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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *World Archaeology*, Vol. 30, No. 1, The Past in the Past: The Reuse of Ancient Monuments (Jun., 1998), pp. 90-108

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/125011>

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# Monuments and the past in early Anglo-Saxon England

Howard Williams

## Abstract

Recent research on both old and new excavation data from Anglo-Saxon burial sites reveals a widespread and frequent practice of reusing monuments of earlier periods. Both Roman and prehistoric structures provided the focus of cemeteries, burial groups and single graves between the late fifth and early eighth centuries AD. It is argued that this practice was central to the symbolism of Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices, and was important for the construction and negotiation of origin myths, identities and social structures.

## Keywords

Anglo-Saxon; burial; early medieval; monument reuse; mortuary practices.

## Introduction

Following the end of Roman political and administrative control, societies in lowland Britain underwent dramatic transformations that involved the immigration of Germanic groups with new social structures and ideologies. Funerary traditions remain the most important archaeological testimony to the influence and cultural dominance of groups from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia (Myres 1969; Higham 1992). This paper aims to demonstrate that the landscape context of burial sites, in particular their reuse of monuments of prehistoric and Roman date, can reveal much information concerning the beliefs and social structures of these early Anglo-Saxon communities and their relationships with the past.

In the famous Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, we are given an account of the death, cremation and burial of a Migration period ruler in southern Scandinavia. Beowulf's death occurs while fighting the dragon at an ancient barrow, from its description a Neolithic chambered tomb. This monument is described as a construction of ancient races, containing a hoard of treasure guarded by a dragon (Alexander 1973: lines 2213–40). Beowulf's body is cremated and a mound is raised over the pyre, presumably close to the Neolithic tomb (Alexander 1973: lines 3137–49; Hills 1997: 301).

The poem was composed in the later, Christian Anglo-Saxon period (between the eighth and tenth centuries AD) and consequently we cannot use it to infer attitudes towards ancient monuments in earlier phases. However, the poem clearly reflects a practice identified consistently in the archaeological record between the late fifth and early eighth centuries: the association of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites with structures of prehistoric and Roman date. For the Anglo-Saxon audience of *Beowulf*, the monument in the poem was the construction of an ancient race, the residence of dangerous super-natural powers, hidden treasure and the place of death of a great hero and king. Moreover, the monument evokes the memory of a distant, mythological past in ancestral homelands on the Continent (Howe 1989; Hunter 1974). This leads to another suggestion. By burying the dead in, or close to, ancient monuments, could the Anglo-Saxons have been constructing social identities, myths of origin and relations with the distant past? If this was the case, then the character of monument reuse has far-reaching implications for the ways in which we think about early medieval cemeteries and the groups who were buried there.

### **The dead in the landscape**

There are numerous ethnographic cases that show how the placing of burials, tombs and cemeteries can be invested with cosmological, social and political significance (Carr 1995: 183; Parker Pearson 1993: 206). There are also numerous studies, from British prehistory and elsewhere, illustrating the deliberate placing of the dead with reference to topographical features in the landscape and the changing relationships between cemeteries and settlement sites (e.g. Parker Pearson 1993; Sharples 1985). In particular, the study of the 'afterlife of monuments', or monument reuse, is now becoming an important area of investigation (Bradley 1993; Hingley 1996; Roymans 1995). Indeed, *Beowulf* introduces us to a world in which ancient monuments may have been as important as artefacts in the performance of mortuary rites. Against this background, it is unfortunate that very few detailed discussions of monument reuse in Anglo-Saxon England have taken place (but see Bradley 1987, 1993; Härke 1994; Lucy 1992).

This reluctance of early Anglo-Saxon specialists to discuss the landscape context of burial sites and their relationships with ancient monuments is even more surprising when we realize that the reuse of older structures has been observed for well over a century. The first convincing cases of monument reuse came to light in the excavation of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in East Yorkshire, the Peak District and Wiltshire, where Anglo-Saxon graves were found in secondary contexts (Meaney 1964; Mortimer 1905). Many more examples have since been found during excavations, yet interpretations of this evidence are avoided in many accounts of Anglo-Saxon England (Arnold 1997: 162; Myres 1969: 121–2; Ozanne 1962–3). When they do occur, they tend to be 'common sense' explanations, applied to individual cases. They do not account for most instances of monument reuse (Williams 1996, forthcoming b).

It has only been in the last ten years that this practice has come to be seen as an important feature of the early medieval period. Richard Bradley has argued that the positioning and alignment of timber halls and burial sites at Yeavering and Millfield sought deliberately to reuse long abandoned prehistoric monuments (Bradley 1987, 1993; Hope

Taylor 1977). Bradley highlighted the ways in which the character of the rituals conducted at these sites may have linked the present with a mythical past. He suggested that pre-historic monuments were reused as a source of power by the rulers of Bernicia during the seventh century AD. His study has influenced the interpretation of monument reuse at other early Anglo-Saxon burial sites (Blair 1995; Härke 1994; Lucy 1992), as well as pagan shrines and early Christian religious foundations (Blair 1996; Morris 1989; Stocker 1993). Bradley's approach focuses on the ways in which ritual may manipulate the perception of time and the past, serving to legitimize the inequalities of early medieval society (Bloch 1977; Bradley 1987).

While many of these studies of monument reuse have involved detailed interpretations of the evidence, they are often specific to single sites or small groups of sites. There has not been a systematic survey of the evidence for monument reuse (Williams 1996; Thäte 1996). There has also been a tendency to focus upon élite burial sites and settlements of the seventh century, involving examples that are not representative of the phenomenon as a whole. This focus on individual sites limits our ability to identify broad trends and patterns in attitudes to older structures over time and space and gives the impression that the reuse of these sites was almost exclusively a practice of the Anglo-Saxon élite, or that it was restricted to certain upland regions. This study is based upon a systematic survey of the evidence for monument reuse throughout Anglo-Saxon England (Williams 1996, forthcoming b). Through a brief survey of the main aspects of early Anglo-Saxon monument reuse, and a more detailed examination of individual aspects of this practice, the paper aims to elaborate upon the important observations and to highlight some misconceptions in previous discussions.

### **Monument reuse in early Anglo-Saxon England**

The following key points can be made about early Anglo-Saxon monument reuse.

- 1 The overall frequency of monument reuse among early Anglo-Saxon burials is difficult to ascertain. Most examples are known from disturbed burials and artefacts discovered under far from ideal conditions. For example, at the cremation cemetery at Thurmarston in Leicestershire and the seventh-century barrow burial at Caenby in Lincolnshire, Anglo-Saxon graves are situated around ancient monuments, but we cannot prove that the Bronze Age sites were still earthworks in the Anglo-Saxon period (Everson 1993; Williams 1983). Indeed, in most cases, the relationships with ancient monuments are difficult to assess. However, there remain approximately 330 cases of 'certain', 'probable' or 'possible' examples of monument reuse, together accounting for a sizeable fraction (about 25 per cent) of all known Anglo-Saxon burial sites (Fig. 1). Monument reuse was clearly an important aspect of mortuary practices at this time.
- 2 Round barrows of Bronze Age date are by far the most favoured category for reuse by early Anglo-Saxon burials, constituting 61 per cent of all known cases (Williams forthcoming b). Recently discovered examples of the practice include burial groups reusing a Bronze Age monument at Wigber Low in Derbyshire (Collis 1983) and graves reusing

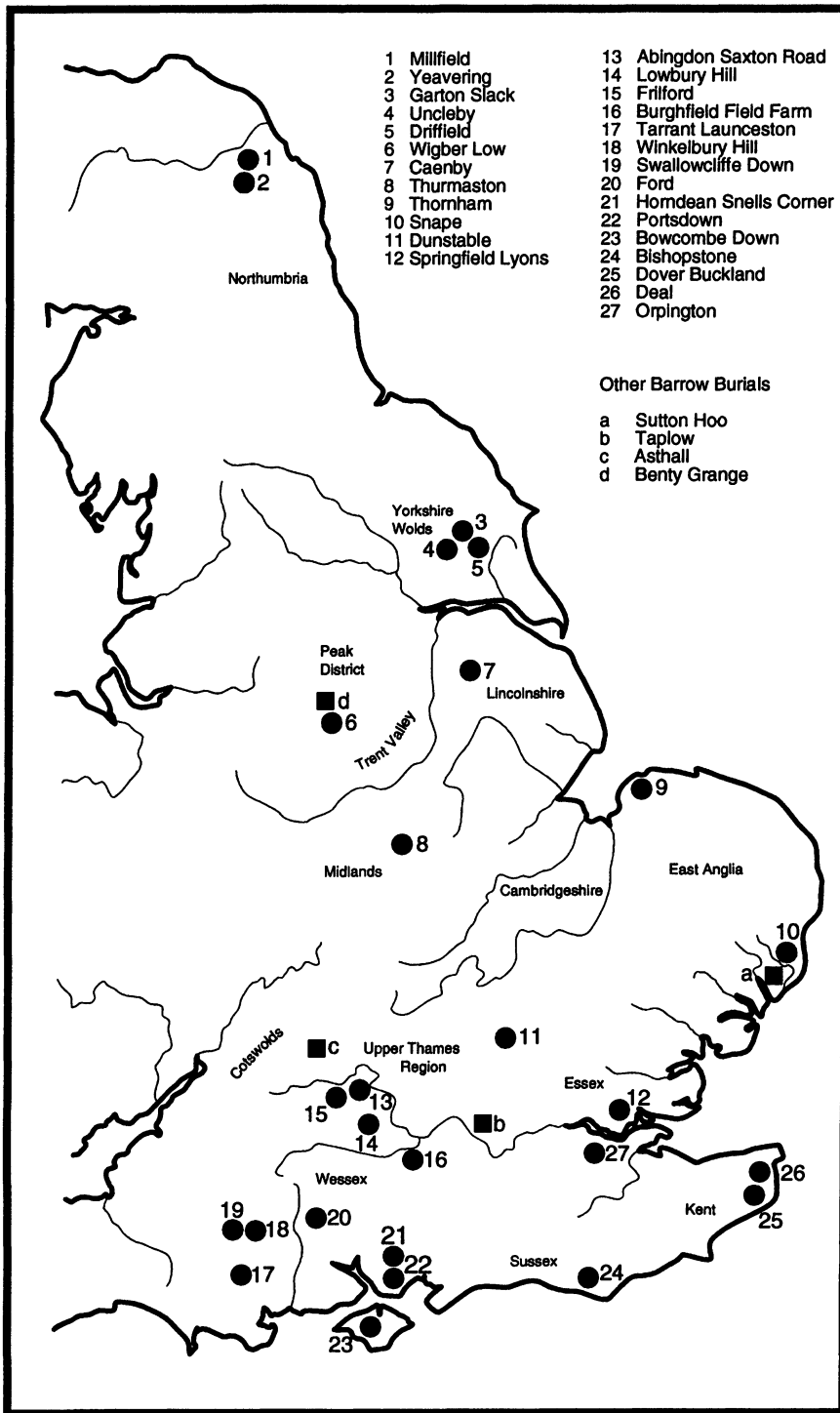
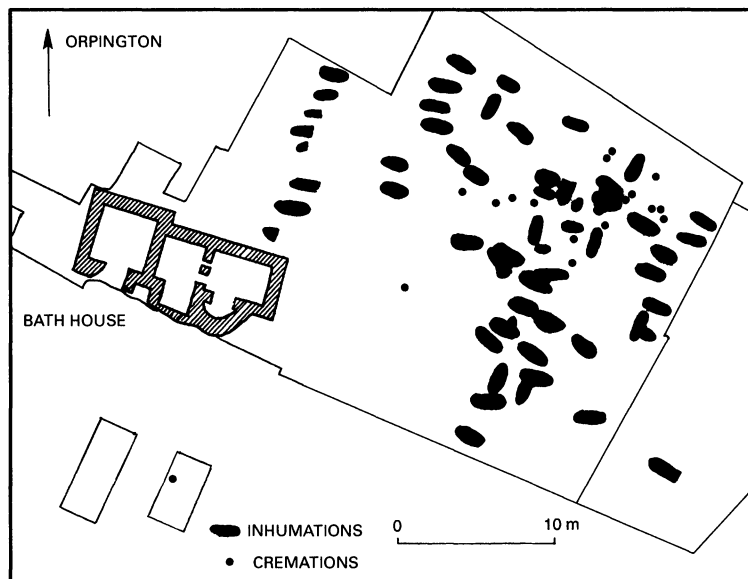


Figure 1 Examples of monument reuse in early medieval Britain mentioned in the text.



*Figure 2* Inhumation and cremation burials were placed adjacent to a Romano-British bath house at Orpington, Kent during the late fifth and sixth century AD (after Palmer 1984).

a Bronze Age barrow at Field Farm, Burghfield in Berkshire (Butterworth and Lobb 1992; Semple, this vol., fig 2). However, there are a wide variety of other prehistoric monuments that were reused, including Neolithic megalithic and earthen long barrows, Iron Age square barrows, henges, stone circles, monoliths, linear earthworks, hillforts, ringworks and enclosures of various kinds. Furthermore, Roman structures also appear to have been deliberately reused between the fifth and seventh centuries AD, including villas, bathhouses, forts, barrows, mausolea, cemeteries, temples and roads. One example is the bath house (probably adjoining a villa) reused for Anglo-Saxon inhumations and cremations at Orpington in Kent (Palmer 1984; Fig. 2). It is clear that, despite the preference for round barrows of prehistoric date, a wide range of monuments could be subject to reuse and examples of Roman and prehistoric date might be treated in similar ways during this period (Williams 1996; see also Hunter 1974). Even natural features that resembled ancient monuments could have Anglo-Saxon burials inserted into them (Williams forthcoming a; cf. Bradley, this vol.).

- 3 It is often assumed that monument reuse was restricted to single graves. While most cases of monument reuse consist of isolated burials, this is because many Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are found by accident, so that these may be all that are recognized (Meaney 1964; Williams forthcoming b). In every region of early Anglo-Saxon England, there are examples of sizeable burial groups, and large inhumation, cremation and mixed-rite cemeteries focusing upon earlier structures (*pace* Leeds 1913; Meaney 1964). Therefore, the burials of families, households and communities could be located around older monuments, in addition to isolated graves. Only in the seventh century were monuments specifically selected for use by single burials. These contained wealthy grave goods belonging to the Anglo-Saxon élite (Arnold 1997; Ozanne 1962–3; Speake 1989).
- 4 Contrary to previous assertions, the reuse of monuments was not restricted to certain

regions (*pace* Leeds 1913; Meaney 1964; Lucy 1992; Fig 1). Monument reuse is most frequent in upland areas where monuments have been preserved into recent centuries and were subject to intensive excavations. Such areas include the Yorkshire Wolds, the Peak District or the downland of Sussex, Dorset and southern Wiltshire. However, many low-lying regions such as Kent, the Trent Valley, Cambridgeshire, the upper Thames valley and East Anglia have produced examples of this phenomenon (Williams 1996, forthcoming b). Variations in the frequency of monument reuse can be explained in terms of regional differences in the quantity and quality of archaeological research, the circumstances of discovery and the different agricultural regimes employed from the medieval period to the present day.

- 5 Attitudes to ancient monuments were not static, but can be seen to change over time. In Roman Britain between the first and early fifth centuries AD, the reuse of prehistoric monuments was a regionally restricted and occasional practice, influencing the siting of burials, votive offerings and temples (Williams forthcoming a). In contrast, in those regions of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia traditionally regarded as the homelands of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, Roman Iron Age cemeteries frequently reused Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows (Thäte 1996). A change occurs in the late fifth and sixth centuries (the 'pagan period'), when many burials and cemeteries in Britain reuse ancient monuments (*pace* Blair 1994, 1995; Härke 1994; Meaney 1964: 19). Examples of monument reuse from the fifth century include large cemeteries at Saxton Road, Abingdon, Oxfordshire (Harden and Leeds 1936) and Bishopstone, Sussex (Welch 1983). Over time, the practice appears to increase in popularity, becoming much more frequent in the seventh century among 'final phase' cemeteries such as Marina Drive, Dunstable in Bedfordshire (Matthews 1962) and Snells Corner, Horn-dean in Hampshire (Knocker 1956; see also Härke and Williams 1997; Williams forthcoming b). At this time, barrow building also reaches a peak and burial with grave goods declines (Boddington 1990; Geake 1992; Shepherd 1979; Van De Noort 1993). This increase in monument reuse coincides with the formation and conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Blair 1994; Carver 1992; Scull 1992). Roman and prehistoric monuments continue to be reused in a variety of contexts in the later Anglo-Saxon period, including execution cemeteries, estate boundary markers, meeting places, élite settlements and religious centres. However, there is little direct evidence for their continuation as communal burial sites after the end of the seventh century (but see Williams forthcoming b).
- 6 There are examples of 'high status' graves of the seventh century reusing prehistoric and Roman monuments, such as the wealthy female burial inserted into a Bronze Age barrow on Swallowcliffe Down in Wiltshire (Speake 1989). It is clear that the élite did not invent a new tradition, but adopted and changed the mortuary practices commonplace throughout Anglo-Saxon England during the late fifth and sixth centuries and continuing into the seventh (*pace* Bradley 1987; Härke 1994).

Taken together, these observations suggest that monument reuse was a widespread and frequent practice in early Anglo-Saxon England. They contradict previous assumptions and interpretations. We can now turn to the specific ways in which people created relationships with the past. Despite the problems posed by the excavated evidence, we can show

that the provision of grave goods, the use of cemetery space, grave positioning, orientation and monumentality were all employed to construct links with older structures in the landscape. These features influenced the character of mortuary practices through the movement and treatment of the body (Barrett 1994; Parkin 1992; Tilley 1994).

### **Grave goods and identities**

The best known aspect of early Anglo-Saxon funerary practices – the provision of grave goods – must now be explained in terms of the wider context of monument reuse. Studies of the provision of grave goods strongly suggest that they symbolized social identity at a number of different levels, including age, gender, status, family or household affiliations and also ethnic identity (Härke 1990; Pader 1982; Richards 1987). The clothing and grave goods created an image of death that could be remembered long after the grave had been covered up. It associated the dead with a particular place in the landscape (Barrett 1994). Even though we often think of cremation as a practice that destroys the remains of the deceased, the care and attention invested in the burial of the remains, often in ceramic urns, suggests the retention of aspects of the dead person's social identity at the burial site. This emphasis upon the identity of the dead may suggest that the living continued to think of them through metaphors of kinship and that the dead themselves were an extension of the living community (Geary 1994). Giving gifts to the deceased may have sustained relationships with the living and expressed the continuing influence of the dead in their affairs (Geary 1994; Parker Pearson 1993). The reuse of ancient monuments places this practice in a new light, for it suggests that the identities of the dead were retained when their lives were over and were believed to reside in or around the ancient monuments (for later Scandinavian parallels, see Ellis 1943). Even when the tradition of burial with grave goods was on the decline and monument reuse was increasing during the seventh century, the laying out of the clothed body seems to have continued.

In the seventh century, isolated burials took place on the sites of older monuments. They included a particularly rich assortment of artefacts and may have been the graves of an élite. Perhaps the symbolic act of burying such valuable objects with the dead may have contributed to establishing relationships with a supernatural past. This could also have been emphasized through the reuse of ancient artefacts and the burial of objects such as weapons and amulets with possible cosmological significance (Andren 1993; Meaney 1981; White 1990; Wilson 1992). For example, at Uncleby in East Yorkshire, a whetstone (an artefact believed to have held mythological associations at this time) was placed upright in the ground close to a weapon burial at the edge of a Bronze Age barrow (Smith 1912).

Thus the reuse of monuments for burial inscribed the identities of the dead in particularly ancient locales. The whole sequence of treating the body, its movement across the landscape and finally its burial with artefacts may have constructed links between the identities of the dead, those of the survivors and the use of these ancient structures. Over time, such monuments may have become synonymous with the combined identities of individual burials: the embodiment of an idealized community of ancestors linked to the distant past and the supernatural (Huntingdon and Metcalf 1991: 113–22; Bloch and Parry 1982: 32–44).



### **The discovery of ancient remains**

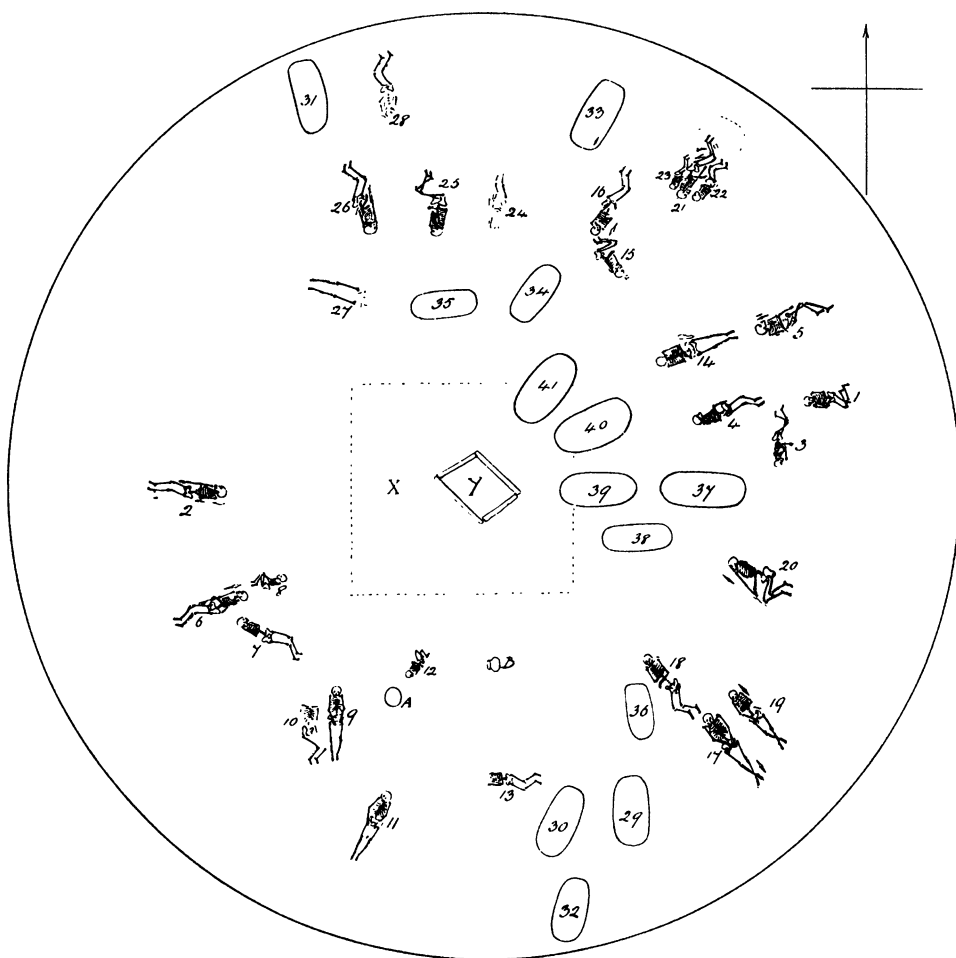
We must also entertain the possibility that during grave digging, or on other occasions, artefacts and human remains may have been discovered in or near ancient monuments and that this influenced attitudes towards these structures (Hingley 1996). It has been argued that the ancient objects, including both fossils and artefacts such as worked flints, beads, brooches and coins, discovered at ancient sites may have held magical, amuletic or ritual significance; these were reburied with the dead (Meaney 1981; White 1990). There are also many cases in which it appears that ancient burials, artefacts and structures were disturbed during the reuse of ancient monuments for early Anglo-Saxon graves. For example, a Roman coin hoard was disturbed by an Anglo-Saxon burial at the Frilford temple complex in Oxfordshire (Bradford and Goodchild 1939: 37–9) and there are numerous cases of Anglo-Saxon graves disturbing prehistoric burials (e.g. Corney et al. 1967: 24).

Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that grave-diggers in the Anglo-Saxon period actually recognized, interpreted or curated these artefacts and human remains, yet it seems possible that their discovery encouraged mythical and supernatural interpretations of ancient monuments. Analogies can be found in the ways in which objects discovered in digging into graves are subject to exaggeration by treasure hunters and antiquarians (for examples see Marsden 1982). There are ethnographic examples of old graves being explored and their contents inspected and interpreted as an important part of ritual practices, either in the context of secondary burial rites, or during burial in a communal grave (e.g. Huntingdon and Metcalf 1991). Furthermore, the importance of artefact discovery is hinted at in the description of the dragon's treasure in *Beowulf* (see also Ellis 1943: 35–6; Geary 1994). Consequently, the exploration of older monuments may have been more than simply grave robbing. We might suggest that the act of grave digging and the occasional discovery of ancient remains were ways of constructing relationships with places that were important in the past.

### **Grave orientation**

Anglo-Saxon graves show a variety of orientations, although south–north and west–east axes are widespread. Sunrise and Christian belief have been suggested to explain orientations in some cases, although the local topography of burial sites, including ancient monuments, can also be shown to influence the alignments of the burials (Boddington 1990). There are numerous ethnographic examples of grave orientation being related to the place of mythical origin, or to other forms of cosmological principle (Carr 1995: 161; Parkin 1992). Therefore, the orientation of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites could have been one aspect of the symbolic relationships constructed between the dead and the ancient past. These relationships may have been achieved in at least three ways.

- 1 There are numerous examples of radial or 'fan-shaped' arrangements of early Anglo-Saxon graves around prehistoric monuments, sometimes focusing upon the central, highest point of the monument. The best example of this practice occurs at Driffield in



*Figure 3* Driffield barrow C38, East Yorkshire. The radial arrangement of sixth-century AD inhumations around a prehistoric barrow represents one of many examples of Anglo-Saxon period grave orientation being influenced by ancient monuments (after Mortimer 1905).

East Yorkshire (Fig. 3), although similar arrangements are known elsewhere, including graves at Buckland, Dover (Mortimer 1905; Evison 1987).

- 2 In other cases, the graves are arranged parallel to the contours of a round barrow, hill-fort rampart or linear earthwork. These may also respect the walls of Roman buildings. Well-known examples of this practice are recorded from Garton Slack in East Yorkshire where burials are aligned along a linear earthwork (Mortimer 1905).
- 3 The grave orientations of many cemeteries appear to be uniform, but the dominant alignment of the cemetery focuses upon an ancient monument. Examples include cemeteries at Snells Corner, Horndean in Hampshire (Knocker 1956), Marina Drive, Dunstable in Bedfordshire (Matthews 1962), Field Farm, Burghfield, in Berkshire (Butterworth and Lobb 1992; Semple, this volume, fig. 2) and Mill Hill, Deal in Kent (Parfitt 1994). At Yeavinger in Northumberland, the Anglo-Saxon timber halls as well as the burial sites were aligned upon prehistoric structures (Bradley 1987; Hope Taylor 1977).

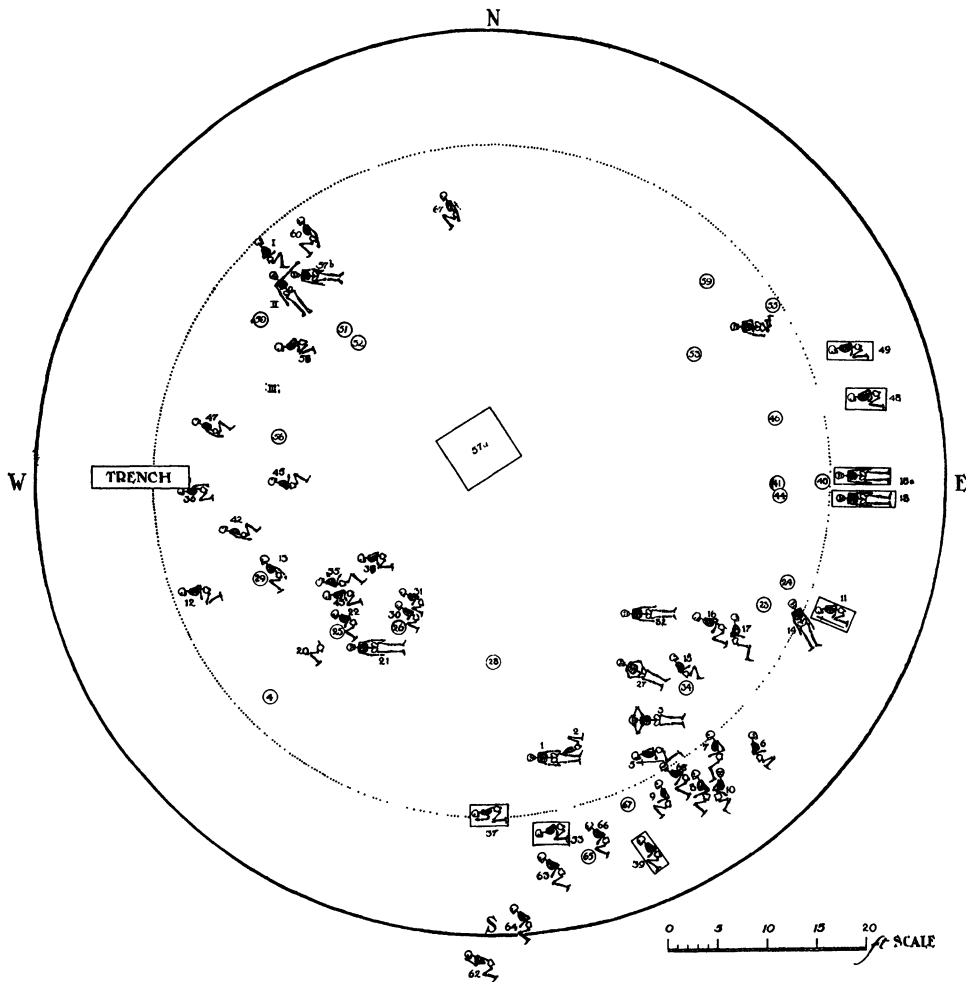
### **The spatial organization and development of Anglo-Saxon burial sites**

The organization and development of some Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are influenced by the existence of older monuments.

- 1 Firstly, at some sites both isolated graves and small burial groups are deliberately placed at the central and highest point of the ancient monument (Speake 1989; Green et al. 1982). Occasionally cemeteries were placed in the midst of a group of these monuments, whilst on other sites prehistoric and Roman structures were reused as enclosures defining the boundaries of cemeteries. Examples include the Bronze Age ringwork at Springfield Lyons, Essex (Hedges and Buckley 1987) and the Roman signal station at Thornham, Norfolk (Gregory 1986). On some occasions it appears as if the central position in an ancient monument was deliberately set aside for high status or special graves, whilst other burials were confined to the edges of these monuments (Pitt Rivers 1888; Corney et al. 1967). In other cases, the central position was adopted by high status graves in the seventh century; examples include the graves at Ford and Swallowcliffe Down in Wiltshire (Musty 1969; Speake 1989; see Meaney 1964 for other examples).
- 2 Sometimes it is clear that graves adjoin a monument on only one or two sides. Excavations are rarely extensive enough to shed much light on this pattern, yet the practice may be related to gaining access to the monument for ritual processions or displays without disturbing existing graves. Cemeteries that were deliberately placed close to, but not over, prehistoric monuments may indicate that these features were 'respected' or were given a different, archaeologically invisible role in funerary rituals. We can speculate that monuments served as stages for ritual performances involving the laying out of the dead or perhaps the cremation of the body (Ellis 1943: 105–11). Another important pattern is the preference for burying the dead on the southern and eastern sides of older monuments. This pattern can be identified in 74 per cent of the sites where one particular side of a monument was reused, including the barrow at Uncleby in East Yorkshire (Fig. 4).

Despite limitations in the quality of the evidence, it seems possible that there was a deliberate ordering in the organization of mortuary practices with reference to ancient monuments. These spatial relationships are not always clear and well defined, partly because different communities were relating to monuments in different ways, but also because attitudes were not static but changed over time.

In some cases we can identify these changes at individual sites. For example, we might expect to find an initial cluster of graves around an ancient monument, with the later burials further away. Unfortunately there are few examples of this, perhaps because many cemeteries had more than one original focus; the burials may have been distributed in relation to household groups. At other sites we can see the opposite pattern, with the earliest graves at some distance from the monument, and later graves establishing closer relationships. This can be seen at the Buckland cemetery, Dover, where graves were inserted into the ring ditch of the prehistoric barrow over a hundred years after the cemetery had been established some distance away from this mound (Evison 1987). It appears that the seventh century not only saw an increased frequency of monument reuse; some cemeteries that already focused on ancient monuments demonstrate an intensified association with the past.



*Figure 4* Uncleby, East Yorkshire. Anglo-Saxon burials dating to the seventh century AD were placed predominantly on the southern and eastern sides of an enlarged Bronze Age barrow (after Smith 1912).

The evidence for grave orientation, cemetery positioning and development illustrates a variety of ways in which ancient monuments were employed in later mortuary practices (Barrett 1994; Graves 1989; Parkin 1992). Through participating in, observation of, or exclusion from, these mortuary practices, people would have come to understand the importance of ancient monuments in Anglo-Saxon society. Each new burial would have created new and distinct relationships, both with the existing structure and also with earlier Anglo-Saxon graves, altering and manipulating attitudes to these places over time.

**Ancient monuments: emulation and elaboration**

The reuse of older structures affects our understanding of the provision of new monuments in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. The evidence suggests that such monuments were not

reused as an alternative to building new ones; instead, both practices were intimately related aspects of mortuary practices at many burial sites. Anglo-Saxon cemeteries containing numerous barrows and other mortuary structures around graves can focus on prehistoric monuments (Meaney 1964; Welch 1983; Filmer-Sankey 1992). For example, at Bowcombe Down on the Isle of Wight, Anglo-Saxon burials were inserted into one of two Bronze Age barrows, and around these barrows were a cluster of smaller Anglo-Saxon mounds (Arnold 1982). Single Anglo-Saxon barrows were also added to existing groups, for example at Ford in Wiltshire where Anglo-Saxon weapon burials were excavated; one was a secondary grave in a prehistoric barrow and another was under a newly built monument (Musty 1969). While Anglo-Saxon barrows appear to emulate the form of prehistoric barrows, only exceptionally is the size of the prehistoric monument replicated. The aim appears to be to create relationships with ancient monuments, yet to retain a clear distinction between older and newer constructions. When Anglo-Saxon barrows are the size of earlier monuments, they are often at some distance away from them (e.g. at Benty Grange, Taplow (Plate 1), Asthall and Sutton Hoo: Carver 1992; Dickinson and Speake 1992; Meaney 1964; Ozanne 1962–3) or they deliberately destroy the prehistoric barrows during their construction (see Filmer-Sankey 1992: 47). These rich burial monuments of the seventh century seem to be either emulating or appropriating earthworks surviving from the past, rather than venerating the remains of earlier times.

Many ancient monuments were reused that in no way resembled Anglo-Saxon barrows, such as henges, hillforts, long barrows and Roman structures (see above). Instead of the



*Plate 1* The Anglo-Saxon barrow at Taplow, Buckinghamshire covered a very wealthy male burial of the seventh century AD. Barrow burial was a symbol of status, but the topography and form of the monument may have served to emulate and evoke the associations of prehistoric and Roman structures. Photograph: Aaron Watson.

emulation of monumental forms, some Anglo-Saxon barrows refer to nearby monuments through their construction. For example, the seventh century weapon burial in a barrow on Lowbury Hill (Berkshire) was placed next to the ruins of a probable Romano-Celtic temple. While the barrow did not emulate the form of the ancient structure, it was built out of material taken from the site of the temple and incorporated large numbers of Roman coins (Härke 1994).

In addition to monument building, there is evidence for the alteration and elaboration of ancient monuments in the Anglo-Saxon period. Despite the difficulties in dating the phases of barrow construction, there is some evidence to suggest that mounds were occasionally enlarged when used for burial in the early Anglo-Saxon period. The best evidence comes from Uncleby, East Yorkshire, excavated by Canon Greenwell (Smith 1912). Such alterations to ancient monuments were not restricted to barrow building. They could include the erection of large wooden posts in the centre of prehistoric monuments, as occurred at Yeavinger (Hope Taylor 1977). In that case, the posts provided the focus for communal cemeteries. The orientation of graves in other cemeteries could be related to similar posts. On other occasions, wooden structures, sometimes described as pagan shrines and temples, were built around, or close to, ancient monuments (Blair 1995; Hope Taylor 1977; Wilson 1992). Such ephemeral features could be much more common than has been supposed and many may have been overlooked in older excavations. Whatever the function of these enigmatic structures, they clearly indicate the appropriation and alteration of older monuments as an integral part of mortuary practices and other rituals.

It appears that the relationship between Anglo-Saxon monument reuse and the building of new mortuary structures has been consistently misunderstood. It has been assumed that monuments were a direct reflection of the status of the deceased and his family (Shepherd 1979; Van De Noort 1993), but there are clearly additional aspects to Anglo-Saxon barrow building. Anglo-Saxon burial mounds created and maintained symbolic relationships with ancient monuments and achieved this through the emulation, alteration and elaboration of more ancient structures.

### **Monument reuse and early Anglo-Saxon society**

The evidence suggests that the poem *Beowulf* brings to life some aspects of a much older tradition, in which death and burial were closely related to prehistoric and Roman structures in the landscape. However, *Beowulf* is not the only literary evidence that ancient monuments were invested with ancestral and supernatural associations. In Felix's *Life of St Guthlac*, an ancient mound is presented in a very similar light to that in *Beowulf*. Guthlac lives as a hermit upon the ancient mound and, when he dies, he is buried beneath it. Later, his grave becomes the focus of Crowland Abbey. In both cases ancient monuments symbolize the distant past and the burial place of individuals who could contact the supernatural. Place names indicate the occasional association of prehistoric monuments with pagan deities and other supernatural creatures such as dragons and gods (Gelling 1978). We can identify the importance of ancient monuments in the construction of myths

of conquest in the accounts of Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Sims-Williams 1983). In these narratives, often mistaken for historical accounts, these places can be associated with battles and the graves of heroes. In regnal lists and genealogies, Anglo-Saxon kings incorporated heroic and mythical figures into their ancestral lines; perhaps the reuse of ancient monuments was another way of interpreting the past with reference to the present (Sisam 1953; see Bradley 1993 for discussion).

While written documents had a limited audience and were the products of later, Christian writers, the rituals carried out at ancient monuments may have affected a greater number of participants and onlookers. Mortuary practices at ancient monuments would have involved the congregation of people from afar and would have provided an important arena for re-enacting links with the past, with the ancestors and with the supernatural through the burial of the dead. Ancient monuments were probably envisaged as powerful, liminal places, that may have been regarded as the dwellings of supernatural beings, ancient or ancestral peoples (Bradley 1987; Tilley 1996: 161–2). Consequently, the burial of the dead may have been an important statement by the living. This link with the past could have been significant in a variety of ways, supporting claims and rights over land, wealth and other material and human resources. In addition, ancient monuments may have been important fields of social action and ritual discourse. They played a part in the construction and negotiation of social and ethnic identities within and between early Anglo-Saxon communities. Thus it may be argued that relationships between the living, the dead and ancient monuments were central to the social, political and religious lives of early Anglo-Saxon people.

These strategies appear to have been transformed and manipulated by emerging élite groups in the seventh century. This was a period of religious change and the formation of kingdoms under the hegemony of the powerful rulers of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia (Higham 1992, 1995; Scull 1992; Yorke 1990). While communal cemeteries continued to focus upon ancient monuments at this time, a new form of élite reuse began that was exclusive to single graves. The complex symbolism of the grave goods at Sutton Hoo and other sites may have acted as important metaphors for mythological narratives as well as the status symbols of an élite (Andren 1993). New barrows were no longer smaller than ancient monuments; they were beginning to emulate them in form and size. Rather than the material embodiment of a communal concept of ancestry and the past, certain monuments became the exclusive domain of élite individuals and their lineages. The central placing of these wealthy graves may represent attempts to transform the dead into *the original builders of the barrows*. Perhaps the people who were buried with so many valuables in these graves were not venerating the ancient past; they were going one step further and trying to *become* the ancestors and deities that other groups had celebrated. By situating their dead at ancient monuments and also building new barrows, élite groups were symbolizing their exclusive links to divine ancestry and supernatural power (Chaney 1970; Wolfram 1994). This symbolism had efficacy because it involved the appropriation and alteration of existing attitudes to ancient monuments; élites were not inventing these traditions *de novo* (*pace* Bradley 1987). In doing so, they were associating themselves with powerful forces and with a distant past that may have served to legitimize political strategies in the present.

### **Origin myths and Anglo-Saxon identities**

A reappraisal of the poem *Beowulf* helps to explain one particular strategy which the reuse of ancient monuments may have served to propagate. *Beowulf* depicts an ancient monument invested with supernatural associations and the wealth of ancient races. In turn, the fate of this forgotten people provides an apocalyptic symbol for the demise of the Geatish kingdom after Beowulf's death and the end of this heroic world (Earl 1994: 40–8). But the monument is also situated in the homeland of the Anglo-Saxons in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany. For an English audience, both the poem and the monument in that poem could have evoked memories of these ancestral places and of the deeds of imagined heroes and ancestors such as Beowulf (Hill 1995: 39–42; Overing and Osborn 1994: 1–37). It would also have emphasized the myth of migration that brought the Anglo-Saxon peoples to England from these regions (Howe 1989). Could death rituals at ancient monuments have propagated similar origin myths?

For immigrant Germanic groups, as well as those indigenous groups that aspired to Germanic ideologies and status, the reuse of older monuments may have been used to portray themselves as the legitimate heirs of the ancient peoples and supernatural beings that originally built these structures. Yet at another level, monument reuse could have evoked memories of imagined homelands across the North Sea. Rituals surrounding death at ancient monuments could have played out mythological narratives of gods and heroes and emphasized genealogical links to the past (Andren 1993; Newton 1993). By controlling the interpretation and experience of these places, groups were defining their own identities and legitimizing their status. During the early Anglo-Saxon period this theme would be particularly important in relations between Germanic and indigenous communities (Härke and Williams 1997; Higham 1995).

Therefore, the act of reusing monuments not only linked past with present, and the living with the dead and the supernatural, it also propagated myths of Germanic origin and identity (Härke 1997; Hedeager 1993; Wolfram 1994). This explains why the practice becomes much more popular from the seventh century and why it was adopted by élites and used to promote their status. Historians and archaeologists are frequently discussing the means by which a common sense of English identity was constructed, and its relationship to the formation of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Wormald 1983; Higham 1992: 230–6; Hines 1994; Howe 1989). Perhaps the archaeological evidence for monument reuse illustrates the ways in which the mythical past was employed to construct these new ethnic and political identities in the centuries following the end of Roman Britain.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Richard Bradley and Heinrich Härke for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Virginia Auld, Aaron Watson and Philip and Susan Williams for their support, encouragement and enthusiasm. I would like to thank Robert Daniels-Dwyer for bringing the Orpington report to my attention.

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