Mortuary Practices in Early Anglo-Saxon England

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Introduction

The furnished cremation and inhumation graves of the later fifth and sixth centuries ad have been assigned to the pagan 'Anglo-Saxons' for over two centuries. Augmenting recent developments in early medieval burial archaeology, this chapter presents the argument that mortuary practices were mechanisms for the construction of memories and, in turn, the constitution of identities during the turbulent socio-economic, political, and religious transformations of the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

Memory is here defined as a social and cultural phenomenon (for a broader discussion see Williams 2001; 2006: 1–35). This follows from the widespread use of 'memory' to refer to perceived and imagined pasts shared between people and generated through social and ritual practices (e.g. Connerton 1989; Rowlands 1993; Assmann 2006). This approach has been widely applied to the study of mortuary practices by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, as well as within the burgeoning interdisciplinary fields of death studies and memory studies (for reviews, see Williams 2006; Jones 2007; Williams and Sayer 2009). Over the last decade in particular, archaeologists have explored the 'social' and 'cultural' memories reproduced through mortuary practices for many periods of the human past (e.g. Chesson 2001; Bradley 2002; Jones 2007) including the early Middle Ages (Bradley and Williams 1998; Effros 2003; Halsall 2003; Williams 2006; 2007c; Fern 2007). These studies have included analyses of the pivotal roles of practical actions, including the deployment of material culture, the human body, monumentality, and landscapes as media for the selective remembrance of the dead and their situating in relation to histories, mythologies, and identities. Building on these approaches, mortuary practices are here defined as 'technologies of remembrance' (Jones 2003; 2007). The funeral and subsequent rituals were a chaˆine opératoire of practical actions, performances, materialities, and places through which memories were forged and re-made (Jones 2003; Williams 2005a: 254–5, 260–4; 2006: 20–2; Jones 2007; see also Devlin 2007: 15–16). Three themes set the scene for this argument: the mortuary process, mortuary variability, and mortuary change.

The mortuary process

Death in the fifth and sixth centuries AD can be best considered a ritualized transition rather than a biological event. Mortuary practices mediated the parallel transformation of the identities of the corpse, the soul or spirit of the deceased, and the survivors (Metcalf and Huntingdon 1991: 79–108). This was a process of selective remembrance, with inhumation and cremation practices, in different ways, involving many stages and settings through which the identities of the dead were commemorated (Hirst 1985: 19; Williams 2006: 36–144). Material culture seems to have held pivotal roles in orchestrating the commemoration of the dead through mortuary practices by creating memorable scenes

that incorporated multi-vocal symbolic allusions (Carver 2000), made more powerful by the brevity of their display (Halsall 2003), and enhanced by the choreographed transformation and consignment of the corpse, and the subsequent memorialization of the burial location (Williams 2006: 117–21). Through the relationship of material culture, cadaver, monuments, and place, the social memory of the dead person was constituted.

Mortuary variability
If death was a memory-making transition in early Anglo-Saxon England, the dead were not all treated or remembered equally. The archaeological record reveals complex regional and local variability as well as internal diversity within every cemetery (e.g. Hines 1999; 2002; Lucy 2002).

In addition to practical, economic, and environmental influences, three social factors may also have had a bearing on mortuary variability. First, adverse circumstances of death may have created 'bad deaths' that required the extreme measures often described by archaeologists as 'deviant' burial practices (Hirst 1985: 38–43; Williams 2006: 96–102; Williams 2007b: 117–19; Reynolds 2009). Second, the social identity of the deceased, including age and gender (Härke 1997b: 126–37; Lucy 1998; Stoodley 1999: 105–25; Stoodley 2000; Crawford 2000; Gowland 2007), kinship (Sayer 2009), social status and ethnicity (Ha¨rke 1997b: 141–51; Stoodley 1999: 91–104, 126–35), as well as the wider social network of the mourners, is likely to have directed the character of the mortuary procedures. It is frequently recognized that mortuary variability does not provide a direct 'window' onto social organization, but instead an idealized and stylized portrayal for remembrance after the funeral (Pader 1982; Ha¨rke 1997a and b; Carver 2000). Third, the commemorative nature of funerals was directed by power relationships among the mourners, including the deceased's family (e.g. Effros 2003: 173), and arguably other groups as well, such as friends, neighbours, and ritual specialists (Dickinson 1993; Williams 1999). Therefore, while mortuary practices may be considered as analogous to artistic compositions resulting from the 'intentional' outcomes of the mourners (Carver 2000; Halsall 2003), they were unlikely to have been the conscious results of a single composer's design. Mortuary variability served to reconfigure social memories and constituting social identities through selective choices concerning how to remember the dead according to the circumstances of death and social identity, as well as the conflicting ideals and relationships among the mourners.

Mortuary change
Regarding mortuary practices as technologies of remembrance also helps us to understand continuities and changes in funerary traditions over time, as neither manifestations of a static collective consciousness, nor purely situational performances. As in most agrarian traditional societies, the pressures to appease and to fulfil the expectations of the deceased, the living audience, ancestors, and deities would serve to constrain the potential for radical changes in mortuary practice. Social memory was therefore not simply about the selective remembrance of the deceased's identity during the mortuary process and the differential remembrance of social individuals and groups (Williams 2006: ch. 1). It also concerned establishing and reproducing structures of practice that bound separate funerals into an enduring mortuary tradition (Williams 2006: 220).

Hence it is unlikely that 'early Anglo-Saxon' mortuary traditions were invented *de novo* as a Germanic 'fashion' in the fifth century. They bear evidence of multiple influences from southern Scandinavia and Continental north-west Europe (Hills 1993; 1998; 1999: 21–4) and perhaps also late Romano-British mortuary traditions (Philpott 1991; Gowland 2007; see Dickinson, this volume). Innovations were by degree rather than dramatic transformation. They were result of the selective choices made by mourners in relation to remembered and adapted pasts negotiated at the local level.

Mortuary traditions were created and evolved through strategies of remembering and forgetting, building upon and selecting relevant traditions of practice. Even the seemingly innovative 'princely burials' at the end of the period in question contain few elements that are not drawn from existing local practices, albeit exaggerated and manipulated for their new context (Williams 2001: 65–7; Carver 2005: 496–7; see also Newman in Carver 2005: 483–7).

In combination, understanding the mortuary process, variability, and change provide the background from which a fuller exploration of later fifth- and sixth-century cremation and inhumation practices can be based.

Contrasting Mortuary Technologies

Many communities in early Anglo-Saxon England had a choice between at least two contrasting mortuary technologies, cremation and inhumation, and in most regions the two disposal methods were used in varying proportions. Isolating a single explanation and meaning for each rite remains elusive. Cremation was certainly the older rite and became increasingly less common during the sixth century. However, regarding cremation as more Germanic, more pagan, or simply a hang-over of older traditions, is an inadequate and simplistic approach to its survival alongside inhumation for well over a century (Williams 2002).

It is also tempting to see the rites as arbitrary distinctions: both rites were concerned with the visual display of the dead (in the grave or on the pyre) and their subsequent interment, albeit leaving very different archaeological traces. Alternatively, it is possible to regard the disposal methods in terms of binary opposites involving contrasting trajectories of the dead, perhaps linked to diametrically different 'meanings', attitudes towards the social person and world-views (Brush 1988; Williams 2005a: 265–7; Fern 2007: 102; Gibson 2007: 291–4).

The difficulty with both these approaches is that we are not comparing like with like in terms of the quantity or quality of evidence. Moreover, what appear markedly different deposits contain evidence that many of the same procedures could be followed during the rituals prior to deposition (such as dressing the dead and providing the deceased with vessels and animal remains).

A more satisfactory approach is to regard them as neither identical nor complete opposites, but as relational technologies. Rather than each disposal method having an inherent singular cultural or religious meaning, they were employed to define coherent group mnemonic traditions as well as to simultaneously create social and religious distinctions

between groups, both within and between burying communities. In other words, context seems to have defined the significance of the two technologies (see Hills 1999: 21). Just as there is no single motivation to cremate or inhume in modern Britain (Davies 1997: 32, 138–41, 231–4), there were probably many factors influencing the disposal method selected in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. In some instances the disposal method offered a long-repeated shared rite that may have defined a sense of community history and identity in death (as with the communities using large cremation cemeteries). In other instances, the two methods may have been employed to visually distinguish between two families or households using the same burial rite (as when employed in 'mixed-rite' cemeteries: Williams 2002). In further instances, both cremation and inhumation could equally have served as 'deviant' rites, reserved for only certain individuals.[1]

Cremation practices
Early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials appear from sometime in the middle of the fifth century, earlier than most inhumation graves (Dickinson, this volume). Both rites persist alongside each other through the period and across most of southern and eastern England (Hills 1999: 20; Leahy 2007: 10–13), although the use of cremation varies considerably in character and frequency between cemeteries, localities, and regions. In some cemeteries and areas, cremation appears to be used briefly and then rapidly abandoned, as at Croydon, Surrey (McKinley 2003). In other cemeteries, it appears that cremation was retained as a minority rite alongside inhumation graves, as at Lechlade, Gloucestershire (Boyle et al. 1998: 38). In further cases it appears that both rites were used contemporaneously for many decades in broadly equal proportions, perhaps utilized by different status groups, families, or households within the same or neighbouring communities. Examples of 'mixed-rite' cemeteries include Portway, Andover, Hampshire (Coo and Dacre 1985) and Great Chesterford and Springfield Lyons, both in Essex (Evison 1994; Tyler and Major 2005).

In eastern England there are different relationships between the two disposal methods. Cemeteries are found where cremation is the dominant mode of disposal. Such sites persisted alongside cemeteries in which inhumation prevailed, and occasional examples of mixed-rite cemeteries are also known. 'Cremation cemeteries' can be extremely large (comprising over two thousand burials), and can therefore be considered to be central burial places serving numerous households and communities (Faull 1976: 231). Examples of this site-type are Spong Hill, Norfolk (Hills 1977; 1999; Hills et al. 1994); Newark, Nottinghamshire (Kinsley 1989); Cleatham, Lincolnshire (Leahy 1998; 2007); and Sancton, East Yorkshire (Timby 1993).

Cremation practices can be reconstructed from the careful examination of the artefacts and bones left in the burial, through experimental archaeology, and by drawing analogies from ethnographic, historical, and forensic sources (McKinley 1994: 72-81; Williams 2004b). The process included the preparation of the body and the building of the pyre, the placing and posing of the body on the pyre, the sacrifice of animals, and the placing of artefacts, materials, and substances with the body. This composition of the pyre had similarities, but also important differences, when compared with the contemporary preparation of

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[1] I would like to thank Edeltraud Aspoeck for drawing my attention to this idea.

furnished inhumation graves (Fig. 14.1). Just as the inhumation tableau was short-lived prior to the filling of the grave, the pyre tableau was equally ephemeral and quickly followed by its vivid conflagration. Further divergences between the two disposal methods include the fact that while funerals involving the inhumation of the body could have involved post-burial rituals such as the raising of a memorial and visiting the grave, cremation ceremonies involved contrasting engagements with the remains of the dead. Indeed, cremation did not end with the burning of the body. Subsequent practices included the cooling and examination of the pyre debris, followed by the selection, collection, and storage of the ashes. There is evidence to suggest that not all ashes were retrieved and subject to burial, and some may have been circulated among the survivors. Moreover, an unknown but potentially substantial time period may have elapsed between cremation and the subsequent burial of a portion of the ashes, making it possible that all urns, for some time, resided in temporary storage areas near the pyre site, in the home, or at the burial site (McKinley 1994: 82–6; McKinley in Gibson 2007: 277–80).

Therefore, rather than a medium for simply the display of the deceased's identity upon the pyre, cremation can be regarded as an 'ideology of transformation' involving a sequence of places, materials, and practices (see Williams 2001). It was a process that sequentially reconfigured the deceased's identity through the preparation and burning of the cadaver and the treatment of the ashes. It is possible that post-cremation practices may have been concerned with the rebuilding of the deceased's identity by placing the dead in a distinctive urn with selected artefacts. This 'journey' from corpse to ashes may even have been linked to shamanistic concepts of the person, and pagan afterlife beliefs (Pluskowski, this volume; Williams 2004b; 2006: 90–6).

The most important artefacts within cinerary urns were the burnt bones of humans and animals. Sometimes this bone is absent, hinting at the possibility that 'cenotaph' urn-burials may have sometimes taken place when the body was not available (McKinley 2003: 11–12). The human remains found in most urns are often heavily fragmented by the funerary fire and the subsequent burial and retrieval processes. Despite this, burnt human remains often retain invaluable information to the expert osteologist. The recoverable data can include the number of individual present (sometimes urns contain the remains of two or more persons), their age, and sex. Pathologies can also be identified. Meanwhile the weight, degree of fragmentation, and bone-colour can allow aspects of the pyre technology and post-cremation practices to be reconstructed (McKinley 1994: 82–6). For example, Jackie McKinley argues for the ashes from urns from Spong Hill, Norfolk, that early Anglo-Saxon cremation seems to have been an efficient process with a high firing temperature, hinting that specialist knowledge may have been required to replicate this efficiency on a regular basis.

Figure 14.1 Artist's impression of a wealthy late sixth-century cremation ceremony (by Kelvin Wilson, reproduced with kind permission, © Kelvin Wilson)

Julie Bond's work on Spong Hill and Sancton has revealed that a wide range of domestic animals were sacrificed and placed on pyres, either as joints of meat (mainly sheep/goat and pig), or as whole animals (horse, cattle, and dog: Bond 1996). Wild animals, including

deer and fox, were also occasional offerings. The horse seems to have held a special role in the cremation process, placed whole, particularly with adult individuals. Adult males and females could both be accompanied by horses, contrasting with the association of adult male weapon burials with horse sacrifice in sixth- and early seventh-century inhumation graves (Bond 1996; see also Williams 2005b; Fern 2007; Pluskowski, this volume). In some cases the volume of ashes created by humans and animals in combination required the burial of the animal remains in a second, often undecorated, 'animal accessory' vessel (McKinley 1994: 93–4; see also Williams 2005b; Fern 2007).

The artefacts from cinerary urns fall into two main groups. Pyre-goods included the burned remains of artefacts placed with the dead upon the pyre, and (especially when found fused to cremated bone) indicate that the dead were dressed and adorned on the pyre in a manner comparable with the tableau created within the grave for the inhumed dead (see below). Items of this kind include dress accessories and personal possessions such as brooches and beads, but also gifts (perhaps of food and drink) added to the pyre, such as pottery and glass vessels. Although partly obscured by the destruction and fragmentation caused by the cremation process, studies suggest that the quality and quantity of items varied in relation to the social identity of the deceased (Richards 1987; Ravn 2003). The absence of certain artefact-types commonly found with the inhumed dead is also notable, including the low proportion of knives, buckles, and (in particular) weaponry. Given that fragments of sword hilts are found in rare instances, it is likely that weapons had been present on the pyre but were selectively retrieved from the ashes prior to burial as part of a ritualized practice of recycling and circulating pyre-damaged artefacts among the survivors (Williams 2005a).

The second group of artefacts from cinerary urns are grave-goods—artefacts either deliberately selected from the pyre debris and/or added to the ashes unburned following cremation. These artefacts include bone and antler combs, and toilet implements (including tweezers, shears, razors, and blades). It appears that these objects had a special role in post-cremation ceremonies (Williams 2003; 2007c). For example, at the cemetery of Alwalton, Cambridgeshire, the vast majority of cinerary urns contained the (deliberately) broken fragments of antler combs (Gibson 2007: 263–4, 293). Practices varied between sites, and at the mixed-rite cemetery at Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire, a different pattern was apparent. Miniature antler combs, and in one case a full-sized comb, were found in some cinerary urns in association with small iron miniature tool-kits suspended from iron rings (Hawkes and Grainger 2003: 124–5, 130; and see Fig. 14.2).

Despite this varied application, a common theme is that grave-goods were closely connected with the presentation and management of the body's surface in life and death. They were practical objects but may have had amuletic and symbolic significance in the cremation process through their association with hair and grooming. In different cultures, the management of hair is often utilized as a medium and metaphor for bereavement (expressing loss and affinity with the dead) as well as a means of commemoration (for discussions, see Williams 2003; 2007c). It seems that these items may have been placed by the survivors to articulate the rebuilding and reconstitution of social identity and ties between the living and the dead as an ancestor, following the dissolution and transformation of the cremation process (Williams 2007c).

The proportion of cremation burials is likely to be under-represented at many sites, since their pits tend to be smaller and shallower than inhumation graves. Indeed, details of pit-cuts and size are often limited because of the nature of soil conditions. In some instances, however, cinerary urns have been found associated with a range of internal structures, including stones and Roman tiles (at Caistor-by-Norwich;Myres and Green 1973: Plate XV) either used to line pits or cover urns. These objects are as much a part of the burial ritual as the placing of the urns themselves, and the choice of stones may have been intended to protect the dead from disturbance and/or to distance the living from the dead. In further cases, they may indicate the remains of damaged cairns raised over graves (Leahy 2007: 29).

Despite detailed analysis, the precise spatial organization of cremation cemeteries is a topic that requires further investigation (e.g. Hills 1980; Leahy 2007). In contrast to inhumation graves, cinerary urns are sometimes found in large groups, sometimes in lines or curvilinear arrangements. This suggests either that urns could be stored above ground for long periods before collective burial, or that graves received above-ground markers, and perhaps only temporary covers facilitating the precise positioning of extra urns, before their permanent back-filling and the raising of a monument (e.g. McKinley 1994: 103–5).
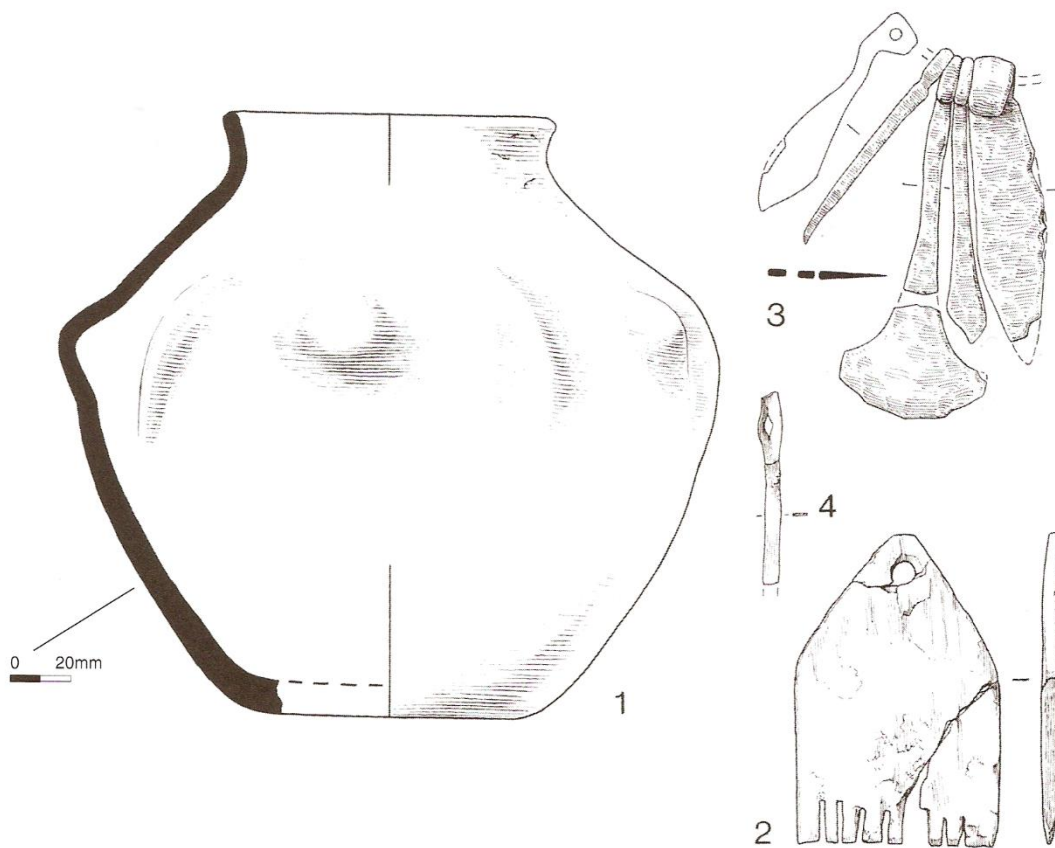

Figure 14.2 Cinerary urn with bossed decoration (1) and artefacts—an antler comb (2), miniature iron tools (3), and a copper-alloy lace tag (4)—found in grave C23 from the mixed-rite early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire (reproduced with kind permission after S. C. Hawkes and G. Grainger 2003)

The monument employed for the cremation process was an ephemeral one, namely the pyre itself. More than simply a pile of wood, pyres require specialist knowledge to build correctly. There is no reason why these pyres might not have included sections of the deceased's house, wagon, store-chest, and boat. Pyres might be adorned with food offerings, textiles, and other organic coverings. They could have been covered with canopies, flags, and other furnishings that do not leave archaeological traces. There are however, rare occasions where pyre-sites are found, sometimes close to cremation burials, and hinting at the range of ritual practices conducted at cemeteries that normally leave scant evidence (e.g. Gibson 2007: 243, 295). Despite this evidence, only ethnographic analogies can inform archaeologists as to the potential complexity and monumentality of pyres (McKinley 1994; Williams 2004b).

Monuments associated with cremation burials also rarely survive intact because they tend to be small and ephemeral. The cists and stone-coverings mentioned above suggest that the locations of urns were sometimes marked. Low mounds are likely to have surmounted many urns and urn-groups. These are sometimes indicated by surviving ring-ditches (e.g. Tyler and Major 2005: 3–4). Post-holes are occasionally uncovered, singly or in linear arrangements, associated with cremation burials (Mayes and Dean 1976: 11). At a number of southern English sites, four- and five-post structures are interpreted as 'houses of the dead', possibly used to cover and/or to contain the remains of multiple, successive cremation episodes (Evison 1988: 35–6; Down and Welch 1990: 25–35; Boyle et al. 1995: 123; Gibson 2007: 249). These structures hint at the possibility that many urns were stored above-ground, making relative estimations of cremation and inhumation burials more challenging than is usually imagined.

Only with the high-status ('princely') graves of the late sixth century and early seventh century are cremation burials located beneath sizeable mounds, as at Asthall in Oxfordshire (Dickinson and Speake 1992), and Sutton Hoo in Suffolk (Carver 2005: 67–106). This could represent the adoption of existing cremation traditions to a new level of competitive mortuary display and symbolism associated with an emergent elite.

The provision of pyre-goods, grave-goods, and animal remains, as well as the size, form, and decoration of the cinerary urns, all varied within and between cemeteries. This variation can sometimes be associated with the social identity of the deceased as revealed by the osteological evidence for age and sex (Ravn 2003: 99–129; Richards 1987; Williams 2007c). Cremation was therefore not the great equalizer serving to destroy or down-play identities in comparison with inhumation (Brush 1988: 83; Devlin 2007: 33–5) or the 'cheap option' that it is sometimes portrayed to be in Western society (McKinley 2007). Given the investment cremation required for burning the body and the length of the ritual process, if anything, the opposite might be the case: cremation required specialist knowledge and considerable materials, and facilitated greater opportunities for articulating social differences among the dead both upon the pyre and in the grave (see Richards 1995: 58; Leahy 2007: 227). Certainly, the rite encompassed considerable variation deployed to mark important social distinctions within and between communities. Moreover, the choice to cremate may itself have been used to mark social distinctions from groups who employed other modes of disposal. Therefore, cremation in early Anglo-Saxon England was a social display in which the identities of the dead were publicly portrayed, and yet simultaneously

the practice was one of transformation and reconstitution for the living and the dead: a technology of remembrance. Fire disaggregated the body, and the cremation process involved the selective deployment of substances, materials, artefacts, monuments, and places in transforming the dead. Yet the community's recollections of the person were sorted and selected, and the body was metaphorically reconstituted using tokens and unique pottery vessels, before the final act of deposition could take place.

Inhumation practices
Furnished inhumations are found in all areas of southern and eastern England, with a slightly broader distribution than cremation. As with cremation, there is considerable variety in the performance of the rite at cemetery, locality, and regional levels. Our understanding of inhumation practices relies on a mixture of artefacts, materials, bone, and contextual data gained from the careful investigation of graves and related features (e.g. Duhig in Malim and Hines 1998: 154–99; Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 78–96; Cox in Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 172–88).

Cemetery arrangements were rarely formal, although some sites reveal clusters, rows, and lines of burials suggesting a degree of social organization (Sayer 2009). Grave orientations are diverse, and seem to be a response to the local topography of the cemetery, although there is an overall propensity at many sites for burial with the head either to the west or south (e.g. Down and Welch 1990: 16–17). Most graves contained just one body, although multiple interments are sometimes found, situated both side-by-side and superimposed. Some were simultaneous while others were successive additions to a remembered burial place (Stoodley 2002). A supine extended posture is common, but flexed and crouched burials were regularly employed (e.g. Boyle et al. 1995: 116–18; Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 89–91). Prone (face-down) burials are found in a minority of instances but at many cemeteries (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 91–2). The treatment of the body was clearly no less the principal focus than in cremation ceremonies, providing the medium for the display and constitution of social identity. Bodies were often dressed for death. Female costume is best known, incorporating brooches, necklaces, keys, bag collections, and other dress accessories. Mortuary costume varied between and within cemeteries, suggesting its complex and changing use as a medium for the expression of female identities at multiple levels (e.g. Hines 1999; Stoodley 1999). For example, the study of the cemetery at Edix Hill, Barrington, Cambridgeshire, revealed multiple contemporaneous female costumes (Hines 2002).

Female mortuary costume probably consisted of more than the deceased's 'best clothes', being instead a composite costume of the deceased's possessions selected for burial by those conducting the funeral, combined with artefacts placed by the survivors with and upon the body. In the case of the rich adult female burial in grave 18 from Butler's Field, Lechlade, Gloucestershire (Boyle et al. 1998: 61–2, 154, 157), evidence was found of nine beads by the skull, interpreted as hair ornaments. Elements of clothing included three brooches, two of which were saucer brooches fixing a peplos-style dress, and the third a great square-headed brooch fixing a cloak. From the saucer brooches were suspended over 300 beads (mainly of glass and amber). Around the neck was a beaver-tooth pendant and a toilet set. At the waist were the remains of a belt-buckle, and on the hands were three spiral finger rings. To the left of the head were placed a collection of artefacts, including a

scutiform pendant, a spindle whorl, an antler comb, and a wooden vessel. A bag with a rim of ivory was placed to the left of the left thigh and contained a range of items including rings of iron and bronze, iron nails, a knife, and three Roman coin (Fig. 14.3).

The detailed analysis of mineralized textiles can often allow the partial reconstruction of the costume and other soft furnishings surrounding the dead body (Harrington 2007; e.g. Walton Rogers in Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 143–71; Crowfoot in Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 207–12). Wear analysis can sometimes discern that costume-sets were made from mixtures of old and worn items combined with fresh (either rarely worn or newly-acquired) brooches (Parfitt and Brugmann 1997: 46–50). Overall the burial costume contained subtle messages conveyed by the position of brooches, beads, and other dress accessories relating not only to the dead individual but to their social position, kin-group, and community (e.g. Pader 1982; Hirst 1985: 46–8). Regional and national studies have shown that the variability in clothing the dead was closely connected to gender, age, status, and perhaps also ethnicity (Stoodley 1999, 2000, and this volume).

Male burial costume is less well known, since fewer metal artefacts were employed. That adult males were clothed in death is primarily reflected in the presence of belt buckles and knives. These items cross-cut gender divisions and age groups, but even these appear to be carefully chosen to articulate the identity of the deceased (e.g. Ha¨rke 1989; Marzinzik 2003; Williams 2007c). Children tend to have poorer graves, but can receive a special assemblage of artefacts rarely found placed together in the same way in adult graves (Crawford 2000; Stoodley 2000).

A further category of artefacts might be distinguished from clothing, and defined as 'grave gifts' (though see Crawford 2004). As with the costume, these might also have been a mixture of some of the prized possessions of the deceased, and offerings by the survivors. The best studied of these 'grave gifts' are weapons, almost always found with males. Heinrich Härke has studied the multi-vocal symbolism of placing weapons with the dead (Fig. 14.4). Rather than simplistic statements of warrior occupation, Härke (1990; Dickinson and Härke 1992; Härke 1997a and b) argued that the number and combination of weapons were deliberately interred to communicate the gender, age, social status, and ethnicity of the deceased. Most were interred with adults but some children could also receive weapons (see also Crawford 2000).

Food and drink were also placed in certain graves, most often revealed by the presence of their containers, including pottery vessels, buckets, glass vessels, and drinking horns. Plant and animal remains sometimes survive and also suggest that both food offerings and sacrifices were associated with burial ritual (e.g. Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 255–9; Lee 2007). These were likely to have been status symbols, but also alluded to the social exchange of food and drink in mortuary rituals and commemorative practices linked to feasting. While nowhere near as commonplace as their occurrence in cremation burials, other 'gifts' placed with the dead can include whole animals (almost always horses) placed with adult male weapon burials (Fern 2007).

Figure 14.3 A wealthy sixth-century grave of an adult female aged between 25 and 30 excavated at the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery from Butler's Field, Lechlade, Gloucestershire, and reconstructed in the Corinium Museum, Cirencester (reproduced with kind permission, © Corinium Museum)

Clothing and grave-gifts were only aspects of the furnished inhumation burial of the early Anglo-Saxon period. The traces of coffins are found in many burial sites, as at Spong Hill, Norfolk (e.g. Hills et al. 1984: 6). Some of the complexity of soft furnishings present in early Anglo-Saxon graves is revealed through the careful examination of mineralized textile remains (Harrington 2007). At Snape, Suffolk, the soil conditions revealed other forms of internal grave structures. These included organic linings and coverings, as well as biers and even whole boats used to contain the body (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 204–14). This last phenomenon is a rare occurrence but was evidently the forerunner to the use of larger sea-going vessels beneath burial mounds at Snape and Sutton Hoo in the late sixth and early seventh century (Carver 1995).

Chamber graves are also known for wealthier graves, providing a secure space within which lavish mortuary displays were conducted. At Spong Hill, two turf-and-timber rectangular chambers were identified and dated to the sixth century. The high-status character of these graves was confirmed by the rich grave goods (including weapons), and the ring-ditches surrounding the graves (Hills et al. 1984: 6).

The composition of the burial deposit could be complex, yet it represented only one stage of the burial process. There are hints from fly pupae preserved by metal corrosion products that graves could have been left open, or only temporarily covered, for several days prior to

the final back-filling event (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 226). This means that the inhumation was a display that could facilitate a range of rites before, during, and after the composition of the grave.

Figure 14.4 Adult male aged between 40 and 50 years of age interred with a spearhead and knife from grave 83, Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hants. Reproduced with kind permission after Hawkes & Grainger 2003: 139. © Oxford University School of Archaeology.

The back-filling of the graves seems to have involved as many practices as the composing and adorning of the body. The placing of grave-gifts discussed above was as much a process of closure as it was the creation of a single composition. For example, shields were often placed outside and over the body and the coffin, obscuring much of the burial deposit beneath (Dickinson and Härke 1992). At West Heslerton, there are indications that spears were broken before being placed in the grave. This suggests that their fragmentation and consignment was as important as their display with the cadaver (Williams 2007b). At Snape, deposits of food offerings, coverings made of organic material, as well as artefacts (including parts of boats, fragments of saddle querns, burnt flints, pottery scatters, and possibly cremated bone) augmented the rituals of back-filling the grave (Filmer- Sankey and Pestell 2001: 242–6). Burnt oak timbers could be placed into the fill of inhumation graves at Snape (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001; Williams 2006: 129–33), and alongside bodies in certain graves from (for example) Berinsfield, Oxfordshire (Boyle et al. 1995: 121–3) and Portway, Andover (Cook and Dacre 1985: 55). This evidence suggests that fire-rituals were sometimes enacted prior to, or during, back-filling, perhaps to obscure the aroma of the corpse, to purify the grave-space, and/or to protect the living from the pollution of the dead (see also Effros 2003: 165–6).

The arrangement of the grave also varied. Where grave-cuts can be identified, they often appear functional excavations, large enough simply to contain the body in an extended, flexed, or crouched posture. Sometimes natural hollows or existing ditches were exploited (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 239). Yet on occasions archaeologists have identified a range of ledges (e.g. Cook and Dacre 1985: 55) and posts (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 238–9) associated with the grave. Some were part of the grave-structures (coffins and chambers), while others may have been canopies over the grave (Hirst 1985: 24). Ledges may have served as steps to help mourners to access the grave and place artefacts with the cadaver, or as supports for organic structures or coverings. Posts might have assisted in the lowering of the coffin, as well as in marking the grave (see Williams 2006: 133–5).

Archaeologists know surprisingly little about the nature of post-burial commemorative practices associated with inhumation graves. Monuments raised over graves are sometimes recognized. Post-holes and slots indicate the former presence of markers above, or adjacent to, some graves (e.g. Evison 1988: 32; Hirst 1985: 25). At Sewerby, a layer of chalk blocks was found associated with at least one post-hole. This layer overlay graves 41, 42, and 49. It can be interpreted as a low platform sealing multiple graves. Therefore, this seems a rare instance of a surviving and modest mortuary monument. It could indicate that stone-settings, cairns, and mounds demarcated many more graves than is usually appreciated (Hirst 1985: 38; see also Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 88–9). Circular and rectangular ditches are sometimes located, and appear to demarcate the burial space. Perhaps they mark the outer edge of a fence or bank as often as they defined the edges of burial mounds (see also Struth and Eagles 1999). Often these ditches are interrupted by a causeway at the eastern end (for west-east orientated graves), which would have allowed mourners access to the grave, and may hint at the significance attached to the grave as a place of veneration and commemoration (e.g. Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 13; Hawkes and Grainger 2006: 157–60).

It is important to remember that mounds do not require ditches, and can be scraped up or made of turf. Therefore the absence of ring ditches around many graves is not evidence for the absence of above-ground monuments. Mounds and other grave-markers may have been a widespread occurrence in the early Anglo- Saxon inhumation practice, but it appears that sizeable burial mounds were a rare phenomenon before the later sixth century (Shephard 1979).

In combination, this evidence allows an appreciation of the complex mortuary variability within the inhumation tradition of the later fifth and sixth centuries AD in southern and eastern England. It is also possible to glean elements of the complex mortuary processes associated with inhumation. Graves would have provided a rich display, but not a single tableau, since many artefacts and materials would have successively augmented and concealed the body through its composition and consignment.

Cemeteries, Monuments, and Landscapes

Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries were more than collections of graves. Cemeteries were 'places of power' in the early Anglo-Saxon landscape (Härke 2001). Whether cremation or inhumation was predominantly practised, or both rites were deployed together, burial sites and graves were locales where public ritual performances took place (Fig. 14.5). Cemeteries were also places select groups had power over, controlling where and what death rituals stated about the past, present, and future. Consequently, cemeteries may have served as places where the power of the living, dead kin, the ancestors (real or invented), and the past were articulated. Burial locations may therefore have held memories and associations actively used by the living in a variety of claims over territory and resources, and as statements of group identity (see also Arnold 1997; Williams 1997; Williams 2006: 195–7; Sayer 2009).

Understanding cemeteries as places requires some appreciation of their above-ground appearance. As we have seen with the mixed-rite cemetery of Appledown, Sussex (Down and Welch 1990), and Finglesham, Kent (Hawkes and Grainger 2006: 18, 28–32), mounds and 'mortuary houses' could surmount graves. Yet how they were elaborated when freshly raised, and whether they were maintained over time, cannot be easily ascertained. There is little surviving evidence for the management of vegetation, internal divisions, paths, and even buildings associated with burial sites. Other cemetery structures may have included 'shrines', but their functions, and their difference from 'mortuary houses', remain unclear (Hirst 1985: 24; Blair 1995). An important point is that the appearance and prominence of a burial site would not have rested on the form of a single early Anglo-Saxon monument. Many cemeteries would have held an 'accrued' prominence; the accumulation of memorials would have rendered them distinctive landscape features even if individual monuments were modest in their proportions (Sayer and Williams 2009). For example, the Cleatham cremation cemetery provides evidence that the same spot was used again and again for the interment of cinerary urns over many generations. Cinerary urns were cut through earlier burials up to seven times in succession. Clearly the significance of the place took precedence over enduring individual monuments or the preservation and respect of earlier urns (Leahy 2007: 29).
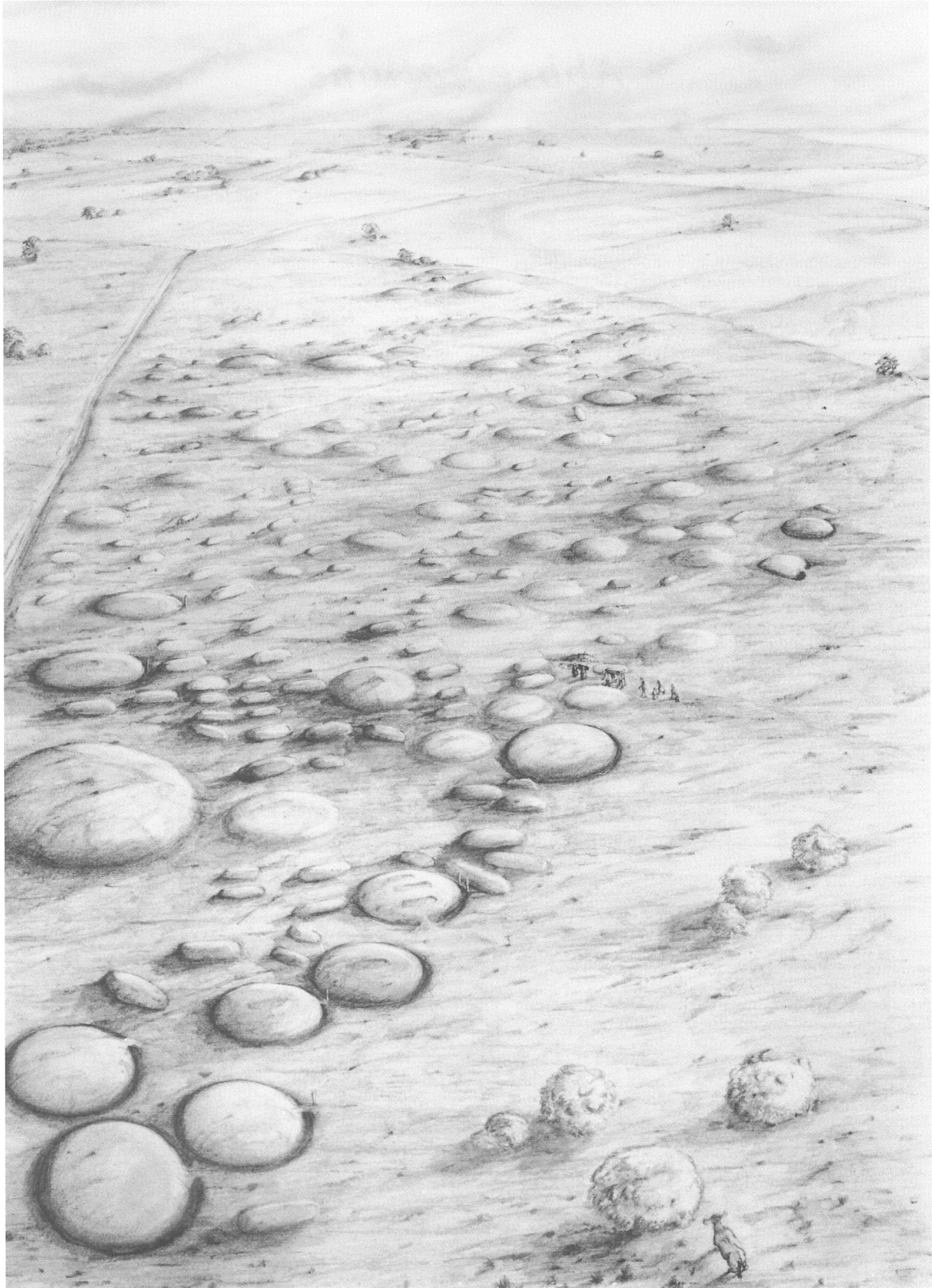
Figure 14.5 Artist's impression of the Finglesham cemetery, a long-running burial location that began life in the fifth century and persisted into the seventh century. By Edward Impey, reproduced with kind permission after Hawkes and Grainger 2006. © Oxford University School of Archaeology

A further appreciation of cemeteries as places comes from considering in detail their chronological and spatial development. Härke (1997b: 138) reviewed three clear patterns in cemetery development: monocentric, horizontal stratigraphic, and polycentric. In some cases it is possible to show on the micro-scale how cemeteries developed, including their spread in many directions from a single focus (monocentric) or their spread in one direction from a core (horizontal stratigraphic). In other instances, it is possible to see multiple foci of development perhaps connected to families or households, sometimes demonstrably containing groups of mixed ancestry (Härke 1995; Stoodley 1999: 131–5; Tyler and Major 2005: 186–9). In some cases, the clustering of child graves and the graves of one gender suggests a supra-familial spatial organization at work (Lucy 1998; Stoodley 1999: 135; Sayer 2009). For example, at West Heslerton, North Yorkshire, there are clusters of child graves in one sector of the cemetery (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 84–5). Likewise, there is evidence for the cluster of weapon graves at West Heslerton (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 84). Therefore the identities of the dead were articulated and commemorated through the spatial organization and development of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites as well as through the contents of graves. Focusing on the analysis of Mill Hill, Deal, and Finglesham, both in east Kent, Duncan Sayer has recently put forward the argument that these household clusters of the sixth century gave way to family-orientated burial arrangements during the seventh century in east Kent. Hence cemetery space articulated the transformation of social arrangements through time, and ideals of group identity (Sayer 2009; Fig. 14.5).

If internal cemetery space was employed to commemorate group identities, the overall burial location could add to this message. Certain prominent landmarks appear to have been often selected as focal points for cemeteries, or parts of cemeteries, from the late fifth century ad. At Buckland, Dover (Evison 1987: 14) and Mill Hill, Deal (Parfitt and Brugmann 1997), both in Kent, circular ring-ditches of prehistoric date seem to have provided focal points for early Anglo-Saxon graves. At West Heslerton, North Yorkshire, the cemetery focused upon a series of Neolithic and early Bronze Age monuments (Haughton and Powlesland 1999: 23–80). Roman monuments might attract similar re-use, as at Great Chesterford, where the excavator postulated that the arrangement of the early Anglo-Saxon graves clustered around a series of early Romano-British mounds (Evison 1994: 39–43). This phenomenon becomes increasingly popular in the early Christian period, but has widespread roots in pre-Christian practice (Williams 1997; Semple 2003; Semple, this volume; Williams 2006: 181–5).

Boundary features may have also influenced the location of burial sites as at Appledown, Sussex (Down and Welch 1990: 15–17). At Portway, Andover, Hampshire, the presence of a linear boundary of prehistoric date defined the eastern side of the cemetery, and may have been retained as some form of territorial boundary in the fifth and sixth centuries ad (Cook and Dacre 1985; Stoodley 2007). Activities other than burial may have taken place close to graves. For example, 'burnt stone features' found at Snape, Suffolk, can be tentatively interpreted as cooking pits, perhaps associated with feasting and rituals connected to the commemoration of the dead (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 259–61). The cemetery was a social space as well as a location for burial.

To some extent, the term 'cemetery' is not helpful in understanding the wider landscape context of early Anglo-Saxon burials. The term suggests to the modern reader a planned and clearly defined burial space. This detracts from the possibility that graves may often only be the most visible aspect of complex mortuary geographies including multiple foci consisting of isolated graves (e.g. Samuels and Russell 1999), small and short-lived burial groups serving farms and settlements (e.g. Patrick et al. 2007), and larger burial sites serving numerous communities that persisted for centuries (see McKinley 1994: 69–71; Hills 1999; Williams 2004a). The term 'cemetery' also detracts from the other locations associated with mortuary practices other than burial. These might have included settlements, mortuaries, pyre sites, shrines and temples, ancient monuments, and natural sacred sites, including springs and trees (Hamerow 2006; Williams 2006: 190–5).

Finally, the worked and inhabited landscape cannot be ignored. Archaeological evidence is showing that, rather than being situated on marginal land, early Anglo-Saxon burial sites were often incorporated into the routines of labour and living. Burial grounds seem often to have been situated in close proximity to routes (e.g. Brookes 2007). Increasingly, the evidence is pointing towards burial locations being adjacent to, or a short distance from, each other, as well as from contemporary settlements (e.g. Hamerow 1993; Dickins et al. 2005; see Williams 2006: 187–90). Therefore, for many early Anglo-Saxon communities, the graves of the dead were collectively visible and prominent aspects of their living environment, even if the funerals were temporary displays by design, and the memorials raised over individual graves were often ephemeral. The presence of the dead permeated the early Anglo-Saxon landscape.

Conclusions

Early Anglo-Saxon mortuary archaeology is a rich and vibrant arena of archaeological research. We still do not have all the answers, although new developments in the theories, methods, and data available to us promise to transform our understanding of early Anglo-Saxon graves and cemeteries, with implications for offering manifold insights into the societies in this period (see also Williams 2007a). Moreover, the critical appraisal of both current and past approaches is essential for research to develop in new and innovative ways (Williams and Sayer 2009; see also Dickinson, this volume). Yet, based on current and available approaches and data, the evidence presented here illustrates that mortuary practices of the later fifth and sixth centuries provide no single and straightforward window onto ethnic origins, religious beliefs, or social structures. Partly this is simply because there was no single 'Anglo-Saxon Way of Death' (Lucy 2000), with no single 'Anglo-Saxon' society behind it. The fifth and sixth centuries AD are defined by mortuary variability and complexity rather than by a singular coherent tradition. What the mortuary practices do indisputably show is how the detailed and contextual analysis of burial data reveals the social and commemorative importance of mortuary practices for communities at this time. Funerals were processes of economic investment, theatrical display, and ritual transition. Meanwhile, cemeteries were spaces and places in the landscape within which social memories and identities were reproduced and transformed.

Defining mortuary practices as technologies of remembrance sheds new light on the historical context of their deployment among the fragmented and fluid societies and communities that inherited the southern and eastern territories of the Roman province of

Britannia in the fifth century, and on how they developed through the sixth and into the seventh century. In particular, mortuary performances provided contexts for creating a sense of historical depth and public affirmation for what may have often been short-lived and experimental social identities and religious systems. This approach, therefore, presents a new framework for studying early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices, particularly in relation to the character of society, and social change, in early medieval Europe during the fifth and sixth centuries. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the role of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary studies as a case study for wider theoretical and methodological debates in the broader field of mortuary archaeology, as well as interdisciplinary studies of death and memory in the past and the present.

Acknowledgements

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