Babies Reborn: Infant/Child Burials in Pre- and Protohistory

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SPECIAL BURIALS, SPECIAL BUILDINGS? AN ANGLO-SAXON PERSPECTIVE ON THE INTERPRETATION OF INFANT BURIALS IN ASSOCIATION WITH RURAL SETTLEMENT STRUCTURES

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Abstract: This paper will investigate the correlation between infant burial and built structures within the context of Anglo-Saxon England. In all published reports of excavated Anglo-Saxon settlements, the discoveries of infant bones have been assumed to represent casual, meaningless disposal. This paper argues that, on the contrary, the presence of infant bodies within settlements was purposive and symbolic, and was part of a more complex pattern of ritual deposition of artefacts and bodies in Anglo-Saxon settlements. The paper challenges the conventionally-held contrast between cemeteries as fora for ritual mortuary behaviour, and settlements as entirely secular and domestic, and suggests that new readings of infant burials may lead to a reinterpretation of settlement spaces, ritual behaviour and mortuary patterns in pre- and post-Conversion Anglo-Saxon England.

Key words: Anglo-Saxon, infant, burial, settlement, ritual

Résumé: Cet article étudie la corrélation entre l’inhumation infantile et les habitations dans le contexte de l’Angleterre Anglo-Saxonne. Les rapports publiés sur les fouilles de villages Anglo-Saxon supposent que la disposition d’os d’enfants en bas âge était ordinaire et sans importance. Cet ouvrage soutient, au contraire, que la présence de corps infantiles dans les villages avait un but symbolique, et que l’enterrement d’objets et de ces corps à l’intérieur même de ces groupements d’habitation faisait partie d’un rituel complexe. Cet article conteste le contraste conventionnel soutenu qu’il y a entre les cimetières — arènes d’enterrements rituels et symboliques et les habitation laïque et familiale. Il suggère que de nouveaux relevés parlant de l’inhumation infantile amène à la réinterprétation de l’espace habitable, du comportement rituel et du modèle mortuaire dans l’Angleterre avant et après la période de christianisation des populations païennes.

Mots Clés: Anglo-Saxonne, enfant, sépulture, site, rituel

A strong association between buildings and special infant burial has been noted in a number of cultures across a wide chronological range, and it continues to the present day, regardless of other changes that may have taken place in culture, society and religion (for example, Scott 1999, 94; Lillehammer 2005, 23; Ulrich-Bochsler 1997, 156; Finlay 2000). The presence of infant burials in and around buildings begs specific questions about infants and the structures with which they are associated. How should the presence of infant burials change our interpretation of a building and the relationship between infant death and settlement areas?

From the fifth to the eleventh centuries, Anglo-Saxon England changed from being a pre- or proto-historic rural pagan society dominated by Germanic culture, to being a Christian culture with a documentary history. Changes in religion and society were accompanied by changes in the burial ritual. In the fifth and sixth centuries, ‘normative’ burial was by cremation or inhumation with grave goods in field cemeteries. In the seventh century, the period of conversion to Christianity, inhumation burial predominated. Burial with grave goods became less common, although a repertoire of rich grave goods associated with the elite was established. The extent to which this new, ‘Final Phase’ of furnished burial represented a pagan response to the introduction of Christianity, or represented Christian burials at a time when burial near or in churches had not been introduced, is still a subject of debate (Geake 1997; Blair 2005; Carver 2005). In the eighth and ninth centuries, the majority of the dead were buried without grave goods, and field cemeteries persisted, although burial in consecrated church ground was beginning to appear. By the tenth century, burial in church cemeteries was an established pattern (Blair 2005).

One of the problems for the study of infant burial in the early Anglo-Saxon period is the relative lack of infant burials in the excavated cemeteries (Evison 1987, 128; Crawford 1991; 1993). There is a range of explanations for this dearth of babies, including the possibilities that the majority of infant bones did not survive in the archaeological record or that infants were buried more shallowly than adults, and so their burials have been lost, but it now seems most likely that the majority of infants were buried elsewhere (Crawford 1993; Buckberry 2000).

One of the possible alternative locations for infant disposal was within settlement sites (Crawford 1999). As Table 20.1 illustrates, infant bones have been found in association with at least eleven Anglo-Saxon settlements with a chronological span that extends from the fifth to at least the ninth century. The presence of infants in Anglo-Saxon contexts should not be regarded as particularly surprising or unusual. The burial of infants in association with buildings is well-documented for the Romano-British period, and though there may be debates about the interpretation of this rite, the weight of evidence for the deposition of Romano-British child burials in association with buildings comes in the fourth century (Esmonde

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1 I am grateful to Professor Helena Hamerow for drawing my attention to the find of an infant bone from the excavations by Cambridge Archaeological Unit at Brandon Road, Thetford, which are due to be published in 2007.
Table 20.1. Infant burials at Anglo-Saxon settlements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of infants</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxon</td>
<td>1, in a sunken featured building</td>
<td>5th-7th century</td>
<td>Hamerow 2006, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Kettleby, Leics</td>
<td>2, both in sunken featured buildings</td>
<td>6th century?</td>
<td>Hamerow 2006, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire</td>
<td>1, with adult female and animal skulls</td>
<td>5th-7th century</td>
<td>Leeds 1947, 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wharram Percy, Yorkshire</td>
<td>1, with sheep bones, laid outside a sunken featured building</td>
<td>Late 6th or early 7th</td>
<td>Milne and Richards 1992, 84-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Heslerton, Yorkshire</td>
<td>‘More than 15’ associated with sunken featured buildings</td>
<td>5th to 7th century</td>
<td>Hines 1997, 164 (recorded discussion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow, Suffolk</td>
<td>4-14, in sunken featured buildings and ditches</td>
<td>6th-7th century</td>
<td>West 1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarrington, Lincolnshire</td>
<td>1 infant longbone fragment</td>
<td>7th/8th century</td>
<td>Taylor 2003, 270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon Road, Norfolk</td>
<td>1 infant</td>
<td>Mid Saxon</td>
<td>Hamerow, pers.com.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamwic, Southampton</td>
<td>2 infants in separate pits</td>
<td>8th century</td>
<td>Andrews 1997; Morton 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarnton, Oxfordshire</td>
<td>Children, not all ages identifiable, and a young female</td>
<td>9th century</td>
<td>Hey 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flixborough, Lincolnshire</td>
<td>1, associated with juveniles and an adult female – possible mortuary chapel?</td>
<td>Mid 8th century</td>
<td>Loveluck 2001, 86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cleary 2000, 140). Burials of infants in association with settlement sites are also recorded from a number of Continental sites, covering a wide geographical and chronological range, so whether one were to argue that Anglo-Saxon culture was influenced by later Roman ritual, or derived from the Germanic homelands, both cultures supported a pattern of infant disposal in non-cemetery contexts (Esmonde Cleary 2000, 140; Hamerow 2006, 20 and 24-5).

Whilst the interpretation of Anglo-Saxon burials in terms of ritual deposition, symbolism and social status has received detailed discussion over many decades (see for example Saxe 1970; Hawkes 1973; Arnold 1980; Pader 1982; Geake 1997 for the pre-Christian and ‘Final Phase’ burials; Hadley 2000; Blair 2005 for the post-conversion cemeteries), settlements have been analyzed almost exclusively in terms of economy and settlement layout (e.g. Millett & James 1984; West 1985; Hamerow 1993), and the possible ritual element of ditches, graves, buildings and ‘special deposits’ (such as animal bones, pottery, and human bone deposition, of which material from infant skeletons forms a significant proportion) have, until the very recent and welcome publication of Professor Helena Hamerow’s work, been almost entirely overlooked (Gibson & Murray 2003; Hamerow 2006). Some burials of adults in settlement areas have been analysed as part of a discussion of non-normative adult burials in the Anglo-Saxon landscape, but infant burials have not been included in this discussion (Reynolds 2003). Given the relatively low numbers of excavated Anglo-Saxon settlement sites, infants have been found in them sufficiently frequently to suggest that deposition of infant bodies within settlements was part of a cultural pattern. Furthermore, infants form a significant proportion of all ‘special deposits’ at settlement sites (Hamerow 2006, 4). Even so, the circumstances of their deposition, and any possible meanings inherent in the choice to deposit dead infants in such locations, has received scant attention.

One reason for the lack of interest in infant burials within settlement sites is that they tend to be found in pits, in ditches, and in the floors of sunken-featured buildings, and the material found in these locations has, until very recently, always been classed as ‘rubbish’ and disregarded, notwithstanding the strong case made by prehistorians that all deposits should be explored for their possible purposive, ritual meanings (see for example articles in Gwilt & Haselgrove 1997; Hill 1995). Compared to the wealth and high status of some of the material found in the cemeteries – weaponry, gold and garnet jewellery, glass vessels etc – finds from settlement sites are of a much ‘lower’ status, and often interpreted as distinctly female in their register – animal bone, broken pots, spindle whorls, loom weights, combs and pins make up the bulk of the finds. Even where articulated joints of animals have been found in pits, rather than being interpreted as ‘special deposits’, these have tended to reinforce the original view of early nineteenth century archaeologists that early Anglo-Saxon settlers lived in squalid, rubbish-filled hovels, as exemplified by T. Lethbridge and C. Tebbutt, commenting on the inhabitants of the settlement they had excavated in St Neots,
Cambridgeshire: ‘They had no regard for cleanliness and were content to throw the remains of a meal into the furthest corner of the hut and leave it there. They were not nervous about ghosts, since they did not mind having a skeleton sticking out of the wall of one of their huts.’ (Lethbridge & Tebbutt 1933, 149). By analogy and association, infant burials, found in these ‘waste’ locations, become, in turn, casual discards. There may have been circumstances, as there are today, when infants were deposited in a hurried, secretive, non-ritual way. Two infants, dating to the eighth century, were found in pits associated with the proto-urban site of Hamwic, Hampshire. In one, pit 5736, the baby was ‘no more than a few weeks old, perhaps newly born’, and it was not clear whether the baby had been disposed of directly into the pit or redeposited from elsewhere. The bone was scattered on the bottom of the pit with soil which may have been cess (Andrews 1997, 204; Morton 1992).

In this context, it is worth mentioning the earliest recorded excavation of an Anglo-Saxon infant found in a non-cemetery context. From the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s, E. Thurlow Leeds led excavations at the site of Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire, which was being destroyed by gravel extraction. In one of the pits associated with the settlement, he described the recovery of two bodies – one an infant, and one an adult female – with associated animal deposits:

‘…9 in. from the top of the gravel on the east side of the pit the toes of a human skeleton... lay close against the wall of the pit...The legs were traced downwards until the body came to light lying on the floor of the pit...The body was stretched ...in a slightly twisted position with the head facing south, and with the arms half out-stretched before the body towards the remains of the skeleton of an infant...Behind the woman’s head and over the body of the child there was a layer about 6 in. thick, composed of earth and gravel which must have been stamped hard before the rest of the pit was filled, and could only be broken up with difficulty. In that behind the woman’s head were three animal skulls, two oxen and a horse.’ (Leeds 1947, 86).

Beyond the identification of the age of the skeletons and the sex of the adult, there was no further analysis of the bones. For Leeds, this unexpected burial, ‘so entirely different from any normal Anglo-Saxon interment’, was attributed either to the stressful circumstances of what he believed to be the site’s abandonment when it was overrun by a native British population (Leeds could not know of later developments in the interpretation of Anglo-Saxon settlement morphology, which makes his interpretation unnecessary and untenable), or that ‘some domestic tragedy’ was responsible for this ‘abnormal, and, in a sense, disorderly interment’.

Leeds’s fixed idea that ‘normal’ Anglo-Saxon interment was in a cemetery, and his assumption that a settlement interment of a woman and infant must be in some way ‘domestic’, tragic, and disorderly, have set the tone for all the later discoveries of infant bodies in Anglo-Saxon settlement contexts. The evidence from Sutton Courtenay, accessible in published form for half a century, actually directly contradicts this interpretation. The size of the pit, the presence of carefully-placed animal skulls, and the carefully-packed soil over the deposit, all point to purposive, visible ritual behaviour requiring the investment of time and effort. There is an extensive archaeological literature on the cultural importance of the dead, and the need for communities to make conscious decisions about the disposal and transformation of the dead body; and there is increasing awareness amongst archaeologists and anthropologists about the symbolic importance of the location of the dead within the landscape (not confined to ‘cemeteries’), in addition to an awareness that strategies for disposal of artefacts, either whole or fragmented, may have a significant ritual dimension, especially when these deposits include human material (Parker Pearson 1993; Esmonde Cleary 2000; Chapman 2000)2. Infants’ bodies should form part of this discourse.

Though there is a small but growing collection of sites at which infant bones have been recognised, problems with identifying infant bone at the point of excavation (thus removing any possibility of reconstructing the relationship between the infant deposit and any other artefacts within the feature), and a tendency to note the material only in specialist bone reports, have reinforced the low profile of infant burials. At West Stow, Suffolk, for example, the Anglo-Saxon settlement site consisted of halls and sunken featured buildings dating from the fifth to the seventh centuries, and included a number of deposits of human bones: two graves of adults were found within the settlement area, and in addition, deposits of infant bones were found at fourteen separate locations across the site (West 1985, 59). All the infant bones belonged to infants less than one year old, and most were, according to the very brief specialist report, newborn. A minimum of four infants were represented by the sample, as this was the maximum numbers of left femurs from the site. Either the remains of four babies had been dispersed widely across the site, or the infant bones may represent up to fourteen separate mortuary events. Five of the deposits came from the general occupation layer covering the site, and may be residual, but seven deposits come from the sunken featured buildings, and two came from the ditches. Some deliberate action of deposition is implied by the presence of infant human bone in these sealed contexts.

It is a characteristic of site reports focussing on Anglo-Saxon settlements and building archaeology that, while the function and purpose of buildings based on artefact recovery may be discussed, the symbolic meaning of infant burials, and their purposive inclusion in buildings, is not. The report at West Stow is no exception; in 170

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2 See especially Chapman 2000, 145: ‘...there is a strong case... for regarding most deposits incorporating human bones as structured and culturally significant’.
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pages of report, the infant burials received one paragraph of attention, though the bone specialist did raise the question (without answering it) of how and why fragmented remains of babies came to be in the closed context of the sunken-featured buildings (Grainger 1985, 59). An analysis of the dead infants is entirely missing from the discussion of the function of the buildings: pottery and loomweights are privileged over the bodies of babies. A further contrast, within the report, is that the human remains in the settlement (including the remains of the two adults, both with fragile bone preservation, one, a female, with significant congenital bodily distortion and later distortion through trauma) are referred to as ‘burials’; a collection of bodies outside the settlement area is referred to as the ‘cemetery’, the inference being that between six and sixteen burials located within the area of a settlement did not constitute an ‘official’ burial area (West 1985, 58 and 64).

This unwillingness to consider possible meanings of ‘non-normative’ disposal of infant bodies, to the extreme that the only notice of their existence is confined to a specialist bone report, and the semantic differentiation made between human deposits which are assumed to constitute a ‘cemetery’, compared to other human deposits deemed to constitute individual, non-normative ‘burials’, is not confined this single site (nor indeed to this period: see for example Esmonde Cleary 2000 for a discussion of the Romano-British material). Similar distinctions occur in the report on the ninth century Anglo-Saxon settlement at Yarnton, Oxfordshire (Hey 2004). Two separate areas of inhumation deposits were found in the excavations at this site. One was a small group of six adult burials at a distance from the middle Saxon settlement. This group was identified as the community field cemetery, of the sort that seem to have been relatively common at this period, before the proliferation of parish churches in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The second group of at least five burials was in the middle of the settlement, and contained the remains of a woman aged between thirteen and nineteen years, whose burial overlay a ditch containing the fragmentary remains of at least four subadults, one aged six to eight years, one aged six to seven years, and the rest juvenile, but of unidentifiable biological age. The commentator noted that ‘it is difficult to resist the conclusion that, regardless of the Christian context of the burials, children were not considered to merit burial within the small cemetery’ (Boyle 2004, 75). There were certainly two separate burial areas at this site, though only the six burials in the adult area have been designated a ‘cemetery’ in the site report, and it was assumed that burial in this extra-settlement area was privileged over burial within the settlement. The settlement was interpreted as domestic and secular, and no analysis was made of the relationship between the mortuary deposits within the settlement and the spaces in which these deposits were found.

There appear to be two assumptions underpinning the apparent irrelevance of infant and other burials to the interpretation of the settlements at West Stow and Yarnton: first, that the settlements were unquestionably secular and domestic in nature; and secondly, that deposits of dead infants within the settlement area were therefore made in an essentially non-meaningful way.

At Wharram Percy, Yorkshire, there is some direct evidence to suggest that infant burials should be incorporated within the discussion of ‘ritual’ deposition at secular sites. Excavation of two sunken featured buildings at this site revealed the burial of an infant and an associated deposition of sheep bones, in the construction ditch of one sunken featured building, within three metres of the building’s west wall (Milne & Richards 1992, 84-5). Radio-carbon dating placed the infant’s death in the late sixth or early seventh centuries. The infant was complete and articulated and was either stillborn or died immediately after birth. The sheep remains ‘indicate a dump of partly butchered bones, possibly in articulated groups, and probably mostly from the same animal, around a year old’ (Milne & Richards 1992, 84). The infant burial appears to have been marked by a round stone or boulder. Fine sieving around the burial revealed minute specks of amber, and an amphora sherd was also found in the vicinity of the burial, though it may have been residual, rather than being deliberately associated with the infant. The infant was carefully placed on a layer of material, upcast from the sunken featured building, which had been used to fill a nearby Romano-British ditch. There was no trace of a grave cut, which has led to the suggestion that the infant was laid in the open air and left exposed, but the burial was covered by a layer of clay and charcoal very shortly after deposition, and there are no signs of rodent gnawing on the bones, so the case for excarnation is not certain (Milne & Richards 1992, 20; Hamerow 2006, 14).

There can be no doubt that there was an element of care and structure to the deposition of this infant, and the elaborate association of an animal carcase and the possible stone marker with the baby suggest that this was in no way a ‘secret’ burial, hidden from the rest of the community (especially if it is true that the infant was left exposed), but the deposit of one newborn baby in association with a building need not be interpreted as part of a wider, public ‘grammar’ of burial. Comparison might be made with similarly-structured burials from the later medieval period, at a time when the only officially-sanctioned form of burial was within consecrated ground. At the longhouse complex at Upton, Gloucestershire, for example, the thirteenth-century burial of a three to six month old baby took place in the south-east corner of a room. The baby was buried with a spindle whorl and a large whelk shell, and a floor slab covered the grave (Rauhtz 1969, 87). In another part of England altogether, at

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1 Dr Simon Esmonde Cleary’s characteristically intelligent and perceptive work on ‘non-normative’ deposition in Roman contexts has been insightful, and I have benefited enormously from his informed commentaries on both Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burial patterns.
the end of the thirteenth century, a baby was buried under the southern wall of a building in Westbury, Buckinghamshire, and an in utero foetus of five to seven months of age, showing signs of gnawing marks from rodents, was buried in association with a building on Croft 13. Also within the building was a pit containing ‘the remains of two intentionally-placed pots’. Whatever was happening at Westbury was outside any officially-sanctioned ritual behaviour; nonetheless the sense of a deliberate, intentional and even purposful burial was so strong that the excavator remarked that ‘it is certainly possible that this burial represents some sort of foundation deposit’ (Iven et al. 1995, 145). At the neighbouring village of Tattenhoe, Buckinghamshire, the southern wall of building 4, archaeologically difficult to define, was marked by a line of pad-stones along the edge of an eaves-drip drainage gully. One pad stone sealed a shallow depression containing the remains of an infant, possibly a still-born baby, with three animal bones place over it. Again, the sense of deliberate ritual was strong enough to promote the suggestion of a foundation deposit, or ‘a more secretive burial of a perhaps illegitimate or deformed child’ (Ivens 1995, 33).

The Tattenhoe and Westbury burials raised two opposing responses to the burial of the infants: either they were unwanted, and secretly deposited, so that the function of the buildings with which they were associated is irrelevant to the babies, or they were ‘foundation deposits’, so that their burial – and also, possibly, the circumstances of their death, if not merely co- incidental – were intrinsic to the creation and functioning of the building to which their bodies had been dedicated. It is not at all clear what, if anything, distinguished the buildings at Tattenhoe and Westbury, or the outhouse at Upton, as requiring special infant foundation burials, compared to any of the other buildings at these villages, apart from the presence of the babies themselves and their associated deposits.

The problems of interpretation inherent in accepting the possible symbolic impact of infant burials within sites such as West Stow, Yarnton and Wharram Percy, which would require a ritualising of what have traditionally been identified as secular, domestic, economic spaces, is further problematised by infant burials in contexts which are currently interpreted as Christian and ecclesiastical. The settlement of Flixborough, Lincolnshire, was in use throughout the Middle and Late Saxon periods. Between the late seventh and mid eighth centuries, the whole of the excavated area was inhabited. In the early to mid-eighth century, building 20 was replaced by an exceptional structure, building 1a, internally divided with a hearth at one end, and containing four burials along its walls on an east-west alignment. Two further burials were located outside the walls of the building to the south and southeast. All the burials were of juveniles aged between three and twelve years, with the exception of an adult female, aged 20-30 years, who had been buried with a perinatal foetus at her feet (Loveluck 2001, 86). All the children showed signs of the dietary deficiencies implied by the presence of cribrar orbitalia, and the female has been diagnosed as having suffered from tuberculosis. The small inhumation cemetery associated with the site contained no burials under the ages of seventeen, though this cemetery was not fully excavated.

The site of Flixborough was initially interpreted as an undocumented monastic centre on the basis of the similarity between the high status artefacts recovered from Flixborough and those from documented monastic sites (Whitwell 1991, 247; Yorke 1993, 146), but Loveluck has challenged this interpretation, arguing that, while it is a complex high status site showing changing patterns of consumption and production through the middle to late Saxon periods, there are no clear grounds for describing Flixborough as a monastic centre at any point in its evolution (Loveluck 2001, 120-121). Given this interpretation, it has been suggested that the burials within and beside building 1a might indicate that the building was the mortuary chapel of an elite household, separating itself from the main cemetery (Morris 1989: 133; Loveluck 2001, 10).

In the case of Flixborough, the separate juvenile, infant and adult burials have been placed within a ‘public’ mortuary context – there is no suggestion here of casual deposition, and, given the dispute about the possible ecclesiastical function of the site, the presence of the settlement burials has been given consideration in the context of the use of the associated buildings: in this case, the building which represents the focus of the burials has been ascribed a specific mortuary function. However, this set of burials corresponds with those from both pre-Christian West Stow and later Yarnton in several ways: at all the sites, there are two burial areas, with the settlement burials consisting predominantly of sub-adults, and the female adults at West Stow and Flixborough both suffered from severe, deforming pathologies. This pattern of burial is replicated at Whithorn, Dumfries and Galloway, dating to the eighth and ninth centuries, which has a secure, documented function as an important Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical site. This development included a church, a burial chapel into which four adult burials were inserted, and a burial ground abutting the east wall of the burial chapel containing the graves of about fifty-six children (Hill 1997, 557). No infants were found within the burial chapel itself, and the ‘children’s graveyard’ was only in use for a very short period of about thirty to forty years. Even so, burial within the children’s graveyard can be divided into two phases. The first phase, lasting only ten to fifteen years, was exclusively for perinatal and infant burials, including the burial of four infants up to two months premature at the time of burial, who cannot have been baptised, and should not, according to canon law, have been included in a consecrated burial ground (Hill 1997, 558). The second phase of burial included older children. The children’s graveyard was sealed by the deposition of a bundle of bones of a young adult female, whose partially decomposed body was wrapped up in a...
The evidence from Anglian Whithorn poses a number of problems of interpretation. The presence of pre-term infants in the cemetery suggests that such babies were considered fit for burial within a church context, though it seems unlikely that all of them, particularly the stillborn, can have been baptised. On the other hand, the infant burials were very clearly segregated from all other burials, and the infant and child mortuary population was very different to the adult mortuary population, both in terms of pathology and burial layout. Finally, deliberate sealing of the cemetery with the translated remains of woman who had been chronically ill, disabled, and probably disabled during her life, raises new possibilities about the ‘special’ nature of the space in which these infants and children were buried.

Given that the later phase of Whithorn’s use for infant burial corresponded to a period of decline and possible abandonment of the site, one interpretation of this infant cemetery could be that it functioned in a similar way to medieval Irish infant burial sites (‘cillins’), which contained dead infants who were excluded from church burial because they were unbaptised, and also contained the graves of excluded adults, such as strangers, suicides, and shipwrecked sailors (Finlay 2000, 411). Not all cillins were associated with abandoned churches; other marginal and disused features in the landscape, such as raths, ogham stones, tower houses and enclosures became the focus for such burials (Finlay 2000, 412). In the case of cillins, the buildings were chosen because they were abandoned, not because of their religious associations, and Nyree Finlay furthermore argued that these sites did not gain a new ritual life with the burial of the babies, because there is no evidence that such sites became places of remembrance, or were ever visited by the relatives of the dead babies (Finlay 2000, 413).

A noticeable feature of the chronological range of infant deposition in association with buildings is that, to date, there appear to be no examples for the last two centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period. The disappearance of infant burial in settlements appears to coincide with the proliferation of parish churches across Anglo-Saxon England, which finally established burial within churchyards as the ‘proper’ place to put the dead (Blair 2005). A few late Anglo-Saxon churches and their graveyards have been excavated, including the site at Raunds, Northamptonshire (Boddington 1996). Here, the church and burial ground were established in the mid-tenth century, and in this first phase of the cemetery, infant burials were found throughout the site. A second phase of graveyard expansion led to the area adjacent to the church walls being brought into use, first for adults, who were buried close to the wall, and then for infants, who were buried right up against the wall as ‘eavesdrip’ burials (Boddington 1996, 9). Infants were almost entirely absent from zones 4 and 5, to the north east and south east of the graveyard. Other excavated sites show a similar pattern of ‘eavesdrip’ infant burial (Blair 2005, 471). The phenomenon of ‘eavesdrip’ burials associated with church buildings is widespread, and itself may be derived from the Roman burial practice of placing dead infants under the eaves of houses (cf. Watts 1989). If the evidence from Raunds for infant eavesdrip as a late introduction, post-dating the first phase of churchyard burial, reflects a general pattern, rather than being a local phenomenon, then the appearance of infants next to the walls of churches, at the same time as they become archaeologically invisible in settlement contexts, might offer the possibility that, to some extent, church eavesdrip burial was replacing and transforming some of the ritual and symbolic references of infant settlement burials.

In this paper I have explored the problem of assessing the ‘meaning’ of separate infant and juvenile burial grounds within Anglo-Saxon secular, or possibly secular, settlement sites. The difficulty of acknowledging that such burials have to be read as part of the settlement’s social and ritual construct, and the lack of a framework within which to discuss whether these burials should be interpreted as private, non-ritual and of lower status than adult burials in field cemeteries, or even as relevant and ritually meaningful to the buildings and settlements with which they are associated, remains a barrier to understanding not only the place of dead infants within the spiritual and symbolic world of the Anglo-Saxons, but also our ability to decipher the relationship between dwelling places, built structures, other ‘ritual’ deposits, and the dead. The sites discussed in this paper, ranging from the fifth to the ninth centuries, and from the ‘secular’ to the ecclesiastical, seem to share a common vocabulary of separate deposition for infants, juveniles and selected adults, and in all but one of these cases, the adult burials included the disfigured or significantly disabled, and it may be that the woman with the infant at Sutton Courtenay should be included in this group, though there is no osteoarchaeological data for the female skeleton. This conjunction of infant, juveniles and disabled adults persisted regardless of a radical change in religious beliefs in this period.

This paper also draws attention to the way in which an assumption that infant mortuary deposition within settlements was ‘casual’ and effectively thoughtless needs challenging, because until it has been reconsidered, the relationship between settlement and extra-settlement
mortuary populations, and the extent to which burial in association with buildings, prior to the introduction of church burial for all, was privileged and 'special' rather than low status, cannot be explored. At present, it is not possible to say, on the basis of the archaeological evidence, how Anglo-Saxon settlement infant burials relate to the life-cycle of buildings or settlements (whether they have, for example, what prehistorians have recognised as a 'regenerative role' for strategically placed artefacts in settlement sites), nor how they relate, in time and space, to other 'special deposits' in the settlement area (Gwilt & Haselgrove 1997, 3). Furthermore, the standard of the currently-available evidence will not bear the weight of analysis which would allow us to test whether infant burial in settlement areas represents a continuation of Romano-British ritual practices, or is sufficiently different to infer a distinct break between Roman and post-Roman ritual. In this paper, I have focussed on the burials of infants within settlements, but it is likely that future analysis of 'special deposits' within the Anglo-Saxon settlements will show (as Professor Hamerow has postulated) that infants form only part of a wider, complex pattern of deposited materials in the Anglo-Saxon period (Hamerow 2006). It is to be hoped that future excavations at Anglo-Saxon settlement sites will be carried out with an expectation that infant bodies may be present, so that excavation strategies appropriate to the recovery of their bodies in situ will allow further exploration to be made of the relationships between infant bodies, households, and the ritual and symbolic life of Anglo-Saxon society.

References


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