Ethnographies for Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation

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This chapter shows how archaeological investigations of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices can be enhanced and extended by anthropological theory and ethnographic analogies. While the interactions between fire, material culture, architecture, space and the human body have been increasingly theorised for early Anglo-Saxon death rituals, this chapter illustrates how refined interpretations can be arrived at using two themes: (i) the significances of vessels and containers as pyre-goods and (ii) building timber-post structures associated with single and multiple cremation burials.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxon, analogy, cremation, death, ethnography, fire, memory, mortuary, pyre, vessels

Introduction

The early Anglo-Saxon period in southern and eastern England reveals rich variability in mortuary practices, including both cremation and inhumation graves. Together these graves have long been used to write the cultural, political and economic history of the decades and centuries following the end of Roman Britain. Equally, they offer a fascinating case study for how prehistoric and early historic archaeologists interrogate mortuary patterns and processes from varied, complex yet partial burial data (for one recent review, see Williams 2011).

While inhumation graves have received most attention, in the last two decades in particular, cremation practices have received growing consideration following the systematic excavation and analysis of a series of key sites including Sancton (East Yorks.), Cleatham (Lincs.), Spong Hill (Norfolk) and Mucking (Essex) (reviewed recently by Williams 2005; Leahy 2007; Squires 2012; 2013; Hills and Lucy 2013). By interpreting the variability and character of cremation burials, and their different relationships with inhumation burials, both spatially and chronologically, archaeologists hope to can discern not only underlying social structures and commemorative strategies, but how these vary and change over time and between localities.

In the interpretation of burial data, early medieval archaeologists have long flirted with the frameworks derived successive schools of theoretical archaeology but all too rarely with anthropological approaches in mortuary archaeology. Only occasionally, and often only indirectly, ethnographic data and broader anthropological theories of death and memory have informed our interpretation of early medieval mortuary practiced (Williams 2006; Devlin 2007). This article attempts to open new ground by, for the first time, presenting a range of ethnographic examples that inspire reflection on our interpretations of the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and the

character and variability of cremation practices specifically. No attempt is made to match the archaeological evidence to any single ethnographic case study. Equally, the aspiration is not to impose a cross-cultural law regarding human behaviour surrounding cremation. Instead, I hope to present a middle-ground between generalised social theory and historical particularism in the interpretation of the character and significance of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices drawing inspiration and insights from both ethnographic data and anthropological theory.

It is a great honour to me personally to dedicate this chapter to Professor Vera Evison. This chapter aims to acknowledge and celebrate her important contributions to the study of cremation in the early Anglo-Saxon period by focusing on two specific themes which build directly upon Professor Evison's research. First, I would like to note Professor Evison's extensive studies of Anglo-Saxon vessel glass have transformed our appreciation of the widespread availability and provision of glass vessels to accompany the dead onto cremation pyres in the early Anglo-Saxon period at the cremation-dominated cemetery of Spong Hill, Norfolk and the mixed-rite cemetery Mucking II, Essex (Evison 1994a; 2009). Second, through Professor Evison's excavation and publication of important mixed-rite cemeteries, notably at Alton (Hants) (Evison 1988) and Great Chesterford (Essex) (Evison 1994b), her work has revealed the varying relationships between cremation and inhumation in the 'Saxon' regions of England, and specifically the phenomenon of four- and five-post timber 'miniature houses to commemorate the dead' (Evison 1988; Down and Welch 1990, 29). Through this chapter, I hope to direct my use of ethnographic studies to present new interpretations of these two key aspects of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practice which I sincerely hope will interest Professor Evison. These two topics reveal the significance of the cremation process itself and the post-cremation reconstruction of identities for the dead as a varied and complex technology of remembrance across early Anglo-Saxon England. Through the staged display and destruction of vessels and containers and building relatively ephemeral architectures to contain single and, quite possibly multiple, cremation burials, we can explore the interplay of fiery transformation and material culture in dealing with the cremated dead.

Anthropology and Early Medieval Archaeology

Anglo-Saxon archaeology has a diffident relationship with anthropological approaches and ethnographic data. In the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (Hamerow et al. 2011), prehistorian Chris Gosden charts the potential of more explicit applications of anthropological perspectives in the archaeological investigation of Anglo-Saxon England (Gosden 2011), having himself long pursued numerous synergies between the disciplines (e.g. Gosden 1999). He argues that Anglo-Saxon England represents a unique historical situation and precise ethnographic parallels are not only unavailable, but potentially misleading if imposed upon the evidence. Notwithstanding these cautionary points, he suggests that broader themes in the current anthropological study of societies past and present, including the relationship between landscape, buildings, material culture and the body, have received little attention and can be profitably applied and explored in relation to a wide range of archaeological evidence for lowland Britain between the fifth and eleventh centuries AD.

It is revealing in itself that Gosden's chapter is unique: no previous attempt has been made to explore anthropological themes for Anglo-Saxon archaeology as a whole. In essence, Gosden's chapter offers Anglo-Saxon archaeology a clear and inspirational wake-up call to current themes intersecting anthropology and archaeology and ripe for further application to the Early Middle

Ages. Certainly the key themes Gosden identifies; exploring in particular approaches foregrounding Anglo-Saxon relational thought and societies as assemblages of human and non-human agents, offer rich and to-date largely untapped potential for future Anglo-Saxon archaeological research. Gosden's chapter runs counter to the contributions of many of the authors in the *Oxford Handbook* who, whilst grounded in regional and period-specific scholarship, with some notable exceptions, draw little or no explicit connection from broader theoretical approaches and themes in material culture studies and other shared linkages between anthropology and archaeology.

At another level, however, Gosden's review gives a misleading impression. In the last three decades in particular, early medieval archaeological research has already drawn upon anthropological perspectives to society and culture in a rich variety of fashions largely unacknowledged in Gosden's review (e.g. Moreland 1997). To take but a few prominent examples from early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology, one might cite the work of Ellen-Jane Pader (1982) on costume, grave-goods and mortuary symbolism, Julian D. Richards (1987) on cinerary urns, and Heinrich Härke (1990; 1997; 2000) on mortuary variability and social structure revealed by the early Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite. Moreover, as early as 1979, Ian Hodder presented a clear use of ethnographic fieldwork from east Africa and Madagascar to discuss the challenges of interpreting early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (Hodder 1980). These are simply some from a rich range of studies drawing on sociology, anthropology and historical research themes (see also Lucy 1998; Williams and Sayer 2009). Specifically, an important collection of essays edited by John Hines (1997) tackled Gosden's topic head-on, with historians and archaeologists debating how to utilise anthropological approaches in the study of a range of topics for pre-Viking England.

Therefore, while Gosden may be correct to argue that 'post-colonial' and 'post-modern' thought is less commonly debated and explicitly discussed in Anglo-Saxon archaeology compared with prehistoric and Roman studies, his restricted citations and generalised comments overlook a significant range of research that has explored a range of pertinent anthropological themes which both fit with, and expand from, Gosden's perceived agenda. Moreover, while Gosden is surely right to suggest that crude parallels between ethnographic situations and circumstances and material evidence from early medieval Britain should be avoided, I would highlight the potential of drawing careful and critical inferences of even old and abbreviated ethnographic accounts as well as current fashions in anthropological theory.

Anthropology and Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation

Despite my reservations, Gosden's appraisal remains significant for early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices. A brief but trail-blazing summary of ethnographic data worldwide was deployed by Jackie McKinley (1994, 79–81) as part of her osteological analysis of cremated human remains from Spong Hill, Norfolk. However, her focus was restricted by the parameters of her study: she was primarily concerned with appreciating open-air pyre technology rather than an investigation of how burning the dead might be situated in relation to a broader set of material practices and their social, cosmological and ontological parameters. Despite these inevitable limitations, McKinley was able to profitably and carefully demonstrate both cross-cultural trends and precise insights from ethnographic sources in a convincing and clear way which directly fed into her robust interpretation for the osteological data at her disposal.

McKinley's review directly inspired my doctoral research (Williams 2000) and subsequent articles which derived (whole or in part) from my thesis. I realised that understanding the process and variability of early Anglo-Saxon cremation required a firm and extensive grounding in anthropological theories of death, identity and memory as a multi-faceted transition for the cadaver, the 'soul' of the deceased, and the survivors, drawing from Robert Hertz's (1960 [1907]) seminal work. While Hertz viewed cremation, inspired by Balinese cremation ceremonies as a 'secondary rite', his approach has been refined and revised to theorise specifically the tempos, multi-sensory affordances, materialities and corporealities of fiery transformation. To build this approach, I drew upon ethnographic research which considered, or informed, the mnemonic interpretation of cremation. I refined my approach by using not only generalised anthropological theory, but specific ethnographic data as integral to my interpretations, informing my interpretations of the significance of sacrificed animals (see also Bond 1996), 'grave-goods' selected for inclusion with cremains (cremated remains) *after* the cremation, notably combs, toilet implements and cinerary urns themselves, and pyre-goods focusing on iron weaponry and blades (reviewed in Williams 2005; 2011; 2013; 2014, see also Nugent and Williams 2012).

This work is part of a broader trend in early medieval burial archaeology. Recent studies of cremation in later first millennium AD Europe and Scandinavia have also drawn upon historical and literary analogies, experimental archaeology, as well as ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological research to explore the fiery technologies in the transformation and commemoration of the dead (see Gansum 2004; Goldhahn and Oestigaard 2008; Oestigaard 2013; see also Kaliff and Oestigaard 2004). For those unwilling to make the leap from ethnography to the first millennium AD, insights can still be gained from the fragmentary and disparate written sources. For example, Karen Høilund Nielsen profitably utilises Tactitus's *Germani* and accounts of elite Italian funerals of the early Roman period, *Beowulf* and Icelandic sagas to interpret early medieval (Late Iron Age) cremation practices and associated stone-settings at Lindholm Høje, Jutland (Høilund Nielsen 2009). Although demonstrating reluctance to draw analogies from further afield, these are still disparate sources which have veracity not because of a shared and consistent cultural continuity between archaeological data and written source, but instead by affording profitable insights into the variability and character of the archaeological data.

Yet these studies remain few and far between and they vary in their theoretical frameworks and methodological applications, and the coherence and viability of their interpretations. Still, they offer a clear demonstration that Gosden's review simply should not be ignored. Research agenda for the interpretation of early Anglo-Saxon cremation simply cannot omit neither ethnographic data nor anthropological theories of death, burial and commemoration. While claiming that anthropological theory and ethnographic analogies are an untapped resource in relation to early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices would be misleading, it is striking how these concepts and approaches are almost completely absent from a range of recent syntheses and analyses. To me, this suggests that Gosden's prompt towards greater use and integration of anthropological theories and ethnographic data is not without foundation. On the contrary, historically focused research questions continue to dominate the principal outputs from the study of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices (Ravn 2003; Leahy 2007; Hirst and Clark 2009; Squires 2012; 2013; Hills and Lucy 2013).

Without insights and analogies from ethnographic sources, early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology risks a great deal. It threatens to turn back the clock over seventy years to a culture-historic era in which the burial data only serves to support narratives of Germanic settlement, religious conversion and kingdom formation. Such avenues of research retain a refined legitimacy, but such exclusively narrow research agendas and interpretations divorced early Anglo-Saxon archaeology from recent, current and innovative theories in both prehistoric and historic archaeologies worldwide, including a range of other research themes regarding gender, ethnicity and mortuary space, for which early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries might be profitably applied. More significant still, such particularism neglects the potential for early Anglo-Saxon burial data to contribute towards current interdisciplinary debates regarding death, memory and material culture in the human past and present.

This has a range of ramifications also for the present-day value and impact of our interpretations of early Anglo-Saxon archaeology in education, heritage management, museology and other dimensions of public engagement (see also Marzinzik 2011) as well as the ethics and politics of digging up and displaying the early Anglo-Saxon cremated dead (see Williams 2007; Sayer 2010; for a global context, see Nilsson Stutz and Thomas 2014). The recognition and significance afforded to early Anglo-Saxon sites, monuments and portable antiquities recovered from across lowland Britain, become a depleted resource if they are afforded local or regional frames of reference and historical value. Moreover, countering threats from agricultural regimes, development, and other forms of land-use as well as ongoing damage from illicit metal-detecting, our arguments regarding the value of early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials are diminished without carefully framing our evidence in relation to broader themes and debates. Therefore, this is not a question of whether we feel comfortable and confident in utilising a particular ethnographic analogy or anthropological theory in relation to early Anglo-Saxon graves. Instead, it is more a question of whether we wish to contextualise, promote and value early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology and burial sites as contributing to multiple narratives about the human past and present, some about the origins of England, others about mortality, memory and material culture of both local and global import (see Quinn et al. 2014a).

To illustrate how we rectify these problems for early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices, here I turn my attention to the interpretation of vessels and containers as pyre-goods and the provision of mortuary houses in the post-cremation rite revealed by Vera Evison's research (see also Down and Welch 1990; Wessman and Williams forthcoming). In doing so, I wish to both take inspiration from Gosden's approach and qualify it. I argue that ethnographic evidence for the important association of vessels with cremation, and the post-cremation building of miniature structures, provide inspiration and insights in the interpretation of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices.

Ethnographies of Cremation: Pitfalls and Potentials

Archaeologists rarely excavate pyres, and it becomes a challenge understanding sequences and tempos of cremation pathways from death, through the burning of the dead to the disposal of ashes (cremains) (Nilsson Stutz and Kuijt 2014). The study of cremation by archaeologists is informed by many sources of theory to help us reconstruct dynamic processes from static data, including the ancient and medieval written sources, pictorial evidence, forensic and experimental archaeologies as well as sociological and anthropological evidence and approaches (discussed in Williams 2008; Cerezo-Román and Williams 2014; Williams et al. forthcoming). This reflects how

interdisciplinary the study of the common themes and heterogeneities of cremation past and present has become (Quinn et al. 2014b). Inspired by the structuralist anthropology of Hertz (1960 [1907]) and van Gennep (1960), the broader theoretical foundations for understanding the transformation of the body by fire, including its physical and spiritual components, are provided by Metcalf and Huntingdon (1991), Bloch and Parry (1982); Bloch (1988) and Vitebsky (1993). In the cremation process, the living and the dead's physical and spiritual components all undergo a structural transformation (see Cerezo-Román 2014, 160–7). This has many material and spatial components, by which social memories of the dead and their aspired afterlife destinations are choreographed. Metaphors of moving from wet to dry, through heat to cold, from flesh to bone, soft to hard, are readily applied to fire-related rituals including cremation (Århem 1988). Moreover, cremation is a visual display in which fire itself has an unpredictable agency and by which smoke, heat and light affect the participants and onlookers. Cremation is thus a medium for social, ideological and ontological transformation (see Oestigaard 1999; 2000; 2005; 2013).

There are demonstrable limits to the application of such theories and themes from other societies far distant in time and space from early Anglo-Saxon England. Much has been written in general terms regarding the challenges and problems of employing specific analogies for mortuary practices (e.g. Ucko 1969; Hodder 1982). When utilised, cremation accounts from early records can be biased in a range of ways within the colonial and missionary gaze: emphasising the savagery of the subject peoples' religious beliefs and behaviour, with particular attention often afforded to exotic and 'un-Christian' practices where they occur, such as human and animal sacrifice, and the mutilation/self-mutilation of mourners: widely regarded as indices of 'primitive' and 'pagan' behaviour whether considered in the early medieval context or the recent past (e.g. Covarrubias 1937, 377–83; Geertz 1983, 37–54, for Balinese human sacrifice and MacLeod 1925 for the punishment, torture and immolation of widows on the American North-West Coast).

In contrast, many dimensions of archaeological interest are neglected. For example, little attention has been given within ethnographic accounts to the spatial organisation of activities or burial location, nor is there attention to architectural and monumental dimensions of pyres and burial facilities. The details of the substances, artefacts and materials involved in cremating the dead are also often lacking. In terms of broad trends, there is little diachronic engagement in ethnographic accounts, meaning that descriptions of funerals are often situated outside historical processes which are so important for approaching archaeological data (e.g. Downes 1999; Vitebsky 1993).

Still, some ethnographic accounts can be rich in material detail and afford insights into the treatment of the dead. Indeed, while tainted in their language and prejudices in many overt and covert ways, older ethnographies often afford more attention to practical details involving the deployment of spaces, fuels, substances, animals and material cultures than more recent ethnographic accounts of cremation ceremonies. Yet if we identify and embrace the inherent biases of the snapshot provided by short stays within a community by a foreign observer whose understanding and appreciate of the events they are witnessing can vary in depth and accuracy, we need not dismiss older ethnographies. For example, we need not embrace the argument that cremation was tied to the diffusion of specific tribal groups as did Kroeber (1927) and James (1928). For the American North-West Coast, for example, Sergei Kan (1987; 1989) has demonstrated the utility of drawing upon eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts into a rich and historically sensitive narrative of Tlingit mortuary practices in terms of society and cosmology. A similar positive synthesis for Aboriginal Australia is distilled by Hiatt (1969) based on early accounts of the

nineteenth century. Of key relevance to the discussion here is Århem's (1988) synthesis of earlier ethnographies in the interpretation of Khasi cremation practices. Furthermore, there are recent precedents for drawing upon ethnographic insights and analogies in the interpretation of prehistoric and proto-historic cremation practices (e.g. Oestigaard 2000; Kaliff 2005) justified by supposed shared cultural and linguistic mythologies (e.g. Kaliff 2005) or by cautiously and selectively relating ethnohistorical sources back onto prehistoric archaeological data from the same regions (e.g. Cerezo-Román 2014, 151–55; Ward and Tayles 2015).

Therefore, while few specific ethnoarchaeological studies of cremation have taken place and none have been conducted that are directly attentive to the research questions of early Anglo-Saxon archaeological evidence, they can still be examined critically for the information that they provide. In particular the focus on cremation followed by water immersion in recent ethnoarchaeological in Nepalese, North Indian and Balinese cremation still has important lessons for us, but they afford limited attention to the pre-cremation preparation of the pyre or the post-cremation treatment of remains (e.g. Downes 1999; Kaliff and Oestigaard 2004; Oestigaard 2005; 2013).

My resulting approach is both unfashionable and 'old-hat' for anthropologists, combining a structural anthropological attention to the sequence of the funeral, with an attempt to tease out a richer 'thick description' of the data inspired by ethnographies (see also Århem 1988, 258). While we might not be able to make historically specific meanings from one context to another, the form, structure, spatial-temporal dimensions, materialities and transformations associated with cremation can provide the grounds upon which formal, technological and practical analogies can be carefully constructed. This is more, however, than gaining insights into *how* early Anglo-Saxon cremation took place, but attempting to begin to build theories for *why* early Anglo-Saxon cremation took place in the fashion that it did and in the varieties that it did.

Containers for the Cremated Dead

Containing the dead was a key metaphorical and mnemonic practice in early Anglo-Saxon practices, most commonly using ceramic containers selected (if not made) for the funeral (Richards 1987; Nugent and Williams 2012; Williams 2014). Yet careful scrutiny of urn contents has revealed that a range of containers and vessels were also utilised in earlier stages of the funeral. As 'pyre-goods' carried to and placed upon pyres to accompany the dead body through fiery transformation, vessels and containers are perhaps under-represented in the archaeological record and are under-represented in recent interpretations of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices as a result.

The importance of vessels and containers in early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices is illustrated clearly in the important work of Professor Evison, who contributed reports on the glass vessel fragments from Mucking (Evison 2009, 619, Hirst and Clark 2009, 586) and Spong Hill (Evison 1994a). Interpretations have been hampered by their fragmentary state, but also the wide range of materials by which they find representation in the archaeological record. Hence, glass vessels are but one of a series of vessels and containers placed on pyres for cremation. At Mucking (Essex), for example, a wider range of fragments of wooden vessels, copper-alloy containers, stave-built vessels and pots seem to have been added to pyres (Hirst and Clark 2009, 586, 619–20). We might also add that there is evidence of bone caskets too as at the Spong Hill cemetery (Riddler and

Trzaska-Nartowski 2013, 106–7). If we add antler and ivory bag rings to the equation as indicators of further containers placed as elements of the dressed cadaver, then a large fraction of the early Anglo-Saxon cremated dead went onto pyres with containers of various kinds (Riddler and Trzaska-Nartowski 2013, 99–104). Crucially, this range of evidence must surely be the tip of an iceberg, especially given the fact that wooden vessels, in which drinks and food might have been provided for the dead, are only recognised by their copper-alloy repair staples. We can legitimately speculate at a wider range of leather pouches and bags, and a range of wooden cups, bowls and drinking horns were likely to have been commonplace additions to cremation pyres. This is because of the strong parallel evidence from inhumation graves on the occasions where soil conditions hint at their presence, as for example with Grave 4 from the Snape (Suffolk) cemetery (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001, 25–9) where a pair of drinking horns were arranged symmetrically at the east end of the grave, by the feet of the body, surviving as dark stains in the soil. Hence, it is difficult to imagine that the cremated dead were not commonly accompanied by vessels, bags, caskets and pouches in which artefacts were contained but also a range of liquid and solid foods, drinks, perfumes and other substances.

Admittedly, there is much we do not know about early Anglo-Saxon pre-cremation practices without contemporary written sources and without many convincing surviving pyre-sites. Therefore, the range, frequency and significance of these items is difficult to estimate. In most instances we do not know if any of these containers, vessels and bags were open or closed, empty or full, broken or intact, when placed with the dead upon the pyre. Furthermore, employing such data in traditional investigations of social status, gender and age is restricted because many items, including expensive ones, might reveal few traces following conflagration. Still, as Christina Lee (2007) identifies, food and drink were evidently important and largely overlooked components of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practice (see also Williams 2014).

How might ethnographies further our interpretation of the significance of vessels and containers (and indirectly their contents) utilised as pyre-goods? Admittedly few ethnographies pay careful attention to the range of artefacts placed on pyres, where they are placed, and what their significance might have been in terms of their material, shape, colour, size or who had been their owner and what they contained. Hence, ethnographic accounts might seem poorly tailored to interpret archaeological containers placed on cremation pyres in early Anglo-Saxon England. However, some ethnographies reveal the wide range of functions and roles that vessels and containers can serve in the pre-cremation and cremation stages of funerals.

In the subsequent discussion of ethnographic evidence below, I utilise the past tense. I do this since, while some of the practices are ongoing across the world, many of my accounts relate to historic situations rather than present-day ceremonies.

The first key insight is that liquids might be utilised for the preservation of the body prior to cremation. From India there were nineteenth-century reports of corpses being preserved in preparation for cremation, including both smoking and drying. In addition, immersion in oil or honey until cremation might be arranged (Crooke 1896, 272). Hence, we need to entertain the possibility that vessels and containers could pertain to the sensory and corporeal management of the body prior to cremation, as much as creating a tableau for display on the pyre.

Manipulating the appearance and sensory interaction with the cadaver is widespread in pre-cremation ceremonies, including the washing, re-clothing and applying perfumes and oils to the corpse. For instance, three ceramic vessels were used to wash the body ahead of its dressing for cremation among the Khasi, Meghalaya, India (Gurdon 1914, 132). In Hindu practice, the preparation of the body with oil and other preparations preceded cremation. A further example of symbolic washing is reported for the Chukchee (Chuckchi) who created tiny wooden cups specifically in order for mourners to dip grass into them in turn. The wet grass was then passed over the corpse as a symbolic form of washing before clothing it (Borgoras 1911, 521–22). Hence, vessels and their contents were key mechanisms for preparing the cadaver for procession to the pyre and its conflagration, both dispersing death pollution and protecting the living, but in some cultures also, protecting the dead from spiritual harm too.

Metaphorical relationships linking human bodies with food and drink seem widespread in cremating societies. Food and drink is brought to the corpse in the morning and evening during the preparations for the cremation for the Khasis (Gurdon 1914, 132), while coins were placed with the body during the procession for the dead to buy more food on their way to the afterlife (Gurdon 1914, 133). In Bali, pots had an important role in collecting holy water from sacred springs to give the soul of the deceased a 'daily drink' (Covarrubias 1937, 368–9). Therefore, vessels and their contents were not simply means of preparing the corpse, but also sustaining and guiding the ghost of the deceased during the pre-cremation practices.

Pots were also subject to death pollution. Water pots of the dead persons' house were broken or replaced in Hindu tradition (Dubois 1906, 482). Therefore the breaking and distribution of pots with the dead might be concerned with the inalienability of pot and person.

The association with cremation and consumption was evident in Hindu funerals where, the consumption of *pindas* — sacred balls of rice — was thought to represent the symbolic consumption of the flesh of the dead person (Crooke 1896, 275). Hindu practice appeased the hungry and thirsty ghost of the deceased through food and drink (Parry 1983). A water pot was hung from the sacred tree to refresh the ghost prior to cremation (Crooke 1896, 287–8).

This significance extended to the vessels used in pyre-side performances. Vessels were also deployed to distribute foods and liquids onto the pyre, as in the Brahmin funerary rites recorded by Dubois (1906, 482) where rice and pulses are placed in a proscribed sequence (see also Thurston 1906). Furthermore water pots were either broken or used to pour water around the pyre three times before the deceased's skull is pierced open: the parallel between breaking pots and breaking skulls helps us to consider instances of 'pierced' urns from early Anglo-Saxon contexts (see Nugent and Williams 2012).

The Phayeng village in Manipur provides an instance of the range of items that might be added to the pyre. Here, household utensils including a plate, bowls and mugs were placed with the body together with a bag of coins, nail-cutter and lace-cutter (Babu 1984, 158). A coin was placed between the corpse's teeth and then the body was transported for cremation. During the cremation procession, a fire collected from the three nearest houses to the deceased's were carried, but so also a pot contained the 'sacred fire' (Babu 1994, 159). The leader of the crematorium shot an arrow at the pyre to displace spirits and the eldest son or another nearest family member would lead the procession with a water-filled pot on his shoulder; water was

poured on every bamboo pole at four corners of pyre. Coins were then thrown onto the pyre and when the fire caught, they poured on some water shouting 'drink, drink' (ibid.). Pouring urns of holy water onto pyres before conflagration had been a key stage of Balinese cremations too: the corpse became so saturated that one writer noted that 'one begins to wonder how it is possible that it will burn' (Covarrubias 1937, 375–6)

Another kind of liquid distributed around pyres by way of vessels might be the blood from sacrificed animals (e.g. Gurdon 1914, 133). For the Khasi, animal sacrifices were a key element of divination in funerals and further beasts continued to be killed whilst the pyre blazed. The relationship between divination and feeding the dead went hand-in-hand it seems, since then betel-nuts were placed upon the pyre with mourners uttering 'goodbye, go and eat betel-nut in the house of god' (Gurdon 1914, 134).

Overlapping with these apotropaic, sacrificial, divinatory and purificatory roles, containers might also pertain to oils, grease and butter added as accelerants for the cremation pyre (see Habenstein and Lamers 1963, 122). Simultaneously these substances might hold symbolic and cosmological significance, as for the Todas of the Nilgiri Hills of southern India (Rivers 1906, 361). Likewise, perfumes and scents might have helped create a spiritual and symbolic aura around the cremation: a practice widespread in both ancient sources and the ethnographic record (Habenstein and Lamers 1963, 81). Therefore, as well as choreographing the sensory experience and tempo, vessels and containers mediated relationships between the living and the physical and spiritual dimensions of the dead undergoing parallel transition through the pre-cremation and cremation ceremonies.

Given early Anglo-Saxon archaeology's long-established obsession with equating grave-goods with the specific social identity of the individual interred, it is important to note that pyre-goods in the ethnographic literature need not be personal possessions of the deceased but offerings to the dead from the family and also from other participants and observers. It is also important to emphasise that the pyre was not a tableau for display but the result of a complex sequence of material depositions. For example, the Khasi mourners threw food offerings onto the lighted pyre once lit, as well as earlier in the funeral (Århem 1988, 278). Meanwhile, among the Yuma tribes of the North American South-West, clothing and blankets were piled over the whole pyre and were contributions from everyone present (Spier 1970 [1933], 303). Pyre-goods might also be offerings to deities; for example, among Sherpas of Nepal, the lama threw offerings of many kinds on to the pyre to the god of fire (von Furer-Haimendorf 1964).

Concealment and consignment are also key when considering the items placed on pyres; items might have brief and limited significance in 'display' and 'drama' (see Williams 2006). Among the Todas of southern India, artefacts given to the deceased – food, ornaments and money – are situated within the folds of the cloak wrapping the body. Meanwhile, a range of gifts from those in attendance are placed in rattan boxes including rings, armlets, necklaces and earrings (Rivers 1906, 354).

There is a further association between containers, vessels and cremation. Vessels might relate to the actual lighting of the pyre. Shah (1964, 55) notes that the Dhankas followed a Hindu custom of carrying the light to the pyre, fuelled by cow-dung in a black earthen pot tied with grass to light pyre. The fire is not arbitrary; the home fire of the deceased was sometimes used (e.g. Sher 1964,

233–4) or else the fire from the houses of neighbours. While practices vary between cultures, the transportation of fire itself is a further significant association of receptacles and burning the dead.

Vessels persist in having many important roles in post-cremation rituals: the pouring of water, milk and other liquids to clean and quench pyres is a widespread phenomenon (e.g. Dubois 1906, 490; Gurdon 1914, 133; Srivinas 1952, 114). For the Khasi, bones were washed and placed in an urn with food offerings beside them comprising rice and eggs (Århem 1988, 278). The Lao Song Dam (Thailand) gave ashes a 'last washing' by pouring and sprinkling scented water over the bones collected from the pyre on an old mat, and then a 'last meal' by rice, fish and raw pork placed beside the bones (Rishøj Pedersen, L. 1974/5, 355). Among the Karen of Burma, pieces of charred bone, the skull in particular, were raked out and held near the fair and addressed as if the dead person. Water was then poured over them (Marshall 1922, 204). There are of course many instances in which the collection of the ashes from the pyre involves special receptacles, including plates and pots (e.g. Wales 1931, 153).

The Indian subcontinent provides many fascinating instances of the close relationship between vessels, liquid and burnt human remains. The Khasi not only washed and 'fed' the dead prior to cremation and upon the pyre, but all subsequent stages of secondary and tertiary funerals involved the sacrifice of animals and the provision of food and drink for the dead, including the pouring of rice wine over the bones (Århem 1988, 282). When the bones were finally interred collectively in a megalithic tomb, food offerings again completed the funeral (Århem 1988, 283). The Phayengs of Manipur collected the burnt bones in a large urn with bones and charcoal tied together so as to represent a crude effigy of the deceased (Babu 1994, 160). The pot was treated as the dead person and presented with a meal before burial with other vessels as grave-goods including a container of rice, a small pot of water and a cylindrical bamboo container containing rice-beer. Subsequent to burial, rice, earth and curry were offered to the grave (Babu 1994, 161). The final funerary ceremony was a funerary feast (Babu 1994, 162–3). The parallels with urn-burial in later prehistoric and early historic European societies might be superficial and formal, but they are difficult to ignore.

Another striking example comes from Chandra Roy's ethnography of the Mundas, in which he describes the pouring of water over the ashes to cool the pyre and collect the bones by female relatives of the deceased (Chandra Roy 1912, 462). An effigy was made of grass-shoots and placed on a figure drawn on the ground with parched rice, both of which were collected and joined with the bones in an earthen pitcher which was hung from a tree near the dead person's house. Breaking a pot was an integral part of the subsequent commemorative rituals. The ashes were later buried in the family burial ground during a 'bone-burial ceremony'. They were buried in the same pot in which they had been placed after the cremation (Chandra Roy 1912, 463–6).

These few examples serve to illustrate a number of points. The ghost of the dead is often hungry and thirsty and vessels are utilised to wash and dedicate, assuage and guide, nourish and replenish, protect and purify, the spirit of the dead before, during and subsequent to cremation. The pyre, even before being lit, is a locus of complex sequences of receptacle performative use and deposition within and around the structure and often tied closely to the perceived passage of body and soul through the mortuary process. Vessels and containers are thus both performative material culture but also mnemonically constitutive of the sacral and social identity of the dead. Their roles were key to the body's preparation, procession, pyre-composition and arrangement,

and the arrangement and conflagration of the pyre itself. Moreover, this relationship of vessels and bodies can persist through to the cooling of the pyre and the collection, transportation and deposition of ashes. As Jonathan Parry (1983) observes, funerals are a transaction by which the dead is transferred to the realm of ancestors in exchange for blessings afforded to the living.

For early Anglo-Saxon England, this foregrounds the key sequence of material transactions in which vessels and containers might be implicated. Hence, vessels and containers on pyres might be personal or family possessions as well as gifts from mourners, but also they might be the results of specific libations and even the mechanism of lighting the pyre itself. The provision of vessels *for* the dead prefigured the use of urns to *contain* the dead post-cremation, creating a multi-stage unfolding relationship between the living and the dead mediated by vessels and containers and the pouring and consuming of food and drink and the sensory deposition of scented and igniting materials.

Despite recognising that pyres were the result of a careful composition of artefacts to both display and consign identities to the flames, archaeologists have yet to consider these various options when interpreting the combination of vessels and containers, as well as dress accessories, placed with the dead (McKinley 1994; Williams 2006, 90–96). Vessels and containers comprising of many materials, sizes and shapes provided rich, layered relationships between multiple stages of the cremation process in early Anglo-Saxon England, perhaps constituting gifts and possessions, and just possibility also offerings to spirits and deities.

What is clear is that vessels afforded more than convenient portable receptacles for ashes. The composition of the pyre distilled the results of numerous living agents, and drew together artefacts and vessels from many sources and possibility deployed to make many connections and relationships apparent between the living, the dead and the supernatural. Previously (Williams 2001), I argued that sacrificed beasts, notably horse and sometimes cows and dogs, accompanied the cremated dead as whole animals were possibly shamanistic familiars within early Anglo-Saxon eschatology. Subsequently, I have argued that pots constituted more than containers, but animated presences by which the dead were believed to be 'stored' and sustained in the landscape of the 'urnfield' cemetery (Nugent and Williams 2012; Williams 2014). Perhaps the vessels and containers revealed in the archaeological evidence relate to a more staged and careful sequence of transforming personhood through the cremation process than hitherto acknowledged. Through the washing, preparation, nourishing of the cadaver, social relations between the living, and ongoing dialogues with the dead were being negotiated in early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices.

Building for the Cremated Dead

As in most archaeological contexts, for early Anglo-Saxon England most of our evidence comes from the end-point of post-cremation practices of ash-disposal. Cremation rapidly transforms the dead body (or bodies) into heat, light, smoke, steam, ash and distorted, fragmented and shrunken bone. The material remains – 'cremains' or 'ashes' – can be left at the pyre site. However, as enduring, inert, partible and malleable substances, ashes can be retrieved by different methods and either divided up or kept together and transported, installed or stored above or below ground, buried, immersed in water or in the air. They can even be carried amidst clothing. The cremated remains can be kept together in one container, or they can be dispersed among many different

destinations with different groups of mourners. The possibilities are almost endless. While we must not over-exaggerate the contrast between cremation and other disposal methods which might equally involve complex processes of translating and transforming the dead (e.g. Appleby 2013: Quinn et al. 2014a, 13), cremation rites in all their variability are unique in allowing this manipulation and mobility of human remains so soon after the funeral. Ethnographies reveal this variation, as well as instances where ashes were afforded a series of successive destinations in individual graves and later in collective tombs (Århem 1988; cf. Appleby 2013). In different ways, these all afford opportunities to re-make, re-place and re-member the dead in a new corporeal, material and spatial forms. In considering these practices, the structuralist framework of Hertz (1960 [1907]) only takes us so far, and we need to enrich his generalised structure with more refined appraisals of the diversity of ways in which ashes can be treated from a range of different ethnographic sources.

Evison's (1988) excavations at Alton (Hampshire) revealed two of what are now recognised as a series of four- and five-post timber structures associated with cremation burials from southern and eastern England, but most commonly identified at Apple Down, Sussex (Down and Welch 1990; see Wessman and Williams forthcoming).

Given the many potential post-cremation treatments for ashes available to the communities of lowland Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, how might ethnographies enlighten our understanding of the choice to build these particular structures? Ethnographies show a surprising range of ways in which miniature houses and structures were built as temporary and permanent repositories for the cremated dead once retrieved, curated and contained above ground. These structures might have commemorated the locations where pyres took place on the ground or memorialised cremation burials interred below ground. While no claim is made for a precise parallel to the early Anglo-Saxon archaeological evidence, these examples open up possibilities regarding the significance of these practices as one among many possible ways of rebuilding and reconstituting ancestral identities for the dead, individually and collectively, following cremation. In particular, the ethnographic accounts foreground mortuary structures as ways of combining and installing the cremated dead as an enduring active presence in the landscape, even if the structures are individually quite modest and seemingly ephemeral in proportions (see Wessman and Williams forthcoming).

The idea that graves and tombs can be regarded as metaphorical homes for the dead is a familiar concept in many societies from the ancient and modern worlds. Cremation rites might be superficially regarded as the antithesis of this view, since the dead cannot corporeally exist anymore as recognisable bodies. However, on the contrary, many societies envision cremation as a pathway to a persistent presence in cemeteries, temples and other landscape locales, from the vast tombs of emperors in ancient Rome (Toynbee 1973) to the stupas of Buddhist tradition. Equally though, we find ample evidence of quite ephemeral structures symbolising the dwellings of the deceased in cremating societies.

There are examples of buildings built on the spot of burial. In India, the Kacharis of Assam, India, did not take away the cremated remains from the pyre site although they did erect a four-post structure enclosing the area where the cremation took place. They used to cover this structure to shelter the sprit from sun and rain (Endle 1911, 48). This matched the treatment of inhumation graves in the same communities: threads of cloth were passed around four posts erected around

the grave in order to prevent the spirits of other men from interfering with the rest of the dead. Similarly, the Garos of Bengal (Meghalaya and Bangladesh) buried ashes in the earth at the same spot as the pyre was kindled and a small thatched building surrounded by a railing which served to record the memory of the deceased and assuage the ghost from returning to haunt the living (Crooke 1896, 288; Downe 1939, 259).

Among the Nivkh (Gilyak), Siberia, a few weeks after the funeral, a toy house was built with a window and a door and a small figure of a man is dressed and placed inside. Above the house was a representation of a cuckoo (an emblem of love). Food and smoking apparatus were also placed with the dead (Czaplicka 1914, 151–2). Then a small house was built over the spot where the relatives placed a vessel containing the ashes of the dead; small parts of clothes, hair and skull were kept inside it.

Among other Nivkh groups, the pyre was swept with eagle feathers. The mourners then made a small square barrier of planks and covered the ashes with fir branches, cotton cloth, birch bark and birch boards placed in layers. These were fastened to the ground using wooden hooks. A remnant of cranial bone was retrieved and wrapped in white cloth. This was placed between two small planks that are fastened together with the umbilical cord of the deceased. This would be subsequently placed in a memorial shrine constructed later in the year. The shrine construction included a stylised wooden image cut and dressed in miniature garments and equipped with all the paraphernalia of the person including a knife, needle case, tinder and flint. This was placed on the board at the cremation site (Black 1973). Next to the shrine was placed a series of small stocks or poles. One had human hair tied to it taken from the head of a close female relative. This hair was regarded as part of the symbolic 'footwear' needed by the dead to cross to the other world. A second pole always had three forks upon which a small bowl was placed to ease the cuckoo's thirst (the bird associated with the soul of the deceased). A third stick was decorated with the image of a cuckoo and a fourth with an eagle feather. Eventually the memorial *raf* was built like a small toy-house with an image of the cuckoo carved on the roof. So in this case, the cremation pyre became the site of elaboration and the aim was to use the cremated remains and other objects to create a new dwelling place for, and apparatus for the journal to the afterlife for, the deceased. The memorials were not enduring, but their intention is quite different; to present a place of mediation with the supernatural world and enable the journey towards it.

A variety of containers were often used to contain cremated remains above the ground. The Sitka Indians gathered ashes in a small decorated box and place it on a scaffold or on the top of a memorial post. Women returned to the pyre and picked charred bones out of the ashes. These were wrapped in cloth and put in a little wooden box which was set in a grave house. The wrapping served to protect the remains from cold (Krause 1956 [1885], 157). Such grave containers often took the form of grave houses on posts, memorial poles or small grave houses (Krause 1956 [1885], 158). Some historical illustrations from the American North-West Coast depict huge timber monuments in the form of fearsome beasts holding boxes of ashes in its hands (Gunther 1976; Krause 1956 (1885), 158, see also Kan 1987; 1989). Among the Tlingit, there was great variation in the form of above-ground containers for the ashes of the deceased. Totem poles and flags were one form of monument, yet others include grave houses (Kan 1989, 38–41). Other Indian groups were recorded as following this tradition, such as the Kutchin of Canada, who suspended the ashes from the tops of painted poles in bags; the same applies to the Tahltan (Jenness 1932).

We find broadly comparable practices in the American South-West described in early histories. Obregon's *Historia* stated that even small bones remaining can be picked up by those that served in the temple and they were thrown into a hole inside of a large temple (Toulouse 1944, 67). In South America, the Kaingang of Brazil collected the ashes in a large basket lined with leaves and ferns, and carried them to the burial place in a procession. They dug a grave, lined it with ferns and placed the basket containing the bones within. Afterwards a small house was constructed over the grave (Habenstein and Lamers 1960, 641).

In South-East Asia we find similar practices of housing the cremated dead. The Chinbons of Burma erected small houses over the dead in a comparable fashion to the architecture in their villages, some standing on piles (Downe 1939, 43). In Tibet where cremation was reserved for high lamas, the ashes were scraped together and mixed with clay and moulded into tiny pagodas and distributed through the landscape (Habensten and Lamers 1963, 81). In Burman cremations, relatives looked for the remains after cremation which were then washed in coconut milk or sometimes with lavender water or eau de cologne. The ashes were then wrapped in white cloths and placed in a newly made earthenware pot and taken to the house temporarily. Then, cremated remains were taken to the burial ground and sometimes put into a hole near the pagoda, sometimes with a miniature pagoda erected over the ashes of highly respected relatives. Sometimes ashes were ground down and mixed with wood to make an image of Lord Buddha (Yoe 1896, 590).

Likewise, among the Lao Song Dam of northern Thailand, after cremation, the fire was extinguished and the closest relatives collected the remains and placed them on a strip of an old mat and sprinkled or poured scented water over the bones. This was important since it showed how the body and social person are regarded in relation to the cremated remains. Then the ritual specialist (*mo book thang*) transferred them to a small metal urn and the remains were taken home to the dwelling and placed on a shelf next to previous members of the family. The 'doctor' collected as many bones as he thought the urn may hold, and placed them on a silk quadrant, tied them up and placed the bundle in a ceramic jar; an inverted rice bowl was placed over the opening of the jar. The jar was buried and a straw-thatched house on a post was erected as a replica of an ordinary dwelling house of the deceased (Rishøj Pedersen 1974/5, 356). The jar was taken to the burial place chosen by the deceased by tossing bamboo sticks over a coin until the dead signalled the place they wished to be buried when both sticks land the same side up (Rishöj Pedersen 1974/5, 356).

This theme of dwellings for the cremated dead can be found elsewhere. In Laos, the remains were collected and placed in a pagoda until a permanent monument was erected for a high-status person (Habenstein and Lamers 1960). In Mongolia, stupas were sometimes raised over the pyres, or alternately the remains were gathered and sent to one of the several holy places or to the lamaserie (Habenstein and Lamers 1960, 90). Placing of cremated remains at Buddhist shrines was common from the eleventh century in China (Ebrey 1990, 410) and in Buddhist traditions across southern Asia, cremated remains can form powerful Buddhist relics that provide the focus of cult practices (Ebrey 1990, 413).

Where does this review get us in understanding timber structures from early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries? First and most crucially, it is important to note that houses might be built over pyres but also burial sites as dwellings for the cremated dead. This contradicts a widespread notion

among early medieval archaeologists, that despite some of Europe's largest mounds in the first millennium AD being over cremation burials, cremation is somehow counter-commemorative and anti-monumental. Second, these miniature structures might embody sophisticated social and cosmological associations; for while modest in scale, as dwellings for the dead, and facilitating ongoing access to the remains of the dead. They afforded a distinctive engagement through the burial of cinerary urns in groups or singly below ground. Third, while the ethnographic evidence suggests that individual structures might be built after single funerals and over single graves, examples like the Khasi (Gurdon 1914) provide analogies for regarding architectures as collective repositories for the cremated dead, augmented over time. In considering this, we open up the explicit possibility that mortuary timber houses were not built over and for single cremation burials, even in cases such as Alwalton (Cambs.) (Gibson 2007) and Alton (Hants.) (Evison 1988) where a centrally placed cremation burial is identified within a four-post structure. Instead, were these timber structures built in relation to the deaths and funerals of specific high-status individuals, but subsequently used as ancestral stores to house above-ground multiple cremation burials, akin to the clusters of cremation urns identified below-ground at Spong Hill? In other words, were the Apple Down timber houses modest shrines or dwellings for multiple generations of the same household or family? In thinking this way, suddenly we are faced with the possibility that early Anglo-Saxon England did not feature just two disposal methods: cremation and inhumation used in different ratios. Rather than a bi-ritual burial programme, we might be dealing with a tri-ritual disposal strategies in use: (i) inhumation burial, (ii) cremation burial in pits and graves, and (iii) cremation followed by storage in above ground mortuary houses.

Conclusion

Utilising ethnographic analogies in British and European early medieval archaeology is deeply unfashionable and widely avoided by many scholars. Yet I would argue that we are missing many profitable avenues of enquiry through lack of familiarity with, and lack of engagement with, both anthropological theory and ethnographic sources for open-air cremation in the recent past enacted in very different environmental and cultural contexts from across the world.

Do these examples take us any further towards an appreciation of the significance and variability of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices? I would be foolish to claim they offer an interpretative panacea. However, I would equally suggest that the examples above from the Americas, Asia and Australasia suffice to illustrate the potential of gaining interpretative inspiration and insights from ethnographic sources, even those composed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Taking two themes which reflect Professor Evison's research, I have identified a successive series of uses of vessels, containers and their contents before and during cremation ceremonies around the world, many of which relate to the purification, easing conflagration, managing the experience of the cremation and offerings to deities and/or to nourish and sustain, guide and honour, the spirits of the dead. Some of these items may be personal possessions or gifts that reflect the gender, age and social status of the dead person(s) but social factors do not explain the precise fashion of their use and deployment within the mortuary process. I propose that the early Anglo-Saxon dead underwent successive stages of preparation, cleansing and replenishment before, during and after cremation, revealed indirectly via the fragments of vessels and containers found in cinerary urns. Therefore, informed by the ethnographic evidence, cinerary urns were the last of a

series of different containers and vessels used to perform acts of care, protection and commemoration by survivors to negotiate the journey of the body through the cremation fire into whatever afterlife realm or ancestral state was regarded as the desired destination and status for the cremated dead.

Moving on to post-cremation practices, I make the argument that amidst the range of disposal strategies, building miniature houses over the pyres and graves of the cremated dead is well-attested and widespread in the ethnographic literature, both marking individual interments and as collective repositories for the remains from multiple cremations and (hence) multiple individuals. This helps us to understand four- and five-post structures like those identified at Apple Down, Alton and elsewhere as more than simply temporary structures, but potentially enduring dimensions of the topography of cemeteries and as semi-permanent memorials to the dead, both individually and perhaps serving particular households or families (see also Wessman and Williams forthcoming). While ethnographies do not pin down any single interpretation for the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in which cremation is found, these arguments serve to highlight the value of thinking with, and through, ethnographic evidence and anthropological theory as integral to the study of life and death in early England.

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