

Cremation in Early Anglo-Saxon England Past, Present and Future research

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"... cremation urns in England contain as a rule nothing of importance" (Leeds 1913: 46).

Introduction

Despite the increasing evidence from settlement and landscape studies, burial sites remain the richest source of information for Migration Period England. Archaeologists have identified two methods for disposing of the dead in the fifth and sixth centuries AD: inhumation and cremation. Both rites are found throughout the area in which furnished burials are found from Wessex to Northumbria, although the proportion of each rite varies depending upon the cemetery, locality and region. Yet in studies of early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology, the inhumation rite has frequently been favoured. This is partly because of the higher quantity and quality of the evidence from inhumation graves. Well-preserved inhumation graves provide an ample source of artefact, bone and contextual information with which to reconstruct the burial rite (e.g. Hirst 1985; Malim & Hines 1998). In contrast, because the bones and objects distorted, fragmented and jumbled together in cremation burials they are frequently thought of as less useful to the archaeologist. This has led many archaeologists to regard inhumation as a richer store of archaeological material while cremation is seen as an unfortunate 'bias' that denies a 'true' window onto the past. Because of this, studies of cremation have tended to limit their interpretations to some basic arguments. Cremation is thought to be generally early in date, evidence of the Germanic cultural and biological origins of those practising the rite, and as an expression of pagan religious belief (Williams 2002a).

This restricted and pessimistic approach is not merely a reflection of the more limited data available, but is also based on the lack of a developed set of theories with which to approach mortuary practices that focus upon cremation rites. Studies have been founded upon a triple misunderstanding of the cremation rite and its relationship with the inhumation rite. Firstly, while cremation may involve the destructive affects of fire, both types of burial are the final products of complex, multiple-staged in which the mourners make selective decisions about how to transform and present the dead. Also, following burial, both types of burial are exposed to a multitude of taphonomic processes. In this sense, cremation is not a distortion, but an important social practice equivalent to that of inhumation. Secondly, while it is accepted that artefacts and bones are usually better preserved from inhumation burials, recent studies have substantially improved the quality and quantity of the evidence for the cremation rite, particularly through the

development of detailed osteological studies (e.g. McKinley 1994; Bond 1996, see below). Therefore there is no longer a justification for the limited attention that cremation receives in studies of the period. Thirdly, this limited set of interpretations that cremation receives also results from a reluctance to tap into the rich resource of ideas and analogies provided by recent studies of mortuary practices and cremation rites in the disciplines of social history, sociology, anthropology and ethnography (see Williams 2000). Each of these factors leads us to re-think the cremation rite in early Anglo-Saxon England, not as simply poorer and distorted data, but as evidence for an important set of technologies and practices employed in the mortuary rites of the early Anglo-Saxon peoples.

In order to promote the importance of the study of cremation for our understanding of religion, culture and society in early Anglo-Saxon England, this paper will attempt two things. In the first part, the history of the study of cremation burials is reviewed, illustrating the development of theories and methods over the last two centuries of scholarship. The paper will then move on to assess the current state of knowledge and to suggest future lines of research. A central theme throughout this study will be the need to move away from regarding cremation as simply 'Germanic', 'pagan', and 'early in date', and instead to interpret the burning of the dead as a social and ritual practice. The choice to cremate the dead can tell us a great deal about the technologies and material culture used in transforming and disposing of the dead. This evidence allows us to begin to identify cremation as an important social and religious ceremony. Moreover, it can be interpreted as a form of remembrance in which relationships between the living and the dead were negotiated and reconfigured. Through the destruction and re-building of the body during cremation rites, group identities in the present were constructed with reference to the dead and the ways in which the past was remembered.

Part 1 History of Studies of Cremation in Early Anglo-Saxon England

In order to understand the methods and interpretations used in contemporary early Anglo-Saxon archaeology, we need to critically appreciate the developing history of the discipline. From the origins of Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the nineteenth century, we can identify the developing relationship between the increasing quantity and quality of data, and a set of theories based on nineteenth century historical and philological racial thinking. Only recently have these approaches been augmented and challenged by alternative theoretical approaches.

Nineteenth Century Studies

Cremation burials were first recorded in the seventeenth and eighteenth century antiquarians but were thought to be of Roman date (e.g. Browne 1893 [1658]; Roach-Smith 1861). However, following the first interpretation of graves to the early medieval period by the late eighteenth-century antiquary James Douglas, Victorian archaeologists and antiquaries increasingly distinguished Anglo-Saxon pots and cremation burials from those of other periods (Douglas 1793). Charles Roach-Smith and Thomas Wright formed the vanguard in the nineteenth century by recognising and ascribing cinerary urns found at many sites from across England as 'Anglo-

Saxon' in both in terms of their date and racial affiliation. The pots discovered at sites like Kingston-on-Soar and Newark in Nottinghamshire were seen to differ from Roman pots in both form and decoration. At the same time, Roach-Smith noted that inspiration from Roman designs was evident and that they were clearly later, more degenerate interpretations of Roman pots by Teutonic barbarians. Despite the absence of weapons that were seen to characterise Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, the cremations contained fibula comparable with Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves, dismissing any possible doubts concerning their date and racial affiliation (Akerman 1855; Roach-Smith 1848; 39-45; 1852a & b; Wright 1847; 1852: 422). This interpretation was supported through comparisons with the pottery and occasional cremation graves found among Frankish cemeteries from France and Germany (Roach-Smith 1852a; Roach-Smith 1861: 119-20; Wright 1852: 422-3; Wylie 1857a).

Even stronger evidence was found by the historian, philologist and archaeologist John Mitchell Kemble. He was a unique individual who built up a powerful racial interpretation concerning the origins of the Anglo-Saxons from archaeological evidence within a framework inspired by his historical studies of the institutions of the Anglo-Saxons and his scientific approach to philology inspired by his close contacts with the German philologist Jacob Grimm. Central to his arguments were his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon burials from England and his own excavations in the 'homelands' of the Anglo-Saxons. During researches in the kingdom of Hanover, Kemble recognised that the urns from England were almost identical to those excavated from the Perlberg, Stade-on-the-Elbe. The similarities that he noted extended beyond the form and decoration of the urns to their use to containers for cremated remains. He also observed that similar artefacts found in the urns including combs, tweezers, earpicks, shears and razors. Aspects of grave construction and their recovery from communal cemeteries also appear to have influenced the comparison between the German and England finds (Kemble 1855; 1856; Franks in Kemble 1863: 215-17). The discovery of a "window-urn" from Kempston in Bedfordshire provided an instance of a funerary rite comparable to many German examples (Roach-Smith 1855). Finally, in his unpublished notes, Kemble records the use of animals on the lids of cinerary urns in both Germany and England as a final aspect of close comparison. In combination, these close connections were explained in terms of the racial, cultural and linguistic links that existed between the earliest English and their Continental homelands:

"The urns of the "Old Saxon", and those of the "Anglo-Saxon", are in truth identical... The bones are those of men whose tongue we speak, whose blood flows in our veins". (Kemble 1856: 280).

Therefore, Kemble and many of his contemporaries were not simply interested in the date of the burials, but their important as material evidence for the place of the Anglo-Saxons as a part of a Germanic race. Cremation was seen as one of the institutions and customs central to primitive, pagan Teutonic communities. Cremation illustrated the shared racial origins of the Germanic tribes as well as the specific Continental origins and subsequent migrations of the Anglo-Saxons. To this end, Tacitus' *Germania*, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, and a wide range of

Scandinavian and European histories, literature and folklore were used to show the universal practice of cremation among the northern peoples and its particular significance as a rite among the early Germans (Kemble 1863; Roach-Smith 1852b; Wylie 1857b). Cremation burials provided the material evidence for the manners, customs and history of the early Germans and their migration to England. The modesty and simplicity of the rite portrayed by Tacitus found similitude with the modest cinerary urns discovered by archaeology, and although the noble rites portrayed in *Beowulf* appeared starkly different (Akerman 1855), this found its match in the rich cremation burial with weaponry discovered at Coombe in east Kent (Roach-Smith 1852a: 164-5). Meanwhile, the pottery was viewed as influenced by Roman and Etruscan forms, before or after the migration. In combination, the archaeological evidence suggested to these early pioneers a simple, primitive Germanic society, but one that was still deserved the epithet of a 'civilization'.

In these early studies, views differed over the precise relationship between cremation and the inhumation graves that were also being excavated and studied (see Kemble 1855; Neville 1852; Roach-Smith 1852b: 230; Roach-Smith 1868: 220). Found together on the same sites, cremation was either interpreted as contemporary or as representing an earlier chronological phase. In either case, cremation was seen as the older, more primitive and pagan rite, gradually replaced by inhumation as Christianity became increasingly influential upon Germanic groups (e.g. Akerman 1860; Rolleston 1870). The wide geographical distribution of discoveries from many counties of England showed that the rite was widespread among the Germanic peoples that settled England (Wylie 1857a: 473). However, even by the 1850s it was recognised that cremation burial was more frequently encountered in the Midlands and East Anglia than in southern England and although not exclusive to any tribe, was clearly more commonly practised in 'Anglian' regions (e.g. Wright 1852: 421).

The archaeological reports of these early writers are often of little use to modern specialists, although the illustrations of artefacts and the cinerary urns are often remarkably accurate. Yet, because of their interest in cremation as a pagan and Germanic custom, the archaeological reports of the nineteenth century sometimes pay close attention to the description of the burials and they were often interested in the cremation rite itself. Rituals associated with fire are often recorded on cremation sites, including evidence of some possible cremation pyres (e.g. Wylie 1852). Grave goods from cremation graves were sometimes used as an indication of the sex of the interred (Akerman 1860: 334). On other occasions, more bizarre interpretations are suggested. For instance, George Hillier thought that clay was carried to the burial site on Bowcombe Down on the Isle of Wight with the specific aim of making pots to contain the ashes of the dead (Hiller 1855: 38). Edward Trollope noted the frequent discovery of (in his mind deliberately broken) combs in cremation graves as suggesting that parts of the combs were "*kept as reminiscences of lost relatives by those who first gave the bodies of the deceased to the fire*" (Trollope 1863: 31). Meanwhile, the miniature implements found were regarded as having a religious or ritual meaning by many. For instance, the small blunt blade similar to that found at Eye - unfinished and unsharpened - could not be used 'symbolical'

meaning (Akerman 1855; Akerman 1860: 333). Throughout the nineteenth century, the discovery of further cremation burials at sites like those at Castle Acre (Norfolk) and Sancton (Yorkshire), were slotted into this existing paradigm of racial interpretation (Houseman 1895; Rolleston 1870). Detailed and often careful descriptions and illustrations allowed for easy comparisons between discoveries at different sites across the country and with excavations conducted on the Continent and in Scandinavia. In this way, it can be argued that the cremation graves of the fifth and sixth centuries became an important source of information for the 'Dark Ages'. But equally, the custom of cremation was seen as more than an antiquarian curiosity. Cremation was regarded as an important material aspect of Victorian discourses on Anglo-Saxon racial origins.

Twentieth Century Studies to the 1970s

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there appears to have been a down-turn in the discovery and study of early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials. However, in the early years of the twentieth century right up until the end of the 1960s, cremation burials were again a focus of attention.

A series of large-scale excavations in early Anglo-Saxon cremation cemeteries took place in this period, and many reached publication. These reports represent the beginnings of the serious archaeological study of Anglo-Saxon cremation graves and many remain valuable to this day. In the East Midlands and East Anglia the picture gained from antiquarian and early archaeological research was augmented by excavations of large burial grounds in which cremation predominated. These included the excavations at Sancton, East Yorkshire (Myres & Southern 1973), Caistor-by-Norwich, Norfolk (Myres & Green 1973), South Elkington, Lincolnshire (Webster 1952), Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire (Fennell 1964), Lackford, Suffolk (Lethbridge 1951) and Illington (Green & Milligan 1993). Meanwhile, cremation burials were found alongside comparable numbers of inhumation graves in the West Midlands and the Upper Thames Valley, once more confirming antiquarian explorations. Notable excavations include those at Abingdon (Leeds & Harden 1936); Nassington (Leeds & Atkinson 1944), Girton, Cambridge (the results of excavations in the 1880s; Hollingworth & O'Reilly 1925) and Bidford-upon-Avon (Humphreys et al 1923). The period also saw the discovery of further examples of high-status cremation burials beneath barrows at Asthall and Sutton Hoo, complementing the nineteenth century explorations at Coombe in Kent (see above; Bruce-Mitford 1974; Dickinson & Speake 1992).

Through these researches, knowledge of the cremation rite improved greatly, but improvements in methods of excavation and processing were not always clear. Stratigraphy and plans are not always reliably and accurately recorded. Equally, although the cataloguing of individual urns and their contents became increasingly commonplace, they were far from universally applied. Often many urns without 'interesting' decoration are not illustrated (e.g. Lethbridge 1951) and on many occasions excavators only discuss unusual or best-preserved artefacts from graves (e.g. Lethbridge 1926-7: see Hills 1980 for criticisms of early reports).

In terms of the theories used to study the evidence, early Anglo-Saxon archaeology developed within the culture-historical paradigm influenced directly and indirectly by trends in prehistoric archaeology (Trigger 1989; Lucy 1998; 2000). The explicit aim was to identify ancient cultures and charting their origins on the Continent, migration and settlement. In many ways this was not a new paradigm, but the development of the ideas employed in earlier nineteenth century studies in which archaeology was expected to fill the gaps in the political history of the fifth and sixth centuries left by the fragmentary written sources. The differences from earlier approaches came in the methodologies employed to answer these questions. The construction of artefact typologies and the mapping of their geographical distribution were used to chart the invasion and settlement of Germanic groups. Yet it is ironic that this focus on artefacts reduced the significance of the cremation rite itself as a material symbol of Germanic racial origins. In a sense, cremation rite itself becomes less of a focus of interest at the very time when detailed evidence was becoming increasingly commonplace.

These approaches are exemplified by the work of E. T. Leeds and J. N. L. Myres who dominated the study of Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century (Leeds 1913; 1936; Myres 1969; 1970; 1977; see also Baldwin Brown 1915; Chadwick 1907). They regarded cremation as the archetypal Anglo-Saxon burial rite, and cremation cemeteries provide a source of evidence for the origins of the Angles and the Saxons upon the Continent (e.g. Leeds 1913: 87-98). When found in England, cremation is consequently seen as the older rite. This interpretation formed the basis for using the proportion of cremation in different regions of Britain to indicate; (a) the provenance of particular groups, (b) the relative date of the cemetery, with fewer cremations suggesting a later date even though Leeds and Myres became convinced that cremation persisted until the late sixth and early seventh centuries and (c) the circumstances in which the Germanic settled and consequently the degree of their exposure to Roman and British funerary traditions. Those that continue to practice cremation the longest were thought to be groups from beyond the Roman sphere of influence and those particularly of Anglian descent. Equally they might be communities that maintained their pagan beliefs for longest, had settled in England at an early date or in situations with limited exposure to a surviving Roman and British population (e.g. Myres 1937: 448-9; Myres 1969: 16-18). In other words, the proportion of cremation rites in cemeteries and regions was not random; communities and tribes had the propensity to use cremation or inhumation depending upon their cultural affiliations and historical circumstances.

This set of assumptions led to the use of the distribution of cremation across the country to assess "*the direction, extent, and rapidity of the invaders' penetration of the country*" (e.g. Collingwood & Myres 1936: 416; Leeds 1936: 29). Cremation was seen as common among, but not exclusive to, the Anglian tribes (e.g. Leeds 1913: 26; 74; Meaney 1964: 15-16; Myres 1969:16). In regions where Angles and Saxons inter-mixed, cemeteries contained both rites ('mixed-rite' cemeteries). Cremation varied in frequency among other groups, particularly uncommon among the East

Saxons and South Saxons (e.g. Leeds 1913: 44; Collingwood & Myres 1936: 368). For example, Joan Kirk's study of the Upper Thames valley argued, following Akerman (1860; 1860) and Leeds (1913: 58; 1933), that the history of settlement can be traced through the proportion of cremation to inhumation found in the cemeteries. The further upstream, the fewer cases of cremation were found. The low frequency of cremation in other regions was also the basis of cultural interpretations. The infrequency of cremation in east Kent suggested that settlement began when the change to inhumation was already underway on the Continent (Leeds 1936: 43). Equally, on a larger scale, Leeds saw the frequency of cremation in the region from Yorkshire to Norfolk as evidence for an earlier invasion in these parts (Leeds 1936: 30). Indeed, the cremation rite and pottery, as well as brooches, were used to challenge the historical record. Subsequently, Leeds promoted the view that the Saxons had not invaded from the south coast, but instead had utilised the Icknield Way from areas where cremation showed evidence of the earliest settlers of Saxon descent in East Anglia (e.g. Leeds 1933; Myres 1954). While increasingly there were attempts to identify British survival within the cemetery evidence (see Lucy 1998 for a review), cremation stood as uncompromising evidence of a purely Germanic and pagan component to the population and burial record of Migration Period England.

These views were developed further through J. N. L. Myres' detailed study of the pottery from early Anglo-Saxon graves and his comparison with the pottery found in Roman Iron Age and Migration Period cemeteries from the Continent. Yet Myres' focus on the pottery meant that he had little to say about the cremation rite itself. Cremation was merely a convenient context from which many pots could be recovered in a relatively good state of preservation (Myres 1969; 1977). Having found a site ideal as a 'quarry' for early Anglo-Saxon pots in the form of the Caistor cremation cemetery, Myres described it as 'ideally suited for use as a type-site for Anglo-Saxon pottery of the pagan period'. He did not mention the sites' value for the understanding of cremation burial rites (Myres 1969: 5). Whereas the custom of cremation was only a crude indicator of cultural affiliations (see Baldwin Brown 1915), Myres thought that the pottery might allow detailed political history to be written for an ostensibly 'pre-historic' period from the material culture. Urns showed the Continental origins of the Germanic tribes, and following their migration, could be used to identify successive phases of settlement linked to the eras of particularly kings mentioned by the Venerable Bede (Myres 1969: 62-119; Myres 1970; Myres 1977: 114-27; Myres 1986: 46-72).

Myres utilises two approaches. Firstly, the construction of a typology from the form and decoration of the urns allowed him to relate a complex and long-term process of migration rather than a single invasion event. Furthermore, the styles of pottery used to contain the cremated dead showed multiple origins at individual sites. Myres used this not only to suggest that in eastern England, the urns show groups with cultural affiliations with the Continental Angles and Saxons in the same cemeteries, but also evidence of contacts with other areas suggesting that the Frisians may have also been involved in the settlement (e.g. Myres 1948; Myres 1970: 162-5; 167). The evidence suggested the mixing of cultures that later developed into geographical culture-zones. A similar idea was promoted by Leeds

to explain the overlapping distribution of different fifth and sixth-century brooch types which he sees as like a piece of cloth 'into which have been interwoven many coloured threads representing a multiplicity of contributions to a common fabric' (Leeds 1945; see also Lethbridge 1951: 13).

The second approach used by Myres was geographical. The distribution and landscape location of the large cremation cemeteries of eastern England was considered. In particular, Myres was interested in their relationship to the river systems along which settlers would have traversed from the coast, as well as the Roman roads that invaders might have exploited. The association of cremation cemeteries with Roman towns was also thought to be significant in parts of East Anglia and the East Midlands. For instance, the Caistor and Markshall cemeteries overlooked the *civitas* capital of the *Iceni*. This relationship was used to suggest the early date and political context of Germanic settlement as *foederati* before the large-scale Germanic invasions and settlement of the fifth century (Myres 1969: 74-77; 85).

Therefore in culture-historic studies, despite the growth of evidence for the cremation rite, increasing less attention was paid to it. Cremation continued to be seen as the cultural antithesis of all things Roman, and evidence of the Continental origins and pagan beliefs of the Saxon settlers, but cremation was just as frequently seen as a frustration and a destructive bias. Myres' pessimism is summed up in his review of the contents of the urns that he studied:

"...cremated remains are likely to be the least informative to the archaeologist of all the material relics of an ancient culture" (Myres 1969: 13).

In their later work, both Leeds and Myres briefly addressed the social, economic and religious importance of cremation. Yet Myres admits that his primary task is not to examine the contents of the urns, nor the cemeteries, but the pots themselves (Leeds 1936: 30-32; Myres 1969: 120-41; see also Richards 1987: 11). A rare exception can be found in the discussions of the Lackford cemetery by T.C. Lethbridge, who discusses the potential magical significance of unburned items added to the urns such as tweezers, shears and combs. Lethbridge recognises their use to manage the hair and close links to the person. He noted that in many ancient and contemporary cultures around the world it is believed that hair has magical qualities. He suggested that the items were buried with the dead and sometimes deliberately broken to prevent their use by sorcerers to control the dead person (Lethbridge 1951: 12-13). Similarly he argued that deliberately piercing holes in pots may have been aimed at allowing the dead person's spirit to enter and exit the pot at will (Lethbridge 1951: 13). However, his ethnographic approach and attempt to interpret the burial rite are the exception rather than the rule.

From the 1970s to the Present

The last thirty years have seen major developments in the study of early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites. The number of well-preserved cremation graves excavated to a high standard has increased dramatically. However, many sites remain

unpublished, notably the cremation cemeteries at Loveden Hill (Fennel 1964; Webster 1973) and Elsham (Webster 1977) as well as the mixed-rite cemeteries at Mucking (Wilson 1971; Webster 1972), Kingsworthy (Wilson 1964) and Springfield Lyons (Youngs 1983; 1984; 1985; 1988). These sites have the potential to augment and alter our appreciation of the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite, yet to date, all but the briefest published accounts remain outside the academic and public arena. Other sites have been published, but not by their original excavators. The challenging task for their publishers has often been hindered by incomplete and unreliable records. This difficulty has particularly affected the publications of three important cremation cemeteries at Illington, Newark and Sancton (Green & Milligan 1993; Kinsley 1989; Timby 1993). Despite improved excavation and recording techniques these sites, together with excavations at Thurmaston and Snape are bedevilled by the poor preservation of many of the cinerary urns (Filmer-Sankey & Pestell 2001; P. Williams 1983). These issues have also affected the useful contributions to our knowledge of mixed-rite cemeteries from excavations at sites like Alton (Evison 1988), Appledown (Down & Welch 1990), Portway Andover (Cook & Dacre 1985) and Great Chesterford (Evison 1994). Each of these cemeteries has added to our knowledge, but overall it appears that the quality and efficiency of publications of cremation graves has lagged behind the successful study and publication of inhumation burials in the same period.

However, the high quality excavations at Spong Hill and Cleatham provide cause for greater optimism. While a synthetic overview of the Spong Hill cemetery has yet to be produced, the excavators have been successful in publishing the largest sample of excavated early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials together with a detailed osteological and artefact reports (Hills 1977; 1980; Hills & Penn 1981; Hills, Penn & Rickett 1987; Hills, Penn & Rickett 1994; McKinley 1994). Spong Hill stands as an unrivalled 'type-site' for the study of the cremation burial rite. Our knowledge of the range and character of the material culture including grave- and pyre-goods and the ceramic urns themselves, the provision of animal remains and the character and treatment of the human remains owes most to the work at Spong Hill.

Yet, the very success of Catherine Hills and her team is in many ways a problem for our understanding of the cremation rite in early Anglo-Saxon England as a whole. Is Spong Hill a typical cremation cemetery (if such a thing did exist), or was it exceptional in its size and character? We need further evidence of comparable quality from other sites in order to assess adequately Spong Hill in its wider context. This is why the publication of other sites to a comparable standard is essential. For instance, the dedicated work of Kevin Leahy to the excavation and analysis of the cemetery from Cleatham, North Lincolnshire, will undoubtedly complement the Spong Hill results. In many ways this site has many advantages over others from the east Midlands and East Anglia. Preservation was good and the sample is large. Consequently the Cleatham cemetery must be considered a priority for future artefact studies and osteological analysis (Leahy 1998).

The increasing data-set for the study of early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials has developed hand-in-hand with developments in theoretical approaches to the

evidence. There have been two themes in the interpretation of the cremation rite. The first is one of continuity: the continued characterisation of the cremation burial rite in terms of ideas and evidence derived from nineteenth century archaeology and developed within the culture-historic paradigm of the early and mid-twentieth century. In this context, cremation is regarded as 'Germanic', 'pagan' and 'early' and is consequently seen as strong evidence for the immigration of groups from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia at an early date and with limited exposure to Romano-British mortuary practices. In overviews of the evidence, writers continue to follow the arguments of Leeds and Myres. This is clear, for instance, in the work of Chris Arnold (1982), Nicholas Higham (1992) and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (1989), who despite very different views of the character and scale of Germanic immigration, regard cremation in an almost identical way. In a series of papers, Catherine Hills, has charted a similar, but much more cautious and refined course (e.g. Hills 1993; 1998; 1999). Looking beyond the affiliations of individual artefact types to the study of the burial rite and its many components, she has compared and contrasted Spong Hill with some of the best evidence gained from the Continental sites. While supporting the traditional paradigm of migration as a primary cause for the similarity between Continental and English sites, she has noted the numerous and widespread connections that the Spong Hill cemetery demonstrates, not simply with 'Anglian' and 'Saxon' areas on the Continent, but indirectly with regions as far afield as Thuringia, Frankia and the Mediterranean (e.g. Hills 1981; Hills 2001). Following Lethbridge (1951: 13) she also admits the possibility of a sub-Roman contribution to the population buried at cremation cemeteries like Spong Hill.

The second major trend in the theoretical study of the cremation rite is the influence of social and symbolic approaches in mortuary archaeology (see Härke 1997; Morris 1992). These studies see burial as more than simply a cultural trait that can form part of the evidence for the movement and development of archaeological 'cultures'. Instead, burial can provide evidence for social organisation, structures and socially ascribed identities. Most of these studies have focused on the inhumation graves (Alcock 1981; Arnold 1980; Crawford 1998; Fischer 1988; 1995; Härke 1992; Huggett 1995; Lucy 1998; Shepherd 1979; Stoodley 1999), but a few social studies have addressed mortuary variability in the cremation graves. We still await a full analysis of the Spong Hill material, but through a series of papers Catherine Hills has investigated the social, cultural and economic importance of many of the artefacts and materials found in the cremation graves at Spong Hill seeking correlations with the age, sex and status of the deceased (e.g. Hills 1981; Hills 2001; McKinley 1994). Such studies have been possible through the detailed osteological analyses produced from this evidence (McKinley 1994). The results show that artefacts and animal remains varied according to the social categories of the deceased, and in some cases these associations differ from those identified in the inhumation rite. Mads Ravn has taken this study much further by employing correspondence analysis to the Spong Hill data. His study suggests that we can read the social structure of the Spong Hill community from the groups that he identifies from the burial evidence, including evidence of a small warrior elite group isolated in his analysis (Ravn 1999).

Through his study of a sample of cemeteries from across southern and eastern England, Julian Richards focused upon the form and decoration of the cinerary urns. Combining a quantitative approach derived from contemporary processual archaeology with a structuralist theoretical stance focusing on the symbolic role of artefacts in early Anglo-Saxon society, Richards seeks to interpret the variability in the cremation rite within individual cemeteries, and between sites and regions (Richards 1984; 1987; 1988; 1995). As with Hills and Ravn, Richards identified many correlations between the age and sex of the deceased and the provision of decoration, urn size and form, and different types of artefacts placed in the urns. His study was hampered somewhat by the quality of the data had access to, and at the time of his study he was only able to incorporate a fraction of the Spong Hill evidence. Yet, to date, his study is still the only source of evidence for many unpublished sites, and a full assessment of his work cannot be presented here. Finally, my own research has attempted to build upon the important results of Hills, Ravn and Richards through a compilation of the data for the cremation burials found in southern and eastern England, but is as yet unpublished (Williams 2000).

The importance of these social approaches is that they break with traditional antiquarian and culture-historical questions of the origins, migration and settlement of 'peoples', but instead focus upon aspects of how society operated and used material culture. It must be said though, that these perspectives are not in opposition, but represent valid but contrasting ways of looking at the evidence. Perhaps it is only in combination that cultural and social/symbolic approaches can be used to construct an archaeological 'history' of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Carver 1989; Scull 1992, contra Arnold 1997).

Yet the development of new approaches to the burial data do not end here. In recent years, post-processual and interpretative archaeologies have opened up fresh ways of thinking about material culture in the context of mortuary practices that is increasingly having an impact on the study of early Anglo-Saxon burial rites. Themes of particular interest including identity, ideology, and social memory have been discussed in some studies but have yet to be applied in detail to the cremation evidence (e.g. Lucy 1998; Richards 1995; Stoodley 1999; Williams 2001b). For example, Martin Carver's interpretation of the burial rites at Sutton Hoo in terms of a political ideology linked to origin myths in Scandinavia and resistance to Merovingian hegemony explicitly regards cremation as more than a reflection of culture and society, but an active choice and political statement by mourners. Although the cremation rites are not his primary interest, he suggests that the archaeology of fifth and sixth-century East Anglia including the cremation cemeteries could reflect an earlier politically motivated world-view which he refers to as a 'ideology of the folk' (Carver 1992: 181). Developing from this perspective, this author has argued that the cremation rites in the fifth and sixth centuries were a deliberately conservative statement by communities with implications for their identities and ideologies (Williams 2002a). Cremation may have taken place as part of a set of practices that created a distinctive 'ideology of transformation' affecting the perception of personhood, group identity and cosmology for early Anglo-Saxon

communities (Williams 2001a). As with later elite burial sites that incorporated cremation, the choice of maintaining a complex ritual technology may have been related to distinctive strategies of remembrance used in constructing social and sacred memories of the past. (Williams 2001b; Williams forthcoming). These interpretative approaches challenge the perception of burials as a 'reflection' or 'window' onto past societies, but instead suggest the centrality of mortuary practices in the process of creating identities and society. However, it is too early to assess how these approaches bring too new perspectives on the cremation rite.

Part 2 - Cremation Burial Rites - Current Knowledge and Questions for Future Research

The first part of this paper charted the development of methods and theories concerning cremation in early Anglo-Saxon England. Let us now identify and discuss the current state of knowledge and some of the profitable areas for future research. Inevitably we can focus upon only some aspects of the burial rite and emphasize those areas that this author believes require further study. While incomplete, this may provide a useful statement to provoke debate and discussion in coming years. Discussion will focus on five areas: the geographical distribution of cremation rites, landscape, monuments and containers, grave- and pyre-goods and animal sacrifice.

Cremation and Inhumation

The distribution of the cremation rite in England has long been a focus of interest, but there remains more detailed analysis to be undertaken. Firstly, it is clear that it is difficult to talk in singular terms of an 'Anglo-Saxon cremation rite'. The cremation rite and the contexts of its use seem to vary over time and space. There is a distinctive division of England into five regions. Three of these - Bernicia, east Kent, and Wiltshire/southern Hampshire, are defined by the rarity of cremation burials. Cremation burials are found in these territories, but only in small numbers as a minority rite and in very rare cases in mixed-rite cemeteries. Examples include: Hob Hill, Saltburn and Norton, Cleveland (Gallagher 1987; Sherlock & Welch 1992), Westbere and Sittingbourne in Kent (Vallance 1848; Jessup 1946), and Blackpatch, Pewsey (Wilson 1971; Webster 1972; 1973; 1976). While often explained away in terms of biases in the evidence, it appears that cremation burials were rare, but not absent in these areas from an early date.

The fourth region is a broad swathe of southern and central England where cremation rites were common in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. The rite occurs in varying proportions together with inhumation graves. The proportion of inhumation to cremation varies. Cremation is absent in some instances, rare in others, but frequently both rites are found in use contemporaneously in the same cemeteries. These 'mixed-rite' cemeteries are found in the West Midlands, the Cambridge region, the Thames Valley, Hampshire and Sussex. Broadly corresponding to 'Saxon' areas of the country, cemeteries in which cremation burials form the majority of graves are absent from this region.

The final region consists of East Anglia, the East Midlands and the Vale of York together with the westernmost edge of the Wolds of East Yorkshire. This is an area where mixed-rite cemeteries are rare, apart from a few possible cases in Rutland, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire. Instead we find a situation of contrasts. The most common form of cemetery are those dominated by inhumation with cremation rare. In contrast, we also find a smaller group of large cremation cemeteries in which inhumation rites are rare or absent. These 'cremation cemeteries' begin earlier than their inhumation counterparts, but their use overlaps for much of the sixth century.

Overall, there appear to be no hard-and-fast rules concerning the mode of disposing of the dead in the early Anglo-Saxon period and each region, locality and cemetery displays variability. Also, the picture is confused by the fact that the proportion of cremation to inhumation is distorted by post-depositional biases. For instance, at some sites cremated bone survives between in acidic soils, while at other sites cremation burials were placed at shallower depths and are more frequently destroyed during medieval and post-medieval agricultural activities. Yet there appear to be general trends in the way the dead are treated that may relate to social, political and cultural linkages and distinctions between parts of the country.

Much more research needs to be done to investigate the local, regional and national context of the relationships between cremation and inhumation. Anthropological studies show that choices concerning how to dispose of the dead are rarely arbitrary. To burn or to inhume the dead was an important distinction that could have been used to mark social divisions within a communities (such as age, gender and status groups) as well as to articulate the distinctive identities and socio-political affiliations of groups and communities.

Space, Place and Landscape

An important topic for future research is the study of cemeteries as places within their landscape settings. An understanding of the places selected for the dead and their relationship with other locations including settlements may reveal a great deal about the social and symbolic importance of the dead for early Anglo-Saxon society (see Parker Pearson 1993). What were early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and what took place at them? Certainly they were end-points for complex sequences of funerary rituals, but what significance did these funerals bestow upon the locations of graves? Also, what other kinds of ceremonies and rituals took place in and around cemeteries? Were they only places of and for the dead, or were they places for the living as well? In many societies cemeteries could have been places of power in many ways (Hörke 2001). They were locations where the living may have thought the dead resided, or where they could communicate with the dead. The character of funerals as communal gatherings made the social and political as well as religious contexts for interactions between social and perhaps even ethnic groups (Williams 1999).

A number of authors have noted that the large size of cremation cemeteries could have made them places where many different communities buried their dead,

perhaps from a sizeable territory in and around them (e.g. Arnold 1997; McKinley 1994). A recent study undertaken by the author aimed to show that cremation cemeteries were not placed in the landscape at random. The location of four southern Lincolnshire cremation cemeteries of Baston, Ancaster, Loveden Hill and Hall Hill, West Keal were studied as part of a wider survey of the location and topographical context of cremation cemeteries in the East Midlands and East Anglia. It could be shown that many sites were located in relation to a number of nearby contemporary settlement sites known from fieldwalking survey, aerial photography and excavation. This supports the view that the cemeteries may have been the burial grounds of many different communities and could therefore have acted as places where linkages between groups were negotiated and defined. Cemeteries were also located in relation to distinctive topographical positions, they were often related to routeways, and sometimes demonstrated associations with ancient monuments. While each site was located differently, this preliminary study shows the possibilities in understanding the cremation rite and cremation cemeteries from the perspective of landscape archaeology (Williams 2002). The field-walking project of Kevin Leahy in and around the Cleatham cemetery has the potential of developing further our understanding of these patterns of settlement activity. Cremation cemeteries may have been 'central places', in both the socio-political and sacred sense.

There is also great potential in studying the spatial organisation of individual cemetery sites, something which until recently has not been attempted (but see Hills 1980). The appearance and space of the cremation cemetery would have been experienced very differently from that of cemeteries where inhumation dominated as a burial rite. Frequently excavators have noted that urns are not placed randomly, but in lines and curves suggesting a degree of intentional organisation to the burial sites with new graves added in relation to those that went before. There is the potential for identifying household plots and their relationship to each other. The uses of the cemetery by different groups, the significance of the cemetery as places, and the evolution of sites over time, could all yield interesting results. As well as looking at relationships between graves, the placing of burials in relation to pre-existing boundaries (e.g. Hills 1977) and ancient monuments (see Williams 1997) needs consideration.

Monuments, Graves and Pots

Early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials are usually buried in very shallow locations and frequently disturbed by later agricultural activity. This has often led to the impression that the graves were not enduring or permanent memorials to the dead. There are antiquarian accounts of burial mounds covering cremation cemeteries from Norfolk but in most cases, few monuments have survived. Excavations have revealed evidence of a range of memorials over cremation burials. The lines of posts and the post-structures identified, for example, at Appledown (Down & Welch 1990) and Alton (Evison 1988) may provide instances where cremated remains were placed in collective stores above-ground, or displayed in containers hung from, or placed upon, timber posts. The four and five-post houses may equally indicate

metaphors by which the dead were understood. They were given symbolic 'houses' within which their spirits might dwell and be contacted. Comparable practices are found in cremating societies from Siberia and South-East Asia (Williams 2000). Other cemeteries provide intriguing suggestions of other mortuary structures, including the lines of posts at Baston (Mayes & Dean 1976) and the lines of stones (perhaps the foundations of a structure) at Loveden Hill (Fennell 1964). Therefore, the burial sites in varying degrees of societies.

Within the grave there is also variation. Linings and coverings for graves have often been noted, but their frequency and significance has been under-studied. One wonders if many structures have been missed during excavations because they are not recognised, or made from worked-stone. The spreads of stones, flints, and sometimes Roman tiles, could serve as markers. They may have served to discourage disturbance by later grave-diggers, or perhaps to attract the attention of grave-diggers and encourage later burials to be placed in relation to earlier interments. Equally, they could have been meant to support post-holes that may have formed a kind of grave memorial. Yet the emphasis is also upon 'containment', keep the dead within the urn and protected from the outside soil.

As we have seen, it is the pottery from the cremation burials that has received the most attention. Pots are adorned with a bewildering array of decoration, and their form varies. This has been used to discuss the date and cultural affiliations of the potters, and in some cases to suggest modes of production, trade and exchange. But they have many other attributes that require attention and investigation. It has long been realised that some pots appear to have been broken, others have lead plugs in them. Were they accidentally broken and later mended, or were these ritual acts of fragmentation and re-making? The fabric, texture and colour of the pots may have been as important in communicating the identity of the occupant as the form and decoration. Equally, the functions and biographies of the urns may have led to their selection. Were pots made for the funeral, and if not, how were they used before? Scientific methods of investigation such as petrology, use-wear and residue analysis may provide many new insights by revealing the ways in which they were used, whether than had long or short lives of use and where and how they were made. There are many new avenues for investigation alongside the traditional attempts to place the pots in chronological and culture categories. Perhaps more than anything, we need to re-think the way we think of pottery in the cremation rite. as Richards has argued, as containers for the dead, pots could have communicated detailed evidence about the identity of the dead. Yet in relation to the post-cremation rites, there seems to have been a great emphasis by the mourners of placing all of the remains within the urn. By analogy with other societies around the world that practice urn-burial after cremation, the ceramics may have been regarded as a new body for the dead. Therefore, pots were seen metaphorically as people, but not in the way that culture-historians have envisaged the relationship.

Grave Goods and Pyre Goods

The artefacts found in cremation burials have usually received two interpretations. Firstly, as with inhumation graves, they are seen as evidence of pagan belief, cultural origins and their relative date. Secondly, they are often regarded as symbols relating to the identity of the dead. Both approaches are valid to a degree, but fail to address the role of portable artefacts in the cremation process itself.

The comparison of cremation and inhumation burials also yields interesting results. The artefacts found in both rites are different. Often this can be explained by the destructive effects of the pyre. In many cases this is true, but the fire would have not only affected the proportion of objects, but their appearance as many would be distorted and fragmented. The choice to collect them from the pyre and to place them in the urns was not a random one, but a deliberate decision by mourners who could equally have left them at the pyre or recycled them among the living. Their altered appearance may have been important for the mourners. To see that they had altered their form, may have showed that both bone and artefacts had made a proper transformation from the state of living to one of an ancestor.

Certain artefacts are under-represented in the cremation rite. Weapons - a central symbol of male identity - are conspicuous by their absence. This is usually explained by the fact that cinerary urns are too small. But this is not entirely true. Certainly the metal parts of swords and shields are too large to be placed in urns, but this does not prevent them being placed alongside or over the grave as sometimes does occur (Roach-Smith 1848; Williams 1983). Also, small spearheads and knives are rare, and these are small enough to place within many urns. An alternative explanation might be sought in the symbolism of the cremation rite. Objects like weapons, made from iron, survive the destruction of the cremation fire unlike glass, amber, bronze, ivory, bone, antler and wooden objects. Therefore, unlike the objects that show signs of distortion they may be fragmented but not distorted. Perhaps this is why weapons are rare in cremation burials - because they did not show the signs of damage and destruction necessary to render them appropriate symbols to accompany the cremated dead.

Other items - including combs and tweezers - are more common in cremation burials than inhumation graves. Soil conditions might explain the low frequency of combs in cremation graves, but it does not explain why toilet implements are more common in cremation than inhumation burials. Why were combs and tweezers significant in the post-cremation rite, and not weapons and knives? One answer may lie in the ontological and cosmological, as well as social, nature of cremation. If cremation can be understood as a ritual technology that changes the conception of identity and memories by which the dead was regarded, then the cremation was a process of destruction followed by reconstitution. In the post-cremation rites of reconstitution - rebuilding the body of the dead - combs, tweezers and the like may have 'stood for' the new surface of the deceased. Rather than being arbitrary signs related to age, gender, status and ethnicity, they were intimately connected to the aim of cremation to destroy and re-build the dead into a new identity. This

argument needs to be developed through a more detailed analysis of the toilet implements and combs. Were they burnt on the pyre, or as many have argued, were they added after the cremation? Exactly how many were 'miniature' artefacts too small to be functional objects, and how many could have been used?

Animals and People

Recent osteological studies have highlighted the importance of animal sacrifice in the cremation rite. A wide range of animal species, both domestic and wild, singly or in combination, are found among the burnt bone placed in the cinerary urns. The most commonly sacrificed species are sheep/goat and horse (Bond 1996). Almost half of cremation burials at the most carefully excavated sites contain evidence for animal sacrifice, and the real proportion of funerals involving the killing of animals may have been much higher. Animal bone could indicate food offerings, and this is likely to be the case for sheep or goat remains. However, for dog, cattle and horse remains appear to have been placed on the pyre as whole animals. These were not sustenance for the dead, but entire beasts selected for slaughter and to undergo the same ritual process as the dead person.

Why were animals sacrificed? The traditional explanations for animal sacrifice focus upon seeing animal sacrifice as a Germanic practice, as evidence for pagan afterlife beliefs. However, social explanations might be sought be regarded the animals as symbols for the identity of the deceased as an indications of the person's social networks and moveable wealth. Hills, Richards and Ravn all find evidence that different social categories of person were likely to have different animals buried with the dead suggesting social rules linked to the killing of animals during cremation rites. Adult males being particularly likely to be cremated with beasts.

But the killing of an animal, or animals, at a funeral could also hold other meanings and importance. The practice is too widespread to be restriction to an elite, and so common as to suggest that sacrifice during funerals was integral to the meaning and process of the cremation rite. Analogies from other parts of the world and from later Scandinavian sources suggest that animal sacrifice could be both a social statement by mourners, and an expression of belief in an afterlife existence. However, more than both of these, killing animals could have been regarded as releasing the beast's vitality and allowing it to guide the dead to a new state of Being. Animal sacrifice was a practice that could be regarded as enabling the *transformation* of the dead into a new status and identity. Within shamanistic and animistic worldviews that frequently fail to see clear divisions between people and animals, and see animals as having functions as psychopomps, the animal(s) may have been meant to guide the dead from their social identity upon death to a new form of personhood and status as ancestor (Williams 2001b). Indeed, in the context of cremation, it may even suggest that the ancestral identity formed through the burning of people and animals was not wholly human, but contained bestial elements.

Conclusion - Cremation, Identity and Memory

This paper has attempted to chart the origins of the methods and theories used to study early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials. In so doing, we have seen the changes and continuities in the way the evidence is approached. The focus has then been to identify some of the potential ways forward in the study of cremation in early Anglo-Saxon England - the issues that remain to be addressed, and some of the new theoretical approaches that future studies may wish to discuss and debate.

My opening quotations were aimed to show the low regard with which cremation rites have been treated in traditional approaches to the period. Cremation is seen as a poor source of archaeological evidence. Yet, this paper has attempted to show that method and theory have together developed and created new perspectives with which to investigate the cremation burial rite in early Anglo-Saxon England. In future studies, let us hope that cremation rites are given the attention and detail they deserve, both for answering the traditional questions of dating, cultural origins, but also for investigation social structure, symbolism, and the ritual technology of cremation in itself.

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