 dish, (3) one of a pair of enamelled disc brooches, (4) glass dish, (5-6) glass phials

burials' (Esmonde Cleary 2000), in that they are positioned in relation to existing boundary alignments on the peripheries of settlements, rather than in specifically designed cemetery enclosures such as at Dorchester, although sites like Radley (II) Barrow Hills and Claydon Pike contained enclosures around certain burials. Booth (2001) has recently studied such sites (along with urban cemeteries) in the Oxfordshire region, and eight of these fall within the Thames Valley itself, including a group around Abingdon (Radley I and (II) Barrow Hills, Barton Court Farm, Ashville) and substantial cemeteries at Frilford and Cassington. Further rural cemeteries lie upriver in Gloucestershire, including

one of the largest known examples in the Thames Valley, recently excavated by Oxford Archaeology at Horcott Quarry near Fairford, which revealed 78 individuals in 73 graves (Fig. 1.5).

There are very few recorded examples in the Berkshire (eg Weycock Field; Cotton 1956-57) and Surrey parts of the valley, whether due to a lack of extensive excavation or a genuine disparity in burial practice. It has been suggested that many of the undated inhumations in Surrey may in fact be Romano-British in date, as two from between Staines and Laleham in the Thames Valley were recently radiocarbon dated to the Roman period (Bird 2004a, 138).

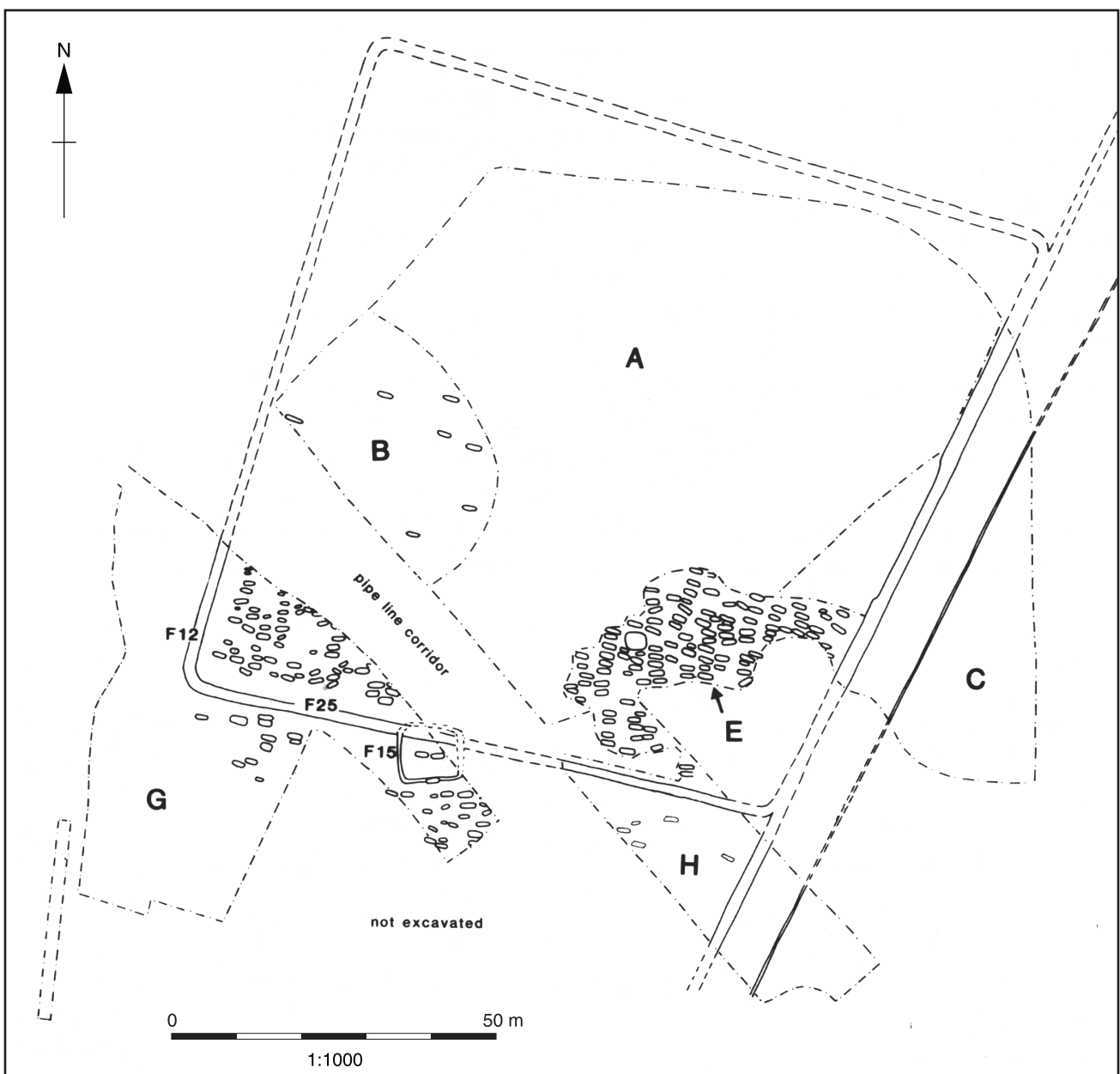


Fig. 5.19 Plan of excavations at Queenford Farm, Dorchester, Oxon

Burial ritual in the later Roman period
(Figs 5.20-5.22)

Many different types of burial ritual can be observed within the late Roman period, although there are a number of recurring aspects. Inhumation becomes the primary burial rite at this time, although the precise chronology of its widespread adoption is complicated by the virtual lack of any burials dated to the 3rd century, a phenomenon encountered across Britain (Philpott 1991, 225). Cremations certainly still continued however, with examples at Bray in Berkshire (Wilson 1970, 301-2; Wilson 1972, 349) and White Horse Hill on the Berkshire Downs (Miles *et al.* 2003). At the Radley (II) Barrow Hills cemetery just north of Abingdon, cremations accounted for 12 of the 69 burials (Boyle and Chambers 2007; Fig. 5.20). Five of these lay within a square ditched enclosure reminiscent of that at Dorchester (see above), while a further eight were located nearby and probably formed a discrete burial group, perhaps of a single extended family. The cremation burial rite employed and the prominence of the square ditched enclosure, which seems originally to have surrounded just a single centrally placed burial, suggests that a specific social statement was being made, although the significance of this remains unknown. There are a number of settle-

ments nearby which may be associated with both this cemetery and another smaller one in the vicinity (Radley I; Atkinson 1952-3), and the excavators suggested that they related to the successive phases of activity at Barton Court Farm just to the south (see insert, Chapter 3). The location of the Radley burials may have been at least partly dictated by the large Bronze Age barrows on the site, then still clearly discernible as earthworks, which may have provided a conscious link to the past (see above). Such association between Roman burial and prehistoric funerary monuments can be demonstrated more graphically at Cotswold Community in the Thames Valley south of Cirencester (OA 2004). One of two small late Roman cemeteries at this site comprised 12 north-south aligned inhumations, focused very clearly on a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch, which must have been visible as an earthwork (Fig. 5.21). Just beyond the Thames Valley, a substantial cemetery at White Horse Hill comprised 49 individuals inserted into a Neolithic long barrow and associated ditch (Miles *et al.*, 2003). The attraction of past monuments in Romano-British ritual practice has already been commented upon above, and the deliberate association of communities with such features may have played a key role in creating and maintaining identities.

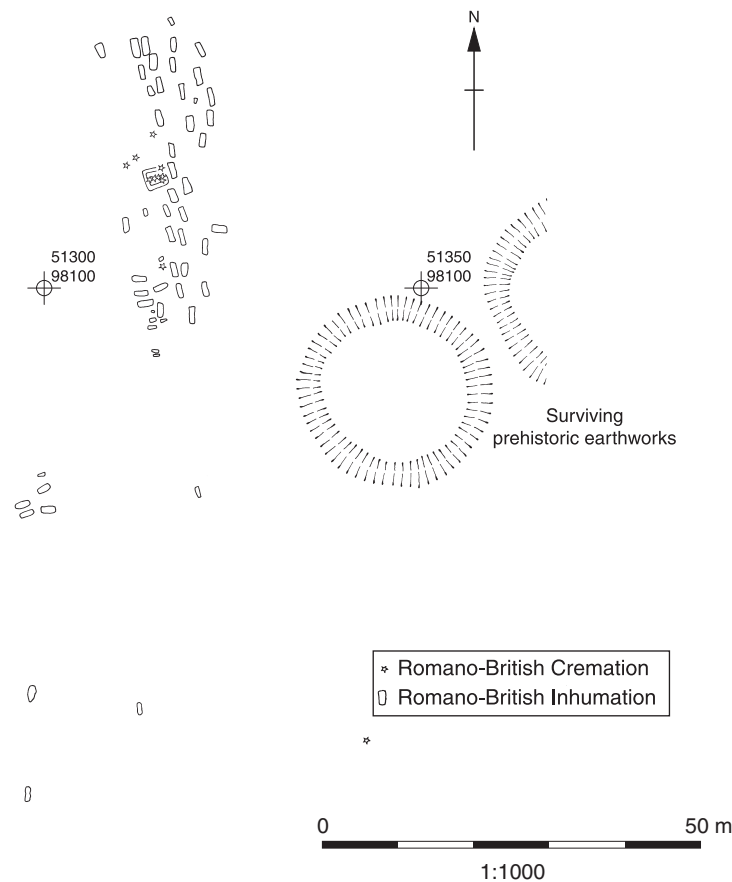


Fig. 5.20 The late Roman cemetery at Radley Barrow Hills

Amongst the large numbers of inhumation burials in the Thames Valley are observed many different rituals, the significance of which is often hard to determine. The typical late Roman inhumation is supine with arms lying by the sides, folded or placed with hands meeting at the waist. Within this broad framework there are many minor variations of body position, while some more distinctive burial rites include decapitation. Decapitation burials are reasonably widespread, although they are more common in rural than urban cemeteries, and are believed to have spread to the latter in the second half of the 4th century AD (Clarke 1979, 374; Philpott 1991, 83). This ritual, in which the head is removed post-mortem and usually placed by the knees or feet, is particularly prominent in the Upper Thames Valley, with almost a quarter of the recorded examples for the whole of Britain deriving from this area (Harman *et al.* 1981; Philpott 1991), including 15 examples at Cassington and 4 from Radley (II) Barrow Hills. There appears to have been no consistency within decapitation burials, with gender, age and apparent status making little difference. For example at Cotswold Community a decapitated young adult male lay prone with his hands behind his back in a ditch without a grave cut, while a group of four 4th-century Roman burials from Abingdon included a decapitation within a lead coffin along with grave goods. The rite does, however, seem to decline with the change to



Fig. 5.21 Roman burials in a late Neolithic/early Bronze Age ring ditch at Cotswold Community

west-east burial in the later 4th century AD, and is generally lacking in those cemeteries assumed to be of Christian character (Chambers 1976b, 30-55; 1978, 252; Harman *et al.* 1981, 148-168; Booth 2001, 41).

In other aspects of burial ritual, such as the provision of a coffin, the positioning of the body and the occurrence of grave goods, there is again no consistency. Although most burials are laid supine, examples of inhumations lying prone, like decapitations, are relatively common in the Upper Thames Valley, although there is no evidence of associated age or gender distinction. Grave goods are generally quite rare although items of clothing, most notably hobnails from shoes, are not too uncommon, especially in rural cemeteries. Other items of personal adornment are much scarcer, although a copper alloy bracelet and a finger ring were found in two burials at Cotswold Community and shale and copper alloy bracelets along with a bead necklace were found in a child's grave at Radley (II) Barrow Hills. Shale bracelets are chiefly associated with child graves in Britain (Chambers 1986b, 37-44), usually in 4th-century contexts. The most common grave goods were coins and pottery (nearly all drinking vessels), presumably accoutrements for the journey to the underworld, with the former occurring in up to 20% of graves in some Oxfordshire cemeteries (Booth 2001, 33). West-east aligned graves generally contained even fewer grave goods and, as with the lack of inter-cutting and decapitation, this may be related to a Christian element.

Interment within coffins can be demonstrated in a number of cemeteries, either by the evidence of nails or wood stains or, in a few cases, the presence of actual lead coffins. At least five such coffins were located at Frilford, and more were excavated more recently at Abingdon Vineyard (*S Midlands Archaeol.* 20, 1990, 73-8; Fig. 5.22). The lack of coffin nails in a grave need not preclude such a structure from being present, as well-built examples may have been dowelled or jointed rather than nailed.

Age and gender in late Roman cemeteries

A general account of population structure in the Thames Valley has been given in Chapter 4, and naturally the study of burials contributes significantly to such analysis. It is a known phenomenon that infant burials rarely occur within most Romano-British cemeteries (see Booth 2001, 32), suggesting that they had yet to become fully integrated members of the community. In most instances, such as at Claydon Pike and Gravelly Guy, evidence for infants is largely confined to isolated burials or disarticulated bone within the pits and ditches of the settlement. However, two sites within the Thames Valley stand out for having extensive cemeteries of infant burials within a discrete area of the settlement. At Barton Court Farm a cemetery that comprised at least 26 shallow graves lay c 50 m east of the villa building, and



Fig. 5.22 One of three mid 4th-century burials found in lead coffins at Abingdon Vineyard, Oxon. The body had been decapitated after death and the head placed at the feet. A group of coins were found in his mouth

further neonatal burials were dispersed across the site (Miles 1986, 15). Three of the infants from the cemetery were accompanied by animal skulls (two dog and one sheep), although no other grave goods were recovered. The adults may have been those buried at the Radley I and II cemeteries to the north-east, at Barrow Hills, with several different phases being identified (Chambers and McAdam 2007). The burials of the latest phase at Radley include a much larger proportion of infants, suggesting that by the later 4th century, at least, the segregation of burial by age was far less pronounced.

At the villa at Hambleden in Buckinghamshire there was an even greater concentration of infant burials, with a total of 97 located outside the north-west corner of the settlement enclosure (Cocks 1921, 150). No associated adult cemetery was located but presumably this lay further from the main settlement. Together with other factors such as the unusually high occurrence of corn dryers and styli, these burials point to the site being of special significance within the region, although the nature of this remains uncertain (see insert, Chapter 3).

The preponderance of male as opposed to female burials in most late Romano-British cemeteries has long been noted (eg Pearce 2000), and is evident in cemeteries within the Thames Valley. Furthermore, there is some suggestion that this disproportion may have been more consistent in rural cemeteries (Booth 2001, 39). The reasoning behind such apparent selective processes remains unclear and may be more concerned with status than deliberate sexual segregation, as the ratios still vary quite significantly.

Overall, the evidence for burial within the later Romano-British period is full of variation and complexity, but the fact that such burials have now become archaeologically visible in recognisable cemeteries is suggestive of great social changes at this time. Burial ritual is likely to have been a very conservative aspect of native society, especially within non-urban areas, with pre-Roman traditions likely to have survived throughout much of the 1st to 3rd centuries AD. The occurrence of cemeteries, mostly consisting of inhumation burials, in the 4th century suggests expanding Roman cultural influence in all levels of society. Such Roman burial styles seem to have continued at least until the end of the 4th century AD and possibly well into the post-Roman period, as at Dorchester.

RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE EARLY ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

Differing traditions

At the end of the Roman period there were broadly speaking two different religious traditions in the study area (see above). Romano-British pagan

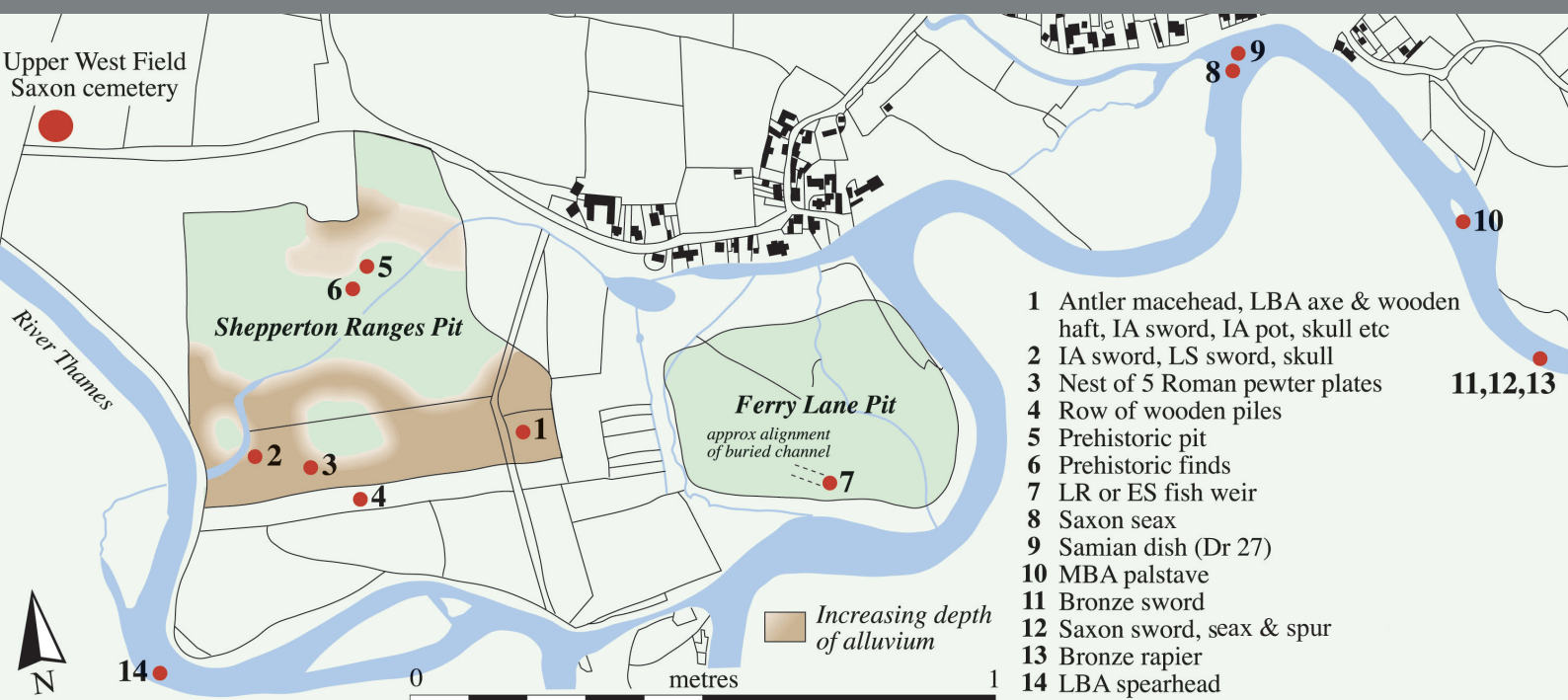
shrines were being venerated at the end of the 4th century, and it seems likely that this continued into the 5th century, although the readily datable evidence such as coin offerings ceased. Simultaneously there is some evidence for Christian populations (see above). By the later 5th century it is likely that different religious beliefs were being introduced by continental immigrants, but evidence for the balance between the three traditions is almost entirely lacking. As we gradually revise the old view of mass Anglo-Saxon invasion into a landscape emptied of Britons, we must start to wonder whether the interplay between these different traditions in the study area might not have been more complex than has previously been believed. The places regarded as sacred by the pagan Anglo-Saxons are likely to have been much the same as the sacred sites of animistic and polytheistic cultures the world over: deep places (caves, pools, springs), high places (hill and mountain tops), woods and trees (Blair 2005, 473). Incoming populations, having left behind the sacred sites of their ancestors on the continent, presumably had to find new ones in their new homeland. It is interesting to speculate how far they were influenced by the sacred topography of the indigenous population. Did they, as the Romans had done before them, assimilate the views of the indigenous population about places where the spirits lived?

River finds (Fig. 5.23)

The river Thames itself had been venerated by the population of the valley for thousands of years. Prehistorians have long recognised the widespread phenomenon of ritual deposits in the Thames (see above for Iron Age and Roman discussion), but finds of Anglo-Saxon date have more often been interpreted as evidence of battles, chance losses or burials. John Hines has commented that the persistence of the phenomenon, the large number of objects involved, and their condition, renders such explanations highly implausible (1997, 380-81). No comprehensive inventory of river finds of Anglo-Saxon date currently exists, but from a rapid survey undertaken in the early 1990s, John Blair suggested that some 10 swords, 8 seaxes and 30 spearheads had been recovered from the river between Oxford and Reading, with 2 outliers upstream at Chimney and Standlake (1994, 99 and note 31, figs 58 and 59). A notable concentration of finds comes from Wallingford Bridge, where at least three late Saxon/Viking type spearheads and a sword have been found (BAJ 61 (1963-4), 108-9; Airs *et al.* 1975, map 2; Evison 1967). Weapons also occur at places where there is currently very little other information for the period: a spearhead and 'scramasax' at Bow Bridge, Cholsey (BAJ 61 (1963-4), 108-9), for

Fig. 5.23 (overleaf) Feature: Saxon and Viking finds from the Middle Thames

SAXON AND VIKING FINDS FROM THE MIDDLE THAMES



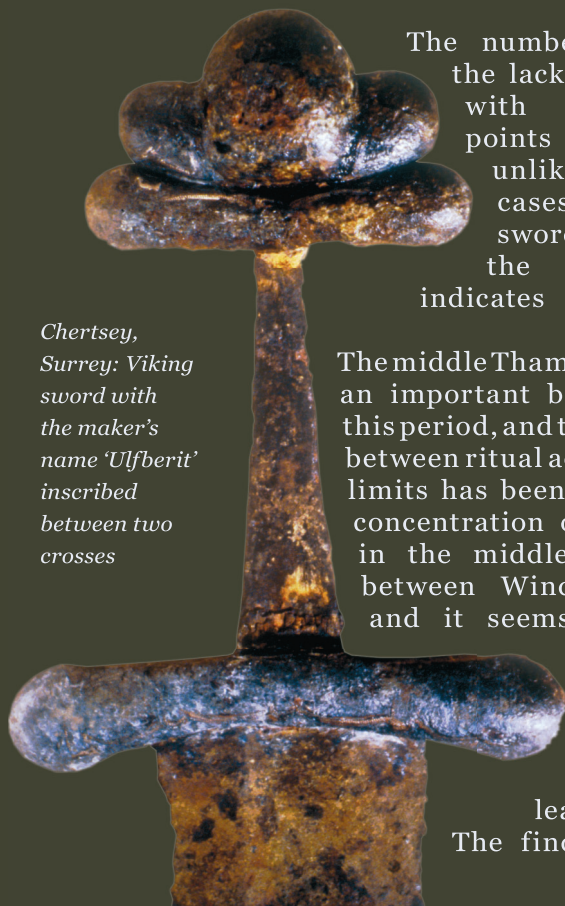
Above: Shepperton Ranges, Surrey: the gravel pit and other archaeological discoveries in the vicinity (the background map shows the area as it was in 1843, based on the Tithe map)

Many finds of metalwork, especially weaponry, have come from the Thames. The great majority were recovered during dredging before about 1960. More recently, similar finds have emerged during large-scale earth moving, especially gravel extraction, that has uncovered former river channels that became wholly filled with silt.

Finds from buried channels at Shepperton Ranges, and Abbey Meads, Chertsey belong to a number of different periods and were clearly deposited at specific locations within what was then an open river channel. This may also be the case for similar groups of dredged artefacts. The prehistoric artefacts from the river have tended to attract most attention, and it has become widely accepted that they were ritually deposited, either as votive offerings or as part of funerary rites.

The post-Roman river finds have received comparatively little attention in recent years, but their discovery in similar locations emphasises the likelihood that they were also ritually deposited. The predominantly military character of the finds has

ULFBERIT



Chertsey, Surrey: Viking sword with the maker's name 'Ulfberit' inscribed between two crosses

previously led to the suggestion that they were weapons lost in skirmishes at river crossings.

The number of findings and the lack of close correlation with known crossing points seems to make this unlikely, and in some cases, such as a Saxon sword from Shepperton, the object itself indicates ritual activity.

The middle Thames seems to have been an important boundary throughout this period, and the potent association between ritual activity and territorial limits has been frequently noted. A concentration of find spots occurs in the middle to lower Thames, between Windsor and Kingston, and it seems that the meeting of the Thames with other rivers (Colne, Wey, Mole and Hogsmill) was especially likely to lead to ritual activity. The finds cover the period

SAXON AND VIKING FINDS FROM THE MIDDLE THAMES



from the 5th century down to the 11th century. There is no obvious gap in the 7th and 8th centuries, as might be expected if Christian influence led to the suppression of a pagan rite before its re-introduction by the Vikings, although precise dating of the objects is often difficult.

This suggests that the Thames was associated with ritual activity throughout this period. There is comparatively little evidence that other rivers in the region were similarly venerated, although there is, for example, a group of objects recovered from the Wey, not far from its confluence with the Thames, which includes Saxon spearheads and a 9th century Danish battle axe (Gardner 1912). Prehistoric artefacts were found in roughly the same location, and this association occurs at a number of the Thames findspots, and at Shepperton Ranges is definitely the result of their being deposited at the same point in the channel. This seems unlikely to be coincidental and suggests the possibility that particular locations may have acquired and retained sanctity over very long periods.

Above: Shepperton Ranges, Surrey: the finds were made during gravel extraction below water

Far Left: Shepperton Ranges, Surrey: late Saxon sword showing curvature of blade as originally found (length of sword 832 mm). Was the sword ritually bent before deposition?
Left: Same sword showing pattern welding of blade



example, and a spearhead and a sword blade at Benson Reach, Cleeve, near Goring (ibid.). Downstream, numerous weapons have been recovered from the stretch of the river between Sonning and Taplow, where settlement evidence also remains somewhat sparse. Reported finds from the Henley area include a spearhead from Marsh Lock and an iron axe from downstream of the bridge (*BAJ* 56 (1955), 57; *BAJ* 65 (1970), 58), and spearheads from Sonning and Wargrave (*BAJ* 56 (1958), 59, 56). A number of weapons have been found at Sashes Island at Cookham. Here, what is reported as 'a quantity' of iron weapons from the period of the Viking attacks was found during the dredging of the lock-cut across the island in 1856, and several iron spearheads of similar date were found in 1860 during the raising of ballast from the river. Further dredging operations in 1896 found a 'Danish' winged axe, and a barbed spearhead of the same period was found in 1958 during work on the banks of the island (Brooks 1964). Downstream, two spearheads have been dredged from the Thames near Marlow, one of 5th- to late 6th-century type, and the other of late 6th- to 7th-century type (Babb 1996 nos 11 and 23)). An axehead of 9th- to 11th-century type was found at Boulter's Lock, Taplow (ibid., no. 44), and a knife was found in the Thames at Maidenhead Bridge (ibid., no. 52). Spearheads are reported from the river near Maidenhead; a sword and spearhead were found in the river at Bray, and two spearheads were recovered from the river near Victoria Bridge at Windsor (Foreman *et al.* 2002, 15 and table 2.1). Saxon and Viking weapon finds from the river in Surrey are considered in more detail in Figure 5.23. A discussion of some of the important swords from the Thames has been published by Vera Evison (1967, 160-89). The meaning of these river finds remains unknown. Both Hines (1997, 381, 405) and Blair (1994, 99) draw attention to the fact that many appear to date from the 8th or 9th century onwards. However, earlier weapon types are known from the river, and weapons dating from the 5th century onwards have been found in the middle Thames between Windsor and Kingston. The repeated deposition of finds of all periods in a buried channel at Shepperton Ranges is one of the clearest cases for continuity of practice in the region (see Fig. 5.23). Elsewhere, the presence of quantities of Bronze Age and Anglo-Saxon weaponry in the river at Wallingford Bridge, and very large quantities of Roman coins found on land a short distance to the west, demonstrates the considerable potential for further research into the many places in the Thames Valley where such associations can be seen. Evidence from the Iron Age and Roman period in the Upper Thames Valley (see above) suggests that some of this ritual activity may be associated with perceptions of crossing the river as being a significant, even a religious, act that necessitated the provision of ritual offerings. Such views may have persisted into the Anglo-Saxon period. It is notable that a number of the minsters of the valley were

located at places that are thought to have been crossing points (for example at Eynsham, Oxford and Cookham). While the choice of such sites could have been made on purely pragmatic political and economic grounds, the repeated association between minsters, rivers and crossing places is striking (see Blair 1996, 12), and would repay further consideration.

Continuity of belief?

There are currently no certainly identified pagan Anglo-Saxon religious sites in the study area to suggest whether there was any assimilation of indigenous pagan customs to those of incoming Germanic people. We can only speculate about whether the survival of the fieldname *Harowdonehull* at Woodeaton (Gelling 1953, xx, 195), for example, means that worship continued at the site of the Romano-Celtic temple (see above), or whether the name simply reflects the Anglo-Saxons' awareness of it as a topographical feature. At White Horse Hill, on the Berkshire Downs at the southern margins of the study area, a Neolithic long barrow had been re-used in the 4th century AD for a cemetery containing some 49 inhumations, three of whom had been decapitated, and perhaps nine cremations. Subsequently, ten Anglo-Saxon burials were inserted into a nearby Bronze Age round barrow. At least five of these had also been decapitated, which may suggest an execution cemetery, but this seems unlikely given that at least two of the decapitated burials were accompanied by grave goods. One had a red and blue enamelled escutcheon, and the other the remains of a shield and knife (Miles *et al.* 2003, 29-59; Dickinson 1976 II, 215-6). The Anglo-Saxon evidence from White Horse Hill remains difficult to interpret, not least because much of the excavation took place during the 19th century. It is also by no means certain that the Anglo-Saxons regarded burial as having any religious, rather than purely social, significance (see for example Hines 1997, 97, 99). It should alert us, however, to the possibility that such places may provide evidence of a fusion of Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon customs at sites that clearly had a very long-lived ritual significance in the local landscape. There may be something similar in the presence of at least 28 Anglo-Saxon inhumations and 13 cremations amongst 212 predominantly late Roman graves near the major Roman temple complex at Frilford (see Fig. 5.5, above). This cemetery appears to have been in continuous use from the 4th to the 6th century. Are we to imagine the small numbers of apparently Anglo-Saxon burials here as newcomers to an otherwise almost deserted landscape? Or are the identifiable Anglo-Saxon burials the first sign of the spread of Germanic culture, even Germanic immigrants, at a place with a continuing religious significance? The re-use of the Roman temple site at Lowbury Hill for a high-status barrow burial in the 7th century is also unlikely to be a simple coinci-

dence. There is widespread evidence that the Anglo-Saxons deliberately re-used Roman and prehistoric sites from the later 6th century, probably because of a growing feeling that such places conferred 'monumentality', demonstrating the status (and perhaps the religious adherence) of peoples and leaders, identification with the local ancestral population, and control of territory. However, we are only assuming that these places had been disregarded over the preceding 150-200 years; recent evidence from Taplow (see Chapter 3, above) suggests that the monumental burial there was set within an occupied site.

There is a little evidence for contact between early Anglo-Saxons and late Romano-British Christian populations in the study area. The assumption has generally been that Christianity was probably fairly localised, and died out in the area long before the conversion of King Cynegils c 635. One of the most remarkable pieces of evidence that there may have been real contact between British Christians and Anglo-Saxon immigrants is the explicitly Christian imagery on a wooden vessel in a child's grave at Long Wittenham (see above). Unfortunately we cannot tell how the child's community had acquired this object, and those who buried it may not even have understood, let alone subscribed to, its iconography. Much more consideration needs to be given, however, to the implications of evidence such as this, and the possibility that the 'managed' and potentially Christian cemetery at Queenford Farm continued in use into the 6th century.

Early Anglo-Saxon beliefs (Figs. 5.24, 5.25)

As has been noted above, evidence for the beliefs and religious practices of the pagan Anglo-Saxons is minimal in the study area, as elsewhere. Numerous accounts of the little that is reliably known about this topic can be found elsewhere and there is little point in repeating it in detail here (see Hines 1997, 375-6 for a list of recent work, and *ibid.*, *passim* for a summary of the current state of knowledge; also Blair 1995 for a discussion of possible religious structures). Sacred sites are likely to have included many natural locations. However, documentary and very limited archaeological evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons also constructed shrines (often wooden) and effigies of wood and stone, although these may be more common in the later part of the period, perhaps as the first cultural effects of Christianity made themselves felt. Two sites in the study area have structures that have been suggested as possible shrines: a square structure with a central posthole at New Wintles Farm (Feature 130 on Fig. 3.32; Blair 1995, 4, 19 and fig. 1), and two circular structures surrounding central pits at Black Bourton (PBS4 and PBS5 on Fig. 3.30; JMHS 2006). Probable deities include those known from the names of the days of the week, some documentary evidence, and from placename evidence

elsewhere in England: among the most significant were probably Woden, Thunor, Tiw, Frige, Hrede, Eostre, and (possibly from an earlier period) Nerthus and Saxnot. Religious observance seems to have included a pattern of regular sacrificial feasting and rites closely connected to the cycle of fertility and the agricultural year (Hines 1997, 379). This included celebrations of midwinter, harvest and the eleventh month (*Blodmonath*) in which cattle were slaughtered before the winter. Numbers of ox skulls have been interpreted elsewhere as the remains of such feasting. John Hines (*ibid.*, 380) also draws attention to the apparent importance of female deities and cult practices that excluded men; it is perhaps not too far-fetched to see some echo of this in the very clear gender dichotomy expressed in contemporary grave good assemblages (see Chapter 4, above). The contents of later church prohibitions suggest that early Anglo-Saxon religion – as Romano-British and Iron Age before – contained a strong element of divination, from entrails, the flight and call of birds, the fall of a thrown handful of twigs, dreams, and so on, and women may have been regarded as having particular skills.

We know almost nothing about the extent to which religious or other ritual behaviour may have been embedded in aspects of domestic, as opposed to public, life. Much work has been done recently to identify ritual practice on Iron Age sites in the study area, and it is clear that private devotion to the spirits of the home formed an important part of Roman religious practice (see above). The subject is rarely explicitly considered in Anglo-Saxon settlement reports, but recent work suggests that 'placed' deposits are recognisable on Anglo-Saxon sites (Fig. 5.24; Hey 2004, 74-5). At Yarnton an intact, uncooked goose had been buried in the top of a pit, and the skulls and jaws of cattle and horses had been deposited in two sunken huts. Pope Gregory, in his famous letter to Bishop Mellitus of 601, which is quoted by Bede, made reference to the Anglo-Saxon custom of sacrificing many oxen 'to devils', suggesting instead that they might celebrate at their new churches with 'devout feasting', killing their animals for food 'to the praise of God' (*HE* I:30). The church explicitly forbade the ritual slaughter and mutilation of horses in 786, although it is not certain how widespread horse sacrifice was in England (see Blair 2005, 167-8, n 138). Locally, the deposition of complete animal skulls and bones in articulation has also been noted at Eynsham, where the lower fills of the very large early 8th-century pit 394 contained skulls of 3 cattle, 2 sheep and 1 horse, and the upper fills contained skulls of 3 cattle, 3 sheep and 1 pig (Mulville 2003, 358 and table 10.15). Was this 'devout feasting' accompanying the foundation of a new minster?

The use of charms and amulets was evidently widespread in Anglo-Saxon society. For the early Saxon period, we have the evidence of grave goods; for later periods, we have the regulations, prohibi-



Fig. 5.24 Possible placed animal deposits from Yarnton

tions and exhortations of church writers, and numerous 'medicinal' texts, showing that belief in the power of charms and amulets persisted throughout the whole of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is perhaps the case that here we enter the realms of superstition and magic, rather than religion. The use, wearing or keeping of objects for protection, for good fortune, or to deflect harm and misfortune, need not have any specific religious connotations, and John Blair has recently drawn attention to the way in which the practice was 'Christianised' after the conversion (see below). The wide range of amulets found in Anglo-Saxon graves was studied in great detail by Audrey Meaney (1981), who considered, amongst others, the possible amuletic significance of herbs, minerals such as amber, crystal, amethyst and jet, objects derived from animals, such as tooth pendants and antler rings, fossils and shells, model weapons and toilet sets, pendants, girdle hangers and work boxes. It is beyond the scope of the present review to consider these in detail. Many examples of such objects are found in the graves of the study area, but such information as we have about their reputed powers suggests that the commonest types, such as amber and animal teeth, were thought to have very wide and rather generalised prophylactic effects. Panther cowrie shells such as those found in graves at Lechlade Butler's Field (see Fig. 4.33 above) may have been fertility amulets (Boyle *et al.* 1998).

In a recent discussion of the attitude of the church, John Blair suggests that Christianisation of the amuletic repertoire can be observed from the late 7th century onwards (2005, 171-5). Explicitly Christian objects appear in some graves; the appearance of beaver tooth pendants may even be associated with play on the Latin word *castor* (beaver) and its similarity to *castitas*, or 'virginity' (*ibid.*, 172-3). Such word play seems laboured to a modern audience, but was vastly admired, of course, by medieval scholarship. Leading church figures such as Cuthbert and Wilfrid wore crosses and relics, and the practice clearly spread, both amongst the religious and the laity, and is attested at numerous sites within the study area. The 'Black Cross' of the monks of Abingdon Abbey appears to have been a roundheaded pin with cruciform decoration (Fig. 6.37; Lambrick 1968, 27 and plate III). Objects found in graves in the study area are a pendant cross of sheet-bronze and silver foil among girdle mounts in Standlake I Grave 8, and a silver pendant cross from a necklace in Lechlade Butler's Field Grave 187 (Fig. 5.25). An iron and silver disc decorated with a cross, of the late 7th or 8th century, was recovered at Wraysbury (see Fig. 6.37; Hinton 1989, 90-92). At Eynsham a fragmentary copper alloy cross and a magnificent buckle plate with an incised Maltese cross on the split end were recovered (see Fig. 5.31 below). The cylindrical copper-alloy 'work box' containers found in Didcot Grave 12, and Lechlade

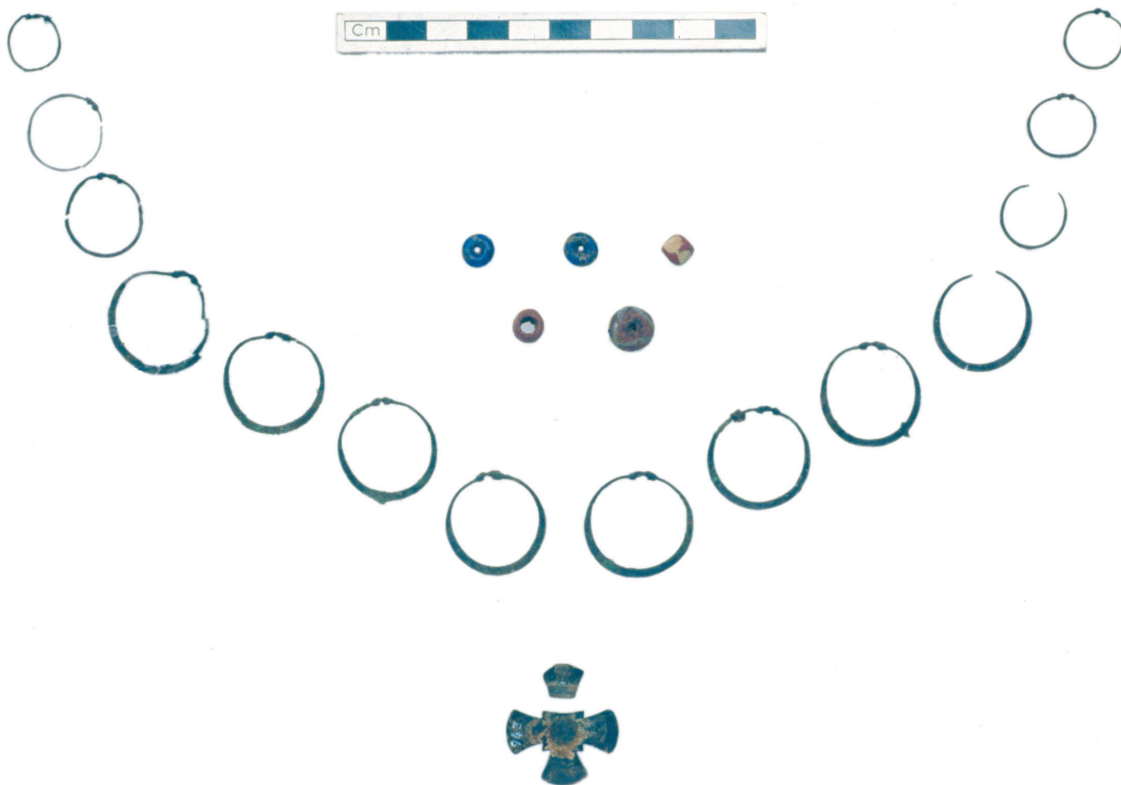


Fig. 5.25 A silver cross and necklace of silver wire rings from Grave 187 at Lechlade, Butler's Field

Grave 14 (see Fig. 4.33) may have been relic containers, analogous to the reliquary St Wilfrid wore around his neck and the capsule-like containers from Frankish graves, which have been interpreted as personal Christian amulets (Blair 2005, 171). Some examples of these objects, including one found just beyond the study area at North Leigh, Oxon, have Christian symbols on them.

Charms, which were very widespread, often involved the use of objects such as handfuls of earth, twigs or branches, bones and organs of animals, 'curing' stones, the burning of grain and so on, in magic rituals to heal human and animal disease, drive out devils, improve agricultural fertility, or foretell the future. Although such rituals will always be very hard, if not impossible, to detect in the archaeological record, some 'ritual' objects such as crystals, shaped stones and the remains of plants that are occasionally found in graves in the study area might have been associated with these practices. In the centuries following the conversion, many such charms were overlain with Christian symbolism; holy water, holy words, invocations of the saints, masses and psalms, replaced the older incantations that the church was so anxious to stamp out (Blair 2005, 483-4). As in the assimilation of folk customs into the ritual year (see below), the church was accommodating and sanctifying practices that it knew, in reality, could never be successfully suppressed.

Burial practice in the 5th to 7th centuries (Figs 5.26-5.27)

Archaeologists have traditionally looked to cemeteries for evidence of religious belief. However, we have no information that the early Anglo-Saxons, unlike their later Christian descendants, regarded death and burial as having any religious, as opposed to social, significance. We do not know whether there was any general belief in an afterlife, and there is no reason to think that grave goods were intended for the life after death. How far burial ritual and cemeteries can be associated with veneration of ancestors or with 'religious' belief in the survival, presence and power of their spirits remains unclear. Evidence from this period does suggest, however, that burial was deeply imbued with ritual significance. Much work has concentrated on how burial practice, particularly the deposition of grave goods, reflected aspects of personal and communal identity, and this is considered in detail in Chapter 4, above. The present account does not repeat the discussion of grave goods that can be found in Chapter 4, but highlights other aspects of burial practice in the study area.

Evidence for late Roman burial practice has been reviewed above, and it is clear that a variety of rites were in use in the study area during the 4th century. In broad terms, the burial rites of the early Anglo-Saxons were very similar to late Roman practices,

and there is no evidence for a revival of what are thought to have been Iron Age rites such as excarnation or river burial. The predominant form of burial in the study area in both the late Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods was inhumation, the body placed lying on its back, with the arms by the sides, folded or placed with the hands meeting at the waist. Variant body positions are not uncommon; during the Anglo-Saxon period, for example, some individuals were buried in a crouched position, or lying on their front (prone), but such burials are a small minority, and their significance remains a matter of debate. In both periods, a small number of people were buried in wooden coffins; the occasional practice of burial in lead coffins in the late Roman period does not appear to have continued into the 5th century. Cremation was a consistent minority rite in the study area in both the late Roman period and the early Anglo-Saxon period. Evidence suggests that there may have been a considerable influx of people who practised the cremation burial rite during the 5th century, as large numbers of cremation burials appear at this time at the cemetery at Abingdon Saxton Rd. Away from the towns, both late Roman and early Saxon cemeteries occur near to rural settlement sites, and graves are often grouped near to enclosure boundaries, and aligned on the boundary ditches. Graves in both periods followed predominant approximately north-south or east-west alignments; east-west alignment was particularly characteristic of the later 4th century and may be associated with Christianity, but north-south alignment is once again very common in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The practice of re-using prehistoric monuments is evident from the 4th century onwards, perhaps intensifying in the 7th century. In both periods, a small number of burials, often cremations, were placed within separate structures or enclosures in larger cemeteries, perhaps marking the burial site of a prestigious individual or family. The fairly common late Roman practice of decapitating corpses does not appear to have survived into the Anglo-Saxon period (although see above for the evidence from White Horse Hill). The clearest change, however, is a very marked intensification in the deposition of grave goods from the 5th century onwards (see Chapter 4, above). The high visibility of these characteristic grave goods has undoubtedly contributed to the identification of large numbers of cemeteries of this period. By contrast, both late Roman and later Anglo-Saxon burials with few or no grave goods remain harder to identify, and are probably under-represented in the archaeological record of the study area. The systematic recording and study of the many variables in Anglo-Saxon burial ritual, as opposed to the simple recovery of urns, skeletons and grave goods, is a relatively recent phenomenon. The best evidence comes from two of the most recent cemetery excavations, at Berinsfield and at Lechlade Butler's Field. The variety of burial rites at these two sites is illus-

trated in Figures 5.26 and 5.27, but the significance of these practices remains for the most part too unclear to justify extended discussion in the present context.

RITUAL AND RELIGION IN THE MID SAXON PERIOD

The conversion to Christianity (Fig. 5.28)

The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity during the 7th century was not a straightforward process. Despite their universal Christian bias, the written sources still convey an impression of the first half of the 7th century as a period of considerable religious uncertainty in England, and for much of the 7th century the old and new religions were in competition. The conversion of a king did not guarantee that he would have a Christian successor. Cynegils, king of the Upper Thames Valley people known as the Gewisse (later the West Saxons), was baptised *c* 635 (see below), but his son and successor Cenwalh was a pagan (Yorke 1990, 136), and as late as 685 the Gewisse/West Saxons were under the rule of the pagan Cædwalla, albeit soon to abdicate and retire to Rome for baptism (ibid., 136-7). With the benefit of hindsight the outcome appears to us to be obvious, but it probably did not appear so to most 7th-century inhabitants of the Thames Valley, and it is important to bear this in mind when considering the meaning of the archaeology of the period. Many of the people of the study area at this time might have echoed the complaint of Bede's Tyneside peasants, 'They have done away with all the old ways of worship and now nobody knows what to do' (*Life of St Cuthbert*, 3).

Much of what we know about the conversion of the English to Christianity comes from the early 8th-century writing of the Northumbrian monk, Bede. He is the source of the information that Cynegils was baptised by an Italian missionary, St Birinus, *c* 635. The conversion of a king was invariably followed by a gift of land to support the missionary, where he would establish his cathedral and missionary base. Pope Gregory had given explicit instructions to St Augustine's mission at the turn of the 7th century to establish bishoprics in places that had formerly been Roman towns, and the reuse of Roman centres is a feature of the earliest phase of the conversion process.

St Birinus was given the old Roman small town of Dorchester, where we must assume he established a cathedral and residence. The West Saxon bishopric at Dorchester was, in the event, to prove short-lived, and it was transferred to Winchester *c* 660 by Cynegils' successor Cenwalh, as the West Saxons retreated from the Thames Valley in the face of Mercian aggression. The Mercians seem to have

established a short-lived bishopric at Dorchester in the late 670s under a bishop Ætla (Blair 1994, 58), but thereafter the area was absorbed into the Mercian see of Lichfield and subsequently the Mercian see of Leicester (founded in 737; ibid., 59). Following the Viking occupation of Leicester, a see was re-established at Dorchester in the late 9th century, probably by the Mercian Ealdorman Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd (ibid., 111), which was to survive until the major Norman reorganisation of dioceses, when, in 1072, the bishopric was moved to Lincoln.

Several campaigns of excavation have been carried out within Dorchester that have revealed evidence from the mid to late Saxon period, but none of it can certainly be associated with the buildings of an episcopal community (Fig. 5.28). Recent excavations on the site of the present abbey buildings (see below) have revealed only the slightest possible evidence for the Saxon church. Elsewhere the buildings that have been excavated may have been associated with an episcopal or minster household, but they may equally represent the buildings of lay people who lived at, or visited, the town. Frere's excavations in the south-west of the Roman walled town (at the allotments) found evidence for a large wooden building of some size and pretensions, with an internal partition. There was no dating evidence beyond the fact that it post-dated a mid 6th-century sunken hut (see above; Frere 1962, 125-6, fig. 9), although two sherds of 8th- to 9th-century Badorf ware were recovered from a robber trench nearby. A series of gullies in the area may have been internal boundaries, and evidence for similar boundaries, together with more evidence for possible sunken huts was located by Richard Bradley at the Old Castle Inn site (1978).

Excavations in the north-west corner of the walled town, at the Beech House Hotel site, in 1972 recovered four phases of Anglo-Saxon activity (Fig. 5.28; Rowley and Brown 1981). The earliest was represented by two probable sunken huts. Subsequently up to six small (average 2 x 5 m) rectangular buildings were constructed on the site; the buildings survived as timber stains associated with spreads of limestone rubble, leading the excavator to suggest that they had been timber-framed structures (ibid., 12). The six buildings need not all have stood at the same time, and displayed little regularity of orientation, although two that were set at right-angles to one another could have formed part of a complex set around a courtyard. One of the buildings contained a possible hearth consisting of a dense patch of charcoal, burnt bone and burnt stones. The next phase of buildings recognised on the site comprised three or four very incompletely preserved structures that appear to have been constructed on limestone sills. The final phase of

Fig. 5.26 (overleaf) Feature: Burial practice at the 5th- and 6th-century cemetery at Wally Corner, Berinsfield, followed by Fig. 5.27 Feature: Burial practice at the 5th- to early 8th-century cemetery at Lechlade, Butler's Field

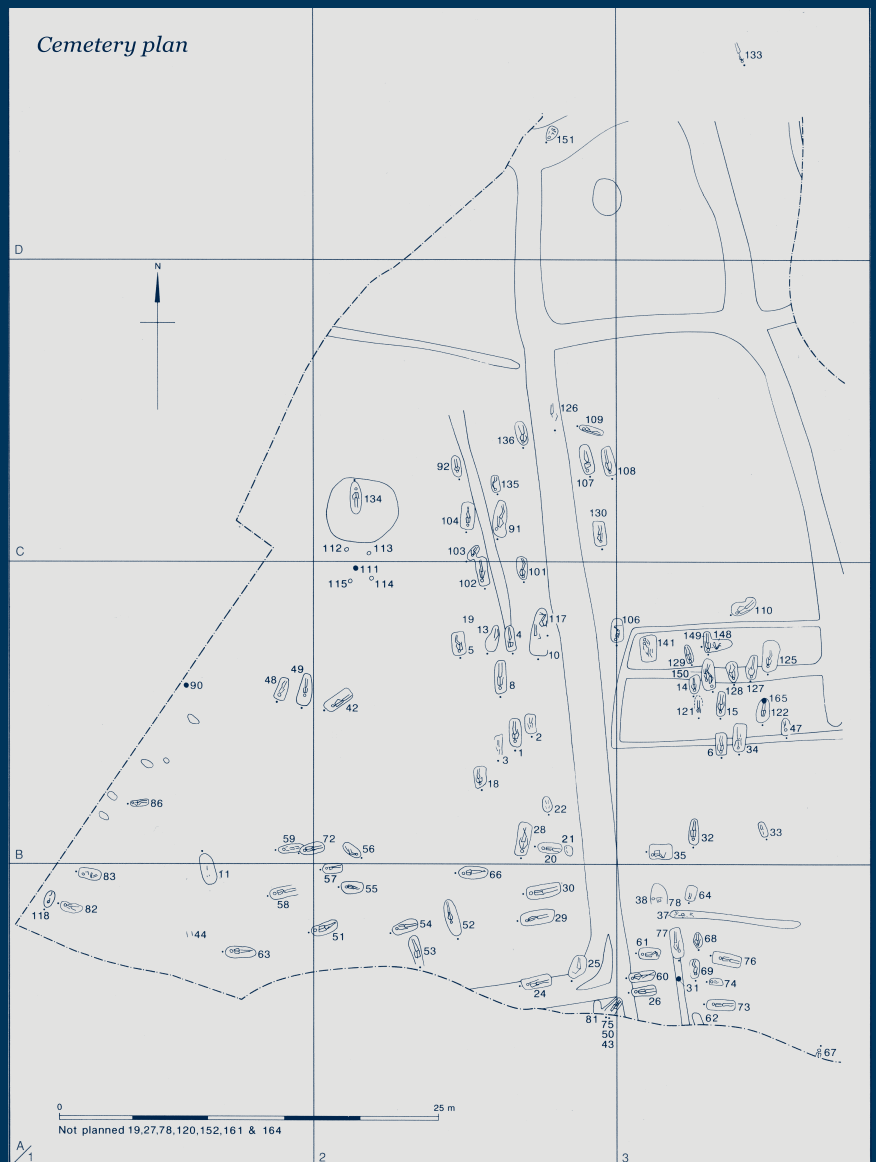
WALLY CORNER BERINSFIELD



Anglo Saxon burial practices

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wally Corner, Berinsfield, Oxon was discovered during gravel extraction in the summer of 1974. A total of 114 burials were excavated from 100 graves, and 4 cremations were found; twice this many may have been present originally. Burials had taken place here from the middle of the 5th century until the beginning of the 7th century, and the cemetery contained the remains of a mixed population of men, women and children.

The graves were aligned along the ditches of a Roman farmstead, and the people buried here were probably from households living nearby. Berinsfield is a typical Saxon cemetery of the period from the study area. Two thirds of the men had been buried with spears and shields, and two thirds of the women with brooches and beads. Most people were buried lying on their backs in individual graves. At Berinsfield, as elsewhere, however, there were some exceptions. The woman in Grave 83 had been buried lying on her right side in a crouched position. She was buried with two unusual brooches, and it is possible, although by no means certain, that she had come originally from a community with different traditions. The young man in Grave 69 was turned to the left; his shield had been placed over his face, a custom that is much commoner in Anglian cemeteries. Children were sometimes buried in multiple graves, as in Grave 150,



WALLY CORNER BERINSFIELD



where a girl of 14 and a child of 3 had been buried together in a manner that suggests they may have been related.

Most bodies seem to have been laid directly on the earth, with little evidence for coffins or grave linings. A small number of graves had been lined with stone, and one had charred logs down either side. Grave 134 contained the burial of a middle aged woman who had been placed in the centre of an early Bronze Age pond barrow. Immediately to the south were the remains of a cremated adult, who had been buried beneath a four-post structure. It has been suggested that these were miniature houses of the dead or family shrines, used over several generations. This area of the cemetery was otherwise relatively clear of graves, which suggests that these burials may have formed some kind of focus.



Clockwise from top left:

- * Excavation underway at Berinsfield in 1974
- * A classic male burial dating from the period c 475-550. This man, who died in his early twenties, was buried in a large grave with his spear and shield, and an iron-bound wooden vessel at his feet
- * Grave 83, an adult woman buried in a crouched position
- * Grave 69, a young man buried turned to the left, with his shield covering his face
- * Grave 150, a girl of 14 and a child of 3. The manner of their burial strongly suggests a family relationship
- * Grave 73, a woman in her early twenties buried in a grave lined with limestone blocks
- * Grave 104, a young adult buried in a grave lined with charred logs
- * Grave 107, a young woman in her late teens buried c 550 with a great square-headed brooch, a saucer brooch, amber and glass beads, and a collection of miscellaneous metalwork contained in a bag suspended from an ivory ring
- * Grave 134, a middle aged Anglo-Saxon woman buried in a re-used Bronze Age barrow; in the foreground, the remains of a four-post structure, perhaps a miniature house of the dead, with the cremated remains of an adult inside



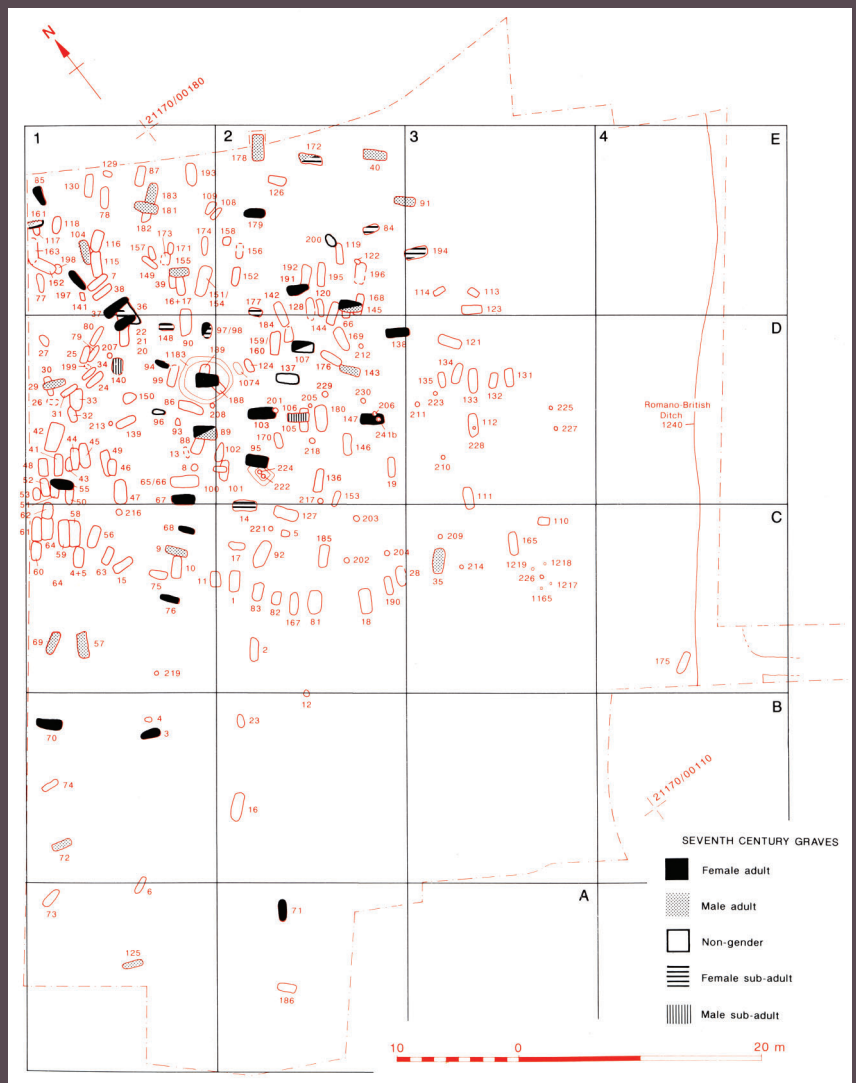
LECHLADE BUTLERS FIELD



Anglo Saxon burial practices

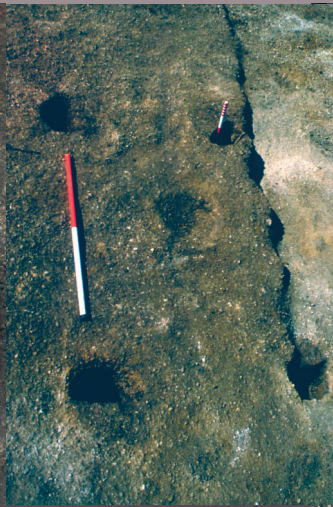
The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Butler's Field, Lechlade, Glos was discovered during housing development in 1985. It is one of the richest cemeteries ever found in the Upper Thames Valley, and exceptional in that it remained in use from the late 5th century throughout the 6th and 7th centuries. A total of 219 burials were recovered from 199 graves, and 29 cremations were found. It is likely that the cemetery was originally more extensive, and it is estimated that between 50 and 75% of it was excavated.

The cemetery was adjacent to a number of Roman enclosure ditches, in an area that had previously been an early Bronze Age ritual focus, and the site of an early Iron Age roundhouse. Just over two thirds of 6th-century male burials were accompanied by shields and spears, and a similar proportion of female burials were accompanied by brooches. However, during the 7th century the great majority of men had no weapons; the four who were buried with weapons all had seaxes, which might have become a sign of particular status. Women continued to be buried with jewellery, but of a completely different style. Most people were buried lying on their backs in individual graves, although three were buried prone (lying on their front), and one appeared to have been propped up in a sitting position. Sixteen graves contained more than one burial, and Grave 81, which



Cemetery plan: 7th-century graves are highlighted. The remainder are mostly of the later 5th and 6th centuries, although a small number are undatable

LECHLADE BUTLERS FIELD



contained five individuals, may have been a family tomb. Traces of wood indicative of coffins were found in two graves, and a small number had stone linings. Evidence that bodies were placed on, and covered by, rush mats was recovered from two graves.

Two structures associated with cremations were identified, one a four-post structure and the other a rectangular ditched enclosure. Ledges identified along the side of Grave 180 may have supported a lid or mortuary structure. A woman in her early thirties (Grave 187) had been buried under a mound, represented by a surviving ring ditch; she had been buried with a silver cross suggesting that she may have been a Christian.

Clockwise from top left:

**Aerial view of the cemetery under excavation (looking south)*

**Grave 13, a child of 2½-3½ years buried with a pot, a disc brooch and a bone needle or pin*

**A rectangular ditched structure with one of two central cremations*

**Grave 11, a child of 6-8 years buried with saucer brooches, beads and two vessels, a bronze-bound wooden 'bucket' and a brass Perlandbecker bowl*

**A four-post structure surrounding the central cremation of an adult*

**Grave 172, a 7th-century male burial with two spears, a seax (a single-edged sword) and an iron-bound wooden 'bucket'*

**Grave 126, aged 14-15 years, one of three individuals buried in a prone (face-down) position*

**Grave 81, a large grave lined and capped with limestone, which appears to have been dug for more than one burial and may have been a family tomb. The remains of two young women and three young children were present. On the right of the grave is a woman in her*

late twenties with her arm around a toddler aged 15 to 18 months

**A cremation*

**Grave 187, inside a ring ditch, probably dug in the late 7th century through the remains of earlier burials*



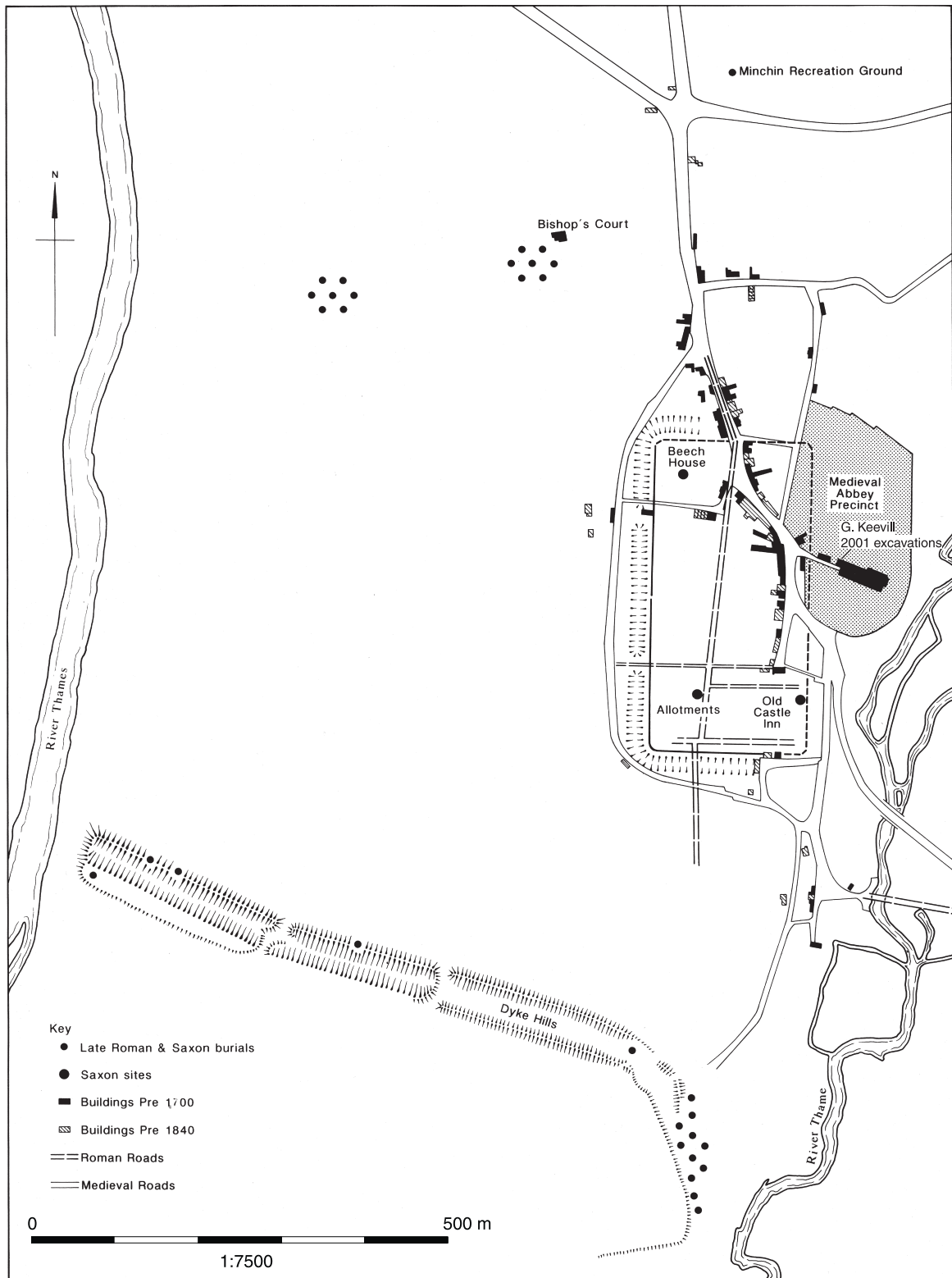
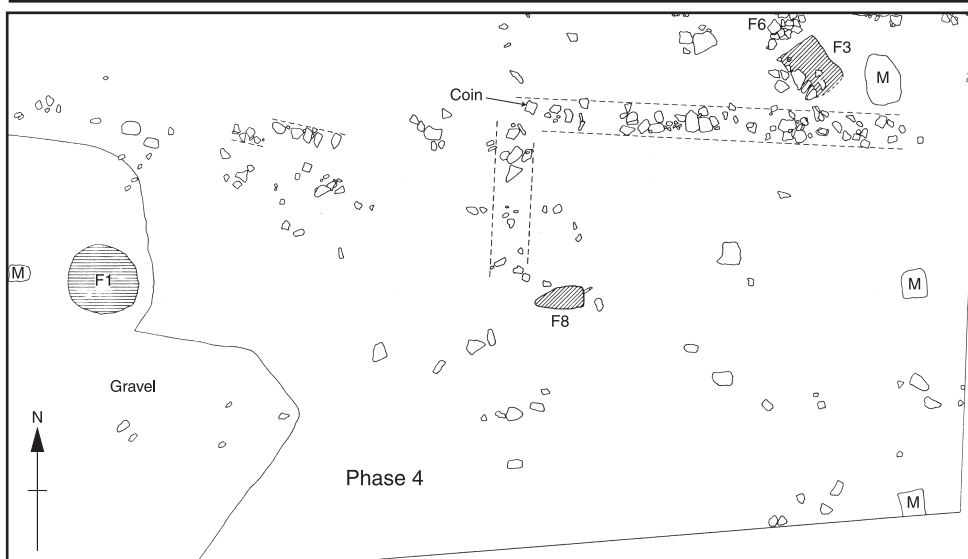
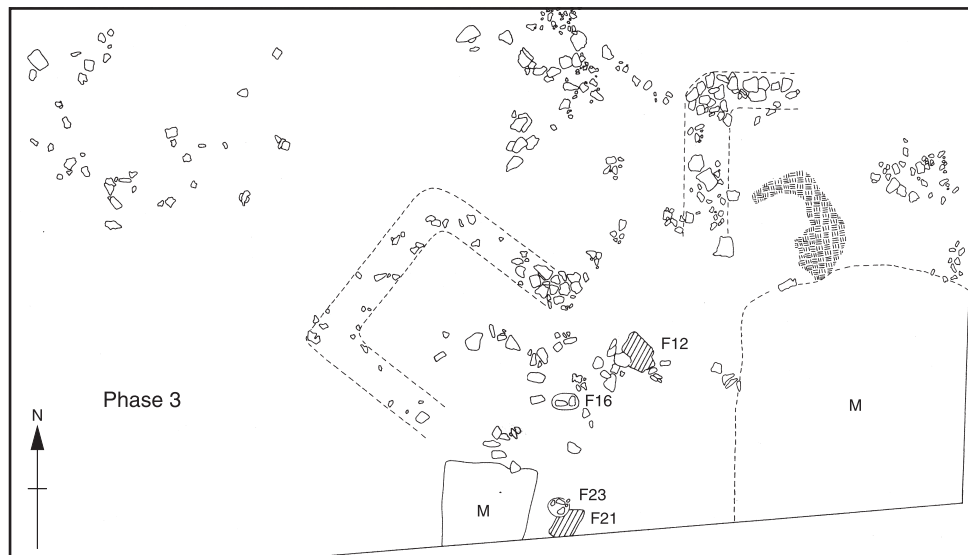
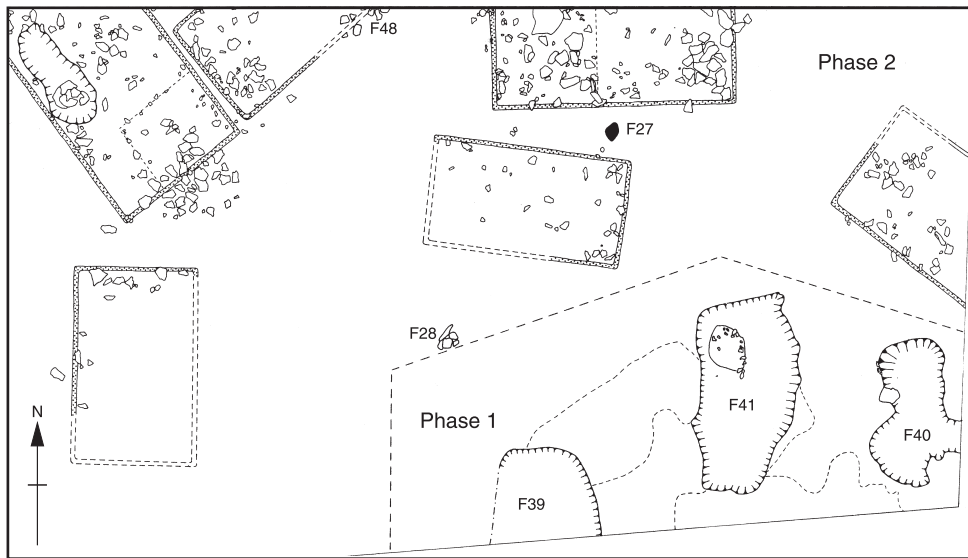


Fig. 5.28 Dorchester-on-Thames: (above) the location of excavations; (facing page) Anglo-Saxon features from excavations at the Beech House Hotel

Chapter 5



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Saxon buildings comprised parts of two mortared limestone walls forming the north-west corner of an east-west building; a silver penny of Burgred of Mercia (852-874) was recovered from one of the walls. A hearth was found at the west end of this building.

Most recently, small-scale excavations outside the north wall of the present Dorchester Abbey (constructed in the 11th-12th century) have located the remains of a large sunken hut (Keevill 2003). Subsequently a post-in-trench building was constructed on the site, of which only part of the west wall was seen in the excavations. After a period of disuse, a second building of similar form (although with more widely spaced posts) was constructed. Both phases of timber building were considered by the excavator to be domestic in character, and could have been part of a mid Saxon minster complex. The position of these buildings, which extended beneath the north wall of the standing church, suggests that its Saxon predecessor(s) may have been on a more southerly alignment than has generally been thought. A short length of wall incorporating re-used Roman tile was observed in a pipe trench north of the east end of the church, and may have been associated with the Saxon cathedral (*ibid.*, 358). An interesting group of finds from the site are discussed in Chapter 6, below.

Elsewhere, the evidence remains very slight. Traces of an extramural settlement of 6th- or 7th-century date, together with parts of 6th- and 7th-century cemeteries have been identified to the west of the walled town (Hawkes 1986, 88 and fig. 7), between the town and the Thames. A very unusual bronze lock for a book or casket, made in the form of two bearded human heads in profile, was recovered in this area from the upper fill of an enigmatic rectangular enclosure known as the Bishop's Court Rectangle (May 1977 fig. 1). Stray finds from the town include a gold and garnet pyramidal stud, now lost (Dickinson 1974, 25-30) and three gold coins (two *solidi* and an Anglo-Saxon runic gold coin probably contemporary with the Crondall hoard, c 640-650; *ibid.*, 25). Tania Dickinson has suggested that the stud has strong affinities with the Sutton Hoo workshop, and the coins and the stud could be evidence for a jeweller working for a very high status patron in the vicinity some time in the first third of the 7th century (*ibid.*, 29-30).

From around the mid 7th century, we see the first evidence for the appearance of a new group of ecclesiastical sites, monasteries or nunneries with staffs of priests that were known as minsters. These were set up under royal and ecclesiastical patronage, and were often ruled by members of the royal families themselves and supported by very large landed endowments. The minsters, of which Dorchester itself would have been one, were the most important (indeed probably the only) churches in the study area until the 10th century. A comprehensive review of the evidence for minsters at a national level has recently been

published by John Blair (2005), and the local evidence is considered in more detail below.

Beliefs

How far lay people in the mid Saxon period genuinely understood and practised the Christian religion is unclear. Accounts of heroic mass baptisms in documentary sources such as Stephen's *Life of St Wilfrid* must arouse suspicion that many people were coerced into conversion, or converted in order to align themselves with new groups and powers in society in the hope of personal gain. However, the deeply ingrained belief in loyalty to one's (secular) lord may have meant that people were content to follow a decision that their leader had taken (Blair 2005, 179-80). The early minster churches served large areas, and at first pastoral care must have been intermittent, at best, for those beyond the ambit of a royal court or a bishop's household. Documentary sources suggest that new renders in kind to endow the church may have been imposed by kings from the mid 7th century onwards (Blair 2005, 156-7). In return, it was expected that priests under the authority of bishops and minsters would travel around among rural settlements to teach, and to administer sacraments (*ibid.*, 161-2). By the late Saxon period documentary sources suggest the regular involvement of the laity in church rituals, such as observation of fasts and feasts, processions for Rogationtide and saints' days, baptism and burial, as well as some of the Christianised charms discussed above. Many of these rites can be seen to be associated explicitly with minster churches, rather than the growing number of local churches, but how early or consistently they became established is very hard to say. John Blair suggests 'diminishing circles of engagement', in which those who worked on monastic land, or provided goods or services to monastic communities, would have been more closely bound into the system than those whose involvement was more remote (*ibid.*, 180). The provision of churches appears generally to have followed patterns of topography and population distribution, and John Blair suggests that by the year 800 most people living in England outside the highland zone would have been within what they would have considered a reasonable walking distance from a minster (*ibid.*, 152 and fig. 19). The question of belief is difficult to approach through archaeological evidence, but some sign of its spread may come from the increasing popularity of declaring belief through the use of Christian symbols on fine metalwork (Evans 1991, 22; see above for evidence in the study area). A lead crucifix set with mother-of pearl nails of 10th- or 11th-century date has recently been found in excavations at the site of the late Saxon St Martin's church in Wallingford. A pierced scallop shell found with a burial at the same site may be the earliest archaeological evidence in the study area for pilgrimage (see Fig. 5.38).

Pope Gregory eventually decided that the Christianisation of pagan shrines would be a better course of action than wholesale destruction, and his views are contained in his letter to Bishop Mellitus of 601. Although the nature and condition of pagan shrines at this time is quite uncertain (see above), the most convincing evidence that this may have happened in the study area comes from Bampton. Here it seems likely that a mid Saxon minster was constructed on the site of a group of Bronze Age barrows, while the presence of a Roman altar with a relief of Fortuna also suggests that there had been a pagan shrine in the vicinity (see above). In addition, a pre-Christian Saxon burial ground a short distance to the east, at a site known as the Beam (probably the origin of the place-name of Bampton) may have been transformed into a Christian focus later preserved in the chapel of St Andrew (see below). The deliberate Christianisation of pagan cult centres would, of course, have had the added effect of ensuring that they could not form focal points for pagan opposition to the church. There is no other clear evidence in the study area for the Christianisation of ancestral cemeteries by the building of a church, although it has been suggested that the strange location of Dorchester Abbey outside the walls of the old Roman town might signify the earlier presence of a Christian martyr cult in a Roman extra-mural cemetery (Doggett 1986, 53-7). It seems unlikely that shift in cemetery location in the 7th century can be directly related to Christianity, although the church clearly exercised an important influence from the 8th century onwards (see below, and Chapter 4 above).

An allied phenomenon, perhaps, is the deliberate creation of Christian cult centres. John Blair has drawn attention to the traditions of local saints associated with minster churches in Oxfordshire, including, within the study area, the cult of St Frideswide at Oxford and St Beornwald at Bampton (1994, 53-4, 73-7). The cults were focused on the relics of the saints, which were kept at the minster churches and were undoubtedly believed to possess great power. It seems likely that every minster church at this period would have had the relics of a local saint, a number of whom can be identified as associated with the founding family of the minster, or the first abess. The suggested reconstruction of the 9th-century minster church at Cirencester (see below) emphasises the importance of relics in religious rituals of this period. At Cirencester, it is likely that the main altar was raised above a crypt, probably for relics, in an apse at the east end of the church.

The legends associated with these saints commonly incorporate journeys in which the saint visits a number of different places in the locality. Thus the legend of St Frideswide associates her with Bampton, Binsey and Oxford, and with travel between them on the river Thames. Bampton and Oxford are both likely to have been mid Saxon minster churches (see below), and Binsey church

with its holy well has been shown to stand on the north edge of an oval enclosure formed by a ditch and stone revetment associated with scraps of early Anglo-Saxon pottery; an 8th-century coin is also said to have been found nearby (Blair 1994, 67 and fig. 47). The travels of the saints may therefore preserve a memory of the creation or adaptation of cult sites in the countryside. Such legends could also be attached to more reliably attested figures, and Kidd notes a local tradition that St Birinus carried out baptisms at Bapsey Pond, near to Taplow (2004, 107).

How long pagan beliefs persisted in the area is very difficult to assess. Some commentators have seen the princely barrow burials of the 7th century as a deliberate assertion of pagan opposition to the new religion (see Blair 2005, 53 n 167 for a summary of literature). John Blair (*ibid.*) has argued that they represent a 'striving for a monumental expression of status' rather than an ideological statement. The fact that church burial had not been widely adopted by Anglo-Saxon royalty and nobility during the 7th century suggests that barrow burial would have remained an option open to an individual of Christian belief, as well as to an adherent of the old gods. The situation is probably too complex to admit of a single explanation. The total cremation burial at Asthall, for example, is most unlikely to have been attended by any Christian rites, but equally there is no evidence that the church necessarily expected to be involved in such matters (see Chapter 7 for barrow burials). It was probably the gradual Christianisation of charms, amulets, rituals of the agricultural year, and the creation of new local cults and cult centres, that ultimately convinced people to abandon the old gods with confidence. The process accommodated ordinary people's widespread belief in the efficacy of magic, and the spiritual power of natural features and places, in an acceptable Christian framework.

The minster churches of the Thames Valley (Figs 5.29-5.32)

In a review of the evidence for Thames minsters, John Blair (1996) has mapped and described some 33 places lying within three miles of the river, at which there is documentary evidence for churches of superior status at some time before the 12th century. He comments (*ibid.*, 7) that the Thames corridor, from source to estuary, contained an exceptional number of exceptionally important communities. On topographical grounds, minster sites appear to show a strong bias towards headlands or islands formed on the gravel terraces (*ibid.*, 9), beside the main course of the Thames itself, or one of its tributaries. Although documentary references are rarely so early (the early charter of 672-4 relating to Chertsey being an exception), the most important minsters were probably established and richly endowed during the first great period of monastic foundation in Anglo-Saxon

England, the two or three generations from the 660s to the 730s (*ibid.*, 5-6). This sets the main period of minster foundation in the Thames Valley firmly in the context of Mercian expansion into the area. From the mid 7th century, much of the area was taken under Mercian control, and was largely to remain so for the next two hundred years. The Mercian kings may have had a variety of motives for the establishment of minster churches in the study area. There seems no reason to doubt that genuine piety and enthusiasm for the religious life played a large part in these early foundations, but political and economic factors will also have been significant. Many of the Thames Valley minsters were founded on sites of strategic significance, at river confluences, crossings, and elevated positions overlooking the Thames and its tributaries, and apparently in control of huge estates.

A small number of sites, Cirencester, Bampton, Eynsham, Oxford, Dorchester and Staines have seen a considerable amount of work. Elsewhere, archaeological evidence for the minsters themselves remains very scarce, and what is known about them is considered more briefly. The evidence is reviewed working downstream from Gloucestershire. The present chapter focuses on what is known about the ecclesiastical presence at these places; many of them were also the location of royal residences and incipient late Saxon towns, and the evidence for this can be found in Chapter 3, above.

At the head of the valley, on the very edge of the study area, was the old Roman town of Cirencester, on the west bank of the Churn. Domesday Book is the only surviving historical record of the existence of a pre-Conquest minster here, and there is no reliable evidence for the date or circumstances of its foundation (Evans 1998). Antiquarian tradition attributes the foundation of the minster to 'Alwyn, a Saxon, in the time of King Egbert'; although this is entirely uncorroborated, the foundation of a minster here some time in the 830s or 840s under his patronage (although within the kingdom of Mercia) is a possibility (*ibid.*). Remarkably, however, excavations here in the 1960s have revealed the plan of a very elaborate church, which remains the only minster church plan of this period known from the study area (Wilkinson and McWhirr 1998; Fig. 5.29). The church was constructed within the old Roman town, over the remains of an elaborate courtyard building. Quantities of reused Roman masonry were incorporated in the foundations, the size and quality of the blocks suggesting that they had come from a prestigious public building. The church was built with a nave 6.4 m in width and in excess of 30 m in length, flanked by aisles, with major and minor apses and a ring crypt at the east end. At the west end of the nave was a forebuilding providing an impressive west facade, probably with one or more upper storeys. Figure 5.29 shows Richard Gem's proposed reconstruction of this building (*ibid.*, 32-9 and figs 26 and 27 for much of what follows). The crypt, located beneath the main apse, is likely to

have contained a relic-chamber, although this has not been defined by excavation. The sanctuary, located above the crypt, must have been at a higher level than the nave, and would have been approached by a significant flight of steps. This would have been the very impressive location of the main altar, directly above the relics in the crypt below; the space around the main altar may have been used by clergy, or for further altars. The purpose of the smaller eastern apse is unclear, but Richard Gem suggests it may well have been used for the burials of important people. The building is likely to date from the 9th century, with a date in the earlier half of the century more probable. There is now growing evidence for a period of strong Carolingian influence on English building during the 9th century, and Cirencester must be seen as a major representative of the trend. Some evidence of domestic structures and occupation in the vicinity is likely to relate to late 11th-century occupation at the minster (*ibid.*, 41).

It remains unclear whether there was a mid Saxon church at Cricklade, although a minster existed here by the period 971 x 973 when it was mentioned in a will (Blair 1996, 18-19). The minster church of St Sampson, later the mother church of the hundred, is located in the south-west quarter of the town, on comparatively high ground (Haslam 2003, fig. 6c), although it is unclear whether it existed before the fortification of the site as a *burh* (see Chapter 3). Haslam has recently commented that there is as yet very little evidence for a mid Saxon presence in Cricklade. Only a few sherds of mid Saxon pottery have so far been recovered (*ibid.*, part 4, conclusion), and a fragment of a silver strap-end with decoration in the 9th-century Trewhiddle style was found in the churchyard of St Sampson's in the 1890s (Hinton 1974, 15-16 no. 7). Haslam suggests that Purton, not far to the south, might be a better candidate for a mid Saxon minster, with St Sampson's itself possibly post-dating the creation of the *burh*. The estate of Purton, which would have included Cricklade, was given to Malmesbury in 688 by King Cædwalla of Wessex, and recovered by Offa roughly a century later.

The first documentary evidence for the minster at Bampton dates to the 950s, at which point it housed a religious community venerating the relics of an otherwise unknown saint called Beornwald (Blair 1994, 63). No Saxon ecclesiastical buildings have yet been revealed by excavation here. John Blair has suggested, however, that the striking alignment of the medieval main church, two chapels of the 11th and 12th centuries and a holy well is reminiscent of the linear groups of churches characteristic of the 7th to 9th centuries (*ibid.*, 64), and the origins of this group of religious structures may lie in the pre-Viking period. The main church was located in the south-west part of a large oval enclosure of Anglo-Saxon date, whose outline partly survives in the modern street plan (Fig. 5.30; *ibid.*, fig. 44; Blair 1998a figs 1 and 2). The south side of the present

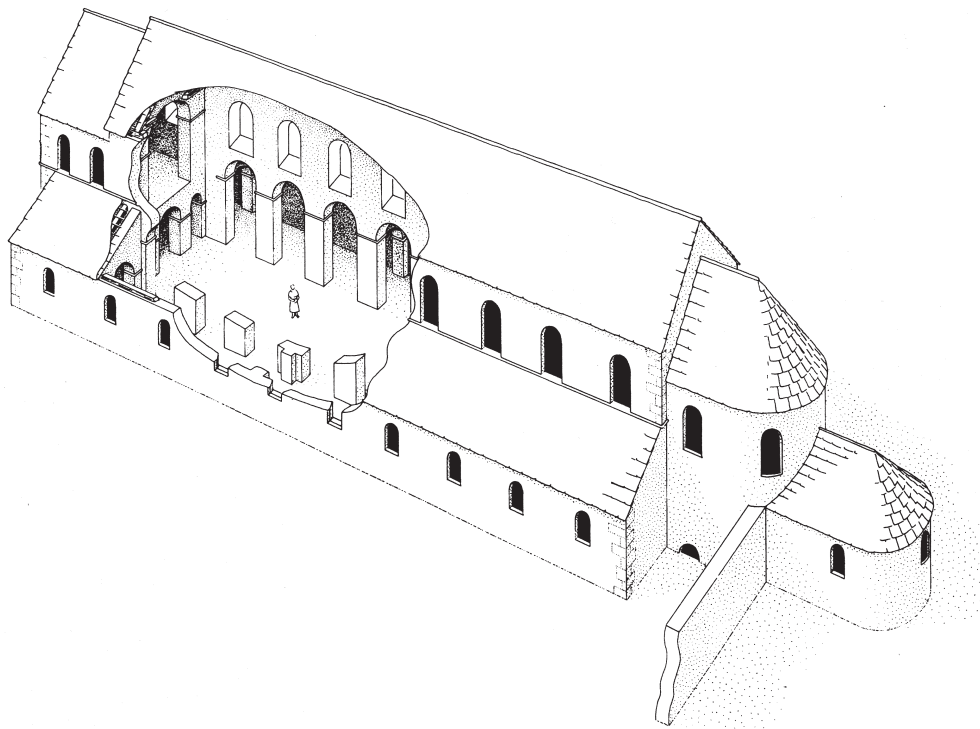
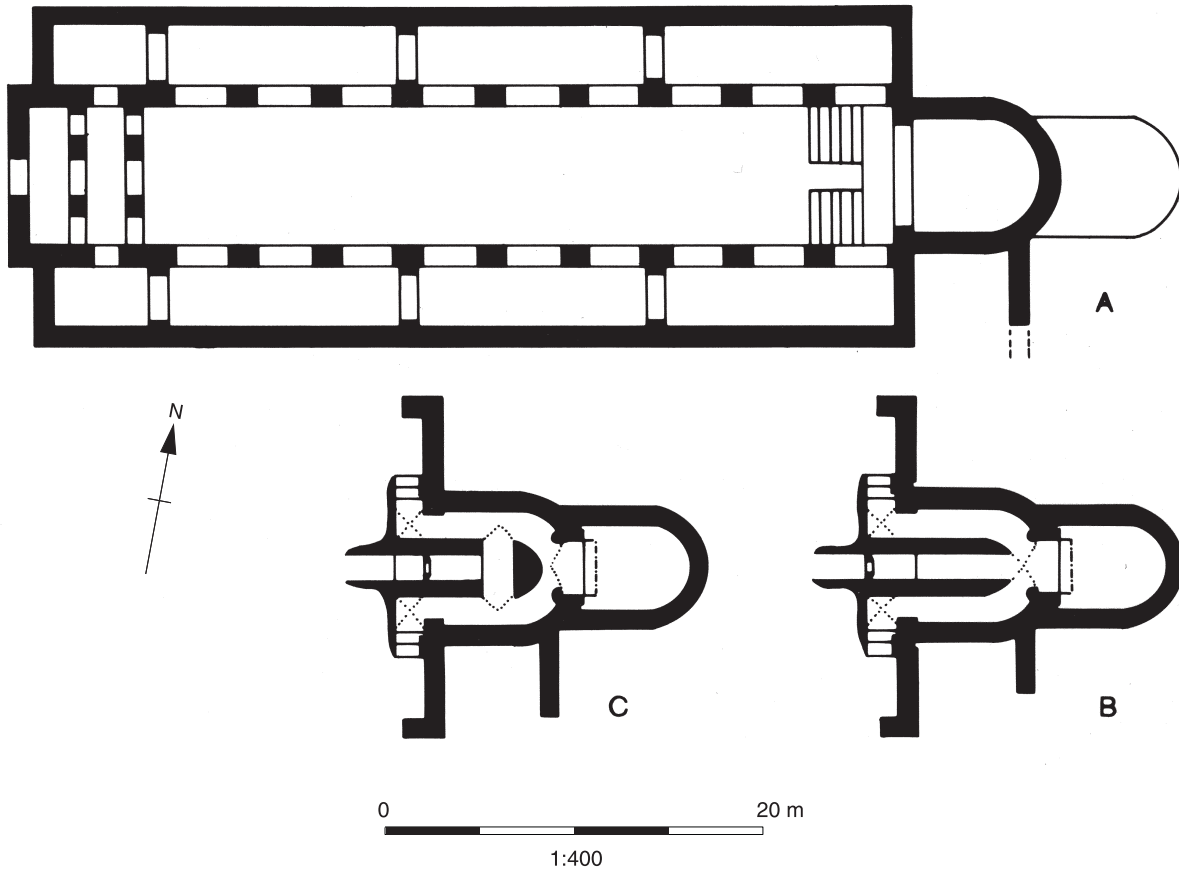


Fig. 5.29 Cirencester: the 9th-century minster church

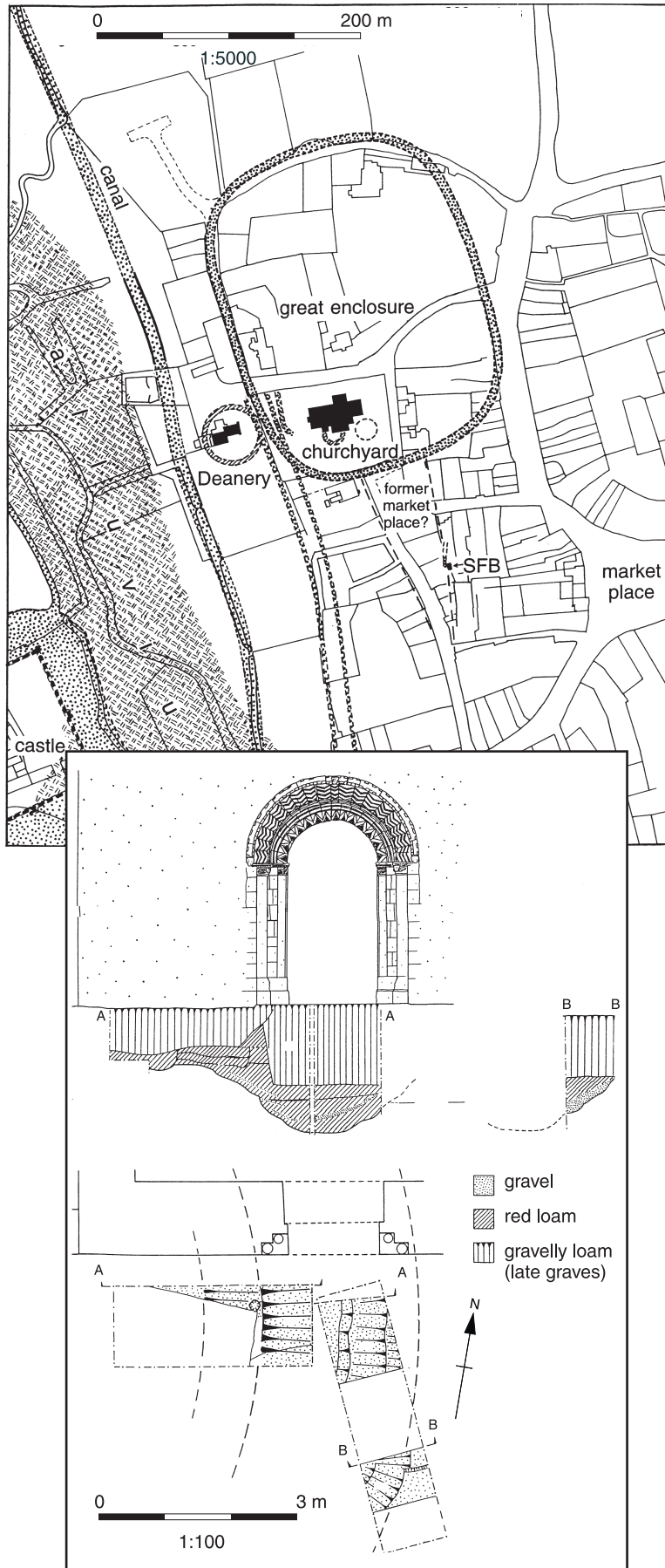


Fig. 5.30 Bampton: the probable minster enclosure, and late Saxon burials

church in this position has been shown to overlie a Bronze Age ring ditch, and three Anglo-Saxon burials have recently been found cut into its edge. A chapel was constructed in the late 11th century within a second ring ditch to the west of the enclosure, and a third barrow mound possibly lies immediately south-east of the main church (Blair 1998a, *passim*). Several burials, one accompanied by a 7th-century pin, have been found at a site known by the 14th century as 'The Beam', some 800 m east of the church enclosure (Blair 1994, 64 and fig. 44), where the 12th-century chapel of St Andrew stands. A settlement appears to have grown up south of the minster enclosure, and a definite late sunken hut (and a second possible one) have now been excavated in this area (see Chapter 3, above). Recent research suggests that a 7 m-wide canal of impressive length was constructed here during the late Anglo-Saxon period, connecting the Shill Brook at Black Bourton with the Highmoor Brook at Bampton, and continuing through Bampton itself and eastwards to the river in a form that shows compelling evidence of being an artificial cut (Blair forthcoming; also Blair 1998a, 47-9 and figs 1 and 2). Possible pagan shrines, and a mid Saxon settlement associated with finds of Ipswich Ware, have recently been excavated at Black Bourton (JMHS 2006; see above and Chapter 3). The important excavated evidence for the mid Saxon minster at Eynsham is considered in Figure 5.31.

St Frideswide's minster at Oxford is first mentioned in written sources in 1004, but there is a long tradition that her church was a foundation of the late 7th or early 8th century on the site that is today occupied by Christ Church and Oxford Cathedral. No structural remains of a minster have yet been located, but numerous burials of the Anglo-Saxon period have now been found on the site and seem more likely than not to derive from a minster graveyard (see this chapter, below). A number of these have been radiocarbon dated to the 8th to 10th centuries, but a burial found in the most recent work on the site has been radiocarbon dated to the period cal AD 620-690. This provides the strongest archaeological evidence to date for the foundation of a minster church here by the end of the 7th century (Dodd (ed.) 2003, 17-19). The presumed site of the minster lies at the south edge of the 2nd gravel terrace on which Oxford is built, overlooking what would have been at the time a steep drop to the Thames below. There is good evidence that a major crossing of the river was established here during the mid Saxon period, exploiting a series of alluvial islands. Numerous piles from a wooden trestle bridge crossing the river channels have been identified in excavation, one of which has been radiocarbon dated to the period cal AD 660-900 (Dodd (ed.) 2003, 15). It is very likely that this mid Saxon activity is to be associated with a minster settlement,

although the possibility that Oxford was originally established as a Mercian bridgehead fortress cannot be ruled out on present evidence.

Abingdon, at the confluence of the Thames and the Ock, has considerable evidence for a concentration of early Saxon occupation (see Chapter 3, above and Fig. 3.53), although no mid Saxon sites have yet been identified in the town. There is a strong tradition of a mid Saxon minster here, the chief sources for which are three documents produced by the abbey itself in the medieval period: the 12th-century recension of the chronicle-cartulary (BL Cotton Claud. C. ix); the 13th-century revision of the chronicle-cartulary (BL Cotton Claud. B. vi); and a narrative known as *De Abbatibus Abbendoniae*, apparently put together in the period c 1189/90-1221 (see Kelly 2000, cxciv-ccx for much of what follows). The traditions preserved by the medieval abbey appear to contain genuine early information, but also much speculation, extrapolation and 'strategic invention'. The information they can offer us is considered here in some detail for two reasons. Firstly because the recent edition of Abingdon's Anglo-Saxon charters by Susan Kelly provides considerable clarification of these problematic sources, and secondly because the stories associated with the foundation of Abingdon cast rare and valuable light on the earliest stage of minster foundation in the study area. The abbey clearly at some stage had access to documents and/or traditions relating to the foundation of a minster at Bradfield, on the river Pang (Kelly 2000, nos 1-4 and commentary). Four charters, none of which is genuine in its present form, record that a nobleman called Hæha (or Hean) founded a monastery on land given to him by a sub-king called Cissa. This land appears to have been seized, and then restored to Hæha, by Ine (king of Wessex 688-726). Associated with Hæha in the land grants is his sister Ceolswith (usually referred to by the shortened form Cilla), and it seems very likely that they were founding a double monastery, at first ruled by Cilla as abbess, and subsequently by Hæha as abbot. The Bradfield charters presumably at some point came into the possession of Abingdon Abbey, but, as Susan Kelly points out, it is not impossible that they originally had no connection with it. A tradition preserved at Abingdon associated its foundation with Ine's predecessor, Cædwalla, which Susan Kelly suggests has some measure of credibility. A slightly different account comes from the version in the *De Abbatibus* narrative. This sets the foundation in the reign of the West Saxon king Centwine (possibly identifiable in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as reigning between 676 and 685). In this account, in 675 a sub-king called Cissa made over to his nephew Hæha a site at *abbendun* for the foundation of a minster. Hæha added some of his own property to the endowment, and gave another part of his inheritance to his sister

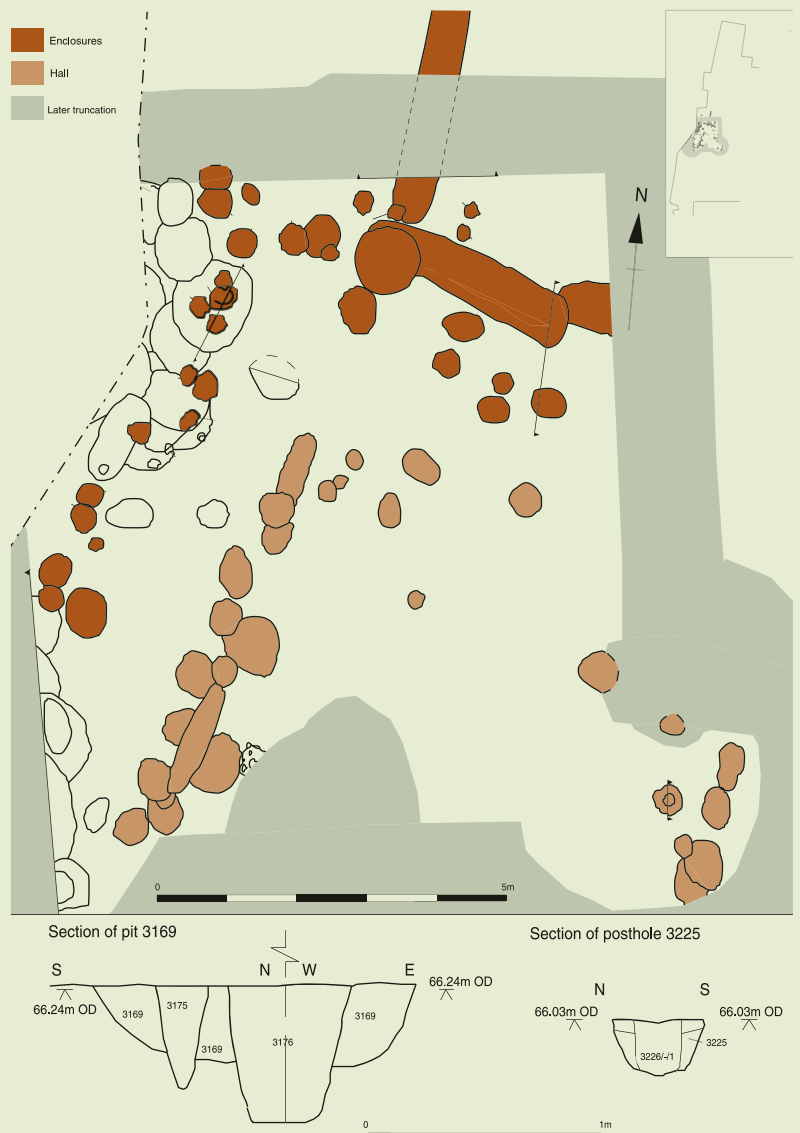
Fig. 5.31 (overleaf) Feature: Eynsham: the 8th- to 10th-century minster

MID SAXON EYNSHAM

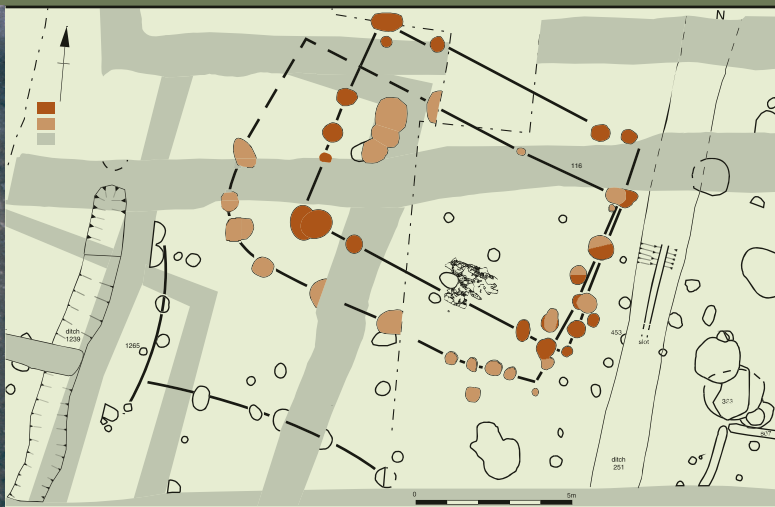


The most thorough investigations of a minster site to date have taken place at Eynsham, Oxon (Hardy et al. 2003). A small number of early Saxon sunken huts were found during the excavations, but the first sign of a significant change of use at the site is datable to the early years of the 8th century. Around this time, a number of very substantial hearths were being used for outdoor cooking, and it seems unlikely that anything on this scale would have been needed at an ordinary farm. Food remains had been disposed of in a very large pit, and these were strongly suggestive of high-status occupation and feasting: prime meat bones of red and roe deer, marine fish such as ray and bullrout, oysters, crane and partridge, and grapes (represented by a single seed). Two sceattas of early 8th-century date were found in fills of the pit, and a third, probably minted in the second quarter of the 8th century, was found a few metres away.

This was followed by the first evidence for formal organisation of space beginning with a pit alignment at the west edge of excavation, that was subsequently replaced by a fence defining an enclosure containing a hall in its north-west corner. Two small ditches at right-angles to each other suggest a second enclosure to the north. The building may have been comparatively small, if its east-west dimension of 7 m represents its long axis; alternatively, if this was



MID SAXON EYNSHAM



the short axis it could have been very large indeed. Originally constructed of earthfast posts, this building appears to have been reconstructed using the post-in-trench technique at a later date. A second postbuilt structure was recorded 9 m to the east and may have been another building. A Northumbrian styca probably datable to the period after 855 was found in its vicinity. The presence of a few unstratified sherds of Ipswich ware in the pottery assemblage suggests that there was also occupation at the site during the second half of the 8th century.

The existence of a minster church at Eynsham is not explicitly mentioned in documentary sources until 864, but it may be the place referred to in an agreement of c 821 in which an estate of 300 hides *æt Iogneshomme* was given to King Coenwulf of Mercia by the Archbishop of Canterbury, apparently under some duress. There was no sign that the minster had suffered any serious attack during the period of the Viking wars. During the 10th century, a new ditched enclosure was laid out on the same alignment as before, but of much more substantial form. A timber hall was constructed towards the north end of the enclosure, and was rebuilt on at least one occasion. This may have been a building of some pretensions, as a large fragment of its plaster wall had fallen into the top of a nearby pit. The plaster had been applied to a framework of wattles between

timber uprights. A fence line to the south-west suggests that the building may have been within a small private close inside a larger enclosure. A substantial group of finds was recovered datable to this phase of activity, including a fine buckle plate probably made in the late 9th century. The presence of features beyond the main ditch suggests that this may have been only one of a number of enclosures arranged around a central church, as has been suggested for the excavated episcopal palace site at North Elmham (Wade-Martins 1980). The excavated building and its enclosure at Eynsham is likely to have been the house of a minster priest set inside its own enclosure amongst a number of others for further members of the community.

Clockwise from top left:

- *The site under excavation*
- *The very large pit, 394*
- *The fragment of plaster wall*
- *Two phases of the 10th-century hall*
- *The 10th-century hall under excavation*
- *The mid Saxon enclosures and building*

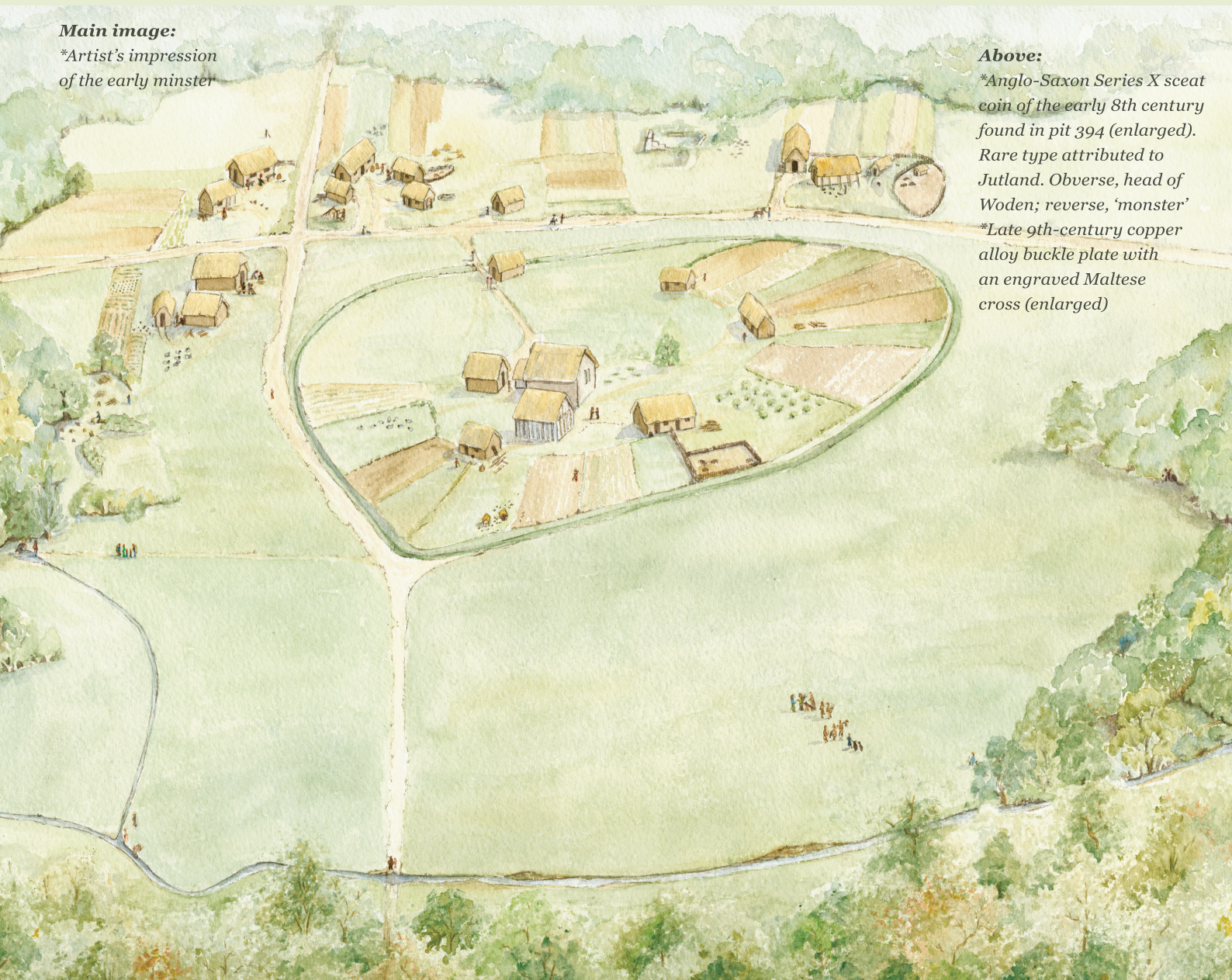


MID SAXON EYNSHAM



Main image:

**Artist's impression
of the early minster*



Above:

**Anglo-Saxon Series X sceat
coin of the early 8th century
found in pit 394 (enlarged).
Rare type attributed to
Jutland. Obverse, head of
Woden; reverse, 'monster'
*Late 9th-century copper
alloy buckle plate with
an engraved Maltese cross
(enlarged)*

Cilla, who founded a nunnery by the Thames at *Helenstowe*, which can be associated with the site of the existing St Helen's Church, on the banks of the Thames (see Fig. 3.53). The placename *abbendun*, ostensibly meaning *Æbbe/a's hill*, seems inappropriate for the low-lying riverside settlement of Abingdon, and it is suggested that the original site of Hæha's monastery may have been the *abbendun* mentioned in a boundary clause of a charter of 956, in the vicinity of Boar's Hill. Susan Kelly notes that there may be some connection here with the St Ebbe of St Ebbe's church in Oxford. The tradition has it that Hæha subsequently relocated his monastery to a place called *Seouecesham*, which is probably to be identified with modern Abingdon. The new site was probably, although not certainly, the site of the refounded abbey of the 10th century. The *Seouecesham* tradition is supported by the fact that it contains the same first element, a personal name *Seofoca*, as is found in Seacourt in nearby Wytham. The final element of this tradition has it that Cilla's community of nuns was subsequently transferred to Wytham after her death, and dispersed during the warfare between Offa of Mercia and Cynewulf of Wessex (between 758 and 786). From all of this, we can perhaps suggest the strong likelihood that a house of nuns, and probably a double minster, was founded at Abingdon in the late 7th century, possibly as a daughter-house of a minster at Bradfield. Some support for this comes from the evidence of the 'Black Cross of Abingdon', an open-work disc-headed pin with cruciform decoration, of a type that is clearly associated elsewhere with religious houses of women of this period (Fig. 6.37; Biddle *et al.* 1968, 27-8 and plate iii). The *De Abbatibus* 'describes' how this object (now lost) was found by the monks of St Æthelwold's abbey on the site of St Helen's *monasterium*, and how it had been made, at Cilla's command, from a nail of the Crucifixion, and buried with her when she died. The topography of Abingdon offers further support for the idea that St Helen's was a very early focal point (see Chapter 3, above). Subsequently, the medieval sources claim that the minster at Abingdon was sacked by the Vikings, and it appears that from the time of King Alfred until c 955 Abingdon was taken over for the site of a royal vill. The refoundation of Abingdon as the second of the reformed Benedictine houses of the 10th century is considered further below. Whether another early minster existed a short distance up the Ock at Marcham remains very uncertain (Blair 1996, 20-21).

The church at Dorchester is considered above. The foundation of the minster at Bradfield, which is known from documentary sources associated with Abingdon Abbey, has been discussed above. There is no indication that it retained any significance in the later Anglo-Saxon period or later (Blair 1996, 22). The earliest documentary reference to a settlement at Reading dates from 870-871, when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the Viking army wintered there and repulsed the attacks of

King Æthelred of Wessex and his brother Alfred (later King Alfred the Great). In his biography of King Alfred, Asser records that the Vikings built a rampart between the rivers Thames and Kennet 'on the right hand side of the royal vill' (Astill 1978, 75). Astill (*ibid.*) has suggested that the 'royal vill' mentioned by Asser could have been situated around the area of St Mary's church, later identifiable as the mother church of Reading, where a coffin containing a hoard of 9th-century coins was found. A nunnery may have been in existence at Reading by the 11th century, and was possibly founded during the reign of King Edgar (959-78); Domesday Book records that Reading church and eight hides were held by Abbess Leveva in the time of Edward the Confessor (Blair 1996, 22). The nunnery had ceased to function by 1071, when William the Conqueror granted the estate to his new foundation of Battle Abbey in Sussex. There is currently very little archaeological evidence for a minster at Reading. The recent discovery of a sherd of Ipswich ware provides the first good evidence for mid Saxon occupation at the site (Norton and Poore forthcoming), while recent work at the Oracle Centre development has identified a group of large, regularly spaced latrine pits that may have been associated with a late Saxon minster settlement. Roman tile and brick re-used as post-packing and make-up in a nearby timber building of the late 11th century might just possibly have come from a demolished minster, which could also have been the source of a stone lamp found on a floor surface of the same structure (Ford *et al.* forthcoming).

Sonning was apparently a second seat of the bishops of Ramsbury during the late Saxon period, and later a large episcopal manor (Blair 1996, 23). Small-scale excavations have recently taken place here, near to the present church and vicarage of St Andrew (Hull and Hall 1998-2003). A grant of land by the Dean of Sarum for the Vicar of Sonning's house is thought to date from the immediate post-Conquest period (*ibid.*, 92), and it is likely that the excavations were located within this area. The bishop's palace itself is thought to lie approximately 100 m to the south. The excavations recovered five redeposited sherds of early to mid Saxon organic-tempered pottery and pottery in a coarse shell-tempered fabric, of unidentified source, which is thought to be of 10th- or 11th-century date. Only a single gully was datable to the late Saxon period, most of the evidence dating from the 11th to the 14th centuries and presumably associated with successive vicars at the site. No evidence suggestive of an episcopal residence was identifiable.

Cookham was an important early minster, whose existence is confirmed in documentary sources as early as 798 (Blair 1996, 23). A memorandum at Christ Church Canterbury records that King Æthelbald gave the minster to Christ Church. It then passed to Cynewulf of Wessex, and was subsequently seized, along with many other 'towns' by Offa. Its value at this time is suggested by the fact

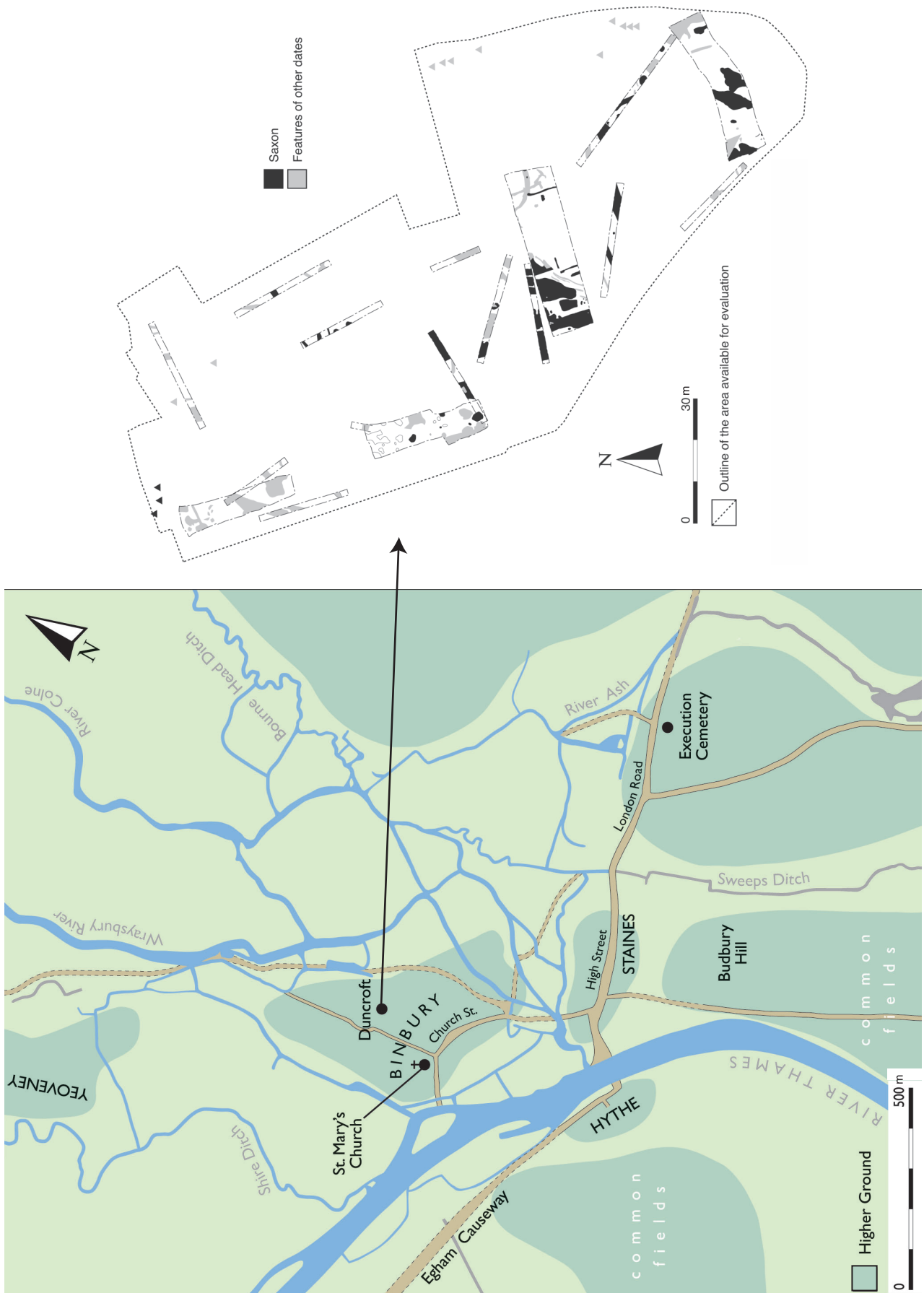
that the Archbishop of Canterbury was given 110 hides in Kent to compensate for its loss (Blair 1996, 23). It is very likely that subsequently the great minster estate was broken up for smaller land grants. By the time of Domesday Book it appears as a royal manor of 8 hides, with a residual 2-hide holding belonging to the church, held by Regenbald the chancellor, and two clerks (see Chapter 3, above). Cookham's importance as a crossing of the Thames may date back to the Roman period, and the burghal hidage fort of *Scaftesege* was constructed here on the island of Sashes (see Chapter 3, above). Despite its importance very little is known of it archaeologically, and the area has generally been protected from development in recent years. It is conspicuous, however, for having evidence of early Saxon occupation nearby, and may have been a relatively long-lived settlement focus. At Bray, there is very little information, although it is clear that there was Saxon settlement there from the reported finds at Hoveringham Pit. However, no further details of this are available. (CBA9 2 (1972), 12-13). The important royal centre at Old Windsor is discussed in Chapter 3, above. John Blair suggests that former minster status for the church here is implied by the Domesday reference to a holding of 3 hides divided between Albert the clerk and the priest of the vill, suggesting the partition of a church endowment. Although important results have been obtained at Old Windsor from excavation, they unfortunately remain unpublished.

The town of Staines was built over a group of islands rising out of the floodplain at the confluence of the Colne and the Thames (Fig. 5.32). The Roman town of Pontibus was centred on the 'High Street' island, which was also to form the core of the medieval town from the 12th century onwards. Evidence for a Saxon presence on this island is limited, and may reflect a genuinely low level of occupation; it is not thought that this retained any form of urban character (Poulton 1987, 207-8). The most consistent remains, which may be early Saxon in date, are riverside gullies, ditches and a possible slipway, which are likely to be the remains of a system of flood defences (see Chapter 6, below). During the mid and late Saxon period, however, occupation shifted northwards onto Binbury island, possibly in response to flooding of the 'High Street' island. Binbury may have been the site of a royal manor (Jones 1982, 210-11) and a minster church. Saxon pottery was recovered here during excavations at the Courage Brewery site in 1986. Further work was carried out in the grounds of Duncroft House; this house, of Jacobean origins, is located close to St Mary's Church, probably the site of the

minster church, and its site is thought likely to have been the manorial centre of the large medieval manor of Staines held by Westminster Abbey (Robertson 1999; see also Jones 1982). The first certain documentary reference to a minster church here is in Domesday Book. However, a forged charter which purports to record the grant of a monastery (*coenobium*) at Staines to the abbey in 969 may incorporate authentic information (Blair 1996, 24). The Duncroft excavations revealed a number of ditches and gullies that probably represent enclosure boundaries. Finds evidence suggests a settlement where weaving, ironworking and crop processing were taking place, and included a 9th-century strap end with a zoomorphic terminal; a strap end in Trehiddle style with niello inlay recovered by metal detecting may also be from the same site. Other finds include two awls, bone points that may have been weaving tools, numerous Niedermendig lava quern fragments, fired clay (a few fragments showing grooves or wattle impressions), some fifty loomweight fragments and hones. The lack of evidence for buildings at what was obviously an occupied settlement remains puzzling. It is possible that the excavated site was at the northern end of the settlement, and therefore located only field and plot boundaries and working areas. However, a number of other sites are known that show concentrations of finds of this period but an absence of features, and it is possible that buildings may have been constructed on sill-beams or padstones at ground level.

The minster at Chertsey is known to have been founded in the 660s, and it was endowed with a very large estate comprising most of north-west Surrey (Blair 1996, 24). It was refounded as a house of secular clerks in 884 (Blair 1991, 94), following attack by the Vikings, and subsequently refounded (from Abingdon) as a Benedictine abbey in 964. A major rebuilding of the monastery is known to have begun in 1110, and extensive excavations on the site have uncovered a wealth of evidence for the appearance of the monastic precinct in the 12th century and later (Poulton 1988). This may have obliterated much of the earlier evidence, but fragments of walling discovered in the area of the south-east corner of the cloister and north transept were earlier than the Norman walls. Some very recent small scale work (pers. comm. Rob Poulton) has produced a small amount of pre-conquest pottery from the abbey site. This seems sufficient to confirm that the Saxon minster was in broadly the same location as the Norman and later abbey. There has been some excavation in the town (Poulton 1998b; Jones 1998) and work there has found

Fig. 5.32 (opposite) Staines. (Left) topography of the area and key features of the post-Roman settlement pattern. Only the areas of higher ground were free from seasonal flooding and suitable for settlement. London Road follows the course of the Roman road, although where it crossed the river remains uncertain. The High Street island was the focus of the Roman and medieval town, but Binbury was more important in the Saxon period. (Right) plan of the Saxon features excavated at Duncroft



nothing earlier than the 12th century, and it would seem that until then the abbey was not associated with a settlement of any size.

Kingston was an important royal estate centre in the late Saxon period. At least two and possibly as many as seven late Saxon kings are known to have been crowned there between 901 and 979, suggesting the presence of a very important church. The limited archaeological evidence is summarised in Chapter 3, above.

THE LATE SAXON PERIOD

The late Saxon church (Figs 5.33-5.36)

The effects of the Vikings on the English church have been the subject of some debate. The mid Saxon minsters were in some cases aristocratic institutions possessed of great wealth, and were undoubtedly a target for Viking attacks. If a mid Saxon minster existed at Reading, it seems unlikely that it could have survived the Viking winter camp of 870-71. In the 10th century, the minster at Abingdon was said to be in ruins after the attacks of the Danes, and the minster at Chertsey was sacked by the Vikings in the late 9th century. It is widely accepted, however, that there had been a catastrophic decline in English monasticism since the early 9th century, and in the

opinion of contemporaries this had as much to do with a loss of zeal for the monastic life as to the actions of the Vikings. John Blair has recently suggested that Viking attacks played an important but not all-determining part in the decline of the great mid Saxon minsters (2005, 291-5 and fig. 35). He draws attention to other factors leading to a general secularisation of minsters: annexation by kings, lords and religious corporations (*ibid.*, 323-9) and urbanisation (*ibid.*, 330-41). This evidence is considered in more detail in Chapter 3, above. There is, in fact, good evidence in the study area that minsters did continue to function in the late 9th and early 10th century. There is no evidence for interruption in burial at St Frideswide's in Oxford in the 9th and 10th centuries. The bishopric at Dorchester was re-established in the late 9th century, and the minster at Chertsey was refounded, apparently as a house of secular clerks, in 884 (Blair 1991, 94). There is no evidence at Eynsham to suggest any interruption in occupation of the site attributable to Vikings, although a reorganisation was evident in the excavated area in the 10th century, and may have been associated with a similar revival or refoundation.

During the course of the 10th century, however, major changes were to take place in English monasticism with the reintroduction from the continent of regular observance according to the rule of St

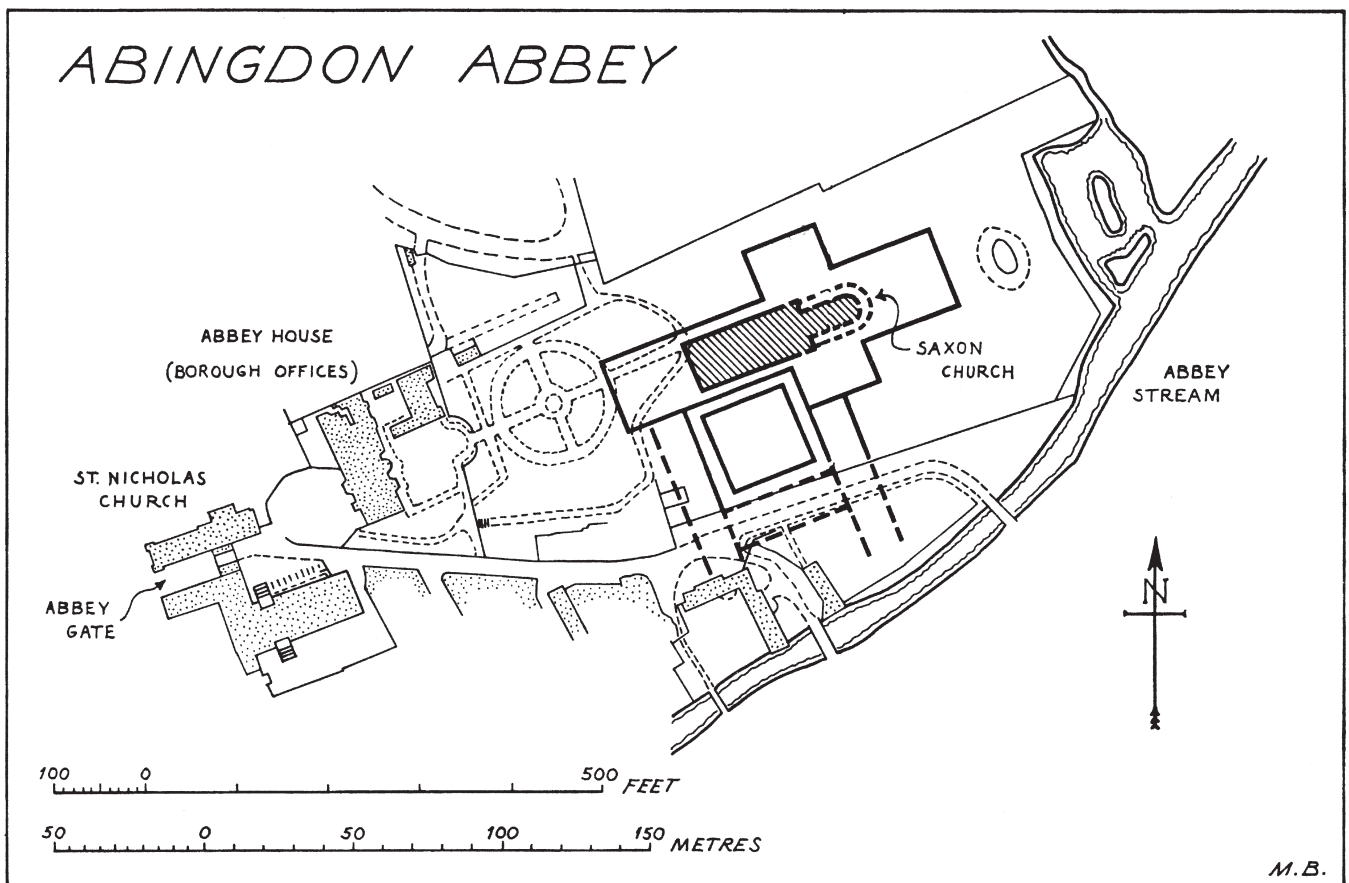


Fig. 5.33 Abingdon: the medieval and Anglo-Saxon abbey church

Benedict. The effects of this were first felt in the study area at Abingdon, with the foundation of a new monastery under St Æthelwold in 955, and some 9 years later at Chertsey, where the secular clerks were expelled and monks from Abingdon installed (Blair 1991, 94). Æthelwold, the first abbot of the reformed monastery at Abingdon, was one of the leaders of the reform movement. The form of his monastery remains somewhat unclear. Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham, who certainly knew Æthelwold personally, records that the patron of the monastery, King Eadred, was himself involved in the surveying and design of new buildings (Biddle *et al.* 1968, 44). On the other hand, the *De Abbatibus* claimed that Æthelwold found intact and took pains to conserve twelve monastic cells and twelve 'chapels' that were supposed to have survived from the days of the presumed founder, Abbot Hæha (Kelly 2000, cci). According to this source, these cells were arranged around a church 120 ft long, with apses at its east and west ends, located on the site of the later *cellarium* of the abbey (*ibid.*). Documentary references suggest that the late Saxon abbey possessed a refectory, cloister, dormitory and chapter house, and a double mill and millstream that were constructed in Æthelwold's time (Biddle *et al.* 1968, 45-6). Excavations undertaken in 1922 to locate the medieval abbey also found traces of very large Saxon church below the nave and crossing of the Norman church, although the identification of this with St Æthelwold remains uncertain. A possible Saxon cemetery was also identified south of the Norman nave. An account of the excavation results can be found in Biddle *et al.* 1968, and the plan showing the location of the very large Saxon church is reproduced here as Figure 5.33 (Biddle *et al.* 1968, fig 11).

Cholsey was founded (or refounded) as a Benedictine Abbey in the early 990s, although its monastic status soon lapsed (Blair 1996, 22). Elsewhere, the minsters at Bampton, Oxford, Eynsham and Cookham appear to have continued to function in the late Saxon period, and a nunnery may have been founded (or refounded) at Reading. Minsters at Cricklade and Staines may both have been given to Westminster Abbey during this period, continuing to function as regional mother churches; a late Saxon minster at Bray is implied by the later status of its church, and the 10th-century royal coronation site at Kingston implies the existence of a major church there (*ibid.*, 23-25). One of the last acts of the Benedictine reform was the refoundation of the minster at Eynsham as a regular Benedictine Abbey in 1005. Excavations here have provided a very clear view of this change in practice, and the evidence is presented in Figure 5.34.

The appearance of the private local church with its own priest is evident in documentary sources from around the middle of the 10th century. Churches of this type proliferated over the period

between c 950 and 1100, and emerge in the 12th century as the parish churches familiar to us from the medieval period onwards. In origin, many of these churches were built by the thegns who held the rapidly evolving small local estates of the period. Others, however, may have been established by lay magnates or ecclesiastical landlords to serve their far-flung estates. John Blair notes that Chertsey Abbey's outlying manors appear in Domesday Book as unusually well supplied with churches, with the notable exception of the large block of land around the abbey itself, where the old minster parochial system may have been maintained for the people of the core estate (Fig. 5.35; Blair 1991, 114, 129, 131). The appearance of small local churches on 10th- and 11th-century estates has been confirmed by excavation in numerous places, but evidence remains very slight within the study area. In his recent review, John Blair suggests that the combination of evidence from excavation, surviving architectural remains and documentary sources such as Domesday Book suggests that local churches may not have developed at a consistent rate across the country (2005, 417-22 and fig. 50). Evidence is abundant in eastern and south-eastern England, but the sources for most of the Upper and Middle Thames show a much slower rate of development, which may not simply reflect hazards of survival and incomplete recording, but the reality of the day. Was the development of local churches actually rather later in the midland belt of strongly nucleated villages and homogeneous farming communities (*ibid.*, 421)? At Woodeaton, the remains of a timber church of the early to mid 11th century were discovered underlying the present building (Blair 1998b, 221-37). This included evidence for a wall constructed using close-set studs or upright planks set into a timber slot, the narrow gaps between them filled with square-sectioned columns of daub formed around bundles of wattles. This is very similar to the form of construction of the plaster wall from a 10th-century hall found at Eynsham Abbey (see Fig. 5.31). This timber church at Woodeaton appears to have burnt down and it was replaced by a stone 'tower-nave' church in the late 11th century. A church at Taplow has been identified from parch marks and geophysical survey (see Chapter 3, above); whether this is a mid or late Saxon church remains at present unclear. Similarly, there is only very limited evidence for surviving architecture of the late Saxon period in the study area. Three churches in the Upper and Middle Thames (Inglesham, Waterperry and South Moreton) may have remains datable to before c 1050; a second large group focused on the south Cotswolds are datable to the period of overlapping Anglo-Saxon and Norman architecture, c 1050-1120 (Ampney Crucis, Ampney St Peter, Coln Rogers, Daglingworth, Duntisbourne Rouse, Edgeworth,

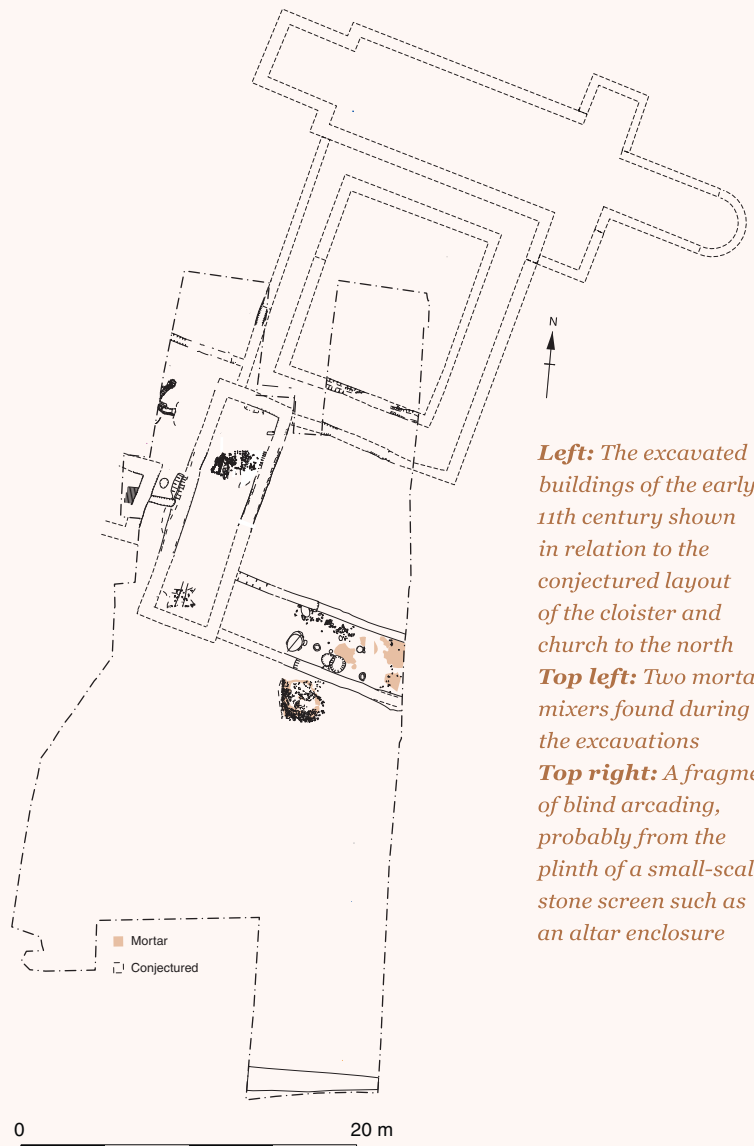
Fig. 5.34 (overleaf) Feature: Eynsham: the reformed Benedictine monastery of 1005

SAXON EYNSHAM OXFORDSHIRE



In 1005, Eynsham was refounded as a regular Benedictine monastery under the patronage of Ealdorman Aethelmaer, and with the leading churchman Aelfric as its first abbot. The excavations revealed evidence for part of the formal claustral layout of this phase which is of great value for the very close date-range that can be applied to it (see below). The buildings were of mortared stone construction, and the probable position of the excavated structures in relationship to the main church is suggested in the conjectural plan (right).

Five distinct buildings or ranges were revealed. The main element is a large rectangular hall towards the edge of the excavation on a north-south alignment. There were few finds to suggest the function of this building other than a possible soakaway; a refectory or dormitory are both possibilities, although the lack of any sign of a latrine makes the latter unlikely. To the west of the hall were a cellared building and soakaway, and this was later to be the site of the monastic kitchen, which perhaps adds weight to the suggestion that the hall itself was a refectory. A narrow range ran across the north end of the hall, and this is interpreted as the south range of a cloister, the major part of which lay beyond the area of excavations. A second range ran eastwards from the south end of the hall.



Left: The excavated buildings of the early 11th century shown in relation to the conjectured layout of the cloister and church to the north

Top left: Two mortar mixers found during the excavations

Top right: A fragment of blind arcading, probably from the plinth of a small-scale stone screen such as an altar enclosure

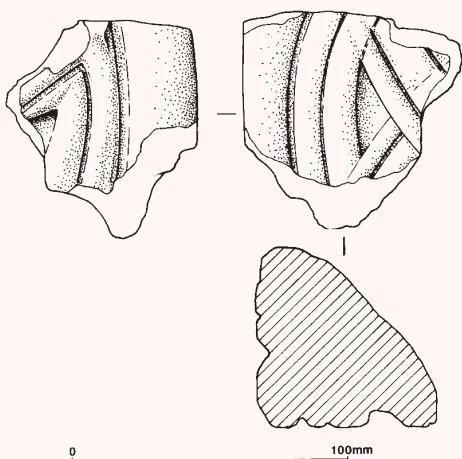
SAXON EYNESHAM OXFORDSHIRE



This appears to have been a lightly built timber or stone range constructed against a more substantial southern wall, and a scatter of pits and small hearths suggests it may have been used for light industrial or domestic craft activity. The space enclosed by the hall and the two ranges seems to have remained as an open yard or garden.

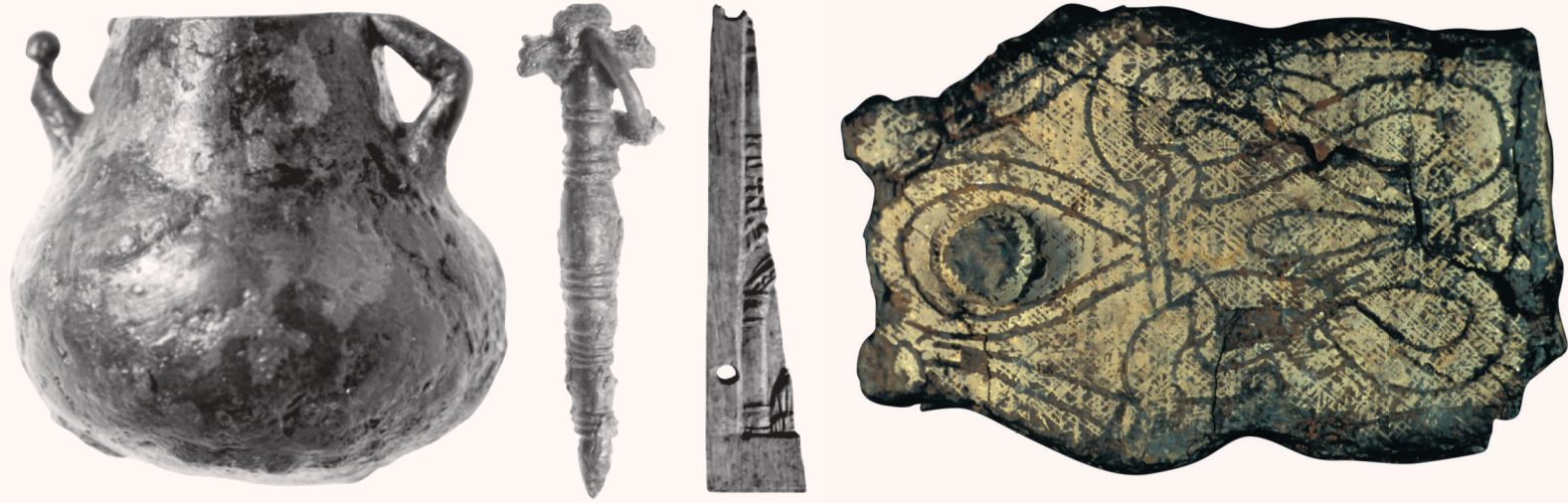
A boundary ditch, probably the boundary ditch of the monastery, was identified at the south edge of the excavation.

Almost nothing survived of the superstructure of the abbey. Only a fragment of a carved cross shaft and a fragment of blind arcading, perhaps from a plinth, were recovered.



Clockwise from top left:
 *Artist's reconstruction of the 11th-century reformed abbey
 *Artist's reconstruction of a mortar mixer in use
 *Unfinished fragment of walrus ivory carving, probably St John for a crucifixion scene (enlarged)
 *Fragment of stone with interlace carving, possibly from a 10th-century cross shaft

SAXON EYNESHAM OXFORDSHIRE



The two most significant finds were fragments of carved ivory. The first is from a small panel of elephant ivory and shows the start of a row of arches. Important figures, perhaps saints or apostles, would have stood within the arches, and the panel was probably for a book cover, a casket or a portable altar. The second is a fragment of walrus ivory and is probably to be interpreted as an unfinished figure of St John the Evangelist. This suggests that ivories like this were being carved at the abbey itself.

Other finds included a probable stylus (above centre), a miniature copper alloy vessel (above left), perhaps for precious oil or incense and an elaborate stirrup strap mount (above right).

Documentary evidence suggests that the abbey was abandoned after the Norman Conquest, and most of its assets were transferred to a new foundation at Stow, Lincs. It was subsequently refounded for the third and last time in 1109, when a completely new set of buildings was constructed.

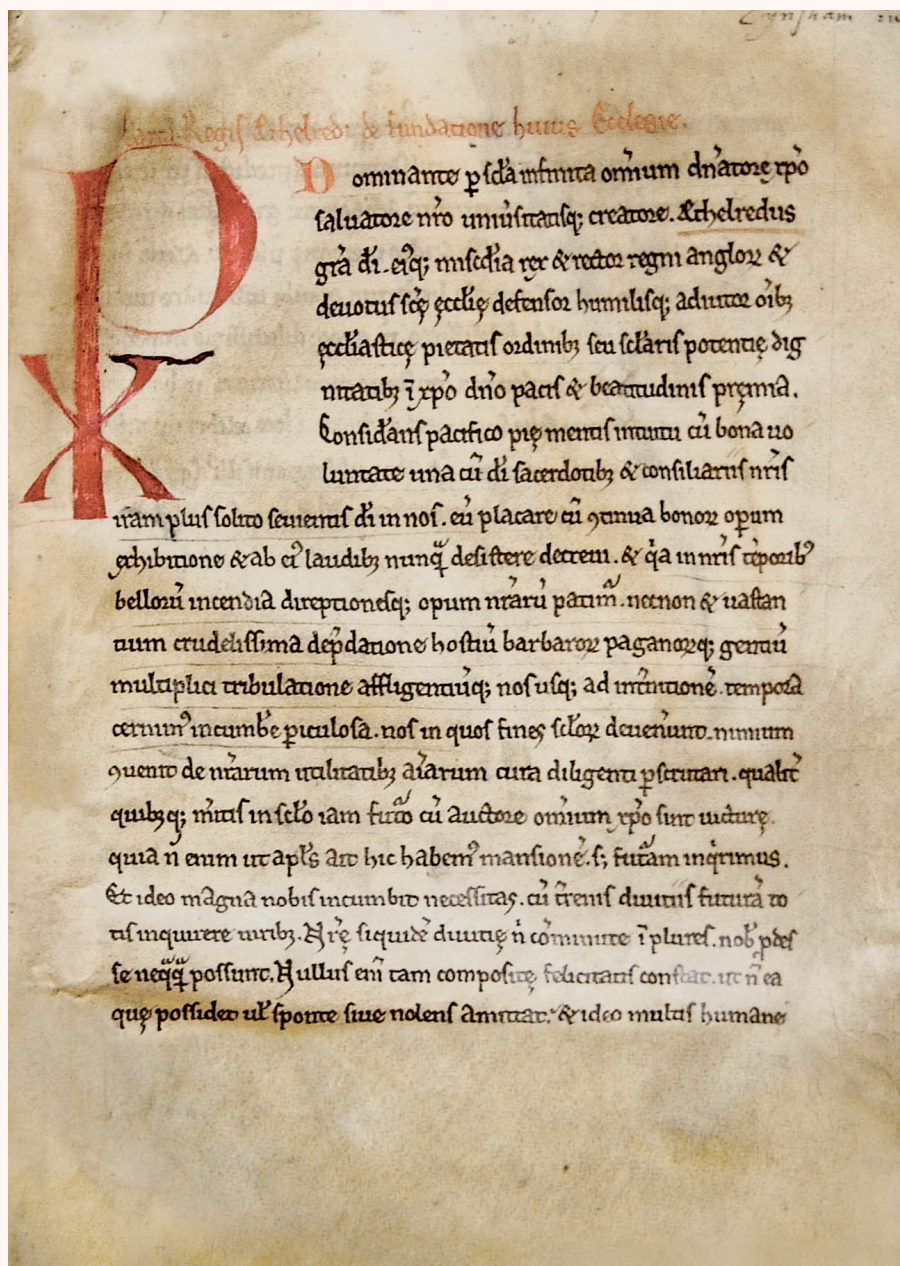
Clockwise from top left: Miniature copper alloy vessel (enlarged)

*stylus (enlarged)

*fragment from a panel of elephant ivory, probably decorated with figures of apostles, saints or angels standing within arches (actual size)

*stirrup-strap mount with silver and niello decoration of late Viking inspiration (twice actual size)

*a later medieval copy of the foundation charter



Miserden, Leonard Stanley, Somerford Keynes and Winstone; Blair 2005, 420-21).

The most substantial pre-conquest remains in the study area are those of the standing tower of the church of St Michael at the Northgate in Oxford (Fig. 5.36), but no evidence is currently known for the form of the late Saxon church itself. Many of the urban parish churches of the medieval period, like those in the countryside, are likely to have originated as the private churches of landowners holding 'urban manors' in the late Saxon period (for example, the Oxford churches of St Ebbe's and St Martin's; see Chapters 3 and 4, above). Small-scale excavations carried out at the church of St Peter in the East in Oxford are reported as finding two phases of earlier churches underlying the existing structure, although this work has not been fully published (Sturdy 1972). Excavations at All Saints Church in Oxford (Dodd (ed.) 2003) identified the earliest church on the site as a small stone building of the later 11th century. At Wallingford, the recent excavation of a mortar mixer and a number of late Saxon burials suggests that St Martin's church had

been constructed in the 10th or 11th century (Iain Soden, Northamptonshire Archaeology, pers. comm; for burials, see below). At St Aldate's in Oxford the presence of a number of late Saxon burials may imply (but does not prove) the existence of a contemporary church (for the burials, see below).

Burial from the 8th century onwards

In general terms there is a clear change in burial practice from the 8th century (see Chapter 4 and above). The communal and individual burial sites in use during the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries do not seem to continue in use after the 8th century, and burials that are datable to the 8th century and later appear to be in new locations. However, our understanding of the dating of the latest burials in earlier cemeteries is not very securely based. The date of unaccompanied burials in these cemeteries, or of burials lacking datable grave goods, remains unknown and can only be assumed to reflect the latest datable grave goods present.

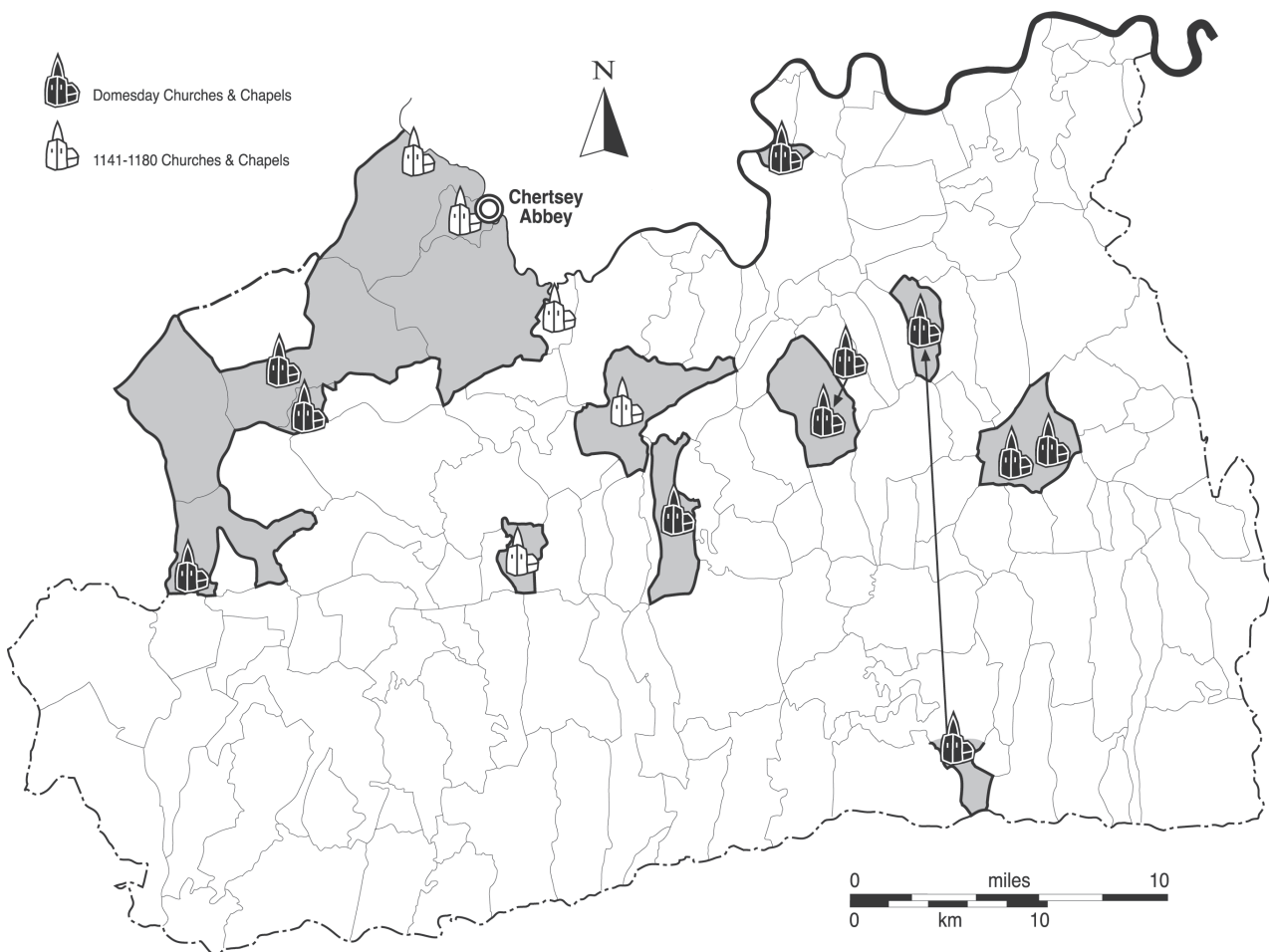


Fig. 5.35 Chertsey Abbey demesne manors and the date of church provision. Distance from the minster was clearly the key factor in securing early church provision (after Blair 1991, fig. 38. The map shows parish boundaries in the early 19th century, which have a strong correspondence with Domesday estates.)



Fig. 5.36 The late Saxon tower of St Michael at the Northgate, Oxford

Burials of the 8th century and later, which rarely (if ever) contain any grave goods, can only be certainly identified through the use of radiocarbon dating, and the systematic use of this technique has been a relatively recent innovation in the study area. However, some patterns are starting to emerge, suggesting that we can identify a number of broad trends. At Oxford, Bampton and Wallingford we see the increasing use of burial grounds attached to minsters and urban churches, and a large rural cemetery at Chimney is thought to have been a satellite burial ground of Bampton minster, perhaps for people who were too poor to pay for burial at the minster itself. Evidence from Yarnton and Shepperton Green suggests that the inhabitants of small rural settlements had their own burial grounds, and this may also be the origin of the cemetery at Beacon Hill, Lewknor, and the small group of burials in a ruined Roman villa at Claydon Pike, Glos. Alongside these, however, is clear evidence from Yarnton that some individuals at such settlements were differentially treated, and their remains disposed of in ditches. A cemetery at Staines has been interpreted as a site for the burial of execution victims (see Chapter 7, below). A small number of furnished Viking burials suggest striking cultural contrasts.

The larger cemeteries of this period appear to have been intensively used, with much evidence for the disturbance of earlier graves to accommodate later burials, the scattering of charnel and the superimposition of graves in long sequences. This suggests that these burial grounds, like later medieval church graveyards, had limited space in which to accommodate large numbers of burials over many years. Where evidence survived, the vast majority of burials were supine and extended, aligned with their heads to the west, and without grave goods. A small number of crouched, prone or north-south aligned burials may be deliberate expressions of condemnation or fear of the deceased, and were particularly common at the execution cemetery excavated at Staines. A number of burials at Oxford and St Martin's Wallingford had been laid on beds of charcoal. The significance of charcoal burial is unclear; other examples are known, and all are from probable ecclesiastical sites. Evidence from St Aldate's Church suggested that valuable timber, in the form of specially felled oak, may have been used for these graves. This would support the view that this was a high-status burial rite. The presence of charcoal may have been symbolic of penitential ashes, although on a more practical level, charcoal may have been used as an absorbent to minimise the effects of putrefaction and promote the preservation of the corpse. The need for such treatment may have applied particularly in cases where corpses had been transported some distance for burial (Tyler 2001, 406-7). Similarly, the context and dating of stone-lined graves is unclear, although they may be imitations of the more prestigious stone sarcophagi, and many

examples are known from monastic and cathedral sites. The practice of burial in stone-lined graves persisted into the later medieval period, but is most common in 11th- and 12th-century contexts. Examples are known from Oxford (Dodd (ed.) 2003, 237) and from Wallingford (Iain Soden pers. comm.); a number are also known from Chertsey Abbey, some of which may be late Saxon, while others are of the 12th to 14th centuries (Poulton 1988 and pers. comm.).

Minster and urban cemeteries (Figs 5.37-5.39)

A sequence of three superimposed burials was excavated at Bampton immediately outside the south transept of the existing church of St Mary (Blair 1998a 47 and fig. 3). The burials have been radiocarbon dated to the late 7th to early 9th century (one burial), and to the 10th and early 11th century (two burials); further analysis using Bayesian statistical methods has allowed one of these to be dated unusually precisely to the early 11th century (John Blair pers. comm.). The burials had been inserted into the inner lip of a Bronze Age ring ditch underlying the south side of the church, and the lower two sloped downwards as if the barrow-mound was still an upstanding feature when they were dug. During a watching brief in the churchyard carried out in 2002, a number of graves were observed cut into the natural gravel; these were overlain by a general churchyard soil into which later graves had been cut. The sequence is similar to that excavated by Blair, and suggests that the earlier graves cut into gravel may represent further burials of the Saxon period, although no independent dating evidence was recovered (Mumford 2003, 73-4).

Four excavations in St Aldate's, Oxford, have revealed evidence of burials that can be associated with the minster of St Frideswide's, and possibly with an urban church nearby (Fig. 5.37). Two burials on beds of charcoal were found during work in Tom Quad, Christ Church, in 1972 (Hassall 1973, 270 and fig. 2). The earlier of these gave a radiocarbon date of cal AD 680-1160, which can be combined with other information to give a likely date range of cal AD 810-970 (Dodd (ed.) 2003, appendix 2). Excavations in 1985 within Christ Church Cathedral Cloister revealed some 20 identifiable individual burials and disarticulated remains of a minimum of 50 further burials dating from the late Saxon period (Scull 1988). All age groups were represented, and both male and female adults were present. Where evidence remained, all burials were supine, orientated west-east, and without grave goods. Two were in charcoal-lined graves with a further layer of charcoal over the body; one appeared to be within the remains of a stone cist, and nails from the fills of two others may have come from coffins. The cemetery had evidently been intensively used; sequences of up to four superimposed graves were found, and there were large quantities of charnel.

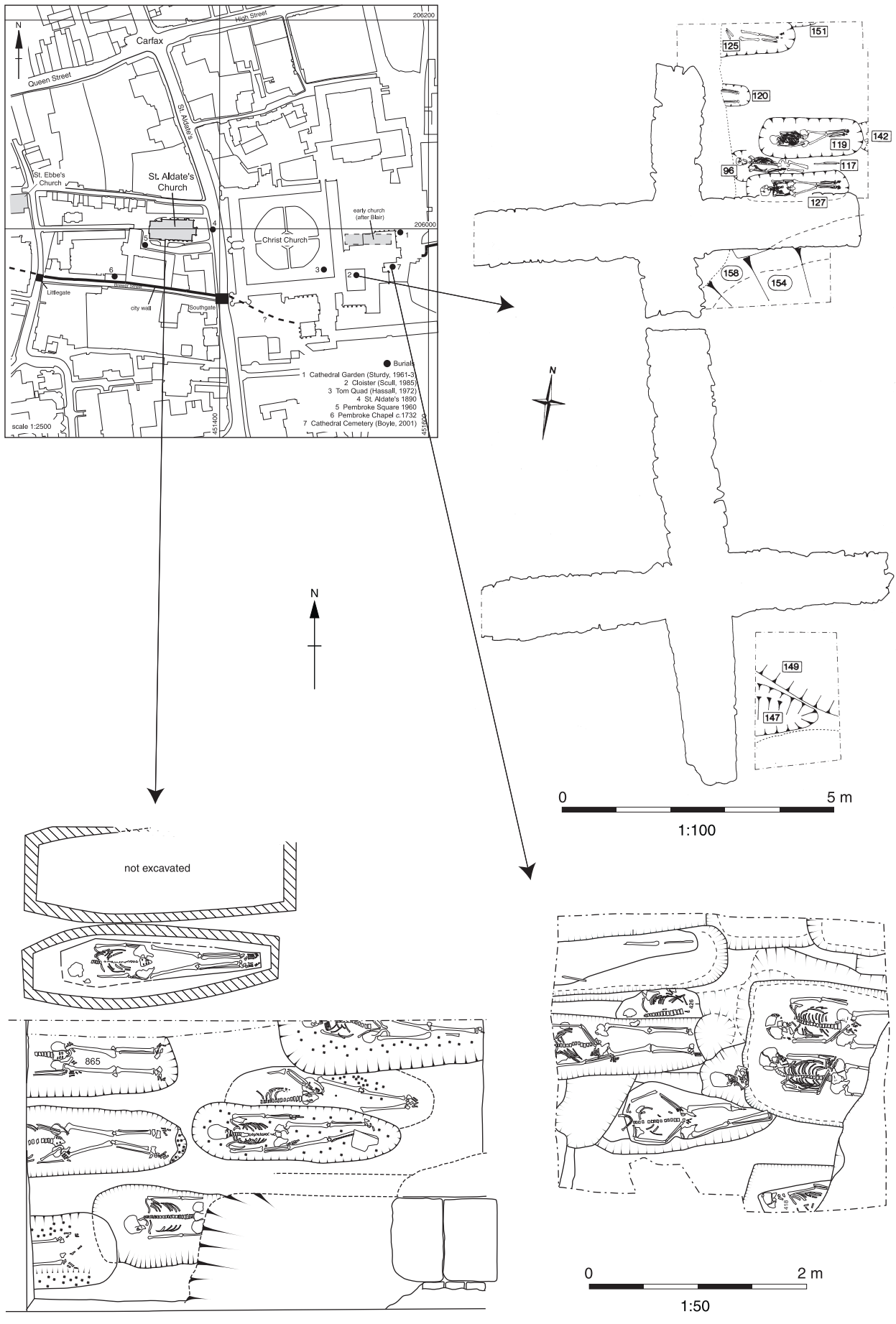


Fig. 5.37 Late Saxon burials at Christ Church and St Aldate's Church, Oxford

Four graves were radiocarbon dated to the period cal AD 660-890 (1 burial) and cal AD 770-990 (3 burials) (Dodd (ed.) 2003, appendix 2). Most recently, excavations within Christ Church Cathedral Graveyard (Boyle 2001) recovered a total of 37 skeletons ranging in date from the 7th to the 11th century. There was a marked predominance of males, with only three females identified. Three of the skeletons were radiocarbon dated to the periods cal AD 620-690, cal AD 690-960 and cal AD 780-990 (combination of this last result with other information suggests the date range is very likely to be cal AD 860-970; Dodd (ed.) 2003, appendix 2.). All the burials were aligned west-east in sub-rectangular graves, supine, extended and unaccompanied except for one who was wearing a copper alloy belt buckle. A number of graves had stone linings, and one had stones placed around the head (possible so-called 'ear muffs'), and there was evidence for possible wooden coffins in the form of iron nails and probable iron coffin fittings. The buried populations in the cloister and the cathedral graveyard are markedly different, and suggest that the former was part of an extensive lay cemetery, while the latter was used by the religious.

A short distance to the west, at the site of the medieval church of St Aldate's, recent excavations have uncovered 8 inhumation burials within charcoal-lined graves (Tyler 2001). Three of these were submitted for radiocarbon dating and analysis of the results has given the following probable date ranges: cal AD 860-980, cal AD 830-960 and cal AD 820-960 (Dodd (ed.) 2003, appendix 2). A fragment of a 10th-century cross shaft was found during the same excavations and may derive from a contemporary church (see Chapter 6, below); however, this was re-used in a secondary context, and may therefore have been brought from elsewhere.

More unusually, recent excavations at Oxford Castle, at the western edge of the town, found two burials cut into the late Saxon rampart. The significance of this is not yet clear, but it may suggest that this was the site of a chapel at the west gate of the *burh*, associated with St George's Tower (Norton 2006).

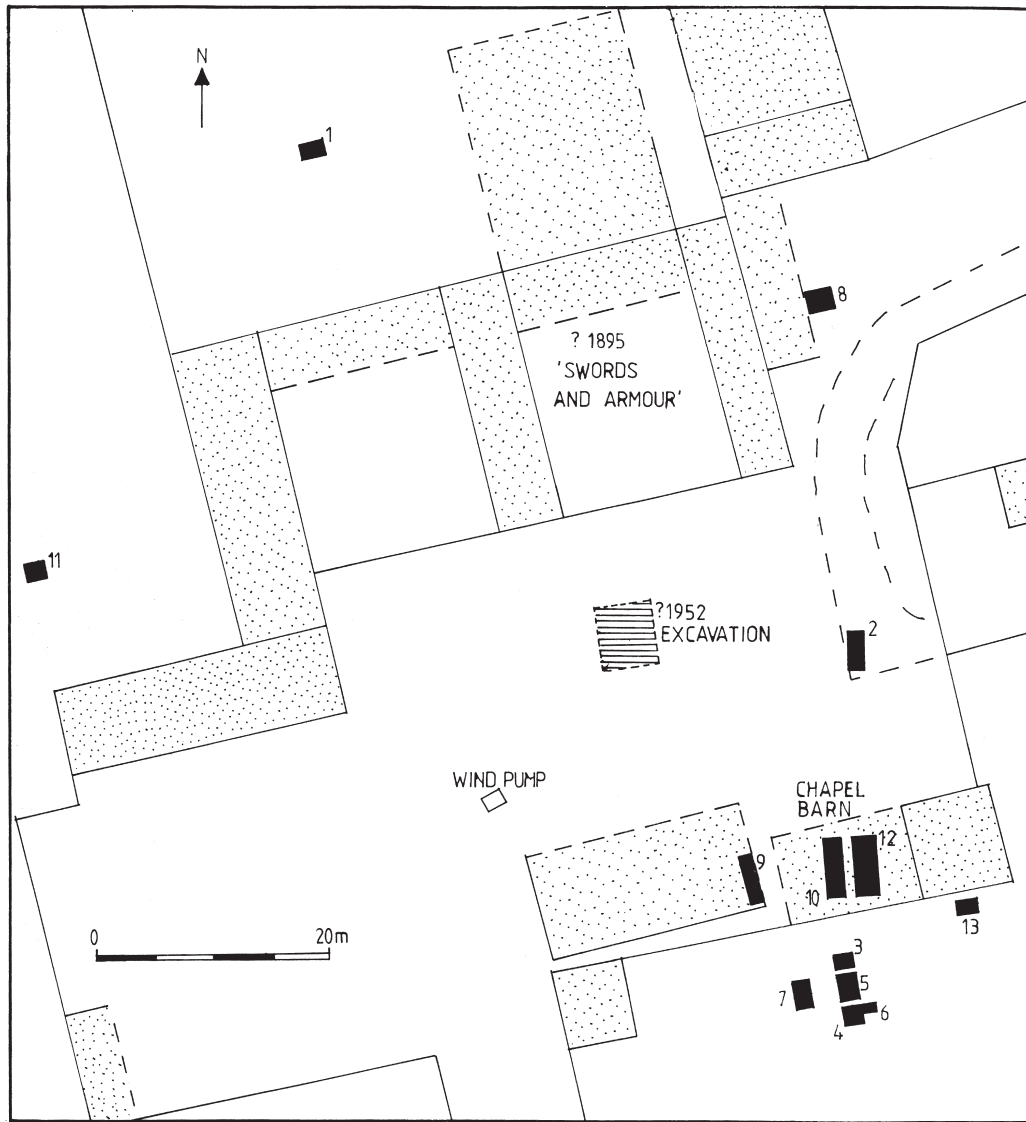
Recent excavations in Wallingford have uncovered the remains of numerous burials associated with the late Saxon church of St Martin located at the central crossroads of the *burh* (Fig. 5.38; Iain Soden, Northamptonshire Archaeology, pers. comm.). Unfortunately, very little survived of the church itself, much of which was destroyed in the 18th century. A total of 219 burials have been excavated, ranging from the 10th or 11th century to the 15th century in date, although the rate of burial declined markedly in the later medieval period. Post-excavation analysis is still in progress at the time of writing, but preliminary results suggest that the church itself may have been constructed during the 10th or 11th century. A lead crucifix with mother of pearl nails, datable to the same period, was found beneath a mortar mixer that was

presumably used in the construction of the church. The earliest burials post-date the mortar mixer. Amongst these were a small number of stone tombs, which originally had slab tops; a number of these had been re-used. In some graves, stones ('ear muffs') were placed on either side of the head, and in one remarkable instance two skulls had been used instead. Two charcoal burials were noted. Finds were generally few, although a hooked tag was recovered from one grave fill. Exceptionally, however, one person had been buried with a scallop shell pierced for suspension around the neck, and it is thought likely that this may be of early 11th-century date and possibly associated with pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

Small-scale excavations at the hamlet of Chimney, Oxon, took place in 1988-9 in order to define the limits and date of a cemetery whose existence had become known through a number of chance discoveries, including 'skeletons with swords and armour', made since the late 19th century (Fig 5.39; Crawford 1989, 45-56). The results suggested that the cemetery may originally have extended over an area of at least 2400 square metres. Evidence of intercutting burials in two of the trial trenches suggested that the cemetery had been intensively used; if this level of use was consistent across the entire area, the excavator has estimated that the cemetery could have contained some 1500-2000 burials in total. In total, the excavations recovered the remains of a minimum of 34 individuals, including neonates and infants, as well as juveniles, and adults of both sexes. Most burials had been heavily disturbed, but in the few cases where information was available the individuals had been buried in an extended, supine position with their heads to the west. The only evidence for grave goods consisted of a small fragment of a comb, and a knife found with a skeleton excavated at the same site in 1952. Radiocarbon dates were obtained on three of the skeletons, giving date ranges of cal AD 890-1035, cal AD 900-1160 and cal AD 900-1110. Documentary evidence suggests that licensed 'overflow' cemeteries were being operated by some minsters in the 11th century (Blair 2005, 466-7). In the 1090s all inhabitants of Milford (Hants) were to be buried at Christchurch minster, except slaves and cottars who could be buried at Milford chapel on payment of 4d. Similarly, estate cottars and slaves who were too poor to be carried to Christchurch could be buried at another of the minster's chapels, at Boldre (ibid.). John Blair suggests that it is very likely that the Chimney cemetery was just such a place, and was established on land that had been granted to Bampton minster in the 950s. If this is true, then it suggests we might have here a remarkable opportunity to compare buried populations from rural overflow cemeteries for the poor with the presumably better-off individuals buried at the minster sites themselves.



Fig. 5.38 Late Saxon burials from St Martin's Church, Wallingford. (Above left) stone-lined grave containing two burials, with the head of the lower individual supported by two skulls; (above right) a grave containing charcoal; (bottom left) a lead crucifix with mother-of-pearl nails; (bottom right) a scallop shell, pierced for suspension around the neck of the wearer, on whose midriff it was found. Possibly an indication of pilgrimage to Compostela in Spain



Trench 8: successive phases

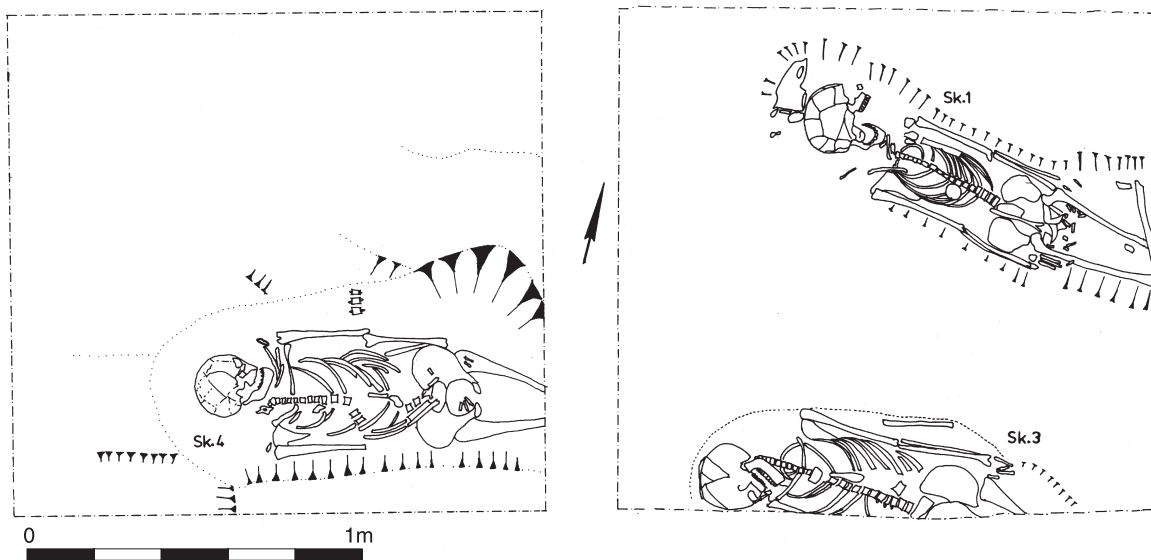


Fig. 5.39 Burials from the 10th- to 12th-century cemetery at Chimney

Rural burial grounds (Figs 5.40-5.42)

A small group of six west-east burials was found 100 m west of the mid Saxon settlement at Yarnton, and a further shallow empty grave was also observed (Fig. 5.40, and Fig. 3.34 for general location; Boyle 2004, 75-6, figs 7.17 and 7.21 and plate 7.6). Three further burials, and other human remains were found within the ditches surrounding the buildings on the main settlement site. Radiocarbon dates indicate that these are a contemporary, 9th-century group. The 6 individuals buried as a group were all supine and extended, on an east-west alignment, and seem completely consistent with Christian practice. A post-built structure a short distance to the south of the burials is likely to be associated with the cemetery, although its function is unclear. A small chapel may be a possibility. No sub-adults were present amongst this group, but two sub-adults were found buried in shallow scoops cut into ditches south of hall 3620. A third anomalous burial, also within a settlement ditch, was of a woman buried in a prone (face down) position, with her legs bent backwards, and it is possible that the manner of her burial reflects some form of punishment. She had been buried over the partial remains of at least four sub-adults, all represented by skull fragments. The meaning of these burials is unclear, although the woman may have been considered responsible for the deaths of the sub-adults whose remains were found beneath her, or this group may reflect an association between prone burial and decapitation (ibid.). The

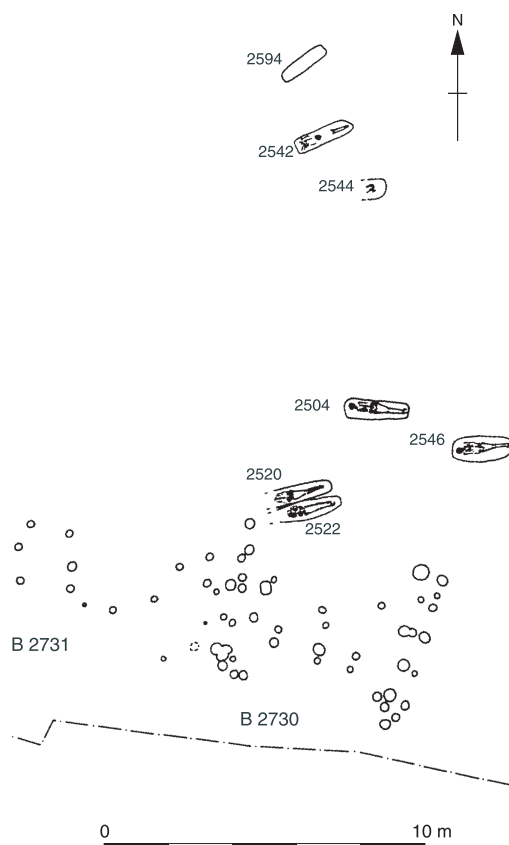


Fig. 5.40 Yarnton: the 9th-century cemetery

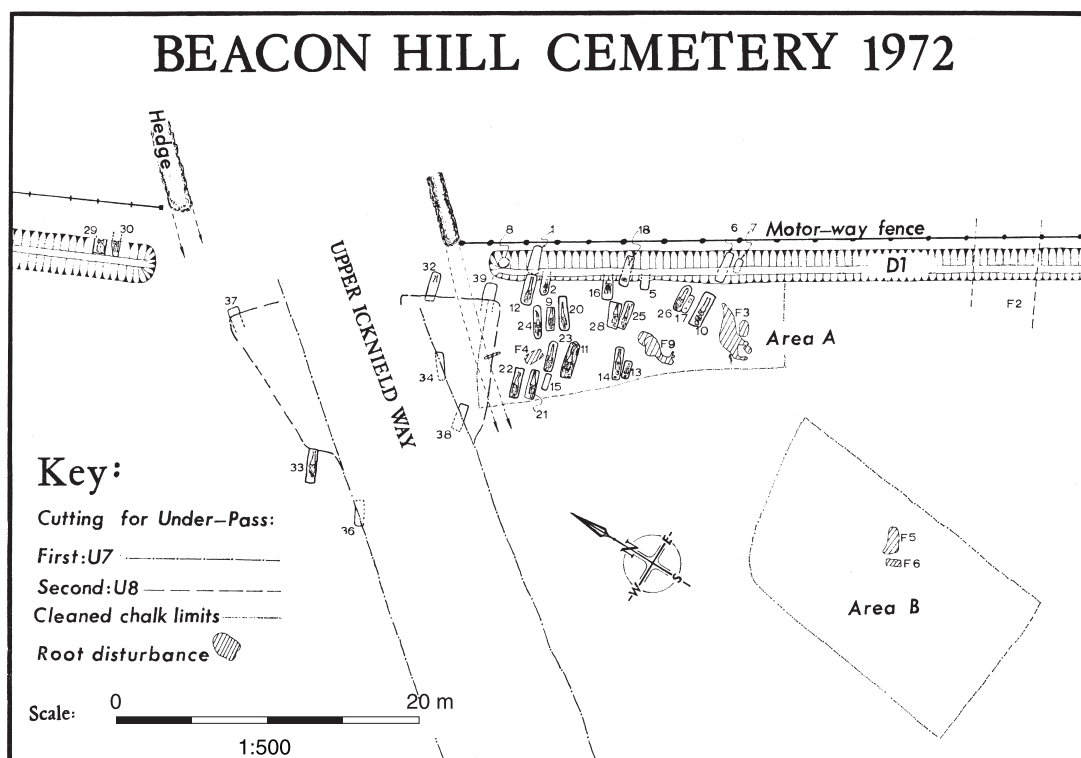


Fig. 5.41 Late Saxon burials from a rural cemetery at Lewknor

other sub-adults may have been buried here because, despite the Christian context, they may not have been felt to merit burial in the small cemetery. Similar evidence for differential treatment of sub-adult burials has been recovered from other sites (Loveluck 2001, 85-6; Parkhouse *et al.* 1996, 199-221).

At Shepperton, a small cemetery of some 20 individuals was found close to the site of a long-lived early to late Saxon settlement (see Fig. 3.48; Canham 1979 104 and fig. 3). The cemetery was only discovered during the machine removal of topsoil, and detailed recording was not possible, but all appeared to have been aligned west-east, and to have been buried without grave goods. The settlement at Shepperton was exceptionally long-lived,

and it has recently been suggested (Poulton forthcoming b) that the early Saxon inhabitants of the site may have been buried at the nearby 5th- to 6th-century mixed rite cemetery at Upper West Field, with burial shifting to the cemetery at the settlement site during the mid to late Saxon period. This would suggest a very similar pattern to that observed at Yarnton, with a communal early Saxon burial ground abandoned in favour of burial on individual settlement sites at some point in the mid Saxon period.

The cemetery at Beacon Hill, Lewknor, is located on the Upper Icknield Way, at the foot of the Chilterns (Fig. 5.41; Chambers 1973; 1976c). Here, 39 burials were identified, although the full extent of



Fig. 5.42 One of a small group of burials of the 8th and 9th century overlying the ruined villa at Claydon Pike, Glos.

the cemetery was not revealed, and its original size remains unknown. Two radiocarbon dates suggest that the cemetery is datable to the mid to late Saxon period. One of two knives found with burials has a groove along the back suggesting it is datable to the period from the 7th to the 9th centuries (Chambers 1976c, 83-4). With the exception of a single crouched burial, the skeletons were supine and buried with their heads to the west, and the graves had been dug in short rows. Several graves appeared to have been re-opened to accommodate a second burial (Chambers 1973, 144-5; 1976c, 78-9). One burial had the head missing, and interestingly, the spine of the same individual is reported as being in two parts, with a break marked by the dislocation of a vertebra; there were also cut marks from a sharp instrument on the upper left arm. The cemetery population comprised a mix of adult men and women, children, infants and one instance of a woman buried with a neonatal infant.

Five east-west aligned inhumation burials were found overlying the late Roman villa at Claydon Pike, Glos (Miles *et al.* 2007). The group consisted of two adult males and two adult females, three of whom gave radiocarbon date ranges of cal AD 670-990, cal AD 690-1020 and cal AD 650-950 (Fig. 5.42). An infant was buried away from the main group,

and an isolated crouched juvenile burial was found cut into a second late Roman building, possibly with stones deliberately placed around the head. The infant and juvenile burials were not radiocarbon dated, however, and the possibility remains that they are of an earlier period, perhaps even associated with the late Roman occupation at the site. The probability distributions of the radiocarbon dates (*ibid.*, fig. 7.3) suggest that at least two of the burials are very likely to be of 9th- or possibly 10th-century date, while the third may be of the 8th century. They are thus rather later than most analogous Anglo-Saxon burials in Roman villas (see Blair 2005, 54 and n 172). It is thought likely that they represent a small family group. There is no structural evidence for any associated settlement in the immediate vicinity, although a number of shallow pits had been dug nearby, possibly for gravel extraction. A coin of Alfred (871-99) was recovered from later silting within the top of one of the pits, and a coin of Baldred of Kent (823-4) was found in a rubble layer nearby, beneath the top soil. Miles *et al.* suggest the coins could be contemporary with the burials. The site is located only 2 km from the cemetery at Lechlade Butler's Field, and provides some evidence for burial practice in the area once that site had gone out of use.



Fig. 5.43 Viking stirrups of around the year 1000, from the bank of the river Cherwell at Oxford

Numerous undated small cemeteries and isolated human burials are known within the study area, and John Blair has counted some 50 within Oxfordshire alone (1994, 72). How many of these are of mid to late Saxon date is unknown and a problem that can only be resolved by more systematic use of radiocarbon dating. A good example of this category of site is the group of eight burials excavated at Appleford in advance of gravel quarrying in 1973 (Hinchliffe and Thomas 1980, 67-8 and fig. 13). All were aligned east-west and two had been buried with knives; the remainder were unaccompanied. A small iron nail found in the area of one of the accompanied graves might suggest the original presence of a coffin, and the excavators noted that another of the graves would certainly have been large enough to take a coffin. The cemetery was undoubtedly originally larger, and an unknown number of burials are thought to have been destroyed by drag-line stripping of the area. The burials overlay the silted-up ditches of a late Roman farmstead, but no other dating evidence was available.

Viking burials (Fig. 5.43)

Very different burial rites were in use amongst Vikings, both in the 9th century and in the context of the later campaigns of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. Three probable Viking burial sites are known within the study area. A skeleton with a horse and an early Viking type of sword was found at Reading in the 19th century (Evison 1969, 335 and n 4). Nearby, at Play Hatch, Sonning, gravel quarrying in 1966 uncovered the remains of two men with a sword, a bronze ring-headed pin, a knife, six arrowheads and an iron strip (*ibid.*, esp fig. 1). The men were aged around 20, and 20 plus, and probably died at some point in the late 9th or 10th century. The sword was found broken in two pieces, and the blade had a pattern-welded strip inlay with a trellis design on

one face and transverse bars on the other. Both the sword and the spearheads are common finds in Viking graves in Scandinavia, but the knife is probably of Anglo-Saxon origin, and the ring-headed pin may have come from northern parts of the British Isles. Vera Evison comments that all three of these burials could be of men associated with the recorded Viking camp at Reading over the winter of 870-71.

Possible evidence of a later burial, dating to around the year 1000, was recovered from the river Cherwell at Oxford in 1884 (Fig. 5.43; Blair and Crawford 1997). The collection of objects, comprising two decorated stirrups, a smaller stirrup, a spur, iron shears and a horseshoe, was acquired by the Ashmolean Museum two years later. The objects, which came from the bank of an island and not from the river itself, had been found with horses' skulls and other bones, including men's thigh bones, now all lost. The stirrups, probably a pair although not identical, have brass overlay decoration of a familiar Anglo-Scandinavian type, and these, together with the prick spur and the shears, are consistent with a date of burial *c* 1000. Evidence for a continuation of Viking warrior burials to such a late date is slight, but there is no reason to doubt the dating ascribed to these objects. There were Danes living at Oxford by 1002, and the Danish army attacked the town in 1009 and took it in 1013. Blair and Crawford have suggested that this burial could be associated with a Danish garrison settlement at the Cherwell crossing, where a church with the characteristic Scandinavian dedication to St Clement was in existence by the 1120s.

The individual buried at St Aldate's in a stone coffin in the 11th century with a magnificent gold ring of elaborately plaited rods may have been a Dane or an Englishman (see Fig. 6.37; Graham-Campbell 1988). The contrast with the unaccompanied charcoal burials recently excavated within the church is striking (see above).

