

SOLENT THAMES RESEARCH FRAMEWORK RESEARCH AGENDA THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Sally Crawford with contributions from Mike Allen

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Nature of the evidence

The Solent Thames area represents a disparate group of counties, covering a range of geographical and geological areas. Neither the individual county boundaries, nor the Solent Thames area as a whole, represent tribal or regional boundaries relevant to the early medieval period, and indeed, the area under review cuts across the frontiers of recorded Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Different counties have different levels of significance in wider Anglo-Saxon studies. In Hampshire, Winchester and Southampton dominate. Winchester is central to understanding the relationship between Roman towns, the church and the development of kingdoms, though similar civitas capitals are known, and have been excavated, elsewhere, while Southampton is fundamental to understanding the processes leading to the return of urbanisation: London, York and Ipswich are the only comparable places in England. In Oxfordshire, the current Dorchester project is important for understanding the Thames Valley. Wallingford and Bampton projects are also both important. Walton/Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire is of exceptional importance as a rural site and an emerging town in terms of its geographical continuity and geographical determinism. Old Windsor in Berkshire is also a site of key importance, badly in need of writing up. Regionally, the borders of the Solent Thames region present particular problems. The Thames represents an exceptional corridor which cannot be fully explored in this study, though the publication of the Thames Through Time volumes mitigates this issue (Booth et al 2007). The Ouse, by contrast, is split between three separate English Heritage regions. Equally, the extent to which London had an impact on the relevant counties in this region cannot be explored only within the Solent Thames boundaries, and, therefore, these two issues should form the basis for cross-boundary studies.

There is a relatively low level of data from the Early Medieval period, which makes direct comparison with earlier (i.e. Romano-British) and later (i.e. medieval) periods difficult. In many respects this highlights the importance of obtaining palaeoenvironmental and palaeo-economic data from this period across the region before realistic consideration of the significant inter-regional variation. Palaeoenvironmental scientists, archaeologist and documentary historians need to pool information rather than work in isolation, and compare and contrast interpretation derived from proxy palaeoenvironmental data, landscape archaeology and documentary sources

However, the drawing together of what are, geographically and territorially, disparate counties offers a number of specific research opportunities.

- This is an area made up of regions normally kept separate in geographical and regional studies.

- The region offers a good opportunity to compare land-based and water-based transport in the early medieval period.
- Differences in levels of research and data collection across the region should be addressed.

Inheritance

The ending of Roman Britain is viewed as a significant break in British history, but the archaeological evidence from this area suggests that the Romano-British way of life did not come to an abrupt halt. Documentary sources offer a picture of aggressive Anglo-Saxon conquest of the area, and several excavated sites in the region are key in elucidating the evidence. The Solent Thames region has played a significant part in framing our interpretation of the ending of Roman Britain, and further work on the Romano-British/Anglo-Saxon interface should be prioritized for this area.

- Establishing the identity of the group using the new culture, building on current work on isotope evidence and DNA analyses, with particular attention to extending studies to include Roman-period skeletons should be a priority.
- When, how, and if villa estates ceased to function needs to be established.
- Environmental evidence should be used to identify possible change from specialised farming to a generalised approach.
- Identification of the extent to which there was continuity of use between Romano-British sites and Anglo-Saxon sites is needed.
- The extent to which Romano-British agricultural practices persisted into the Anglo-Saxon period should be explored.
- Better understanding is needed of the relationship - economic, political, social - which existed between the Anglo-Saxons and the Romans across the region.
- Detailed comparison of settlement patterns and chronologies comparing activity patterns between the Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods should be carried out.
- Existing evidence to identify areas with material culture overlap and areas without - in particular the reasons for the abandonment of Silchester - needs to be reviewed.

Chronology

There are a number of key chronological research questions relating to the early medieval period in the Solent Thames region in particular. Recent initiatives to carry out systematic carbon 14 dating programmes on burials both nationally (Hines *forthcoming* Hampshire) and by Annia Cherryson at a county level will, it is hoped, resolve some of the issues for this chronological period. The use of pottery for dating is problematic, due to a lack of stratigraphic sequences in the region, but two Anglo-Saxon towns - Oxford and Winchester - have produced tight dating sequences.

- The date of earliest Anglo-Saxon settlement needs to be established.
- Better definition of chronologies within Anglo-Saxon cemeteries should be developed.
- Better definition of pottery sequences in the region is needed.

- There needs to be a review of the current radio-carbon dating evidence, particularly from sites radio-carbon dated before the early 1990s.

Landscape, land use

The region offers a number of well-excavated sites with good environmental evidence. The presence of early medieval economic evidence (charred grain and animal bones) is highly variable and disparate both across the Solent Thames region and within it. Many Saxon rural settlement sites contain relatively few good contexts from which to sample, and these may be biased by the specific nature of activities associated with them, e.g. sunken featured buildings. It is clear that contentious attempts must be made to both sampling this material, and provide syntheses on a regional or sub-regional basis.

Again, as with other periods, the opportunity to look at regional variation in stock composition and potentially in breeds should be objectives, possibly using isotope analysis (Sykes *et al.* 2006). One key theme to address is agricultural change, in all its forms, after the Romano-British period. Tied with this is that of changing regional specialisation in herds and crop vs herd proportions.

The region has a wide range of different landscape types, from the heaths of East Berkshire to the gravels of the Thames Valley. The quantity of woodland is recorded in Domesday and was clearly a major managed resource for timber, wattle, browse, pig pannage and orchards. It remained a key resource for timber for construction, the manufacture of artefacts and probably more importantly as fuel for domestic fires and furnaces. *Palaeoenvironmental* evidence (pollen, charcoals etc) should help define the presence location of such resources.

As in prehistory, colluvium and alluvium may mask early medieval sites and evidence, but can also contain significant evidence of the local and wider land-use via contained *palaeoenvironmental* data. Thus site-based studies of colluvium, alluvium and riversides are integral to studying both early medieval sites and the landscape in which they reside. Economies may exploit ridges and valley bottoms differently, with the possibly better pasture in the lush vegetation of the deeper soils developing the dry valleys, where some evidence may have been buried and obscured by later colluviation or alluviation. Changing agricultural practices and the management of rivers and riversides for mills and fish traps, potentially increases and changes colluviation and alluviation patterns. As the site- and activity-specific level of interpretations is often greater in more recent periods, the precise level of site taphonomy and sedimentation often directly related to those activities. As such detailed, but targeted, geoarchaeological desorption of basic sedimentary sequences (e.g. ditches and infills) can elucidate information and answer questions not readily derived from basic context records and artefact assemblages.

With the propensity of mills and fisheries recorded in Domesday, archaeological evidence of these should be sought (sieving for fish bones). Established ports and Southampton and Portchester would have had relatively major quays, and the opportunity of examining these and the waterlogged deposits and ecofacts that might

be present should be seen as a priority. To date no comparable sites have been highlighted on the Isle of Wight.

- Collection of more extensive environmental samples would allow detailed analysis of particular sites and consequently regional comparisons.
- Existing and additional environmental information needs to be built on to identify when and where changes in agriculture and land use took place, for example possible woodland regeneration or new crop species.
- Identification of location and nature of woodland, including regrowth of more extensive woodlands, such as on the slopes of the Chilterns should be attempted through *palaeoenvironmental* enquiry and data.
- Further study of the relationship between parish boundaries and Anglo-Saxon social organisation is needed.
- A review of rural field systems should be carried out with a view to promoting their preservation, particularly with more intense pressure on land from modern agricultural practice.
- There is a specific need to understand the process of agricultural intensification in the 9th to 11th centuries.
- Geoarchaeological studies to identify activities occurring at particular sites and site types.

Settlement

The region has a number of excavated settlement sites, from the early to the late period, and is particularly notable for the range of urban settlements that have been studied within it. Key themes for future research have been identified.

Study of waterlogged plant assemblages should be conducted in urban Saxon centres throughout the Solent Thames region. Even small-scale evidence recorded in small interventions, provided analysis and recording is compatible, should enable and the interpretations to be made. Then the character and diversity of urban centres can be defined and larger trade, markets and economic networks suggested.

The importance of defining both urban and rural economies is that they are clearly directly inter-related, and studying the detail of town economies cannot be completed without a good comprehension of the rural economy which supplies it. With rare exceptions little attempt has been made to use the *palaeoenvironmental* and palaeo-economic data to investigate these interpretations, but see Bourdillon (1988).

- A review of settlement patterns and land use is needed, particularly the apparent concentration of settlement on gravel terraces in the Thames Valley
- There is a need for more detailed area studies comparable to Whittlewood research project - which would also allow for regional comparison of settlements - so need to identify areas where a Whittlewood project would work.

- More information on settlement change and village formation is required to test possible models.
- Pollen analysis and environmental analysis needs to be carried out as a routine part of site excavation, to look at changes in diet for example.
- The region lends itself to further work on the origins of small towns (e.g. Amersham, Bicester, Andover), particularly in the context of studying the relationship between large and small towns.
- Settlement patterns in areas of dispersed settlement e.g. Chilterns require more study.
- Patterns of comparison between rural and urban economies.

Social organisation, economy and subsistence

Anglo-Saxon settlement sites, particularly those without the more readily identifiable sunken featured buildings, are ephemeral, and settlement morphology, particularly for the middle and later Anglo-Saxon periods, is still under dispute. Problems of identifying sites are exacerbated by lack of dating evidence. There is a need for:

- There is an increasing awareness that so-called 'productive sites' need further study and investigation: they are evidence that our current understanding of economy and exchange in the middle Anglo-Saxon period is inadequate. The Solent Thames area has a significant part to play in understanding middle Anglo-Saxon economy and exchange, through looking at the distribution of sceattas and the centrality of the upper Thames as a magnet (cf recent work by John Maddicott on links between Droitwich and London and the rise of the kingdom of Mercia (Maddicott 2005)). The visible patterns of travel and exchange between the Cotswolds and the Thames, and the direct link for continental trade northwards through Hamwic to the Thames Valley is an important phenomenon that needs studying.
- Whether other artefacts moved in the same way needs to be determined.
- Cemeteries are playing an increasingly important role in identifying population movement, health, and ethnicity: scientific investigation of skeletal material, in particular dating, stable isotope and DNA investigation, should be prioritized for previously excavated and new skeletal material.
- Investigation should include evidence for origins and diet through stable isotope analysis.
- Evidence is needed to allow recognition of estate centres (consumption) and specialist production sites e.g. iron smelting which would be expected within a 'multiple estate' model.
- Domesday records many watermills. Their date of establishment and, in particular, the number of mid Saxon examples, needs to be determined.
- The possible relationship of these dates to the intensification of agriculture and establishment of open fields should be considered.
- Archaeological evidence for specialised production (e.g. vineyards recorded in Domesday) should be sought.

Ceremony, ritual and religion

The Solent Thames region has been of major importance in the study of burial practice for this region, including the transition to Christian rites. However, the evidence from cremations has been less well-studied and the purpose of the late Anglo-Saxon charcoal burials remains uncertain. No substantive evidence for pre-Christian ritual sites has been found. This period saw the reintroduction of Christianity and the establishment of minsters and a parochial system. While there has been much work on minsters, few churches have been proved to have a pre-Conquest foundation date and the number of standing structures is limited, although Wing is a splendid example. There are many issues which would benefit from further work:

- Recent excavations and better understanding of Anglo-Saxon burial patterns, especially those associated with the post-Conversion period, means that there is a real need to date known unaccompanied burials, which may well be Anglo-Saxon - it is possible that there are many more excavated unfurnished Anglo-Saxon cemeteries than are currently recognised.
- There is a serious research need for a radio-carbon dating project on skeletal material from this region on the lines of Dawn Hadley's dating project for the Northern Danelaw.

The bulk of the region's churches will have had pre-Conquest origins, though this is not reflected either in surviving fabric or in Domesday entries. A co-ordinated framework for identifying opportunities for archaeological work at church sites (groundworks, maintenance, installation of heating etc) is important, so that no opportunity to investigate sites is missed.

- Clarification of the demise or survival of late Roman Christianity and paganism into the 5/6th centuries should be sought.
- Understanding of the significance and cultural context for the re-use of earlier sites for burial and other ritual activity needs to be improved.
- Evidence for Anglo-Saxon pagan religious practice other than in burials e.g. 'shrines', or such as ritual embedded in daily life, as often suggested for later prehistory, needs to be identified.
- The nature of middle-late Saxon religious sites, including the recognition and distinction of early minsters and monasteries, requires further work.

Transport and communication

The location of Anglo-Saxon settlements on or close to the known lines of Roman roads suggests that many, although not all, of these continued to play an important role in transport and communication in the later period. Waterways were also important lines of communication, although not enough is known about this in a cross-channel and coastal context. The extent to which rivers were navigable is also unclear, although evidence for alterations to channels, waterfront activity and structures has been found in a few areas. More work remains in all these topics.

- There is very little evidence for early medieval activities along the Thames waterfront, though recent open area excavations at Dorney in Buckinghamshire hint at the possible importance of the waterfront in the Middle Saxon period, away from the main known areas of dense settlement. There is a need to focus on gathering evidence from the Thames waterfront.

- Further work is needed on understanding the fate of Roman roads in the early medieval period.
- Cross-channel and coastal communications require investigation.
- Whether the Upper Ouse was navigable prior to the construction of mills along it needs to be determined.
- If possible the late Saxon road network should be reconstructed.

Material Culture

A number of coin hoards have been found across the region and the finds from metal detecting are adding coins and other metal artefacts to the record, particularly for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Goods found in inhumation cemeteries have demonstrated that the population during the early part of the period was in general relatively wealthy, with access to luxury imported goods, such as Rhineland pottery. The princely burial at Taplow was exceptional, but it is possible that other rich burials may still be found. For the later period the main evidence for material culture comes from excavations of urban sites, particularly Oxford and Winchester where there have been extensive excavations over many years. There is much more than can be learnt about material culture in relation to society and as a possible dating tool.

- The systematic classification and dating of artefacts will in particular to help understand Middle Anglo-Saxon patterns of trade, travel and economy.
- The current uneven implementation of Archaeology Inventory Projects needs to be addressed.
- Regional ceramics: there is an urgent need for ceramic studies to identify regional variation.

The built environment

Understanding of urban development in the region has been based on piecemeal excavations. There is a need for a pro-active approach to urban research. A regional understanding of late Anglo-Saxon domestic settlement is lacking. There are few examples of excavated late Anglo-Saxon rural houses across the region.

- Current evidence for Anglo-Saxon towns in the region requires assessment to identify further research priorities.
- More research is needed into what late Anglo-Saxon domestic buildings looked like.
- Regional variations in domestic buildings should be identified.
- Lack of evidence of Anglo-Saxon occupation on ‘medieval’ sites requires investigation.

Warfare, defences and military installations

Important new work on later Anglo-Saxon defences is taking place at Wallingford. The Wallingford project emphasises the previous lack of coherent study of later Anglo-Saxon burhs and their defences. The region has a number of important later

Anglo-Saxon defensive structures, in particular the *burh* of Sashes, still presumably preserved under spoil. Research themes include:

- Further research on other early medieval defensive structures in the region is needed, following the Wallingford project model.
- A review of the linear earthworks in the region should be carried out.
- Further consideration of roads and herepaths from both documentary and archaeological evidence.
- Pre-Viking Age defensive sites need to be identified.
- The impact of the establishment of burhs on their hinterland, perhaps acting as drivers for re-organisation of estates or intensification of production should be explored.
- Undocumented burh-like fortifications (e.g. Newport Pagnell?) need to be identified and their function investigated.
- Evidence for defensive networks of beacons, lookouts, strongpoints etc recognisable around burhs needs to be recorded.

Legacy

The Conquest provides a clearly dated political event to mark the division between the Early and Later Medieval periods, but in terms of settlement, landscape and administration there was no significant change. The majority of settlements and parishes were already in existence by the end of the period, and the large administrative units created survived into the later 20th century. The development of these structures during the Early Medieval period requires more systematic study.

- Extent to which the processes of nucleation of villages, formation of open fields, development of a system of local churches began in this period needs more investigation.

Specific problems in the region

There are a number of specific problems in this region, relating to publication and the identification and protection of sites, for which a strategy is required. The Isle of Wight remains an under-studied resource.

- Its status and relationship with the South coast requires further study.
- Investigation is needed into the use of the coastal inlets on the Isle of Wight in comparison with the Hampshire coast.
- Estate links between Hampshire and the Isle of Wight would bear further investigation.

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