Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, 400–700

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INTRODUCTION

In 1986, Sonia Hawkes published her seminal article on 'Early Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire' in a volume on *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region;*[1] John Blair's book on *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* appeared eight years later.[2] Little of what follows has not at least been touched upon in these magisterial works and this paper owes a great debt to their authors, both of whom offer far more detailed discussion of what is known about early Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire than can be attempted here. Rather than try to update their surveys, this paper will focus on one particular issue: how and why Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire looked very different in the year AD 700 than it did just a few generations earlier.

Some scholars have argued that this is because it is in the 7th century that we cross the threshold of historical visibility, and have for the first time contemporary written sources in the form of charters and lawcodes, as well as the later chronicles. In other words, they argue that the impression of radical change in Anglo-Saxon society during the late 6th and 7th centuries is largely an illusion created by the advent of literacy, the written sources leading us to look at the same picture in a new way. Yet, while the concept of 'transitional' periods in history has been rightly challenged,[3] there is nevertheless a consistency to the changes we see in the later 6th and 7th centuries which suggests that they are more than an illusion created by the nebulous light cast by later sources.

John Blair has suggested that to 'write the political history of a non-literate culture can rarely be much more than futile'.[4] For that very reason, I will avoid the temptation to correlate archaeological evidence in any direct way with historical events and figures as recorded, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – a most dubious source for the 5th and 6th centuries.[5] Instead, I will concentrate on certain generalised changes in the character of the archaeological record of this period, and what these tell us about the socio-political development of early Anglo-Saxon England.

The first part of this paper offers a brief review of what is known of the transition from Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon settlement in this region in the 5th century. The main emphasis, however, is on the changes that occurred during the 6th and 7th centuries in burial rites, settlements and patterns of trade. I should note briefly here that my geographical definition of 'Oxfordshire' is rather loose and that, since Oxfordshire as such did not exist at this period, I have taken the liberty of annexing parts of Berkshire and Gloucestershire for the purposes of illustrating particular points.

[1] S.C. Hawkes, 'The Early Saxon Period', in G. Briggs, J. Cook and T. Rowley (eds.), *The Archaeology of the Oxford Region* (1986), 64-108.

[2] W.J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994).

[3] G. Halsall, 'The Merovingian Period in Northeast Gaul: Transition or Change?', in J. Bintliff and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Europe between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (1995), 38-52.

[4] Blair, op. cit. note 2.

[5] B. Yorke, 'Fact or Fiction? The Written Evidence for the Fifth and Sixth Centuries AD', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, vi (1993), 45-50.

FROM ROMANO-BRITISH TO ANGLO-SAXON IN THE UPPER THAMES VALLEY

Our view of the transformation of Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England has been radically altered over the last 20 years or so. The traditional view, adopted by the pioneers of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, above all E.T. Leeds and J.N.L. Myres,[6] took as its unquestioned starting point the accounts of the Anglo-Saxon settlement by Gildas, Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These tell of invasions on a scale so massive that, according to Bede, at least one region, called *Angulus*, was actually depopulated.[7] The titles of some early studies have become clichés of the tradition of relating the distribution of artefacts to the movements of Germanic invaders, for example Leeds' article published in 1912 entitled 'The distribution of the Anglo-Saxon saucer brooch in relation to the Battle of Bedford AD 571'.[8] Even in later publications, Leeds saw reflected in the distribution of certain types of jewellery an invasion by Saxons into East Anglia followed by 'their unquestionable south-westerly advance *en masse* by the Icknield Way into Oxfordshire and Berkshire', a hypothesis which found support in Myres' distribution maps of certain types of pottery.[9] The once undisputed tenet of mass migration from the Continent into 5th-century Britain has now been largely rejected, however, and few archaeologists today would argue that a burial containing Continental style dress ornaments was necessarily that of someone with immigrant forbears. Nevertheless, the scale and nature of the migrations into Britain remain hotly debated topics.[10]

A now-famous article published by Dunning and Hawkes in 1961 related the distribution of Germanic graves containing Late Roman official belt fittings to the presence of the earliest Germanic 'soldiers and settlers' in Britain.[11] The best known (and most discussed) examples of such burials come, as it happens, from Oxfordshire, from the Roman small town at Dorchester-on-Thames. Here, the graves of a male and two females were uncovered near the Dyke Hills Iron Age ramparts, as well as another female grave at Minchin Recreation Ground to the north.[12] These items were probably not buried until the 430s or 440s, so these people need not be ex-mercenaries, but could equally be early Germanic settlers. These uncertainties notwithstanding, the evidence for a 5th-century Germanic presence in the region is undeniable: it comes not only from Dorchester but also from Abingdon and some half a dozen other sites in the region. Yet the incontrovertible conclusion which still stands nearly 40 years after the publication of the article by Dunning and Hawkes is that the number of such 'Dorchester type' burials, and of demonstrably 5th-century Anglo-Saxon burials of any kind, in Oxfordshire as elsewhere, is small.

Individuals such as those buried at Dorchester (if indeed these represent 'federates') could never have been numerous in the Upper Thames Valley, and it seems unlikely that they could have taken control by force. What they *did* possess were the badges of Roman

[6] Former Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum and Bodley's Librarian, respectively.

[7] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. Mynors (1969), bk. 1, c. xv.

[8] E.T. Leeds, 'The Distribution of the Anglo-Saxon Saucer Brooch in Relation to the Battle of Bedford AD 571,' *Archaeologia*, ser. 2, xiii (1912), 159-202.

[9] Leeds, op. cit.; J.N.L. Myres, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (1969), 101-2, Map 8.

[10] J. Richards, 'Style and Socio-political Organisation: A Preliminary Study from Early Anglo-Saxon England', in S. Driscoll and M. Nieke (eds.), *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (1988), 145. See also H. Hamerow, 'Migration Theory and the Anglo-Saxon "Identity Crisis"', in J. Chapman and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Migrations and Invasions in Archaeological Explanation* (BAR S664. 1997), 33-44.

[11] G. Dunning and S.C. Hawkes, 'Soldiers and Settlers in Britain, Fourth to Fifth Century', *Medieval Archaeology*, v (1961), 1-70.

[12] Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, Fig. 7 and Pl. 5.

authority (such as the Dorchester *cingulum*, the official belt) and that may have made all the difference. This would fit well with Dickinson's recognition of the symbolic importance of the chip-carved decoration, derived from Roman motifs, which appears on certain saucer brooches which became prominent in the region in the course of the 5th century.[13] Even small groups with an authentic aura of Roman authority about them must have had a considerable edge in attracting followers.

The nature of the relationship between the British and Anglo-Saxon populations remains hazy at best, although our evidence is growing. There is, for example, some reuse of Roman settlements in the early Anglo-Saxon period. Roman villas at both Barton Court Farm and Shakenoak were probably occupied well into the 5th century and also attracted early Anglo-Saxon settlement as, of course, did the small town of Dorchester-on-Thames.[14] This is not, however, the same as demonstrating continuity of settlement in any meaningful sense, and it remains impossible to say whether any direct link existed between the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon residents of these sites. Certainly, there was a rapid, widespread adoption of Continental styles of building, costume, weaponry, burial rite and pottery in the 6th century. But was this 'Anglicisation' of the Upper Thames valley carried out by a small, immigrant warrior elite, by a folk migration from the Continent, or was it merely the result of influences from neighbouring regions which had already become 'Anglicised'?[15]

The question can of course be asked of Anglo-Saxon England as a whole and the answer is that it varied regionally. In Oxfordshire, there is remarkable evidence of potentially large-scale indigenous survival at the large late Roman cemetery of Queenford Farm, just outside Dorchester-on-Thames.[16] It lies in a region with a number of Anglo-Saxon settlements and cemeteries which were established during the 5th century, yet radiocarbon dates of five of the otherwise undatable Queenford Farm burials indicate that the cemetery remained in use well into the 6th century. At the cemetery of Frilford (Berks.) there may have been continuous use of the same burial ground from the Romano-British to the Anglo-Saxon period.[17] For the most part, however, early Anglo-Saxon settlements and cemeteries were established in entirely new locations, as at Berinsfield, a site I will return to later. There is thus little hard evidence for the continuity of individual Romano-British settlements and cemeteries in this region, although more radiocarbon dating of late Roman cemeteries is clearly called for. Furthermore, a study of pollen cores taken from near Shotover, northeast of Oxford, shows that a cleared, open landscape was maintained throughout the late Roman to late Saxon periods, suggesting a degree of continuity of landuse despite the fact that this is an area where no early Saxon settlements or burials have yet been found.[18]

It is probably safe to assume that considerable numbers of 5th- and 6th-century Britons lie 'hidden' in both Late Roman cemeteries such as Queenford Farm, and in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. Heinrich Härke has pointed to a correlation between those males buried with

[13] T. Dickinson, 'Material Culture as Social Expression: the Case of Saxon Saucer Brooches with Running Spiral Decoration', in H-J. Hässler (ed.), *Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, 7 (1991), 39-70.

[14] An excellent summary of the evidence for this may be found in Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 3. See also D. Miles (ed.), *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon.* (CBA Research Report 1, 1986); A. Brodribb, A. Hands and D. Walker, *Excavations at Shakenoak, pts. I-V* (1968-78); S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1962', *Archaeol. Jnl.* cxix (1964), 114-49; S. Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester-on-Thames, 1963', *Archaeol. Jnl.* cxli (1984), 91-174.

[15] I make no distinction here between 'Angles' and 'Saxons', even though the Upper Thames region displays primarily 'Saxon' characteristics in its material culture.

[16] R.A. Chambers, 'The Late- and Sub-Roman Cemetery at Queenford Farm, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxon.', *Oxoniensia*, lii (1987), 35-70.

[17] A. Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (1964), 46.

[18] P. Day, 'Post-Glacial Vegetational History of the Oxford Region', *New Phytology*, cxix (1991), 445-70.

weapons in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (a rite accorded to *c.* 47% of adult males), with stature and certain epigenetic traits, suggesting that burial with weapons was restricted to particular lineages, perhaps those descended from immigrants.[19] If he is right, then roughly half of the males buried in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries may be Britons.

Given that the earliest Germanic arrivals in the Upper Thames valley do not represent a single, massive folk migration or invasion, how did this region come to be 'Anglicised'? Again, archaeology can offer only a hypothesis, but one which at least fits the evidence well: namely that once a number of first arrivals, or 'apex families', of Continental origin or descent had established themselves in this region by the end of the 5th century, they constructed origin myths and genealogies to create a more or less homogenous and politically stable group identity.[20] Many Britons must have 'rewritten' their family histories to suit the new circumstances and would quickly have become assimilated. Thus, by the time Bede was writing in the 8th century, the population of this region was seen as descended from the Saxons, even though the archaeological record shows that, in reality, ethnic affinities were more complex. That there is at least some substance to the 5th-century link with 'Saxon' areas of northern Germany is, however, shown by the distribution of certain types of jewellery, such as equal-arm and saucer brooches.[21]

BURIALS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

After the chaos and opportunities brought about by the departure of the Roman army and the 'de-Romanisation' of lowland Britain, this mixed society had to maintain and reproduce social identity and rank, eventually becoming 'Saxons' with a shared history. How this came about is far from certain, but we can at least say that society in the 5th and 6th centuries was undoubtedly ranked, and this is most clearly seen in burials.

Over 1600 Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and burials are now known in England.[22] Oxfordshire is fortunate in having more than its fair share, although there are only a handful where the burials were well-preserved, where most of the cemetery has been recovered, and which have been excavated to modern standards. It is perhaps worth briefly reviewing a few basic characteristics of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. First, most Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in this region are comparatively small. Berinsfield appears to be fairly typical for this region, containing around 118 graves representing a maximum population of 30-40 people at any one time.[23] This contrasts, incidentally, with Romano-British cemeteries, some of which served much larger communities – Queenford Farm, for example, may have contained up to 2000 burials – and this is, of course, itself indicative of a change in settlement and social structure. Second, most Oxfordshire cemeteries are mixed rite, that is both inhumation and cremation was practised, although as we now know, the body was laid out in very similar, perhaps identical, ways in both rituals.[24]

[19] H. Härke, *Angelsächsische Waffengräber* (1992).

[20] C. Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Kingdoms', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 6 (1993).

[21] H. Böhme, *Germanische Grabfunde des 4. bis 5. Jh. zwischen unterer Elbe und Loire* (1977), Karte 5. See also V. Evison, 'Supporting-arm Brooches and Equal-arm Brooches in England', in *Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, i (1977), 127-48. Since these publications, at least two more equal-arm brooches have been found by metal-detectorists working in the Abingdon area.

[22] C. Scull, pers. comm.

[23] A. Boyle and A. Dodd, D. Miles and A. Mudd, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Berinsfield and Didcot* (1995).

[24] M. Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1992), 64-5.

How were these small communities of the 5th and 6th centuries structured? Berinsfield again provides a good example. A detailed analysis of the cemetery carried out by the OAU has identified three broad 'status groups' based on the grave goods with which the dead were buried.[25] These different status groups appear to have been more or less evenly distributed across the cemetery, and this is fairly typical of cemeteries of the 5th and 6th centuries. The general consensus is that these different status groups do not reflect 'rich', leading families and 'poor' dependent families, but rather different ranks within the same households: thus, the *pater familias* and wife were buried ostentatiously, while younger sons, dependants, and so forth, were provided with less burial wealth.[26] Boyle and Dodd interpret the Berinsfield cemetery as containing three such household groups, indicated by the clustering of graves with certain epigenetic traits and the distribution of men, women and children.[27]

This fits well with the settlement evidence (discussed below) and the fact that identity, status and affiliation in this period were almost entirely kin-based. Some individuals also had allegiances to a war band, but such allegiances tended to last only as long as the war leader was able to provide largesse. In short, as far as may be determined from present evidence, early Anglo-Saxon communities consisted of households of broadly 'equal' status, each internally ranked according to age, gender and proximity to the head of the household (although these households could of course include unfree dependants). Chiefly power was localised, unstable and based on the charisma and ability of the individual. It was probably not dynastically derived until the late 6th or 7th century, when we see a marked change in burial practice.

This change in the basic pattern of burial in the late 6th and 7th centuries is apparent with regard both to the burial rite itself and the topography of burial. Looking first at burial rite, there was a dramatic decline in the practice of cremation, which had effectively ceased by the mid 7th century. There was, furthermore, a sharp decline in the number of grave goods buried with the dead. Only a select few were now provided with weapons or jewellery; all that survives from most burials of the 7th century are the most basic dress accessories, often just a belt, sometimes with a knife suspended from it. The burials from Didcot Power Station provide some good examples of this kind of burial.[28] The general impression is that the burial rite and apparently dress styles also became somewhat more standardised and less variable.

At the same time as this overall decline in grave goods occurred, a small number of super-rich, so-called 'princely' burials appeared, invariably as barrow burials. The most famous of these is, of course, Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, in Suffolk.[29] Several of these 'princely' graves have been found in Oxfordshire. The one about which we know most is Asthall barrow, excavated in the 1920s. Tania Dickinson and George Speake have extracted a remarkable amount of information from what is a rather unpromising collection of burnt fragments and the following summary derives wholly from their work.[30] The Asthall barrow contained a cremation of an individual, probably male, buried in the first half of the 7th century. The grave goods included at least seven vessels, including a Frankish ceramic bottle (which reached this region almost certainly via Kent), a Byzantine bronze bowl and a small, Late

[25] Boyle et al., op. cit. note 23, Fig. 30.
[26] Welch, op. cit. note 24, 81-2.
[27] Boyle et al., op. cit. note 23, Fig. 31.
[28] Ibid.
[29] R. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, 3 vols. (1975-8).
[30] T. Dickinson and G. Speake, 'The Seventh-Century Cremation Burial in Asthall Barrow, Oxfordshire: A Reassessment', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo* (1992), 95-130.

Antique silver vessel. There were in addition a set of bone gaming pieces and a range of finely worked metal fittings. Despite the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the finds, they indicate what Dickinson and Speake have described as a grave belonging to the 'topmost echelon of princely burials'.

The early 7th-century burial at Cuddesdon, just north of the Thames, was uncovered in 1847.[31] The name derives from 'Cutha's hill' and it too probably represents the remains of a barrow burial, the barrow itself having been ploughed out long ago. What survived – two swords, a bronze bucket from the eastern Mediterranean and two splendid blue glass Kentish bowls – is certainly indicative of high status.

Two other Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon barrows were identified over ten years ago by John Blair, one at Leafield, some four miles northeast of Asthall, and the other at Lew, roughly the same distance southeast of Asthall, but both remain uninvestigated. It may well be that others will come to light.[32]

How should we interpret these 'princely' barrow burials? It has long been recognised by anthropologists that burials and burial rite can be actively used to express social identity and legitimise status, especially where power is unstable and territorial competition fierce. By 600, the Anglo-Saxon elite had the means at their disposal to consolidate and increase their territorial control and access to portable wealth. To quote John Blair, 'Surely we can sensibly call them kings',[33] and the most ostentatious burials of the 7th century must be linked to their emergence. In other words, these barrows were a visible means by which a descent group established ties to its ancestors while at the same time staking a claim to ancestral territory.[34] This was indeed a time when written sources suggest that the region which is now Oxfordshire was at the centre of an expanding local kingdom centred on Dorchester, and when the Upper Thames valley became border territory in disputes with Anglian, and especially Mercian territories.[35] The surviving archaeological evidence for 7th-century Dorchester is slight but nonetheless clearly suggestive of special status: three gold coins, a gold and garnet-inlaid pyramidal stud, probably from a sword, and the famous 'Janus headed' lock.[36]

In addition to these changes in burial rite, the topography of burial also changed in the 7th century. A few early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries continued in use, for example at Lechlade (Glos.)[37] More often, however, old ancestral burial grounds were abandoned some time in the first half of the 7th century, as was the case at Berinsfield. What replaced them is not always clear, although no doubt many small groups of unaccompanied (and therefore undated) burials which are occasionally uncovered date to the Middle Saxon period and are probably associated with as yet unidentified settlements.[38] In a few cases, however, it is clear that a new cemetery was founded a short distance from the old one. This was the case at Long Wittenham, where a cemetery of the 5th to early 7th centuries appears to have been replaced by a burial ground sited some 400 m. to the west.[39] Although only ten graves were found at Long Wittenham II, they contained characteristic 7th-century objects. What exactly

31   T. Dickinson, *Cuddesdon and Dorchester-on-Thames* (BAR i, 1974).

32   Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 45.

33   Ibid., p. 37.

34   J. Shepherd, 'The Social Identity of the Individual in Isolated Barrows and Barrow Cemeteries in Anglo-Saxon England', in B. Burnham and J. Kingsbury (eds.), *Space, Hierarchy and Society* (1979), 77.

35   Blair, op. cit. note 2.

36   Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, p. 88 and pl. 8b; Dickinson, op. cit. note 31.

37   A. Boyle, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Butler's Field, Glos.* i (1998).

38   Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 72.

39   Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, p. 89.

the purpose of this separation was is unclear. Early interpretations saw such new cemeteries as a deliberate attempt to distance the newly-converted community from its pagan forbears.[40] But it is far from clear that these new cemeteries were truly 'proto-Christian'. Given that the process of conversion was slow and from the 'top down', and that many of these changes in burial practice were evident before the end of the 6th century, it is hard to see how they can be attributed primarily to the impact of Christianity. After all, King Cynegils of the West Saxons wasn't even baptised until *c*. 635. Sonia Hawkes' assessment that 'the political situation and its new economic and social pressures' were responsible for these changes in burial rite is far more plausible. They suggest a society in which the very concept of 'the community' was being redefined and in which ranking was becoming more strictly determined. Having considered how burials reflect these socio-political changes, I will now turn to settlements.

SETTLEMENTS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The study of Anglo-Saxon settlements originated in Oxfordshire, with the activities of E.T. Leeds. Leeds' excavations in the 1920s at Sutton Courtenay (then, admittedly, part of Berkshire) revealed the first early Anglo-Saxon settlement to be recognised as such and excavated under controlled conditions.[42] At the time, it was believed that the sunken huts he excavated were primitive Anglo-Saxon dwellings. We now know, however, that in nearly all cases huts such as these were accompanied by more substantial ground level timber buildings, sometimes referred to as 'halls' and indeed, Leeds did record some postholes which he interpreted as sheds. Since the 1920s, literally hundreds of Anglo-Saxon settlements have been investigated. The most extensively excavated settlement published to date is Mucking (Essex), which appears to be typical of many 5th- to 7th-century settlements, at least in southern and eastern England, with its loosely structured layout and shifting occupation.[43] Much smaller, though broadly comparable Oxfordshire settlements have been excavated at Barrow Hills, Radley (adjacent to Barton Court Farm) and New Wintles Farm, only a mile north of Eynsham.[44]

These settlements, and indeed most excavated settlements of the 5th to 7th centuries, have several things in common: their layout is loosely structured without clear focal points or edges; there is relatively little variation in the size of buildings, all of which were fairly small (usually around 6 m. x 12 m. or less), and there was no obvious 'central' or main building. Despite this apparent lack of large, high status buildings, early Anglo-Saxon society was, as their burials clearly indicate, most certainly ranked. This ranking, however, seems to have been contained primarily within households, not between them (cf. the discussion of burials, above). In any case, it does not seem to have found expression in the size of buildings. All this changed with the appearance in the late 6th and early 7th centuries of *some*

[40] A. Meaney and S. Hawkes, *Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Winnall, Winchester* (Soc. for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Ser. 4, 1970); A. Boddington, 'Models of Burial, Settlement and Worship: The Final Phase Reviewed', in E. Southworth (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: A Reappraisal* (1990), 177-99.

[41] Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, p. 92.

[42] E.T. Leeds, 'A Saxon Village near Sutton Courtenay, Berks.', *Archaeologia*, lxxii (1923), 147-92; ibid. 'A Saxon Village near Sutton Courtenay, Berks. (2nd Report)', *Archaeologia*, lxxvi (1927), 59-79; ibid. 'A Saxon Village Near Sutton Courtenay, Berks. (3rd Report)', *Archaeologia*, xcii (1947), 79-93; H. Hamerow, 'Anglo-Saxon Timber Buildings: The Continental Connection', in H. Sarfatij, W. Verwers, P. Woltering (eds.), *In Discussion With the Past: Archaeological Studies Presented to W.A. van Es* (1999), 119-28.

[43] H. Hamerow, *Excavations at Mucking, vol. 2: The Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (1993).

[44] E. McAdam, forthcoming; S. Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, pp. 83-4, Fig. 10.

settlements which clearly were high status, with large, architecturally imposing, 'focal' buildings, and a controlled, planned layout. This is, of course, epitomised by the royal vill at Yeavering in Northumberland and is connected with the emergence of the first post-Roman landlords, rulers (if only of small regions) who competed fiercely for territory.[45]

We can see a hint of this change at the settlement at Yarnton, c. 4 km. NE. of Eynsham Abbey. Excavations here by the Oxford Archaeological Unit suggest that, even though the core of the 5th- to 6th-century settlement probably lay outside the excavated area, a reorganisation of the settlement can be detected beginning in the later 7th century, although the main changes took place in the 8th century, when a system of ditched enclosures was laid out.[46]

From the late 6th century onwards, we can see growing differentiation between settlements, and this differentiation is also apparent in the Upper Thames valley. Two settlements of high, possibly royal, status which have been identified from aerial photographs but not excavated, probably originate in this period. The first is at Drayton, just to the west of Leeds' excavations at Sutton Courtenay, where several large timber buildings are arranged in a distinctive 'L' shape, the largest of which measures some 25 m. in length, directly comparable in size with the largest 'great hall', A4, at Yeavering.[47] Some 650 m. to the south is the cemetery of Milton II, never properly excavated, but described by Sonia Hawkes as 'the richest 7th-century cemetery so far discovered in the Upper Thames region';[48] two Kentish composite disc brooches, a hanging bowl and other finds certainly indicate high status burials at Milton II, though whether they are directly associated with the Drayton buildings is impossible to say. Metal-detectorists working in the Sutton Courtenay area have, furthermore, recovered 6th-century finds which almost certainly derive from a cemetery associated with Leeds' settlement (Fig. 1.2 & 1.3); from the same area come later high-status finds which are presumably contemporary with the Drayton buildings (Fig. 1.1; Fig. 2.4-8; Fig. 3).[49] This is the first time that an associated complex of Anglo-Saxon sunken huts, large timber buildings and a cemetery have been identified and the Sutton Courtenay/Drayton area would certainly repay further investigation. The second high-status settlement is located at Long Wittenham, some 5 km. to the east of Sutton Courtenay, and is also associated with a largely unexcavated cemetery of the 5th to 7th centuries.[50]

CONCLUSION: THE EMERGENCE OF KINGDOMS

By AD 700, several new features had appeared in the Oxfordshire landscape, which would have formed important focal points for the people who lived here. The most obvious were the barrows and planned settlements with large halls, reflecting a new monumentality of both elite buildings and burial markers. There were also, of course, new religious centres, although I will not elaborate on these here as they will be dealt with in next year's Hassall Lecture. Overall, there was a greater differentiation of settlement types, the abandonment of many ancestral cemeteries and the founding of new burial grounds.

[45] B. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (1977). See also B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (1990); H. Hamerow, 'The Earliest Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms', in P. Fouracre (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 1 (forthcoming).

[46] G. Hey, *Yarnton Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape* (forthcoming).

[47] D. Benson and D. Miles, 'Crop-Marks near the Sutton Courtenay Saxon Site', *Antiquity*, xlviii (1974), 223-6.

[48] Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, pp. 88-9 and pl. 8c.

[49] I am grateful to Abi Wilson, Jimmy Lyons and Anthony Lyons, for bringing these finds to my attention and for their permission to publish photographs and drawings of them.

[50] Hawkes, op. cit. note 1, p. 89.

Finally, closer trade links developed with other regions, to the extent that what is now Oxfordshire became joined via the Thames to an exchange network that ran, in John Blair's words, 'overland from Byzantium to northern Gaul and thence to Kent'.[51] These new trading links are particularly well illustrated by the distributions of two classes of artefact. The first is of coins minted in London, which reached the Upper Thames valley, if only in small quantities, in the 7th century.[52] The second is the distribution of scales and weights, studied in detail by Chris Scull, which suggests that, in the 6th and 7th centuries, the Upper Thames valley was involved in bullion transactions with Kent, probably in exchange for prestige goods such as imported glass vessels and gold jewellery.[53] These goods would in turn have enabled the Upper Thames elites to increase still further their power and prestige. The Kentish composite disc brooches from Milton, the gold plate disc brooch from Sutton Courtenay (Fig. 1) and the blue glass bowls from Cuddesdon are examples of this increasingly close contact with Kent, and there are many others. The most informative of the graves containing such scales and weights was excavated by Scull at Watchfield, dates to the middle of the 6th century and has been interpreted by him as an administrative official, a kind of 'proto-reeve' for a local leader.[54]

These changes in the archaeological record of the later 6th and 7th centuries all point to the formation of larger, more stable polities whose elites had increasing access to goods and, crucially, ideas from the Frankish and Mediterranean worlds. In short, they represent the earliest stages of kingdom formation. This course of events, which has been compared to a series of 'knock out rounds' between lower order political groupings (in this region, the Gewissae and the Hwicce), resulted in a small number of dynasties with authority over a large region, a situation traditionally known as the Heptarchy.[55] This competition would of course have been fuelled by a demand for land. Several scholars have argued that land was essential to the reproduction of status and power in the post-Roman period; leaders had to be able to pass on a certain number of hides to their heirs in order to maintain or enhance their social position. Land was thus not only an economic resource, but a social one.[56] In this admittedly rather Darwinian model of competitive exclusion, even fairly modest population growth would trigger intense competition.[57]

This is a model that works well for the Upper Thames region. The current consensus is that it is here that the origins of the West Saxon kingdom lie, and that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's account of Alfred's ancestor Cerdic arriving in Hampshire to found a kingdom smacks of an origin myth spun to explain the prominence of Hampshire during Alfred's reign.[58] As we have seen, the earliest Anglo-Saxon sites in Wessex come from the Upper Thames valley, especially the area around Dorchester. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, furthermore, places Ceawlin's aggressive expansionism in the second half of the 6th century, precisely the time when many of the changes just described began.[59]

[51] Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 29.
[52] A. Vince, 'The Economic Basis of Anglo-Saxon London', in R. Hodges and B. Hobley (eds.), *The Rebirth of Towns in the West, AD 700-1050* (1988), Figs. 44 and 45; Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 30.
[53] C. Scull, 'Scales and Weights in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Archaeol. Jnl.* cxlvii, 199-200.
[54] C. Scull, 'A 6th-century Grave Containing a Balance and Weights from Watchfield, Oxfordshire', *Germania*, lxiv.i (1986), 105-38.
[55] S. Bassett, ' In Search of the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms,' in S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 3-27; C. Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Kingdoms', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 6 (1993), 68-9; Hamerow, op. cit. note 45.
[56] T. Charles-Edwards, 'Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide', *Past & Present*, lvi (1972), 3-33; Scull, op. cit. note 55, pp. 77ff.
[57] Scull, op. cit. note 55.
[58] B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (1990).
[59] Ibid. 135ff.

It is this increased competition which must in large part lie behind the changes visible in the archaeological record, namely the emergence of the first obviously high status settlements and burials, which were often deliberately separated from the old, ancestral settlements and cemeteries. By the late 7th century, we are in what John Blair has described as 'a recognisably medieval world of kings and nobles whose wealth depended on systems for exploiting the land and its assets', namely the collection of taxes and food renders.[60] But this is a tale that he will take up next year.

As Chris Scull has suggested for early Anglo-Saxon studies generally, we can approach 'Dark Age' Oxfordshire in two ways.[61] We can view the 5th and 6th centuries retrospectively, through the highly unreliable written sources of later centuries, an approach with a long and honourable tradition but one which risks anachronism. We can, however, also use archaeology which, while it tends to yield a coarse-grained picture, allows general theories of socio-political development to be constructed and tested. Oxfordshire, with its exceptionally abundant and high-quality archaeological evidence, offers the potential to combine both approaches, a possibility which bodes well for the future of early Anglo-Saxon studies.

Catalogue of Selected Metal-Detector Finds from Sutton Courtenay/Drayton (Figs. 1-7)

1. *Sheet gold fragment.* Part of the front-plate of a plated disc brooch of Avent's Class 7.2,[62] decorated with filigree annulets and a ribbed wire rim. The front-plate would originally have measured approx. 42 mm. in diameter. A raised lozenge-shaped collar contains an inlay of garnet or red glass. A central circular cell was also surrounded by a raised collar and would have enclosed a central setting. Parallels include brooches from Faversham and Kingston in Kent.[63] The Faversham brooch has been dated to between AD 580-613 using x-ray fluorescent analysis of the gold content.[64]

2 and 3. *A pair of gilded ae saucer brooches* with double-outlined six-point star design and narrow, plain border. Gilding heavily worn. Traces of an iron pin survive on the back of each brooch, as do the catch plates. Diameter: 37 mm. Six-point stars are rare, and this is only the fourth recorded example. The general layout of these brooches corresponds well with a brooch with a five-point star motif from Filkins Grave 13.[65] Dickinson sees the star motif as belonging to an Upper Thames/East Midlands group and dates it to the early/mid 6th century.[66]

4–8. *Five ae mounts.* These are treated as a group due to their close similarity in style and execution. Late 6th to early 7th century.

4) *'Axe-shaped' mount* gilded and decorated with dense Style II interlace with two cast rivets on the back. A similar mount (now thought to be from a box) was found in a barrow burial at Caenby (Lincs).[67] Two further parallels come from Coddenham and Barham in Suffolk.[68]

5) *Bird of prey mount* showing bird in profile, claws and beak tucked in. Parallels include mounts from Gilton (Kent),[69] Barham (Suff.)[70] and Asthall.[71]

60   Blair, op. cit. note 2, p. 49.

61   Scull, op. cit. note 55, p. 66.

62   R. Avent, *Anglo-Saxon Garnet-Inlaid Disc and Composite Brooches* (BAR 2, 1975).

63   Avent Corpus no. 165; A. MacGregor and E. Bolick, *Ashmolean Museum Anglo-Saxon Collections: Non-ferrous Metals* (BAR 230, 1993), Fig. 7.4; the Kingston brooch is illustrated in B. Faussett, *Inventoriam Sepulchrale* (1856), Plate II.1.

64   Avent, op. cit. note 62, p. 61.

65   I am grateful to Dr. T. Dickinson for her comments on the Sutton Courtenay/Drayton finds.

66   T. Dickinson cited in Boyle et al., op. cit. note 23, p. 78.

67   R.A. Smith, *British Museum Guide to Anglo-Saxon Antiquities* (1923), Fig. 104.

68   S. West, 'A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Material from Suffolk', *East Anglian Archaeology*, 84 (1998), Figs. 21.9 and 7.70.

69   Faussett, op. cit. note 63, Pl. VIII.5.

70   L. Webster and J. Backhouse, *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900* (1991), Fig. 39.

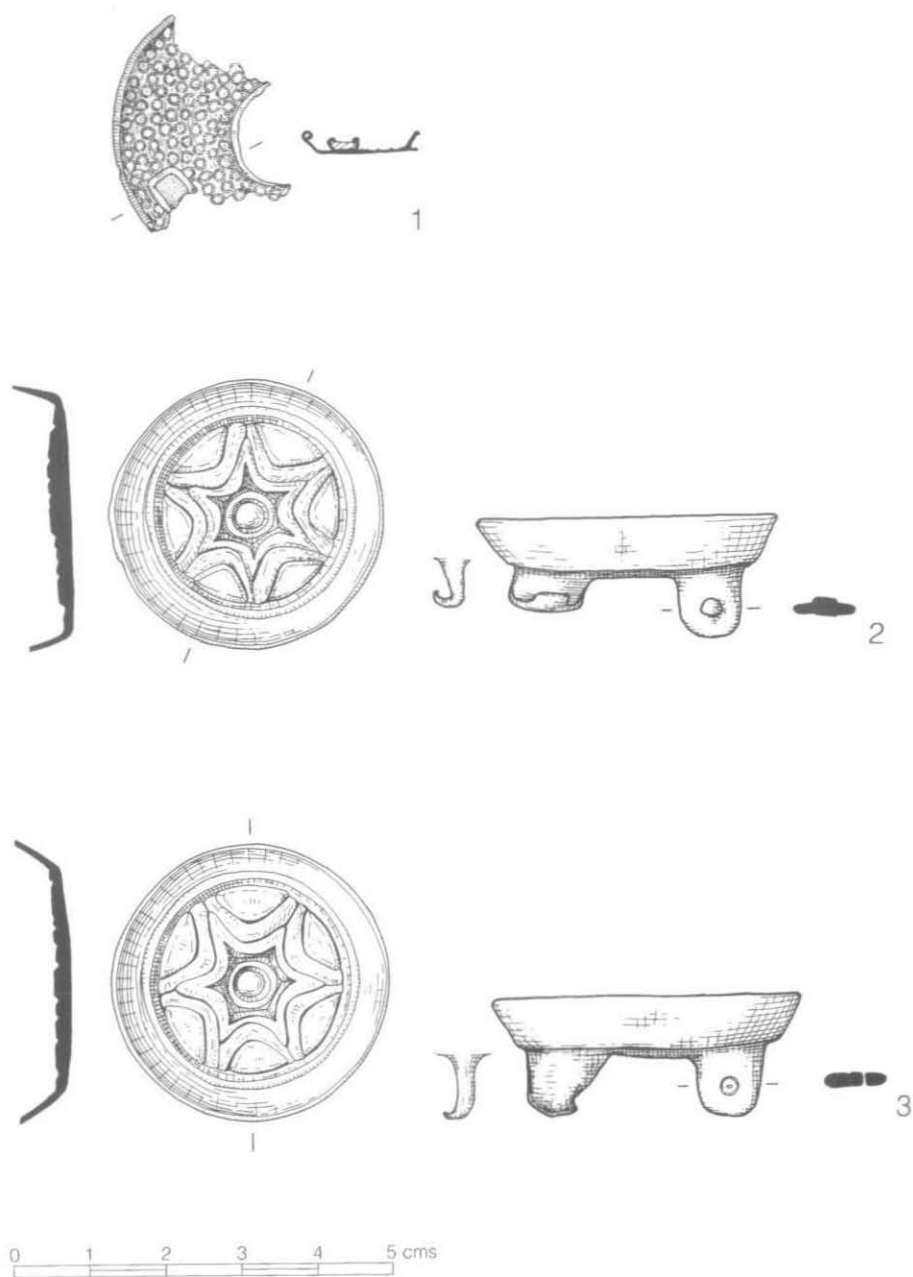71   Dickinson and Speake, op. cit. note 30, pp. 95-130, Fig. 18b.

Fig. 1. Metal-detector finds from the Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (A. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)
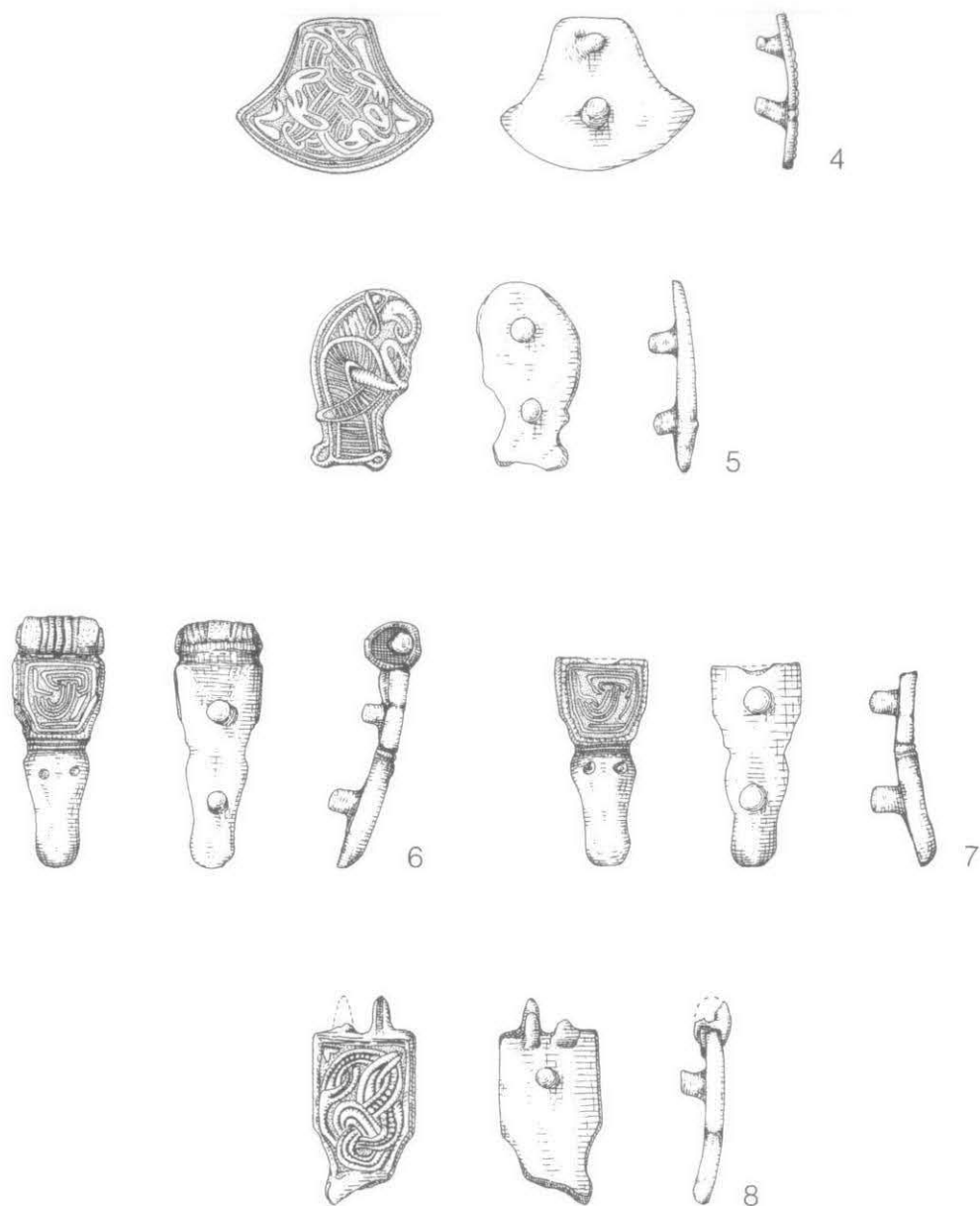
Fig. 2. Metal-detector finds from the Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (A. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)
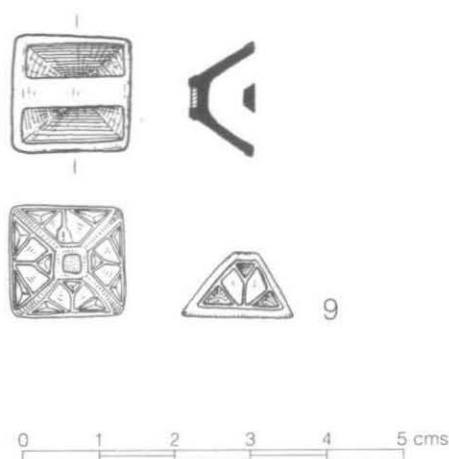
Fig. 3. Pyramidal stud from the Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (A. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)

6, 7) *Two animal-headed ae fittings*, both with cast rivets on the reverse; 6 appears to have been part of a hinged fitting. The animal heads are broadly paralleled by the more elaborate rim-mounts from the Sutton Hoo shield and by a mount from Coddenham (Suff.)[72]

8) *Mount*, broken and heavily corroded, with a single cast rivet; a fragmentary hinge bracket projects from the flat end. Decorated with Style II animal(s) with beaded body. A close parallel for this type of decoration occurs on a die from Barton-on-Humber.[73]

9. *Pyramidal stud*, cast ae, probably from a sword, with a transverse bar across the base to allow for fastening by means of a strap. Top of stud is inlaid with yellow glass. Each side is decorated with a panel of incised decoration. Similar examples come from Faversham (Kent)[74] and Barham and Coddenham (Suff.)[75]
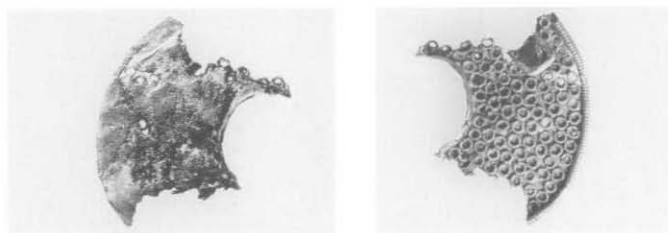

Fig. 4. Fragment of plated disc brooch from Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (Photo: R. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)

[72] Bruce-Mitford, op. cit. note 29, vol. 3, Fig. 22; West, op. cit. note 68, Fig. 21.3.
[73] G. Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art* (1980), 71 and Pl. 13p.
[74] Smith, op. cit. note 67, p. 45, Fig. 44.
[75] West, op. cit. note 68, Figs. 5.48 and 21.22.

Fig. 5. Pair of saucer brooches from Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (Photo: R. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)

Fig. 6. Five copper alloy mounts from Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (Photo R. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)
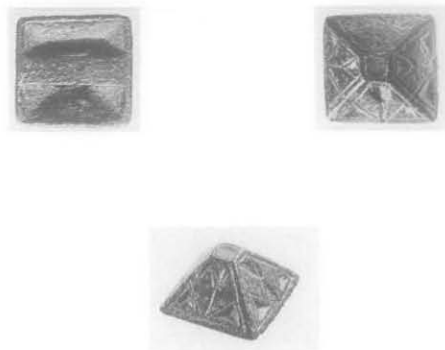
Fig. 7. Pyramidal stud from Sutton Courtenay / Drayton area. Scale 1:1 (Photo: R. Wilkins, Inst. of Archaeology, Oxford.)