Later Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, 700-1100

By John Blair

SUMMARY

This paper is based on the Tom Hassall Lecture delivered to the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society in 1999. In view of the author's recent book on the subject it is much shorter than other published versions of Tom Hassall Lectures, and is largely confined to noting new discoveries and publications during 1996-9.

The purpose of the Tom Hassall Lectures is to provide up-to-date syntheses of archaeological knowledge and research in the Oxford region. For the Anglo-Saxon period, this presents a difficulty: only six years ago I published a book which tried to offer just such a synthesis, and which concentrated on the post-Conversion centuries.[1] To summarise it here would be pointless: it is necessary to be more selective, and also perhaps more personal, than some other lectures in the series. Rather than attempting any sort of comprehensive coverage, I shall concentrate on recent work and discoveries which seem to me to enlarge our range of perceptions of the period, and to offer the most promising directions for the future. If this risks imbalance, it may highlight areas which once seemed impenetrable or obscure, but which we may now be better-placed to explore after the advances of the last twenty years. This is my excuse for concentrating on personal interests – notably minsters and urbanization – and for drawing more than once on my own field project at Bampton. Once again, I owe a special debt to the Oxford Archaeological Unit for making unpublished material accessible.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

The 1990s saw one outstandingly important excavation of an Anglo-Saxon settlement, at Yarnton on the Thames gravels just above Oxford.[2] By its sheer scale this site shows clearly, for the first time in the region, a phenomenon classically exemplified by Mucking (Essex): the slow 'drifting' of an Anglo-Saxon settlement across an expanse of gravel terrace. While the 5th- to 6th-century settlement seems quite normal, its form changed around the turn of the 7th and 8th centuries, with a greater variety of buildings and a more structured layout. It is possible (no more) that the foundation of the minster at Eynsham brought about changes in the organization and exploitation of its estate, to which Yarnton certainly belonged later. Mid to late Anglo-Saxon pottery scatters (suggesting manuring) from Yarnton fields, and evidence for the establishment of hay-meadow at a similar date on nearby Oxey Mead, add to the slowly accumulating body of data for the establishment of

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[1] J. Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (1994) (hereafter *ASO*).
[2] G. Hey, *Yarnton: Saxon and Medieval Settlement and Landscape* (forthcoming); I am very grateful to Gill Hey for discussing the site with me.

open fields. The chronology remains fluid (did these changes happen in the late 9th to 10th centuries, as I am still inclined to think, or in the 8th to 9th?), but Yarnton is making a significant contribution towards attacking this very central and intractable problem of the early medieval economy.

Another exceptional aspect of the Yarnton site is that it carries the story of settlement shift beyond the mid-Saxon period, through the 9th and 10th centuries and to the outskirts of the later medieval village. Even so, the chronology and processes of stable village formation still remain curiously elusive. The Yarnton excavation brings us up to the 10th century, but leaves us there; excavations of deserted medieval villages (for instance, locally, Seacourt) take up the story only in the 12th century; and it is in the nature of the available documents that groups of house-plots attached on a regular basis to particular types of holdings can be traced only (as at Cuxham) from the 13th.[3] There does still seem to be a real difference in kind between the farmyards of, say, 9th-century Yarnton and later medieval village tenements. Bridging this gap, and establishing a chronology which will show whether the villages of late medieval and modern Oxfordshire were mainly formed before or after the Conquest, remain tasks for the future.

The royal manorial and hundredal centres of Domesday Oxfordshire may in most cases have been relatively late creations. A conspicuous exception to this is Benson, now illuminated by Christine Holmes's excellent study, which stands out as one of a tiny number of English royal sites which can be shown to have had a continuous existence between the 8th and 11th centuries.[4] Its singularity still needs some explanation, but may have something to do with its proximity to the early episcopal seat of the Gewisse, and its location in the Abingdon-Dorchester complex of dense early Anglo-Saxon activity. Another site in this complex about which we are learning more is Sutton Courtenay, where Helena Hamerow's analysis of metal-detected finds reveals what seems to have been an élite early 7th-century cemetery near the Drayton 'palace' cropmark, and a concentration of early 8th-century coin-finds suggesting a trading site or market.[5] Sutton Courtenay was a place of royal assembly by 868, when a West Saxon charter was issued there, but its place-name ('south *tūn*') can only mean that it was a satellite of Abingdon, just to the north: this royal place was evidently established in relation to an older and more stable monastic centre.

More information about the fine details of the Anglo-Saxon countryside remains to be teased out of place-names and charter-boundaries, interpreted with an eye to the modern landscape. The West Oxfordshire Charter-Boundary Group has now gone a long way towards tracing all the boundary-clauses on the ground, though analysis and publication of this work remains to be done. A fine example of what can be achieved is Madeleine Hammond's work on the Pyrton estate: as well as throwing much light on the estate-structure and economy of the Oxfordshire Chilterns, she shows, through a brilliant piece of observation, that the place-names *Readanora* and Golder (*gold-ora*) describe soils with respectively a reddish and a golden-yellow hue.[6]

Trade and transport can be studied partly through the routes which they used, partly through their archaeologically visible products. Growing evidence for early medieval canalization along the Thames and its tributaries could certainly be investigated further

[3] M. Biddle, 'The Deserted Medieval Village of Seacourt, Berkshire', *Oxoniensia*, xxvi/xxvii (1961-2), 70-201; P.D.A. Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village* (1965), 120-3.

[4] C. Holmes, 'From Pre-History to Domesday Book', in K. Tiller (ed.), *Benson: a Village through its History* (1999), 15-44.

[5] Work in progress; I am grateful to Helena Hamerow for information.

[6] M. Hammond, 'The Anglo-Saxon Estate of *Readanora* and the Manor of Pyrton, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, lxiii (1998), 23-42.

through fieldwork and excavation, combined with geo-morphological approaches and the (still very new) scientific techniques for dating sedimentary deposits.[7] With the corpus of recorded Anglo-Saxon coin finds growing almost monthly, it should be possible to achieve a much more accurate and fine-grained analysis of the monetary economy than I could offer in 1994.[8] These are possibilities for the future, but with pottery, the other main trace-element of exchange, the long-awaited publication of Maureen Mellor's work has now achieved a great advance.[9] Recognizing and classifying 7th- and 8th-century wares is still problematic, but three mid to late Anglo-Saxon regional traditions can now be isolated: in the Cotswolds and Hwiccian area (*OXAC*), in the Vale of the White Horse and the Upper Thames (*OXBF*), and in the Oxford region (*OFB*). The large-scale use of the last of these in London is unambiguous evidence for the Thames as a transport corridor, while the occurrence throughout the region of St. Neots-type wares from the east midlands (*OXR*) points to overland transport over long distances by cart or packhorse.

BURIAL

The publication to modern standards of the cemeteries at Berinsfield, Lechlade and Didcot is a landmark in the Anglo-Saxon archaeology of the region.[10] The rich and prolific cemeteries of the upper Thames have been known mainly from grave-goods recovered by rudimentary Victorian excavations, but the new sites allow us to study spatial organization, age and sex structure, and health and diet. Processes during and after the abandonment of furnished burial in the 7th and 8th centuries are now receiving long-overdue attention. The essentially 7th-century cemetery at Didcot, where one grave contained the remains of a putatively Christian 'thread-box', dates from a generation after Birinus's evangelization in the region, and shows how big a question is begged by the phrase 'pagan cemetery'. The point is made more graphically by the latest grave at Lechlade, of a woman buried under a barrow (the only one recognizable in the cemetery) and wearing a silver necklace with a pendant cross.

In *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* I assembled evidence to suggest that there was no automatic link between conversion and the adoption of churchyard burial, but rather a long overlap phase, spanning the mid 7th to early 10th centuries, when the ordinary Christian laity continued to be buried in family or neighbourhood cemeteries.[11] The point is now made with greater force by the Yarnton site, where a group of six or more graves, plainly connected with the adjoining settlement, yielded reliable radiocarbon dates between the late 8th and late 9th centuries.[12] In an age when burial in consecrated ground was not a requirement for all Christians, it seems best to abandon 'pagan' and 'Christian' as topographically specific labels, and instead to envisage cemeteries rather as we now envisage settlements: shifting over time, until they settled down in the more stable landscape of the

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[7] I am grateful for the advice of Ed Rhodes, with whom I hope to collaborate in pursuing this question.

[8] *ASO*, 80-4. The hobby of metal-detecting has hugely increased the number of finds, and the new arrangements for reporting and logging portable antiquities should mean that they are better recorded from now on. The Fitzwilliam Museum's Corpus of Single Coin Finds is becoming available on the internet (http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/coins/emc.html) at the time of going to press.

[9] M. Mellor, 'A Synthesis of Middle and Late Saxon, Medieval and Early Post-Medieval Pottery in the Oxford Region', *Oxoniensia*, lix (1994), 17-217.

[10] A. Boyle, A. Dodd, D. Miles and A. Mudd, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Berinsfield and Didcot* (O.A.U., 1995); A. Boyle et al., *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Butler's Field, Lechlade*, I (1998).

[11] *ASO*, 72-3.

[12] Hey, op. cit. note 2.

10th and 11th centuries. This is illustrated by my current work on the Bampton region, which suggests a continuum from the 5th- to 6th-century cemetery at Brighthampton, through the 7th- and early 8th-century ones of the Windrush valley (Standlake, Yelford, Cokethorpe and Ducklington), to unfurnished and poorly dated mid to late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Chimney, 'the Beam' and Bampton; the requirement for all corpses from this great mother-parish to be buried in Bampton churchyard itself, which the vicars there were defending so stoutly in the 14th century, may have been established no earlier than the 11th. But much of this is still speculative, and will remain so until the radiocarbon dating of unfurnished burials can be financed on an altogether larger scale.

MINSTERS AND SMALL-TOWN ORIGINS

In *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* I gave considerable prominence to the many monastic establishments founded in the upper Thames region during the 7th to 9th centuries; six years on, I am still more convinced that the importance of minsters in the political, social and economic life, as well as the religious life, of the Anglo-Saxon countryside has been much under-rated. With their extensive, low-density occupation, the overlaying of most areas beyond the immediate environs of the church with later settlement, and (not least) the failure of archaeologists to perceive them as a distinct category, they have been the Cinderellas of Anglo-Saxon settlement studies.

That is now changing, and I shall focus here on two Oxfordshire minsters where knowledge has grown significantly over the last few years. The first is Eynsham, first mentioned as a minster in the 860s, where post-excavation analysis has clarified important aspects of the data recovered in 1990-2.[13] Here an apparently normal early Anglo-Saxon settlement, overlying the remains of a Bronze Age enclosure, was replaced by timber buildings that seem to have evolved continuously during the 9th and 10th centuries. This supports the implication of the written sources that when Ealdorman Æthelmaer re-founded Eynsham as a Benedictine abbey in 1005, he took over a going religious concern. In turn, the market-place and town developed during the 12th and 13th centuries on the northern edge of the abbey precinct.

The second example is Bampton, where the origins and development of the ecclesiastical nucleus have become clearer.[14] Most remarkable is the discovery that two Bronze Age ring-ditches – one under the south transept of the church, the other enclosing the medieval Deanery house and chapel to its west – seem to have determined the layout of the Anglo-Saxon church or churches. Radiocarbon dates from the earliest located phases of burials show that the churchyard existed by at least the 9th century; a burial in a large, well-built mortared cist, which yielded a date of AD 960-1030 at 95% confidence, becomes the earliest of this type yet known from England.

It was already my view in 1994 that the focal character of minsters, and the economic stimulus which they provided, may have been the single most important factor in the generation of market towns.[15] But although the correlation of minsters with towns is striking, the archaeology is hard to pin down. The pre-urban nuclei are visible topographically and archaeologically; the 12th- and 13th-century planned streets and burgages are generally still in use; but the intervening phases elude us.

[13] A. Hardy, A. Dodd and G. Keevill, *Excavations at Eynsham Abbey 1990-92* (forthcoming); cf. *ASO*, 24, 27, 63, 114-16, for preliminary conclusions.
[14] *ASO*, 62-4; J. Blair, 'Bampton: an Anglo-Saxon Minster', *Current Archaeology*, 160 (1998), 124-30. See also this volume, pp. 267-90.
[15] *ASO*, 119-21.

Recent work in two Oxfordshire market towns illustrates what might have been found if the rescue efforts of the 1960s and 1970s had not largely ignored such places. At Bicester, mid-Saxon timber buildings have been found near the Market Square, facing St. Eadburh's minster across the River Bure.[16] At Bampton, the road leading southwards from the church, where topography suggests the former existence of a funnel-shaped open area, has been identified as an 11th-century settlement focus by two fortuitous discoveries: on its east side a small sunken-featured building, and to its west a system of plot-boundaries.[17] It seems likely that this was the site of the market mentioned in Domesday Book, replaced in the 12th or 13th century by the big triangular market-place to the east. These cases vindicate a more positive response to the archaeology of small-town centres, where planning preferences for infill and 'brown-field' housing are likely to increase development in the coming years.

OXFORD

With Brian Durham's *Oxford Before the University* in the final stages of editing, this is still a time for stock-taking rather than new hypotheses about the Anglo-Saxon city. Over the next few years, as the Urban Database develops, we should be able to do more with the mass of still sometimes undigested data that we already have, especially if they can be plotted three-dimensionally in relation to the gravel terrace and observed early ground-surfaces. A fine-detailed contour map of the historic city is a basic requirement; Roger Ainslie's ingeniously simple first attempt, using the known spot-heights of manhole covers, has already drawn attention to some interesting anomalies.[18]

In the meantime, discoveries continue. The Ashmolean's Sackler Library site has produced the first sherd of Ipswich Ware to be found in Oxford.[19] In Brasenose Lane, work by Lincoln College has revealed 10th- and 11th-century occupation surfaces 3 m. below the modern ground-surface (a good illustration of the need for systematic collation of levels); and evaluation in the Provost's garden at Queen's has encountered surfaces of a similar date, representing either an extra-mural settlement or the first occupation within the eastwards extension of the defended town.[20] At the monastic heart of Oxford, a long sequence of burials from the cathedral graveyard, and charcoal burials and a 10th-century carved cross fragment from St. Aldate's church, add small but significant pieces to the emerging picture: the radiocarbon results are awaited eagerly.

An appropriate point of conclusion is Oxford Castle, which takes us beyond the Conquest and to one of Tom Hassall's main contributions to the history and archaeology of Oxford. The colossal rubble-built keep, which forms both the west tower of St. George's chapel and part of the western defenses of the castle, has long been recognized as an anomaly among Norman-period fortifications. In an important recent paper, Derek Renn suggests that it might be a late Anglo-Saxon tower pre-dating the castle, both because it is mis-aligned on the chapel and crypt and because the motte – which can be reliably dated to the early 1070s – 'effectively neutralized St. George's Tower by blocking its view over Oxford'.[21] I must admit

[16] This is still unpublished, and it would be premature to give any details.

[17] *South Midlands Archaeology* (hereafter *SMA*), 28 (1998), 48-9, 53; for the second site see this volume pp. 267-90.

[18] *SMA*, 27 (1997), 77-8.

[19] *SMA*, 28 (1998), 88.

[20] *SMA*, 29 (1999), 78-9, 83.

[21] D.F. Renn, 'Burhgeat and Gonfanon: Two Sidelights from the Bayeux Tapestry', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, xvi (1994), 177-98, at 179-81.

to remaining sceptical, but that is essentially because of the sheer massiveness of the tower, which dwarfs all known Anglo-Saxon towers and is built on a scale (and with wall-thicknesses) otherwise unknown in Anglo-Saxon England.

Maybe I am falling into the old trap of arguing from silence about a period where so much is still obscure. The prospective redevelopment of the Castle site – whatever form it eventually takes – should at least provide opportunities for detailed study and recording of the tower, and if I am proved wrong I shall be delighted. That indeed should be the spirit of anyone who investigates any aspect of Anglo-Saxon archaeology. We know vastly more than we did thirty years ago, but we probably still do not know half of what there is to be known. If the current mood is against research excavation, planning policies have become more conducive to preserving and at least sometimes investigating the buried Anglo-Saxon remains of Oxfordshire. Opportunities will go on occurring, and we are probably in for some surprises. A future Tom Hassall lecturer, in another twenty or thirty years, should be able to fill many of the gaps.