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Children, Childhood and Society

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The bodies of children, though generally under-represented in early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries, are conspicuously present in a minority early Anglo-Saxon burial rite, where one or more bodies were placed simultaneously in the same grave (Crawford 1999: 108). In early Anglo-Saxon England from the 5th century AD to the conversion to Christianity in the 7th century, the predominant method for disposing of an adult body was inhumation or cremation with grave goods in cemeteries. The cremation ritual consisted of burning the body (with or without artefacts); collecting the ashes; and placing the remains in the ground, sometimes in a container, of which the most archaeologically-conspicuous type is a pottery urn. Additional small and miniature artefacts were sometimes added to the cremation pot. Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries, which are the focus of this paper, normally consisted of single supine burials, laid out without much regularity across the cemetery area. Early inhumation cemeteries rarely display any archaeologically discernable boundaries. Men, women and children are usually found distributed relatively evenly over Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and those buried with and without grave goods do not show any strong clustering, though some possible clusterings on the basis of age, gender or grave wealth have been observed at some cemetery sites (Lucy & Reynolds 2002). Graves were rarely intercutting, suggesting that most graves were marked in some way, and there was not normally any observable skeletal morphology, so children’s skeletons cannot be sexed. Furthermore, the population distribution for Anglo-Saxon skeletons makes it clear that the archaeologically recoverable skeletons represent a selected proportion of the mortuary community: children, especially babies, are famously under-represented in the Anglo-Saxon cemetery evidence (Crawford 1991, 1999: 25; Buckberry 2000). Though there may be archaeological explanations for the ‘missing infant phenomenon’, the inescapable conclusion is that dead children could not normally have been buried in the adult folk cemetery – any infants and children that are found in these cemeteries, therefore, must be considered to have been a deliberately selected proportion of the total (Crawford 2000). On the basis of the surviving evidence, it is not possible to say what circumstances, either related to the social context of the child, or related to the context of its death, may have led to the decision to include a child’s body within the community cemetery (Crawford 2000).

The use of the term ‘children’ in this paper is not intended to convey any biological sense of those who are not ‘adult’. It is a well-established paradigm that age categories, like gender, are a social construct, albeit one closely linked to physiological development and changes (Sofaer 2002: 119). Failure to recognise the culturally variable character of childhood in studies of Anglo-Saxon mortuary ritual has led to confusions and misreadings of the cemetery evidence, a problem compounded by inconsistencies in age categories used across site reports, and even within the same publication (Crawford 1991). However, studies of the archaeological evidence, in...
conjunction with the earliest documentary evidence, indicate that any body assigned an age of ten years or above at the time of death could have been perceived as an adult within Anglo-Saxon society, at least in ritual terms (Crawford 1991). Children’s graves are characterised by a comparative lack of grave goods, and by the range of adult artefacts they do not possess, rather than by any child-related objects (Crawford 2000). In this respect, Anglo-Saxon children truly were ‘sub-adults’, defined by what they were not; children’s burials reflected incomplete achievement of ‘adult’ grave goods. Key amongst the ‘missing’ artefacts for children were ‘gendered’ items: weaponry for men, and jewellery, girdle hangers and dress fasteners for women. The most common grave goods for children were gender-neutral artefacts such as pots and knives (Crawford 2000; Stoodley 2000).

Younger age thresholds are not easy to identify in the archaeological record. Cultural distinctions between the very young, completely dependent child and older children are implicit in Old English vocabulary and later documentary sources, but if they exist in the archaeological record for the early Anglo-Saxon period, they are not sensitive to current methods of analysis and observation (Crawford 1999: 54, 2007). On the one hand, then, it is possible to argue for a culturally-constructed transitional date from childhood to adulthood of around 10 to 12 years of age, when some boys received weapon sets, and some girls were buried with brooch sets and chatelaines, while any transition from dependent infancy to young childhood, though anthropologically and comparatively likely, can only be mooted. In these circumstances, and however unsatisfactory the compromise may be, this paper will offer an osteologically-determined age for the burials under discussion where that is possible, and the word ‘child’ will be used to mean a child in Anglo-Saxon cultural terms (i.e. under the age of 10 to 12). Other age ranges and terms used have to be dependent on the information available within the published excavation reports, and should not be assumed to reflect any culturally-determined age category.

Multiple burials

Although the dominant burial form in earlier Anglo-Saxon furnished inhumation cemeteries was supine, single burial within one grave, some excavated cemeteries include a small number of exceptions to the rule of single burial. Multiple burial was a small but significant variation to the norm, which involved adult males and females of all age ranges, and children, with and without grave goods.

The multiple burial ritual has been reassessed recently by Nick Stoodley, who proposed the following simple categorisation of multiple burials: ‘grouped’ burials in individual graves; sequential burials in a single grave, which can be subdivided into deliberate insertions of new bodies into existing graves, or accidental overlap with earlier graves; and contemporary burials in one grave, either side by side or one on top of another (Stoodley 2002). Only in the last type, where there was simultaneous burial of two or more bodies in one grave, does it appear certain that two or more deaths occurred either simultaneously, or within a very short space of each other. Early Anglo-Saxon bodies do not show archaeologically visible signs of having been preserved or stored out of the grave for more than short periods after death.

Where different post-mortem processes occur, as they clearly must in the case of different types of ‘multiple’ burial, it is not surprising that, as Nick Stoodley argued, multiple burials had multiple meanings (Stoodley 2002). However, there is a consistent conceptual difference between these different categories of mortuary groupings, in terms of how these groups were created, and in terms of the cultural and behavioural significance of these different methods of associating bodies within the mortuary ritual. The most profound variation lies in the processes that took place at or around the moment of death. A cluster of individual burials, deliberately intercutting burials, and secondary burials intentionally inserted into pre-existing graves, all make statements of remembrance or association between bodies over an extended chronological period. The first body or series of bodies in the sequence remain in a ‘systemic context’ after death, in that the body retains a meaning and a place in social memory after the point of death and burial (Schiffer 1976: 27-28; Hallam et al. 1999; Johnson 1989; Williams 2003: 5). Where two bodies are buried simultaneously (that is, where the archaeological evidence within carefully-excavated sites shows absolutely no signs of re-cutting or re-use of the grave), there can have been no definite expression of the continued social presence of the dead in the life of the living, nor any reinforcement of temporal links between one body and another.

The normal focus of mortuary interpretation is on what happened after death: the process of burial and the burial itself. Contemporary, simultaneous burials allow us a rare opportunity to say something about the ‘death event’ of an individual within Anglo-Saxon society, rather than about what happened to the body after death. The death of one individual happened at the same time as, or immediately before or after, the death of another member of the community. Subsequent to the deaths, a deliberate decision was made (except in the case of women buried with in utero babies, where the buriers may not necessarily have been aware of the foetus) to deviate from the predominant ritual and bury the two bodies in the same grave. We cannot say that all simultaneous deaths in the community were given multiple burials, but we can say that, in addition to any other unknowable social factors (age, wealth, familial relationships), the
coincident death-event of two or more people played some significant role in determining their subsequent non-standard mortuary disposal in the same grave.

Not all Anglo-Saxon cemetery sites include multiple burials in their rituals: all the graves at Alton, Hampshire, for example, contained single bodies (Evison 1988). However, a striking aspect of the multiple burial ritual where it was practiced is the disproportionately large number of children found in them (Crawford 1993: 84-85). At the furnished inhumation cemetery of Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire, for example, every simultaneous double burial included a child (Chadwick Hawkes & Grainger 2003). At Nassington, Northamptonshire, the only two infant burials recovered from the site (which consisted of approximately 40 excavated bodies) were in double burials (Leeds 1944).

To give a more detailed picture of the age groups involved in the multiple burial ritual, Fig 8.1 offers a breakdown of the body combinations at Empingham II, Rutland (derived from Timby 1996). In all, 14 of the 136 graves at this site contained the bodies of more than one person. Children are strongly represented in multiple burials at Empingham II – nine of the 31 children aged less than ten years of age in this mortuary population (29% of the children) were in multiple burials, including a two year old in the site’s only four-person grave. All age and gender combinations are represented here, with the notable exception of children with children. Over half of the Empingham II multiples include a child under the age of ten years. This pattern is replicated across the Anglo-Saxon inhumation burial ritual, with some sites, such as Lechlade (10 out of 15 multiples), Nassington, Northamptonshire (all multiples), and Berinsfield, Oxfordshire (all certain contemporary multiples), having considerably higher ratios (Stoodley 2002; Leeds 1944; Boyle, Jennings et al. 1998).

These figures are potentially skewed by the inclusion of women who died during pregnancy, as noted above. At Westgarth Gardens, Suffolk, two of the three multiple burials are of adult females with infants (Graves 9 and 48: West 1988). At Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, three of the five double burials at the site are of women with infants. The positioning of the few surviving infant bones in Grave 21 led the excavator to suggest that the associated adult female might have died in pregnancy, though heavy post-burial disturbance in the pelvic area, and the woman’s age (she was identified as being around 50 at the time of death) make such a diagnosis less convincing. Grave 26 at Worthy Park leaves much less room for doubt: the infant associated with a female aged between 18-30 still had its feet enclosed within the woman’s pelvic girdle. The infant’s body, resting between the female’s legs, had been covered by a layer of chalk rubble. This seems a case of ‘obstetric calamity’, where complications associated with the birth led to death and burial for a mother and infant who literally could not be separated (Chadwick Hawkes & Wells 1975). However, infants are also found in association with adult males, so infant/adult female pairs cannot automatically be assumed to represent childbirth mortality unless, as in the case of Worthy Park Grave 26, a death in pregnancy seems indisputable.

Child pairs are relatively uncommon in the multiple burial ritual as a whole. As already noted, there were no child pairs at all at Empingham II, Rutland (Timby 1996), and neither were there any at the large cemeteries of Berinsfield, Oxfordshire (Boyle 1995), Lechlade, Gloucestershire (Boyle et al. 1998), Polhill, West Kent
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(Philp 1973), Worthy Park, Hampshire (Chadwick Hawkes & Grainger 2003), and Castledyke South, Humberside (Drinkall & Foreman 1998), for example. An exception to this pattern is the site of Great Chesterford, Essex (Evison 1994). The excavated portion of the cemetery at Great Chesterford consisted of 161 inhumation graves, 23 cremations, two horse graves and one dog burial (Evison 1994: xi). Dating evidence from the site was poor, but the earliest burials may be assigned to the mid-5th century, and the latest burials were deposited c. 600 AD. Aside from the animal inhumations, the site is very unusual in having a large number of children’s graves. There were at least 82 burials of juveniles under the age 15, of which 65 were infant or foetus graves (children under the age of two), not including two infants found within the pelvic girdle of female adults (Evison 1994: 33-35). Multiple, simultaneous burials at the site consist of Grave 142, containing a horse and a male adult; Grave 86, containing a juvenile and a dog; Grave 95, containing two infants aged under two months at the time of death; Grave 150, with two infants aged between 2-4 months at the time of death, and Grave 83, which contained the remains of at least six foetuses, all aged between 36 and 40 weeks. As the excavator commented, ‘it is possible that graves 95 and 150 might represent burials of twins or even triplets, but it is difficult to imagine how six or more foetuses of the same age can be buried in the same spot, unless the grave was marked and reopened each time for the burial of a full-term stillborn’ (Evison 1994: 31). Given the position of this grave pit in the cemetery, the conditions of excavation, and the probable size of the living population serving this cemetery, the pit containing six foetuses has to be considered as a non-contemporary series of burials.

Explanations for multiple simultaneous burials

One benign explanation of simultaneous death and burial might be that two close members of a family, not necessarily mother and child, might have succumbed to the same illness and died more-or-less together, and their shared grave reflects the close bond of affiliation or affection between the two (Crawford 1993: 85). Simultaneous death in small communities may have represented a stress or ‘insult’ to the community which required special rituals (in this case, multiple burial) to repair it (Crawford 1993: 89; Stoodley 2002: 120). This ‘stress’ might have been particularly acute where the deaths involved a mother and child; in other medieval contexts, pairings of women and infants in one grave have been interpreted as simple reflections of the hazards of childbirth, or as reflecting social concerns with reproduction (Finlay 2000: 418). The relationship between the adult and child bodies in some Anglo-Saxon graves may be interpreted as expressing emotional bonding between children and adults; at Empingham II, one of the adult females appeared to have been cradling a child within her arms, and at Lechlade, Gloucestershire, there is a clear case of a child aged between 15 and 18 months being embraced by an adult female in the grave (Grave 81) (Timby 1996: Boyle et al 1998). Similar emotional ties may have existed between other members of the family, of course, and anecdotal supporting evidence can be found in the later Old English documentary sources. While the written evidence belongs firmly to the milieu of Christianised Anglo-Saxon England, older, pre-Conversion social mores and structures remained embedded in later Anglo-Saxon society, and the written sources offer our closest anthropological parallels in time and space to elucidate the proto-historic social structures of Anglo-Saxon culture in the period before the Conversion. The earliest hagiographies, for example, refer to a period shortly after, or contemporary with, the last phases of furnished burial, and the lists of carers who brought children to visit saints for a miracle cure include father, kin and neighbours as well as mothers (Crawford 1999: 39). Writers of hagiography were consciously modelling their reports of Anglo-Saxon saintly miracles on older traditions, but it is probable that the details of daily life reflected an Anglo-Saxon reality (Ward 1976). A very late 12th century Life of St Peter of Cornwall and Launceston, recording events relating to pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon society, even offers an exact parallel for some of the old male/young child pairings seen in the earlier Anglo-Saxon mortuary evidence: when a holy man died, as his funeral cortège was making its way to the church for burial, the body of his granddaughter was brought out of her house, she having ‘died in a state of innocence, immediately after baptism, and still dressed in white’. The hagiographer records that she was buried in her grandfather’s coffin, placed on his knees (Hull & Sharpe 1985: 27).

Within the simultaneous multiple burial ritual where children are present, the children always have fewer grave goods compared to the adult, though both juveniles and adults bodies may have been furnished. At Polhill, Kent, for example, Grave 69 contained the remains of a male adult over 45 years of age buried with a knife, bronze buckle and spearhead, and a child aged about five whose only surviving grave good was a knife (Philp 1973:180). Where both the adult and child have grave goods, it might be argued that it was nothing about their relative social status, but about the coincidence of their deaths, which may have been the primary factor in determining that these bodies were given simultaneous multiple burial (Crawford 1993: 89; Stoodley 2002: 120). Coincidental deaths within an Anglo-Saxon community, perhaps caused by disease, might seem the simplest and most obvious explanation for the presence of children in the simultaneous multiple burial ritual, but this suggestion is weakened by the consideration that, while children are most likely to succumb to infectious disease, child/child pairings are extremely rare in the Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery evidence. A more normal pattern of death through outbreaks of disease would be to find more children buried together, given the higher rates of mortality in childhood and infancy (Woods 2007: 378).
One group of early Anglo-Saxon multiple burials where the death of one of the grave’s occupants has not been interpreted as coincidental are adult/adult pairings where one of the burials (usually female) was prone. The case of a probable ‘live’ burial at Sewerby, Yorkshire, has been discussed in some detail. In this example, both the lower (supine) female burial and the prone female buried above her in the same grave had grave goods, and were amongst the ‘richest’ women in this relatively poor mortuary community, so social inequality or slave status is not necessarily the explanation for the prone burial; explanations based on witchcraft or deviant social behaviour have been sought instead (Hirst 1985: 38-40). In a ritual where the normative burial was supine, prone burials, as in the Sewerby example cited above, suggest at the least deiance, and possibly a lack of respect. The existence of a ‘prone’ burial ritual has been called into question; the apparent deviance of the burial ritual might be attributable to post-mortem cadaveric spasm (Reynolds 1988; Knüsel et al. 1996). Though dead bodies may move within mortuary spaces, the argument that the majority of Anglo-Saxon prone burials might have been caused by post-mortem decay processes assumes the presence of coffins or burial ‘lids’ which have not been identified archaeologically, and in part derives from a culturally anachronistic distaste for the concept of soil being thrown onto a body without an intervening coffin or covering (Reynolds 1988: 716). Multiple side-by-side burials where one body is prone, while the others are supine and undisturbed, make cadaveric spasm a much less likely explanation than that there was a deliberate intention to bury one body face down. Later Anglo-Saxon ‘execution’ cemeteries such as the Sutton Hoo, Suffolk example, illustrate beyond doubt that Anglo-Saxons were capable of mutilating bodies post- or peri-mortem, and used prone burial as a way of marking deviant or criminal social status (Carver 2005: 12). Examples of child/adult pairings where the child’s body was prone are not difficult to find: examples include Empingham II, Grave 113, of a young male adult and child, where both the child (under the adult’s legs) and the adult were prone; Empingham Grave 119 where one child aged two ‘was completely overlain’ by an adult; and Norton, Cleveland Grave 116 of an infant who was buried prone by the side of female (Timby 1996; Sherlock & Welch 1992).

While prone (secondary) adults in the multiple burial ritual have been interpreted as ‘live’ burials, can the presence of children in the multiple burial ritual be predicated on the assumption that the two or more deaths represented by a multiple burial were ‘natural’ and ‘coincidental’? Where animals have been found buried or cremated with humans, they have invariably been interpreted either as food offerings (especially in the case of sheep or pigs), or as grave-goods to ‘accompany’ the human burial (horses, dogs) (Wilson 1992: 101; Bond 1996: 83). Where cremated animal remains are found in urns adjacent to urns containing human bone, the former are habitually termed ‘animal accessory vessels’ (McKinley 1994; Bond 1996: 78). In other words, the archaeological reading of human/animal pairings is consistently different from the reading of human/child pairings, where the former sees the animal’s presence as grave good/deliberate and the latter sees the child as equal/coincidental within the grave. Is this reading based on the evidence, or on modern ideas about the status of children?

**Bodies or objects?**

In her recent review of the way the human body is represented in archaeological practice and theory, Jo Sofæra noted that the separation of people and objects is ‘deeply ingrained in the discipline’ (Sofæra 2006: 62). This explicit separation of ‘body’ and ‘object’ in the grave is embedded in discussions of Anglo-Saxon mortuary ritual; in his recent review of early medieval mortuary archaeology, Howard Williams rightly argued for a more interdisciplinary approach to the mortuary ritual, taking into account anthropological theories on the ‘dividual’ social person, and on the ‘biography’ of objects, yet throughout, the central relationship in the grave is presented as being between the human body on one side and the artefacts accompanying it on the other (Williams 2005). Yet there is a case for arguing that bodies and objects cannot be so readily separated, and that there is considerable archaeological evidence for the objectification of bodies (Brück 2001; Green 2002; Fowler 2002; Fowler 2004; Chapman & Gaydarska 2007; Lally 2007; Garwood, this volume). Bodily integrity and sacredness should not be privileged when interpreting the use of bodies in the past (Yates 1993; Meskell 1999; Scheper-Hughes 2001: 3; Sofæra 2006: 64).

Across different cultures, living and dead bodies may be commodified in a number of ways, ranging from a traffic in human organs; the collection of relics of the ‘special dead’; the use of bodies as war trophies; slavery; prostitution; apprenticeship; and giving bodies in gift exchange (Thomas 2002; Sofæra 2006). Later Anglo-Saxon culture provides a number of examples of such commodification. Slavery and prostitution were a documented part of Anglo-Saxon society, and slavery at least was a trade which included the bodies of infants and children (Crawford 1999: 174; Pelteret 2001). In the later Anglo-Saxon period, there was a lively trade in saint’s relics, and bodies/body parts of criminals and victims of war were put on public display, most famously the literary example of the severed arm of the monster Grendel, which adorned the hall of Heorot in the Old English poem *Beowulf* (Swanton 1978: lines 833-836).

Evidence for use of body parts as objects in the early Anglo-Saxon period are rare by comparison, though the human teeth found in a pouch in an early Anglo-Saxon grave at Marina Drive, Dunstable, Bedfordshire, may qualify, suggesting that parts of bodies could be transformed, kept, displayed and deposited in the grave: that some Anglo-Saxon body parts became objects, retaining a ‘biography’ beyond the moment of separation
from the body (Matthews 1962). At Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber, at least three graves contain additional teeth. The ‘extra’ teeth are briefly discussed under the heading ‘amulets and related objects; animal and human teeth’ (Drinkall and Foreman 1998: 289), where it is recorded that the ‘extra’ teeth in Graves 25, 42, and (possibly) 26 may have either been ‘carried by the individuals concerned, or else deposited in the grave fill as part of the burial ritual’ (Drinkall & Foreman 1998: 289). Grave 25 contained a female aged 35-45 years and three teeth from ‘a smaller individual’; Grave 42 was of a female aged 45 or more, with two incisors of an individual aged ten or more, and Grave 26 was of yet another female aged 45 or more, with the addition of a canine tooth and two incisors (Drinkall & Foreman 1998: 42, 48). A further body, that of a 10-11 year old in Grave 32, also had the human teeth of a six year old deposited within her grave, in a pouch which also contained a copper alloy ring, a glass bead, a pebble and a scrap of iron. Though the discussion in the site report hints that the extra teeth in these cases ought to be classed as ‘objects’, the site catalogue reflects the usual archaeological tendency to separate the human body from the grave goods. In each case, the teeth are assigned to ‘Individual B’ rather than being listed as ‘finds’, and consequently the surplus teeth are completely absent from the plans of the graves.

Though the collection of items from Castledyke South Grave 32 might evoke the ‘child’s cache’ at Assiros, discussed by Diana and K. A. Wardle (this volume), it should be noted that, in ritual terms, the girl in Grave 32 was an adult, and collections of such miscellaneous items which seem to ‘lack utilitarian purpose’ (Dickinson 1999: 368) are typically associated with adult women in the Germanic burial ritual (Meaney 1981: 247-62). Such women are usually discussed in terms of their possible status as ‘wise women’ or healers, and the miscellaneous items collected together in their pouches are regarded as ‘amuletic’ (see especially Dickinson 1999).

At the furnished inhumation cemetery of Edix Hill, Cambridgeshire, containing over 120 bodies, 13 of the 18 multiple-burial graves contained children under the age of 12. Three of these multiple-burial graves show similarities, both with each other and with the multiple burials from Castledyke discussed above. Grave 13 contained the body of a female aged 25 who was suffering from debilitating and deforming arthritis and congenital/developmental pathologies. In terms of wealth, her grave goods carried the highest score of the Phase I burials (those belonging to the 6th century); she was buried with a cruciform brooch, a small-long brooch, a disc brooch, a necklace made up of 46 beads (including 35 amber, one polychrome glass and one crystal bead), silver rings, wrist clasp, a belt with buckle and strap end, a knife, latchlifters, and a purse with fragmentary contents. Her body was covered by a thin layer of soil, and then an infant aged less than one year was placed over the adult female’s left shoulder with a buckle, small knife and pot, before the grave was filled in over the two contemporary burials. The first body to be inserted into Grave 18 at Edix Hill, dating to the second phase of the site’s use, was a female aged 17-25, who was suffering from leprosy. Her body had been placed on a bed – a form of grave furniture particularly associated with elite female burials in the Germanic world (Speake 1989). Her rich grave goods (she had the highest wealth score of any of those buried in Phase II) included a necklace of 29 beads, silver rings, a key, two knives, a bucket, a weaving batten, a comb and a box, in which were a spindlewhorl, a copper-alloy sheet, a fossil sea urchin, a sheep astragalus, glass, a metal rod and iron fragments. The body of a child aged about three years was placed over her burial, followed by the body of an adult. It is possible that two further burials catalogued as Grave 17, a double burial which overlay Grave 18, may in fact have been two further insertions into Grave 18. Grave 84 contained the body of a female aged 25-35, whose arthritic and deformed body with multiple congenital and developmental pathologies was buried with a long string of beads (2 glass, 29 amber and one bone), a buckle and a nail. The body of a perinatal infant, definitely contemporary with the female burial, was underneath the adult’s head in the position of a pillow.

In all three of these burials, then, the primary focus of the grave appears to have been the body of an adult female. All three women were wealthy, or very wealthy, in terms of grave goods; all three showed skeletal changes representing bodily disfigurement as a result of chronic illness; and all three shared one further characteristic – the inclusion of a small child within the grave (Malim and Hines 1988). In addition to these three, Grave 82 contained the badly disturbed remains of a woman suffering from arthritis and ‘other special pathological features’ and a child aged 3-4, and Grave 60 might provide a further example of the same pattern: this grave contained the body of an arthritic female aged 25-35, who was buried on a bed with a variety of grave goods, including a pin, buckles and a silver ring: due to disturbance, it is not clear whether a baby’s body was associated with this grave or with a female buried in Grave 61. The women might have been the mothers or carers of the children, but there are some peculiarities in the positioning of the children which argue for other explanations, particularly the placing of the infant in Grave 84, which lay under the adult’s head.

Not all wealthy, physically impaired women at Edix Hill were buried with infants – Grave 69 contained the single body of a female with arthritis aged about 18 years, whose grave goods included wrist clasps and a bag group, while the rich woman in Grave 93, whose body carried ‘changes suggestive of leprosy’, was not associated with any other burials. However, the association of impaired adult female/special (wealthy) burial/child burial is a persistent minority ritual thread at Edix Hill across the whole period of the site’s use, echoed with slight variation at Castledyke, and also visible in some form at
other pre-Conversion sites such as Beckford (Hereford and Worcester) and Lechlade (Gloucestershire), and later Anglo-Saxon burials at Flixborough (Lincolnshire); Whithorn (Dumfriess and Galloway) and Yarnton (Oxfordshire), indicate that an association between women with deforming physical impairments and infant burial may have continued well into the Christian period (Crawford forthcoming).

Discussion

A recent and welcome trend in the discipline of the archaeology of childhood has been an emphasis on the need to interpret children as dynamic and active participants in the past; asserting, controlling and creating their own physical spaces and artefactual environment (for example Sofaa Derevenski 1993; Lillehammer 1989 and 2005). It is increasingly possible to identify the child as a social actor in the past. The emphasis on the child as having agency in the past rightly redresses a narrative which has placed children as passive onlookers, almost invisible in the archaeological record except when used or manipulated by adults to enact adult concerns and adult agenda (Moore and Scott 1997, Proust 2000). The mortuary ritual represents an arena where the modern conflict between identifying children as having agency clashes most dramatically with the theoretical assumption of children as adjuncts to adult narratives. Interpreting the ‘place’ of children in the past – either as people or possessions – is particularly acute when it comes to their dead bodies. A child that dies represents a challenge to social, familial and community cohesion in a number of ways because it is not ‘natural’. Abbot Aelfric of Eynsham, writing in the late Anglo-Saxon period, agreed with his continental exemplars in describing the death of a child as ‘the bitter death’, in contrast to the death of a young adult (‘the unripe death’) and the death of an old adult (‘the natural death’) (Thompson 2004:10). The death of a child was painful because it was not natural. The feeling of loss at the death of a child may be linked directly to the value a child had to those who nurtured it. In this context, a child had greater ‘value’ than an old adult.

Following trends developed by prehistorians, Anglo-Saxonists have become aware that mortuary objects might be seen as having ‘biographies’: they were created, used, then ‘died’, by deposition in hoards or votive places, or through recycling (Parker Pearson 1993, Gosden and Marshall 1999, Williams 2005). Some artefacts may have been created with the specific intention that their ‘lives’ would end in votive or ritual deposition: such intent is relevant to understanding the relationship between people, the things they create, and the way they use these things as commodities for social, political and theological transactions, before, during, and after deposition (Osborne 2004). The period under study in this paper – early Anglo-Saxon England from the 5th to the 7th century – witnessed a massive haemorrhage of material wealth into the grave ritual, effectively ‘killing’ enormous quantities of artefacts as they were permanently removed from the community as grave goods, in both cremation and inhumation contexts. Animals – horses, dogs and sheep in particular – were also apparently included in this act of conspicuous deposition and loss. In his insightful paper reviewing the state of early medieval mortuary archaeology, Howard Williams rightly pointed out that objects within the mortuary ritual are not merely evidence for status or identity, but are ‘a means of managing death pollution and interactions between the living, the dead, and the supernatural’ (Williams 2005: 207). Objects (including animals), then, communicate, mediate and manage; objects have ‘life courses’ and ‘biographies’. ‘Objects’ have become more like people. At the same time, however, it needs to be recognised that human bodies might become objects. The Life of St Peter of Cornwall and Launceston, already cited, offers a literary example of how a ‘companion’ body may transgress the bounds between body and artefact, even if only in a metaphorical way: as the body of the holy man was processed through the town, and: ‘passed in front of the house of his son-in-law, behold, suddenly from that house instead of a banner there was carried out to meet him the body of the daughter of his son-in-law’ (Hull and Sharpe 1986:27). In this miracle story, the body of the child has been explicitly transformed into an object: she comes to the burial not as a focus for parental or familial grieving, but as a triumphant symbol and objectified reinforcement of her grandfather’s spiritual and religious status.

The presumption that all human bodies are central and pivotal to the burial rite, in which objects play a secondary, supportive role, is challenged by the simultaneous multiple burial ritual. In the case of multiple burial, the bodies can only be central if an assumption is made that both bodies died, coincidentally and naturally, at the same time, and are read as partners in the ritual, whose coincidental deposition is based on unknowable relationships and accident of death. Any alternative explanation, of course, raises the possibility that one or more of the bodies in the multiple burial ritual perhaps did not die naturally and coincidentally. Though human sacrifice has ‘long been out of fashion’ for archaeologists, as Miranda Green has commented, there is no good logical reason for assuming that a dog in a burial is a sacrifice or ‘accessory’, but a second human body in a burial is simply a coincidental death (Green 1998: 8). While there is no unequivocal evidence for the sacrifice of humans in early Anglo-Saxon archaeology, Iron Age examples of pair burial or multiple burial have been cited as probable cases, especially the recurrent presence of children buried with adults at cemeteries such as the Iron Age cemetery at Carrowjames, Co. Mayo (Green 1998: 8). As Miranda Green also noted in this context for the Iron Age, ‘the ritual killing of children may have had especial potency associated with their value. After all, killing the young meant quite literally sacrificing the future’ (Green 1998: 9). Need an element of sacrifice be sought to explain the presence of children in the Anglo-
Saxon burial ritual? A converse proposal would place the emphasis on the child and the stress of the child’s loss to the community: perhaps children whose bodies were selected for inclusion in the inhumation ritual needed ‘adults’ to accompany them in the grave, which might explain the relative predominance of children in the multiple burial ritual (but would not explain those infants and children buried on their own) (Crawford 1996). It is also possible to interpret the association with disabled adult females and infants discussed above as a negative reflection of the social status of the adults, rather than offering any comment on the child: their disabilities may have rendered them child-like and so their bodies were associated with infants. At Edix Hill and Castledyke, however, these women were very rich (and not at all child-like) in terms of their artefact assemblage. The value of their grave goods, juxtaposed with the presence of the contemporary infant or small child burial, raises the alternative possibility that the infant body added ‘value’ to the grave assemblage of these socially and physically ‘special’ women.

Archaeological parallels and documentary evidence together suggest that there is no good reason to suppose that the Anglo-Saxons always privileged all bodies in the burial ritual, nor that one or all of the bodies found within the multiple burial ritual should not have had a role as ‘objects’, rather than as bodies. Given that the multiple burial ritual was not normative within Anglo-Saxon mortuary ritual, it might be argued that all the bodies within the multiple ritual should be read as having a different form of social identity from other bodies in the cemetery. However, the evidence discussed above implies that adults, rather than children, held the dominant identity in the ritual. Some condition of life or death, found more commonly in children than in adults, predicated their inclusion in the multiple burial ritual. Not all the bodies in the burial ritual were equal, and greater consideration could be given to the liminality of children as social actors, and to the possibility that their presence within the multiple burial ritual is as a result of objectification and association. As archaeologists, it is right that we look for evidence of infants, children, women and other members of the non-‘normative’ groups as agents engaged in controlling, shaping and manipulating the archaeological environment (Moore and Scott 1997). However, we also need to be aware that children’s bodies in general, and infants’ bodies in particular, may not have had agency at all. Children, like artefacts, are made and ‘belong’ to the parents who made them. An unthinking imposition onto the early medieval period of concepts of individuality and the separation of objects and bodies that are unique to Western modernity may be interfering with our ability to identify the most valuable ‘objects’ within the Anglo-Saxon furnished burial ritual – the bodies of the ‘accompanying children’ buried in multiple graves.

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