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On reading Anglo-Saxon Graves

Introduction

John Mitchell Kemble, whom we celebrate today, was acknowledged as a prominent if controversial scholar in his own life-time (1807-1857) (figure 1). He remains important to us today not so much for his edition of 1500 Anglo-Saxon charters, or his pioneering account of *The Saxons in England*, as for the way he made all Anglo-Saxon material matter. 'I need not tell you how deeply I have at heart the spreading among my countrymen…. [of] a love for these old records' he remarked, adding 'without losing the wisdom of our own times'.[1] He shows us how the relics of the first millennium - manuscripts, weapons, brooches, pots and graves - can bring relevance to one's personal life, to contemporary politics and to the human long-term story. That's already something.

Modern historiography, or its archaeological equivalent, seems concerned to strip away the creative output of every previous researcher in order to reveal a hidden agenda, preferably something vaguely unpleasant and reprehensible, such as a lust for products that were not fair trade (slave trade in fact), or an inappropriate fondness for some vice or other. In this case Kemble was held to be the champion of the Teutons and the promoter of a theory of Anglo-Saxon invasion from north Germany which was not at all to the later taste. Bruce-Dickens wrote of his 'uncompromising Germanism'[2] and although Kemble is not actually blamed for starting a World War, Teutonic tendencies are noted by the modern archaeologist with a nod and a wink or a shake of the head. In a paper published this year, Howard Williams announces that 'from the beginning archaeology in Britain developed an overtly

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[1] R. A. Wiley, 'Anglo-Saxon Kemble. The Life and Works of John Mitchell Kemble 1807-1857 Philologist, Historian, Archaeologist', *ASSAH* 1 (1979), 165-266 (at 192)

[2] B. Dickins, *J.M.Kemble and Old English Scholarship*, Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, British Academy 1938 (London, 1938).

nationalistic and racial strand', and takes Kemble and his Victorian contemporaries to task for using archaeological material 'to constitute their personal and group identities and inform broader concepts of nationhood'.[3]

But just as Kemble wrote in a context, so do we. And the irony is that while the post-modern critique assumes earlier scholars to be driven more by prejudice than by curiosity, it cheerfully ignores the mote in its own eye: a home-grown prejudice that attributes motives to our predecessors that are simply anachronistic. Bruce Dickins was writing in 1938 so his preoccupations were understandable. Howard Williams' verdict on Kemble, delivered in 2005, reveals an agenda of his own, and at the same time lets us hear what a leading early medieval archaeologist sounds like these days: Kemble, he says, was 'not simply *describing* his discoveries in an empirical or objective manner, but constructing a theoretical interpretation drawing on a range of sources from his wide ranging studies of northern European societies with an explicit Germanist and Anglo-Saxonist ideological programme in mind'.[4]

Of course for Kemble, as for all of us, his world is all there was, and it is right that later generations should deconstruct it. Anachronistic reproaches aside, Howard Williams' study is actually the best attempt yet to place Kemble's archaeology in its context. I also recommend Raymond Wiley's biography, published 25 years earlier in the same Oxford journal.[5] Both are full of facts and references, and I have profited from them gratefully as a guide to Kemble's life and work. Taken together they answer the question: 'how far was J. M. Kemble involved in archaeology?', and answer it comprehensively.

The task I gave myself for today was different. With Kemble, so to speak, in the chair, I want to argue for a new picture of Anglo-Saxon England as it might be seen now, and a new way of reading its graves. It's a picture almost entirely derived from archaeology, although fuelled by a great deal of imagination, or even, as my unkindest friends like to tell me, by a great deal of science fiction. My hope that this will be acceptable to this audience lies in three particulars, first that the picture may be useful in itself – or at least give us something to argue about; secondly that it relates to the path that Kemble was himself

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[3] H. Williams, 'Anglo-Saxonism and Victorian Archaeology: William Wylie's *Fairford Graves*', *EME* 16.1 (2008), 49-88 (at 50).
[4] H. Williams, 'Heathen Graves and Victorian Anglo-Saxonism: Assessing the Archaeology of John Mitchell Kemble', *ASSAH* 13 (2005), 1-18 (at 11).
[5] Wiley, 'Anglo-Saxon Kemble'.

travelling at the moment of his untimely death here in Dublin in 1857. And lastly that it will show how archaeology, for long the close colleague of history, is having an interesting affair with literature, attracted by similar interests and the same kind of daily encounter with creative expression, above all in burial archaeology.

Kemble's model

Kemble never had a full time job in a university, the main result of which was that he completed an enormous quantity of research. He belonged to that group of nineteenth-century young men who meet at college - in this case the other Trinity College, at Cambridge – and have just enough money not to work. They smoked, formed clubs and wrote each other sonnets, some better than others. Alfred Tennyson was one of the party, and revealed something of Kemble's rebellious character in his lines addressed to JMK:[6]

> My hope and heart is with thee – thou wilt be
> A latter Luther, and a soldier-priest
> To scare church-harpies from the Master's feast;

Tennyson found Kemble to be

> spurr'd at heart with fieriest energy
> To embattail and to wall about thy cause
> With iron-worded proof, hating to hark
> The humming of the drowsy pulpit-drone

More of a scientist than a cleric, then. Kemble's background was theatrical, his father an actor and manager in Covent Garden and his sister Fanny a famous actress and playwright. She noted that the youthful John was 'writing morning noon and night' compiling 'whole volumes of arguments against the hereditary aristocracy, the established church and the armed forces'. This probably reflects no more than the natural wish of any young person that can afford it to avoid committing themselves to what they regard as antique and haughty institutions. The other side of the same coin was a huge appetite for learning of every description. A typical day began by reading Kant from 5 am until breakfast, followed by an hours' Spanish. So although he left Cambridge

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[6] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Poems of Tennyson*, with an introduction by T.S. Eliot (London, no date), p. 36.

with only a pass degree, he apparently did not regard either the place or high qualifications as necessary for a career in scholarship. There was a mobility in those days for those of a privileged class that meant one could travel to a place and study there without going through the admissions office or producing the money up front. For Kemble, the journey of his awakening was up the Rhine and its destination philology at Munich, where he become immersed in the ancestral texts of Germany, an encounter probably similar in intensity to that of a twenty-first-century reader discovering *The Lord of the Rings*. Kemble had an Austrian mother and was to marry a German wife, so his love of Germany was not skin deep. One can imagine his excitement as he devoured the Ring of the Niebelung and other ancient texts, opening the door on whole new world that was never to close.

Archaeology is now studied as though it was a recondite science, but one forgets how much the digging up of ancient burials was once part of the normal experience of the literati. Kemble had been on a dig when he was 18, and had had plenty of experience in handling Anglo-Saxon urns in England; but he was not really engaged with archaeological inquiry as such until he returned to live in Germany in 1849, aged 42. There he carried out excavations on the Luneberger Heide, noting the similarity between the newly unearthed cremation urns with those he had seen in England (figure 2). Although he was expecting it, this too must have been a pivotal moment. For the next 8 years he continued to dig and lecture on the character and connection of the continental Saxons and the Saxons in England, as displayed by burials, and by funerary urns in particular. His last lecture, given here in Dublin to the Royal Irish Academy on February 9th 1857 was on *The utility of Antiquarian Collections, as throwing Light on the Pre-historic Annals of the European Nations,* in which he urged us all to pull together in a noble spirit of inquiry, even though, he admitted, the subject had 'little attraction for the great mass of mankind, and must be pursued with little sympathy and no profit'.[7]

If we want to assess what he concluded from his archaeological studies, it is as well to remember that he started from a long way back. In N Germany the emergent urns were still thought in some quarters to grow naturally, and Kemble remarked drily: 'a confirmation of this [was] found in the asserted fact that they mostly made their appearance

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[7] J. M. Kemble, *The Utility of Antiquarian Collections, as throwing Light on the Pre-historic Annals of the European Nations* (Dublin, 1857), pp. 29-30.

in the month of May'.[8] They now tend to sprout in September – the ploughing season. The scholarly wisdom of the day divided all burials into Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age, depending on their contents. Kemble showed that this scheme did not work: one grave often contained all three materials and, contrary to the opinions of his friend Dr Worsaae, it was self-evident that the objects in a grave did not have to be contemporary.[9] Instead he used the dates inscribed on Roman coins to give a *terminus post quem*. The graves he studied in Germany formed a group, and this group as a whole was shown by the coins to be post-Roman. And this group, using similar burial rites and depositing similar objects, must represent 'one race of men, and one period of time'. 'Keltic they are not, or they would not be found in Luneberg; Slavonic they are not, or they would not be found in Warwickshire; only one race remains, - they are Saxon, in the one place as well as the other. The bones are those of men whose tongue we speak, whose blood was in our veins.'[10]

He also noted that both the cremation and inhumation rite belonged, by virtue of their objects, to the same race and he explained the puzzling difference of burial rite through divergent ideology. At Luneberg and Verden he, Count Münster, Baron von Estorff and M Hagen had opened some 3000 burials, of which only 2 were inhumations, and the Count had been digging for 25 years without ever seeing an unburnt skeleton. But in the south at Sinsheim near Baden where the grave goods and pottery closely resembled those of the cremations in N Germany, there were only inhumations under barrows. This was the basis for his argument that cremation was the Pagan and inhumation the Christian expression of Germanic belief, in Germany as in England.[11]

Although the 'race' to which all these burials belonged was the Teutonic, he did not believe they could be further divided, even in England. Current archaeologists may be surprised, as I was, to find that Kemble did not actually subscribe to an invasion of Anglo-Saxon England by Angles, Saxons and Jutes. My picture shows a group of urns

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[8] J. M. Kemble, 'Burial and Cremation', *ArchJ* 12 (1855), 309-337 (at 313).
[9] Kemble, *Utility of Antiquarian Collections*, p. 8.
[10] J. M. Kemble, *Horae Ferales; or Studies in the Archaeology of the Northern Nations*, ed. R. G. Latham and A. W. Franks (London, 1863), p. 229.
[11] J. M. Kemble 'Burial and Cremation', *ArchJ* 12 (1855), 309-337 (at 334); in England he went further, asserting that all barrows with named occupants must have been Christian: J. M. Kemble, 'Notices of Heathen Interment in the Codex Diplomaticus', *ArchJ* 14 (1857),119-139 (at 124-5).

from Stade on the Elbe, published by Kemble, matched with examples from England, obtained from Myres' corpus.[12] A glance will show what puzzled Kemble and everyone since: that all the urns are different, and those that are similar to each other are not found in the same place. Although they can be allocated to regions, the patterns of the urns do not map on to county names (Essex, Sussex, East Anglia). This introduced the idea that the archaeology was telling a different story to Bede 'I am convinced that the received accounts of our migrations, or subsequent fortunes and ultimate settlement, are devoid of historical truth in every detail,' he wrote,[13] although elsewhere he was 'prepared to admit that some greater influx of Germans than usual, upon the eastern and southern coasts of England, took place about the middle of the fifth century of our era', so attracting the attention of contemporary authors.[14]

Even so Howard Williams saw Kemble as wanting archaeology and history to work together with a common goal in the study of the origin of Germanic peoples.[15] That may be true, and would be understandable given Kemble's initiation into the German notion of *urgeschichte*. But the utility of this observation depends on what you mean by history. My reading of Kemble's intellectual itinerary is that he thought far more about literature than about history, or more about the character of the Anglo-Saxons as expressed by themselves, than about the sequence of events that produced England. His 'history' focused more on hearth and home than the big political programme of migrations and kingdoms that has set the agenda for two centuries. His attempt to draw history out of documents[16] does have a sense of progression from Pagan tribe to Christian kingdom, but is more like a theatre programme detailing the cast of players (the king, the noble, the serf, the reeve); moreover it contains rather little archaeology. Chapter 1 discussing the origins of Saxon and Welsh traditions presented an open goal to the excavator of barrows in England and Germany, although, since it was actually written before 1849, he may not have yet

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[12] J. N. L. Myres, *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period* Vol.II (Cambridge, 1977). Examples as numbered here on Figure 2.

[13] J. M. Kemble, *The Saxons in England. A History of the English Commonwealth till the period of the Norman Conquest* (London, 1876), p. 16.

[14] Kemble, 'Burial and Cremation', p. 319.

[15] Williams, 'Heathen Graves', p. 6, citing J. M. Kemble, [Report of a Lecture on the Heathen Graves of North Germany] *ArchJ* 12 (1855), 385-392 (at 386 and 390) and J. M. Kemble, [Report of a Lecture on the Mortuary Customs Of the Scandinavians] *ArchJ* 13 (1856), 92-4.

[16] Kemble, *Saxons*.

developed his archaeological arguments. When he did, his main task was to assemble and understand the particular attributes of Germanic behaviour and religious practice: barrow-building, attitudes to ships, horses, dogs, pigs, hares, deer, acorns, cherries, plums, pears, apples and hazel, the wood of the magic wand. All this was nearly forgotten by later Anglo-Saxon archaeologists – although it is being rediscovered now. His archaeological, like his philological, approach was to make a spyhole into the Germanic mind. In the *Codex Diplomaticus* the emphasis was on family law and family life, the ownership of property, the style of inheritance, the nature of tenure, matters of belief, the relations between men and women. It seems very probable that his study of graves was intended to enhance this picture; graves introduce us, after all, to the opinions of burial parties on the dead, a material obituary potentially as rich as that of a Charter or a Will.[17] As for the invasion hypothesis, the albatross that historiography has hung around his neck, he seems to have cared not a jot for it. So he turns out to be a modern archaeologist after all.

At this point in our deconstruction we can note that while Kemble's love of Germany was undeniable, it can hardly be claimed as a conspiratorial post-hoc motivation for using archaeology to prove that the English are Germans. His recourse to archaeology and his emphasis on the similarity between the German and the English urns coincided with a sad time in his life; he had just left his German wife believing her irredeemably decadent. In this context it is hard to see his work as motivated by a pro-German agenda per se. His experience of alienation from the academic establishment, and then from his wife, may have turned him towards the construction of safer, nobler ideals. And although he remained nominally a Christian, it is not excluded that his early disdain for the Church of England, added to this later personal disillusion, had opened his eyes to the assets of the Anglo-Saxon gods, in particular, to use Wiley's phrase, 'their sanctifying function, preserving family, farm and fertility'.[18]

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[17] J. M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* 6 vols (London, 1839-48). He was himself aware of the analogy between archaeology and literature, calling the different artefacts and graves 'different letters by which we spell out the history of the land': J. M. Kemble, [Editorial] *ArchJ.* 6 (1849), 1-3 (at 2). Analogies for the archaeological discourse that follows will found in other papers in the present book, for example the non-coincidence of cultural and political boundaries (Tom Shippey) and the diversity of language (Jane Roberts).
[18] Wiley, 'Anglo-Saxon Kemble', p. 228.

Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon burial since Kemble

The development of thinking about Anglo-Saxon burial since Kemble's death has been well summarised in a dozen books and PhD introductory chapters.[19] It is fair to say that the archaeological agenda has been strongly influenced by our partner subjects: history, literature, art history and anthropology. In the USA, Anglo-Saxon archaeology is found in art history or English departments, while the rest of archaeology is in anthropology. In England the Anglo-Saxons are now studied separately, as archaeology in archaeology departments, as history in History departments, as art in art history departments and as Old English in departments of literature. Kemble was spared these stressful schisms if only because he worked outside universities. I have always backed interdisciplinary centres, such as that at York, but since I am talking now mainly about burials, I hope you will forgive me if I confine myself to a narrow archaeological view. Our study was for many years primarily in the service of history, and it focused on graves and objects as a reflection of the supposed Anglo-Saxon migrations and the beginnings of the English kingdom. For a century, the principal efforts were applied to using the graves to map the Anglo-Saxon regional groups and their place of origin, i.e. the matters that Kemble had already dismissed as irrelevant.

During the 1960s the agenda changed due to the influence of 'processual archaeology', in which material culture was held to reflect social changes in existing populations.[20] While migration was not deemed impossible, it was not deemed causative, and the more interesting use of graves was in charting the emergence of an aristocracy (hierarchy) and then of kingdoms (state formation). This was done by noting and scoring the wealth displayed in grave goods and monuments, quantifying it and dating it. The trend observed was that during the fifth to seventh century in England, cemeteries showed a switch from many adequately furnished graves to fewer, better furnished, graves. In the

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[19] For research history, see S. Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud, 2000), Chapter 1; C. M. Hills, *Origins of the English* (London, 2003).

[20] See, e.g., J. F. Shephard, 'The Social Identity of the Individual in Isolated Barrows and Barrow Cemeteries in Anglo-Saxon England', *Space, Hierarchy and Society*, ed. B. C. Burnham and J. Kingsbury, BAR Int. ser. 59 (Oxford, 1979), 47-80; C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (London, 1988); M. O. H. Carver, 'Kingship and material culture in early Anglo-Saxon East Anglia', *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. S. Bassett (London and New York, 1989), pp. 141- 158.

first centuries nearly everyone had grave goods, in the later there were fewer furnished graves, but they were rich. Similarly, burial mounds became more class-ridden: being small and numerous in Kentish sixth-century cemeteries and large and dispersed on seventh-century sites in Kent, Sussex, Wessex and East Anglia. The deduction made was that the Anglo-Saxon people had changed as well, from a more equal to a more hierarchical, more socially stratified, community. This social change was credited variously to an increase of resources and consequent international ambition, or to a decrease of resources and consequent international stress. In any case, it was held to be the process of social ranking that produced the earliest English kingdoms.

The loss of confidence in state formation as a principal prime mover in social change came, at least in my case, with an end-of-conference contribution made by the anthropologist Edmund Leach in the 1973.[21] He explained that culture change could not be explained purely in social or economic terms since the main impetus in humans was always ideological. Processual or analytical archaeology had left this out and Leach considered its agenda pretentious and naive. Colin Renfrew pronounced himself rendered apoplectic by this attitude,[22] but I for one found it enlightening. It was true that archaeologists had lost interest in religion in the 60s and 70s and the question of ideological conversion had stayed off the agenda, or at least remained unquestioned. But in the early medieval period, and in the European theatre, ideological pressure may well have been more influential than the economy, or to put it another way, in social change ideals mattered more than reality.

Two examples will suffice to show how early medieval archaeologists adjusted their interpretations. In the Rhineland Wolfgang Böhme had shown how *adelsgräber*, princely burial, or burial under

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[21] E. Leach, 'Concluding Address', *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*, ed. Colin Renfrew (London, 1973), pp. 761-771, esp 769: 'What matters, in the minds of the actors is religion and politics'.

[22] 'As an archaeologist I was – and I am – driven to near apoplectic indignation by the minimal view of the scope and potential of the subject taken by Leach and Hobsbawm': A. C. Renfrew, 'Dialogues of the Deaf', *Space, Hierarchy and Society*, ed. B. C. Burnham and J. Kingsbury, BAR Int. ser. 59 (Oxford, 1979), 253-259 (at 253). Leach's critique was later addressed in Renfrew's inaugural lecture *Towards an Archaeology of Mind* (Cambridge, 1982) and was taken up and successfully promulgated into the archaeological mainstream by Ian Hodder, whose *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1986) I salute in my title.

mounds, proceeded up the Rhine from the earliest (near the Rhinemouth) to the latest (in the Alpine region); and at the same he showed how the first churches followed the same trajectory.[23] The processualist explanation for this was that the hierarchical tendency among otherwise egalitarian Rhinelanders had begun in Belgium and spread to Switzerland. However, it occurred to me, as I am sure to others, that we were dealing here not with what burials signalled, but the context in which they were doing it. It may be that people always lived in a hierarchy, but only occasionally felt obliged to signal it in monuments. Burials did not represent the whole of a community's necessary and sufficient expression; the real question was what was causing the investment to be made at a particular place and time: why that, why there and why then?[24] In this case, both the building of burial mounds and the building of churches could be ascribed to the same reason, the pressure from Christianisation, which was first opposed and defied, in the form of barrows, and then accepted in the form of churches. But about changes in social hierarchy we could say very little.

Similarly, it could be noted that exchanges across the north sea were lively in the sixth century, when claw beakers and reticella beads travelled between East England and Sweden, but dead in the seventh; and when they revived in the eighth changed their axis through 90 degrees from Scandinavia to the Rhineland – just as the churches were appearing. Those who interpreted this as a new surge in Dark Age economics may have forgotten that there had been plenty of exchanges already: so, not new trade but trade in a new direction. This opened the door to a different range of causes: Christianity had not only enhanced trade with other Christian lands; it had suppressed the previous trade system enjoyed by those who were still pagan.

If ideology could result in the adoption of a new material culture and represent a new political alignment, there was no need to invoke migration as a cause of culture change. People could change their own culture for political reasons. Renfrew and Cherry's concept of *Peer*

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[23] H. W. Böhme, 'Adelsgräber im Frankenreich. Archäologische Zeugnisse zur Herausbildung einer Herrenschicht unter dem merowinginschen Königen', *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 40 (1993), 397-534

[24] M. O. H. Carver, 'Why that? Why there? Why then? The politics of early Medieval monumentality', *Image and Power in the Archaeology of Early Medieval Britain. Essays in honour of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. H. Hamerow and A. MacGregor (Oxford, 2001), pp. 1-22.

Polity Interaction was useful here: a model of small quasi-independent communities in contact with each other and influencing each other through a process of ongoing argument.[25] This seemed to suit the early medieval North Sea situation very well. It was not then a German Sea or a Merovingian Sea or a Celtic Sea; it was an open arena, a thoroughfare not a barrier, in which traffic could freely pass, unless prevented by political action.. Cultural investment was the result of decisions taken by each polity, in the context of their maritime neighbours. A monument was said to have 'agency', that is, it reflected the agenda of the people who made it, mitigated by the agendas of the neighbours. We were therefore entitled to regard the major monuments, at least, as examples of political alignment, actual or intended. This in turn would account for their astonishing diversity either side of the water.

Sutton Hoo

These new ways of thinking about the archaeological evidence were influential in the Sutton Hoo research project that began in 1983.[26] It added another dimension to the possible interactions between polities: that of interacting with the dead, and in particular with memories of the Germanic past and of the glory that was Rome. The shoulder clasps, thoroughly Germanic in their Style 2 animals, evoked Roman shoulder-clasps worn by Roman military leaders.[27] The helmet, thoroughly Germanic in its ornament, alluded to the helmets worn by Roman officers on parade.[28] The sceptre, a whetstone signalling the sharpener of swords, and carrying the Germanic masks of gods or ancestors, was itself derived from the template of the Roman or Byzantine imperial *insignium*.[29] It is an example, as one of my Old English students put it, of 'intertextuality'. These objects were laid out in a chamber, the dead man almost certainly contained in a tree trunk coffin, with a pile of clothes over his feet and his public persona proclaimed: government at one end, feasting at the other; the space arranged symbolically to reflect his future roles (figure 3). The objects are not heaped or dumped: they

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[25] *Peer Polity Interaction and Socio-Political Change*, ed. C. Renfrew and J. F. Cherry (Cambridge, 1986).

[26] M. O. H. Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?* (London, 1998) and *Sutton Hoo. A Seventh Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context* (London, 2005)

[27] R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, 3 vols (London, 1975-82), II, 534.

[28] Ibid. p 220.

[29] Ibid. p 351.

are laid out with respect to the space assigned. The allusions are therefore numerous and it is evident that the assemblage was a selection of the most deliberate and symbolic kind. There is no way that it represents the whole of the dead man's wealth, an assumption that has misled a number of historians.[30] Common sense tells us that the selection was made by a burial party, in which the widow was a major player. What we are looking at, or rather what the graveside spectators were looking at, was a composition, in which each object and its position in the ground carried a potential meaning. It is a palimpsest of allusions.

The Sutton Hoo Ship burial has been used for many years as a platform for the reality behind *Beowulf*. Roberta Frank put paid to that with her masterpiece 'The Odd Couple' showing how these two prominent survivors had been artificially paired off at an early date and were having trouble getting a life of their own.[31] I agree with her, but would add another factor to the argument. Sutton Hoo is not the reality behind *Beowulf*, because it too is a work of literature.[32] The burial draws eclectically on the same grand memory-bank as the poem; it was not designed to report ethnic, economic or social reality: it was designed to express feelings. One day we will know a little more about how to read those feelings, and only then can we use them to inform history: what a certain group on a certain day celebrated about the past and feared about the future, turning their thoughts into a stage setting and a scenario for their leading man.

The chamber was placed in a ship and the ship placed in a trench below ground. But this ship was not just an addition to the grave goods, or a sign of cultural descent from earlier practitioners. There *were* no earlier practitioners in England. The ship too was a reference, it had a metaphysical role. If we cannot penetrate that role except in general terms of the 'Voyage to another world', we can at least determine the context of its use. The burial of the ship in Britain was a

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[30] e.g. J. Campbell, 'The Impact of the Sutton Hoo Discovery on the Study of Anglo-Saxon History', *Voyage to the Other World. The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. C. B. Kendall and P. S. Wells, Med. Stud. at Minnesota 5 (Minneapolis, 1992), 79-102.
[31] R. Frank, '*Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo: The Odd Couple', *Voyage to the Other World*, ed. Kendall and Wells, pp. 47-64.
[32] M. O. H. Carver, 'Burial as Poetry: The Context of Treasure in Anglo-Saxon Graves'. *Treasure in the Medieval West*, ed. E. M. Tyler (York, 2000), pp. 25-48. This is not to exclude the historicity of Sutton Hoo or *Beowulf* at a more general level. See below, and Tom Shippey, this vol.

reference to a deep past, going back at least to the Bronze Age, and confined to Scandinavia, and comprising shared religious ideas of which we know very little. The question to be asked was why ship burial was adopted in Britain, only in East Anglia, only in the south east part of Suffolk and only in the early seventh century. The answer would seem to be that this composition expressed the aspirations of a newly formed kingdom of East Anglia, one that wished to be esteemed alongside the imagined Roman polities while aligning itself with its ancestral allies in Scandinavia. For this reason they resurrected and reified the ancient metaphor and its ideological trappings.[33]

Although I am trying to reposition the Anglo-Saxon cemetery as a theatre, rather than an archive, I am not saying that it has no historical value. For the elucidation of events we depend on date and the accuracy of independent dating, that is a dating that relies on neither typological or documentary alignment. Thanks to better stratification and better radiocarbon this is steadily improving. The story at Sutton Hoo involves three cemeteries (figure 4). The first took the form of a mixed cemetery of cremations and inhumations, established on the parish boundary between Sutton and Bromfield 300m to the north. Here during the sixth century there were small barrows, and there was a burial in a bronze hanging bowl. Towards the end of the sixth century, a new cemetery was inaugurated at Sutton Hoo. Bronze bowls under mounds 10m in diameter contained the ashes of young men, dogs, horses, cattle and sheep, with playing pieces – and that's just the material that survived. At the turn of the seventh century, a young man and his horse were buried in adjacent pits under one mound. He was about 25 and lay in a tree trunk coffin with a sword and little bag of oddments; outside the coffin lay a shield, spears, the horse's bridle with silver pendants, a cauldron and pot and a bag of provisions. The tableau so formed, right down to the jingling bridle, could have come straight out of Wagner, a minor Siegfried, off to an endless adventure.

Next came the two ship burials, under Mound 2 and Mound 1, the pinnacle of investment. After this the princely burial ground began to fade. A few adolescents were placed in poorly furnished graves; a rich woman bedecked in silver was laid on a couch in a chamber in the mid seventh century. Then things went quiet for a few years until the place was revived, if that's the right word, as a place of execution. A

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[33] M. O. H. Carver, 'Ship Burial in Early Britain: Ancient Custom or Political Signal?' *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. O. Crumlin-Pedersen and B. Munch Thye (Copenhagen, 1995), pp. 111-124.

gallows or gibbet was placed on Mound 5 and another at the edge of the mound cemetery along the path leading to the ferry. Here were many sad burials of execution victims, hanged and dismembered and dumped. Men and women lay in the same grave, companions of a common misdemeanour. The hangings continued, one every few years from the eighth century to the eleventh, after which the gallows was relocated beside the newly built Wilford Bridge.

This sequence would seem to have some historicity. A wealthy family in the late sixth century felt it important to seek remembrance on a more regional scale in a new burial place. The burial rite adopted, cremation in bronze bowl, was already antique; the reference made was to north Germany in the fifth century. Horse and rider inhumation burial, a Rhineland practice of the sixth century, was also at the end of its development when introduced into England in the years around 600. The ship burials that followed it were also a few generations later than their nearest previous flourishing, on Bornholm and in Uppland Sweden. None of these rites were common practice in England. In each case therefore we can note these high investment burials making a reference back to another place at a previous time. There is no question of this being some sort of 'English tradition' or the 'final phase' of an existing practice. It is all new to England, and carries a meaning appropriate only to its place and time.

Insofar as we currently know how to deconstruct these messages, they are 100% Pagan. Obviously there are 'Christian' objects in the grave, especially those imported from parts of the Christian empire. And as clearly there are Roman imperial echoes. But burying ships in a mound is not a casual Christian option, nor are Roman parade helmets – or else we are in the presence of symbolic anarchy. The Christian message, as became clear, was to take the burial ground of kings and convert it into a *cwealmstow*, a killing place for dissidents. Just as there are scholars who see Christians everywhere, so there are others who feel, perhaps with Kemble, that Pagans have been under-esteemed. I try hard not to be of either party, because ultimately I do not think we are entitled to place our perceptions of modern institutionalised religion anachronistically in the seventh century. I am reluctant to accept with Ole Crumlin-Pedersen that ship burials are enacted in honour of Freyr;[34] but I am equally suspicious of claims that a seventh-century

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[34] O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Boat Burials at Slusegaard and the Interpretation of the Boat-Grave Custom', *The Ship as Symbol*, ed. Crumlin-Pedersen and Munch Thye, pp. 87-100

ship burial could be attributed to a Christian, in the sense of a member of an institutionalised church.[35] For me there *was* no institutionalised Christian church in Anglo-Saxon England until the eighth century, and perhaps later, for the simple reason that there was no established unified and effective English government to impose and enforce it. To assume that the Christian orthodoxy functioned universally from the arrival of the first documented missionaries is a teleological error born of conviction rather than evidence. My conviction, which could of course be in error too, is that if belief was an essential ingredient in the composition of burial rite, and the composition of belief in the fifth to seventh was eclectic, local and open-ended – this is what the archaeology says. The burial parties neither knew nor cared what the scholarly definition of Paganism and Christianity might be. It is therefore futile to search in this period for 'evidence of conversion'. There was no conversion, only local expressions of fluid and eclectic ideologies. As we have seen at Sutton Hoo, all this was to change with the capture of societies and of people's minds by the new Christian kingdoms. But that came later.

Wasperton

I would like to pursue this matter of ideological diversity a little further using a second site belonging to the period before Sutton Hoo, the Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Wasperton, which is about to be published (figures 5 and 6).[36] This site has several unusual and very welcome properties: first, it lies on the upper Avon in the centre of south England, near the watershed between the rivers draining east into the Wash and west into the Severn. Prima facie, therefore, it lies on the border between the English and Celtic worlds as Kemble and all since have understood them to be. Secondly it was completely excavated, together with the 12 hectare prehistoric site in which it stood; and lastly it begins in the third or fourth century; it is a Roman cemetery that became Anglo-Saxon.

The approach to the analysis of this cemetery was also unusual. Most Anglo-Saxon cemeteries appear to be 'flat' - that is the graves are not stratigraphically connected with each other and we rely on the objects in them to provide a sequence: the order of the graves is given by the order of the assemblages It is thus no accident that scholars of the

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[35] J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford 2005), p. 53 and note.
[36] M. O. H. Carver, C. Hills and J. Scheschkewitz, *Wasperton. A Roman, British and Anglo-Saxon Cemetery in Central England* (Woodbridge, 2008)

Anglo-Saxon period have spent a great deal of time and ingenuity in creating typological sequences of weapons and brooches, latterly using correspondence analysis which provides statistical support for a common model. Ultimately the dates of these assemblages are dependent, as Kemble knew, on the dates of coins found in the graves, something that occurs more frequently on the continent than in England.

Although such efforts are to be admired, there are reasons for disquiet. While all Germanic grave goods subscribe to a common vocabulary, they cannot be assumed to be saying the same thing. Just as language with a common root varies from country to country and valley to valley, so grave groups vary from region to region, and indeed from village to village and cemetery to cemetery.[37] The discovery of a grand chronological system relies on there being such a system to find. But a Pan-Germanic prescription may never have existed, or at least may not have applied in England. When all is said and done, the choice of what goes into a grave is a local decision, and it only needs a few wayward additions of antiques to mess up the model of the sequence. It might even be thought that the addition of antiques is actually neither wayward nor infrequent. Grave goods consist of a tribute by the living to the dead, so it would not be surprising if ancestral thoughts dominated at the graveside. 'The fact is' said Voltaire, 'that there is no family, town or nation that does not do what it can to push back its date of origin.'[38] In his will of 1015 Atheling Athelstan bequeathed his brother Edmund a sword that had belonged to King Offa and which was by then more than two hundred and twenty years old.[39] The eldest grandchild in my mother's family inherits the ring worn by one of Nelson's pall-bearers, and although the present owner has no plans to bury it, if he did, it would also be two centuries adrift from its chronology. We have already seen archaic references at Sutton Hoo: one can imagine that on a more modest scale similar signals of family history could be made with great square headed brooches or spears.

These matters raise the apprehension that assemblages in Anglo-Saxon graves do not offer, except very indirectly and generally, a measure of their date; and certainly not a date of sufficient accuracy to put graves in order. The argument needs to be turned on its head: not, 'what date is implied by these grave goods?', but 'which grave goods

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[37] J. M. Kemble, [Report of a Lecture on the Heathen Graves of North Germany] *ArchJ* 12 (1855), 385-392 (at 392). Also Jane Roberts, this vol.

[38] F. M. A. de Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, trans. E. Dilworth (Indianapolis, 1961), p. 81.

[39] D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 19.

were chosen at that date?' Using a literary analogy, we need to know who said what, when. At Wasperton we had the chance of making this dream come partly true. The 200 inhumations could be put in order largely by stratification and alignment, while the 26 cremations were placed in sequence mainly by radiocarbon dating[40]. Objects were only used where their period was unequivocal (i.e. as between Roman and Saxon), or where they clearly belonged to the latest period represented on site (the early seventh century). The result was a dated sequence in which the ritual preferences of a small community could be chronicled.

Thus we did not wish the interpretation to depend on a priori relationship between grave goods and date. And, by the same token, we did not wish to assume a direct correlation between grave goods and an ethnic group. Ever since Kemble and before, scholars have expected an equation between Anglo-Saxon grave goods and Anglo-Saxon people, even if there was less confidence, as Kemble observed, that the corpus could be broken down further to reflect Bede's Angles, Saxons and Jutes. In the 1990s archaeologists, at least in England, began to doubt *all* ethnic labels, and it was not long before this disillusion spread into the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries: why must the wearers of saucer brooches be Germans? Perhaps the concept of a Germanic invasion needed revisiting.[41]

In a way it was surprising that this had not happened before. The idea that Roman Britain consisted mainly of Romanised Britons had long been accepted; so why not speak of Saxonised Britons? In both cases, the local inhabitants had suffered a change of costume, language and social strategy, as one politically aggressive movement replaced another. This accepted, the discussion soon focussed on numbers, a discussion that was heavily tempered by events of the twentieth century in modern Europe. Following a comprehensive analysis, Heinrich Härke proposed that male burials of the fifth to seventh centuries in England consisted of about half and half immigrant Germans and native Britons. He got no thanks for this, and later remarked of the modern academic communities: 'The British didn't believe there were so many Germans; the Germans didn't believe there could be that many Britons'.[42]

Two new techniques are being brought to bear on this question, although neither, it must be said, is well equipped to adjudicate on the

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[40] Radiocarbon dating proved difficult for the poorly preserved inhumed bone.
[41] Hills, *Origins*; Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*.
[42] H. Härke, 'Archaeologists and Migrations. A Problem of Attitude?' *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms*, ed. T. F. X. Noble (London and New York, 2006), pp. 262-276

matter of numbers. DNA assessments have been used to show associated groups (haplogroups) of people living in modern Wales, England and Germany. These are deduced by taking samples from the modern populations, and they use the rate of mutation in genes (one mutation per thousand years) to infer what the population was like 1500 years ago. The best one can say of this is 'not very precise', but it hasn't prevented some marvellously vivid descriptions of early medieval demography. The latest testosterone-fuelled hypothesis is that a few well endowed German males arrived in England in the fifth century and proceeded to mate the British population into submission, thus achieving, through very few numbers, the Germanic gene pool that is said to obtain today.[43] We have not seen the last of these theories, which make such excellent journalistic copy, and I personally look forward to a competing vision, in which the Cornish peninsula experiences a mitochondrial surge from a boatload of Irish matrons.

The second new technique, stable isotope analysis, applies more directly to the fifth to seventh century, since it uses bone from the Anglo-Saxon graves themselves. The relative amounts of oxygen and strontium isotopes in the teeth (the isotope 'signatures') reflect the ground water in the place a person grew up, as opposed to the place they died. We can therefore see how far an individual had migrated during their lifetime. Clearly the number of specimens suitable for analysis and the cost (at £600 at time) means that these results will take time to attain demographically useful proportions. But the results are nevertheless very promising. At West Heslington, persons buried in Yorkshire came from both east and west.[44] At Wasperton, 20 were measured, 13 of them grew up locally, 3 came from the West Country and 4 from the Mediterranean area. No-one seems to have hailed from Germany.

To summarise the sequence that emerged from these analyses (figure 6), the Wasperton cemetery lay in well documented Iron Age territory, legalised by the Romans into the *civitas* of the Dobunni, and by the Saxons into the territory of the Hwicce[45]. In the third to fourth

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[43] M. G. Thomas, M. P. H. Stumpf and H. Härke, 'Evidence for an Apartheid-like Social Structure in Early Anglo-Saxon England' *Proc. R. Soc. B*, 273:1601 [doi:10.1098/rspb.2006.3627] (October 22, 2006), <http://journals.royalsociety.org/content/x77xhr414g22/> 1-7.

[44] P. Budd, A. Millard, C. Chenery, S. Lucy and C. Roberts. 'Investigating Population Movement by Stable Isotope Analysis: a Report from Britain', *Antiquity* 78 (2004), 127-141.

[45] B. Cunliffe, 'Tribes and Empires c1500BC – AD500', *The Peopling of Britain. The Shaping of a Human Landscape*, ed. Paul Slack and Ryk Ward, The

century, about 19 persons were buried in a disused Roman enclosure, disposed in family plots. There was one cremation, not in a pot, and 18 inhumations aligned N-S exhibiting Roman bracelets and hobnail boots, and some decapitations. Of these, two were immigrants from the Mediterranean and four were locals. During the fifth century, the dominant alignment was W-E and the focus was in the plot at the SE corner of the enclosure. There were no grave goods, but the burial parties used planks and stones to line the grave-pits. Of these 5 were locals, three were born in the West Country, and one in the Mediterranean.   About AD 480 a party of 22 cremations took over a relatively unused part on the west side, which they demarcated with a fence. These and the 53 inhumations which followed them were culturally Anglo-Saxon. The inhumations, the women with brooches, the men with spears, took over or continued the previous family plots. The main cultural affiliations of their grave goods were towards East Anglia. The four specimen skeletons measured had all grown up locally. In the second half of the sixth century, a new mood is detectable. The cultural affiliations now are mainly with Wessex and along the Thames Valley, and the first graves appear outside the enclosure. These re-use old Bronze Age and Roman barrows, or build new ones. The process of high status commemoration accelerates into the early seventh century with rich graves, perhaps under mounds, at four points on the periphery. One of these, dated by radiocarbon, is a large timber and stone lined W-E grave, without grave goods, but whose occupant appears to have grown up in a Mediterranean land. At this point the cemetery comes to an end.

The Wasperton sequence presents us with a remarkable vignette of life in central England from the fourth to seventh centuries. Clearly there are exciting echoes here of documented peoples and practices, and equations, for example with Britons, Saxons and Christianity, that we may be tempted to apply. The graves in the SE corner, for example, seem to write the history of a family of British Christians, who emerged in the late Roman economy, flourished during the fifth century and were respected by German immigrants who arrived in its latter decades. During the sixth century their star was on the wane, and the smarter members of the family were no doubt moving and

Linacre Lectures 1999 (Oxford, 2002), 115-138; Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, 4th edn (London, 2005), 190; S. J. Yeates, *Religion, Community and Territory. Defining Religion in the Severn Valley and Adjacent Hills from the Iron Age to the Early Medieval Period*, BAR Brit. ser. 411 (Oxford 2006), 90.

marrying into a more rewarding English milieu. But there is a reprise in the early seventh century, when new blood arrives from a Mediterranean land to rest in the old family plot, a precursor of the return of the British, Roman and Christian political ethos about to affect the wider community of new English kingdoms.

All this may be fiction. But there are messages that I hope I can persuade you will be influential in the shaping of things to come. Firstly, burial happens at family level and we should credit the family members with the ability to make their own decisions, and to try and use the graves to learn from them what they thought about their past and their future. Every grave, in other words, is its own literary composition, its statement on the day; and this is why they are all different. In these compositions, the potential range of references is very great, even for a small community of no great historical importance in central England. References to the prehistoric monuments that were still visible became important in the later sixth century. References to Rome, references to the West Country, to East Anglia, to Wessex, rise and fall throughout. I certainly believe there were immigrants: the group of cremations (from which isotope measurements were not possible) looks like an immigrant family inserted into a pre-existing community. But this family probably came from East Anglia, rather than Schleswig-Hostein. There were other immigrants too, from the south and the west. But these incomers were invisible in grave goods; they disappeared among the local signals, and only their teeth gave the game away. Anglo-Saxon cemeteries can make history, but only when sorted by science and mediated through an interpretation as literature.

Conclusion

Anglo-Saxon archaeology is a curious boutique of a subject in which different paradigms are assiduously practised, often without reference to each other. I certainly would not claim that my particular vision is widely followed, or indeed followed at all. Many archaeologists continue to labour at the face of the migration issue; as late as 2007 a paper by Philip Bartholomew ended by reasserting his faith in Bede and Procopius, from whose pages '…it is possible to recover, once again, a true understanding of the mighty movement of peoples which took place in the early fifth century and which transformed the Britannia of the Late Roman empire into the land of the Angles, the Engla-land in which

we live today'.[46] Bringing a wide range of scientific investigations to bear, another twenty-first-century author notes the contrast between two fifth-century cemeteries 600 metres apart in the upper Thames Valley: Queensford ('a typically well ordered Roman cemetery with lines of burials inside a rectangular enclosure and very few grave goods') and Berinsfield ('littered with Anglo-Saxon jewellery, weapons and pots, its burials scattered in family groups'. He defines the options: a small elite invasion (of 10000 or less) which prompted the Britons to adopt the clothing, jewellery, language and religion of their rulers; or a mass migration of over 100,000 which alone, it might be thought, would account for the domination of the English language.[47] Compare this glib sketch of a winning model with John Myres' conclusion on the supposed Anglo-Saxon invasions, published in1936: These were times, he says, 'whose quality cannot be portrayed without serious distortion in those broad and rational sequences of cause and effect so beloved by the historian. The conflicts are too complex, the issues too obscure, the cross-currents too numerous, and the decisions too local, to make possible the application of any single formula to their solution; and it is at least reassuring to remember that, if we found such a formula, we should unquestionably be wrong'.[48] My copy of this book has manuscript letters from its co-author R.G. Collingwood pasted into the back. One of 1934 commiserates with its addressee who had complained about the historical inaccuracy of a Runnymede pageant. In compensation, Collingwood recommends the philosophical pleasures of noticing 'what particular misrepresentations satisfy them and why?' It is hard not to conclude that while our critique of earlier scholars is one of rising scepticism, our demands on the past have actually become less subtle, and less reflexive, than theirs.

It can be accepted that during the fifth century Britain was transformed. It had already been transformed by the Romans and would be transformed again by the Normans. And the mighty movement of peoples, if it happened, or even the mighty movement of armies, no doubt played a role in Saxon, as in Roman and Norman politics. But this is not what the cemeteries talk about. They contain the discourse of families and localities, and of many thousand graveside opinions. This is bad news for students of history, but good news for students of people.

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[46] P. Bartholomew, 'Continental Connections: Angles, Saxons and Others in Bede and Procopius', *ASSAH* 13 (2005), 19-30 (at 28).
[47] D. Miles *The Tribes of Britain* (London, 2005), pp. 173-6.
[48] R. G. Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 455-6.

The archaeologist's task is to release from the ground a million small stories from those who never expected to have a history. In this we resemble researchers who labour to make sense of other kinds of primary material; labourers like John Kemble, whose path towards cemetery archaeology led not from grand theories about religion and culture, but from his experience in assiduously collecting and editing charters and wills. Each of these documents eavesdrops on the distant voices of real early medieval people. And so does every Anglo-Saxon grave.

Illustrations

1. Portrait of J M Kemble as a young man (Wiley 1979)
2. Saxon urns from Stade on the Elbe (Kemble 1956) and Anglo-Saxon urns (Myres 1977, II)
3. Reconstruction of the Mound 1 burial, with coffin (Carver 1998)
4. Three burial grounds at Sutton Hoo (Carver)
5. The Wasperton cemetery in the 5th century (Carver et al)
6. The Wasperton sequence (Carver et al).