An Archaeological Resource Assessment of Anglo-Saxon Derbyshire

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The Resource

Some 151 records in the County SMR are currently dated to the period AD401-1066, the vast majority relating to burials in the Peak District, churches and crosses. Given that there are now c8000 records on the database the percentage for the early medieval period is woefully small.

As is so often the case with the archaeological record for Derbyshire there is in the early medieval period a marked contrast between the types of evidence which characterise the Peak District and that from the areas to the south and east. The evidence in the Peak District is dominated by the seventh century barrow burials and the later stone crosses and other sculptural remains. Outside the Peak District barrow burials are rare and indeed any cemetery or settlement evidence is hard to come by. Stone crosses do occur across the county and into neighbouring counties, but clear evidence of surviving Anglo-Saxon churches is rare, as is evidence for settlement. Documentary evidence for the kingdom of Mercia in which Derbyshire formed a border land with Northumbria is also sparse.

Outside of the Peak District

The Derbyshire Archaeological Advisory Committee (DAAC) recently funded a project by Trent and Peak Archaeological Unit to produce a new gazetteer and synthesis of the Anglo Saxon material in lowland Derbyshire. A short interim report on this project has been produced and is already a useful summary of the known sites and finds for the period c450-850 in the area of the county outside the Peak District (T+PAT 1995). At the time of the project there were 17 records on the SMR relating to the period under consideration in the area outside the Peak District, a search of museum collections produced a further 6 finds of metalwork not previously recorded. The majority of the finds and sites were mostly concentrated in and around the Trent Valley and were predominantly finds of metalwork, some of which would seem to suggest the site of cemeteries.

Cemeteries and burials

The only known cremation cemetery was discovered in 1866 during construction of a railway cutting at King's Newton near Melbourne (Briggs 1868). A number of cremation urns were recovered which were dated to the sixth century. There is also a report of the discovery of a grave, possibly from the same area, which contained a Merovingian tremmissis minted at Quentovic, and gold and garnet jewellery, which would suggest a seventh century date (Dolley and Hughes 1955). At Hilton in the

1940's three Anglo-Saxon shield bosses were found during gravel quarrying, although the exact location is uncertain. During excavations outside the Roman fort at Littlechester in Derby by Chris Sparey Green in the 1970's, a number of Anglian burials were found, though details remain unpublished. Burials have also been recorded from Brizlingcote and Duffield, both accompanied by a cruciform brooch, and at Stapenhill in Burton–upon-Trent, now in Staffordshire. A rich female burial was discovered in a barrow at Wyaston near Ashbourne and secondary inhumations of this period were found in the Bronze Age barrow cemetery at Swarkestone Lowes. Less secure finds of burials have been reported from Ockbrook and Ashover.

Some recent metal detector finds may indicate the presence of burials, particularly near Repton. Two separate finds in the parish of Milton comprised an eighth century disk brooch and fragments of a small long and cruciform brooches. Finds of a shield boss from Sawley and another merovingian tremissis from Hasland, could also be indicative of former burials (T+PAT 1995).

Settlement Evidence 450-850

The only excavated settlement in the county from this period and arguable the whole of the early medieval period, is at Willington in the Trent valley (Wheeler 1979). During extensive excavations of cropmark sites on the gravel terrace in advance of gravel extraction in the early 1970's, Hazel Wheeler excavated 3 SFB's and a scatter of pits and post holes, which overlay a Romano-British enclosure system. The features produced pottery dated to the 6th century and quantities of fired and unfired clay loomweights. The only other indication of settlement evidence is a loomweight from Cubley near Ashbourne, although the major site at Catholme, just over the border in Staffordshire, suggests that further settlement evidence is to be expected in the Trent Valley (Loscoe Bradley 1977). Excavations by T+PAT in advance of the filling of Carsington Reservoir on the southern edge of the White Peak produced hand made pottery of apparently early Anglo-Saxon date. This was the site of a Roman-British masonry building set in an enclosure. In the ditch was found a quantity of hand made pottery of probable Anglo-Saxon date possibly indicating a recut of the Roman ditch. A number of post hole structures were also found within the enclosure but these could not be certainly dated (T+PAT 1992a; Jones 1997:103-4).

The only other site which has revealed evidence of early settlement is Repton. Excavations at Repton by the Biddles and by Harold Taylor are best known for the evidence of the Viking occupation in the 870's and the studies of the Anglo-Saxon crypt. However excavations have revealed evidence of buildings relating to the pre-Viking monastery and there is some evidence of pagan Saxon occupation and burials on the site (Biddle,M and Kojlbye-Biddle, B 1986a, 1987, 1992).

The Peak District

The evidence for the early medieval period in the White Peak consists predominantly of the evidence from the Anglian barrow burials mostly excavated in the 19th century by Bateman (1861). The only recent excavation of an Anglian burial was carried out by John Collis at Wigber Low (1983). This evidence for the Peak District was reviewed by Margaret Fowler in the 1950's (Fowler 1953) and again by Audrey Ozanne (1962-3). The most recent and detailed survey is the PhD thesis by Howard Jones and it is this which has been drawn on for what follows (Jones 1997).

Fowler in her review drew attention to the apparent Christian symbols in some of the graves, such as the cross on the Benty Grange helmet, and also speculated on the degree of 'celtic' survival and the ethnicity of the 'Pecsaetan', were they an intrusive group of settlers from south and east or were they largely the Romano-British population. Ozanne took the view that the burials were basically, late, i.e. mid-late 7th century, and the perception of late 'princely burials' under barrows or reusing prehistoric barrows has tended to prevail.

Jones's study however has clearly shown the evidence to be more complex than previously held. He has identified somewhere between 60 and 70 burials of Anglian date, including primary burials under barrows, mostly inhumation but also some cremation, secondary burials in prehistoric barrows and flat graves. The barrow burials are concentrated on the limestone plateau and appear focussed on the Roman road from Buxton to Derby and appear bounded to the north by the Wye valley. This detailed re-assessment of the grave goods has suggested a greater chronological depth to the burials than accepted by Ozanne. Although there are Roman period burials under small barrows from a number of sites, there is no clear evidence of a continuous tradition of barrow burial into the Anglian period. There are 6th century cremations under a barrow at Musden Low and, as Jones notes, a number of other burials particularly spear accompanied male burials, could be late 6th-early 7th centuries. Equally some of the artefacts found at Wigber Low in the 19th century could fall at the end of the 7th century rather than earlier.

Although there are a number of rich burials such as Benty Grange with its helmet, Lapwing with evidence of a bed and the gold and garnet jewellery from Cowlow, the assumption that the burials are predominantly single rich burials must also be questioned. The excavations by John Collis at Wigber Low have revealed at least seven Anglian burials in a prehistoric cairn and a recent metal detector find of a spearhead to the south of the cairn raises the possibility of an associated flat cemetery. Given the limited nature of the 19th century excavations by Bateman and others the situation demonstrated at Wigber Low may not be unique and interpretations of the chronology and social developments postulated from 19th century evidence may be in need of major review.

Settlement Evidence

With the exception of the burials there is little evidence for early medieval settlement in the Peak District in general. The only possible evidence of a settlement site is one previously mentioned at Carsington on the southern edge of the White Peak.

With the exception of Carsington other evidence for settlement consists of a number of stray finds of metalwork . For the late Roman/sub Roman period there is a zoomorphic buckle discovered in the 19th century when sinking a lead mine near the village of Youlgreave and a small number of penannular brooches with zoomorphic terminals. Anglian finds are also rare although the numbers are being added to by metal detector finds. Excavations at the medieval grange site at Roystone Grange produced a fragment of a 6th century square headed brooch. A number of iron spearheads of possible Anglian date have also been recovered as well as a circular copper alloy mount with gilded interlace from near Minninglow and a scutiform pendant possibly from Longstone. Although limited the evidence provided by these finds suggests a distribution on the fringes of the limestone plateau, with a preference for valleys and riverside locations suggesting a rather different perspective on the location of post-Roman settlement than that offered by the barrow burials (Jones 1997).

One major monument which may relate to this period is Grey Ditch a linear bank and ditch on the north east fringes of the limestone plateau. Grey Ditch runs across the valley of the Bradwell Brook effectively cutting of the line of Batham Gate, the Roman road which runs from the fort at Brough to Buxton and so restricting access to the limestone plateau. Dating evidence for the monument is not conclusive, but the most recent excavations (Guilbert and Taylor 1992) showed that the bank had been built across upon the surface of recently ploughed land and that the ploughsoil contained Roman pottery of 2-4th century date and may be a post- Roman territorial boundary.

It is known that the Peak District was dominated throughout much of the period by a number of large royal estates, which survived break up and fragmentation which took place elsewhere over the course of the period. These were particularly concentrated in the Peak District with centres at Wirksworth, Bradbourne, Bakewell and Hope in particular. Roffe has suggested that these constitute the hundred of Hamenstan which he suggests may represent the core territory of the Pecsaetan (Roffe 1986; Sidebottom 1999). Stafford has suggested that these upland estates survived because they were important for hunting, they provided important raw materials such as lead and possibly silver and they were a border area between Mercia and Northumbria (Stafford 1985 39).

Settlement models.

Two alternative models of the development of post-Roman settlement in the White Peak have been suggested Unwin 1988; Hodges 1989; 1991a; summarised in Jones 1997:110-4).   To oversimplify, Unwin disagrees with the idea that large estates existed in the upland area from the early post Roman period and that in the 5th and 6th centuries upland Derbyshire was sparsely populated. Following the immigration into the area via the Trent Valley, population increased and pressure led to a re-colonisation of the uplands in the 7th and 8th centuries. This in turn was followed by increasing royal control and the establishment of large estates.

Hodges, on the other hand, suggests a model which sees a settlement shift in the post-Roman period rather than a wholesale abandonment, a process documented elsewhere in England.   The increased interest and concern with land and resources from at least the 7th century, in part influenced by the church, may have led to the abandonment of some sites.However, Hodges essentially sees the sub-Roman settlements evolving through the Anglian period and being 'affected but not transformed' during the Anglo-Scandinavian period to become medieval villages. He accepts that the high limestone plateau may have been settled as late as the 10th century, in contrast to the valleys and peripheral areas around the White Peak (Hodges 1991a).

The Later Anglo-Saxon Period (850-1066)

If anything archaeological and atefactual evidence for the 9-11th centuries is even more sparse than for the previous period. Best known are the stone crosses and other sculptural remains. Routh first catalogued the stones in 1937 but since then finds of cross fragments have come from excavations at Repton, Monyash,and Blackwell in the Peak District and other sculptural fragments from the excavations at St Werbergh's church in Derby, prior to its demolition for a road scheme.

Although the best known crosses are in the Peak District, cross fragments occur all across the county including the Trent valley. The crosses have been traditionally dated to either the pre Viking or Anglian and the post-Viking periods. The best known crosses at Bakewell, Bradbourne and Eyam are dated to around 800 AD as is the Wirksworth slab. This traditional dating has been adopted in a recent study of these four monuments (Rollason et al1996) but a recent study of the stone crosses by P. Sidebottom has offered a radically different interpretation (Sidebottom 1994 and 1999).   He sees the crosses as being of early 10th century date, specifically the period between c920 and 940 when the area was being re-conquered by the kings of Wessex. The crosses, in Sidebottom's thesis, represent a concrete expression of the acceptance by the Viking and possibly Mercian settlers of the area of not only the secular authority of the Kings of Wessex, but of the Christian church as well. It is fair to say

that this, here much summarised, interpretation is not universally excepted but it offers a challenging new model for understanding these monuments and the progress of settlement in this area in the 10th century.

With the exception of the remarkable crypt at Repton (Taylor 1987) there is little surviving Anglo-Saxon fabric in Derbyshire's churches. Remains of Anglo-Saxon work have been suggested at Ault Hucknall, Bradbourne (Hart 1981) and Stanton by Bridge and Walton -on -Trent (Wardle 1994) amongst others.

Derby was one on the five boroughs of the Danelaw but there is little archaeological evidence of this settlement or its Anglo-Saxon predecessor, with the exception of the remains of the pre-conquest church revealed by the excavation of St Alkmund's church in the late 1960's (Ralegh Radford 1976). There are of course the remarkable finds from Repton associated with the occupation by the Great Army in 873/4. Close to Repton is the unique Viking period barrow cemetery at Ingleby, currently the subject of a research project by the University of York.

Evidence for this period is largely based on Documentary evidence. The re-conquest of Derbyshire was undertaken by Edward the Elder, who built a burgh at Bakewell in 920 and a monastery is also mentioned at Bakewell in 949, although Sidebottom points out this could equally refer to Bradbourne or even more likely Wirksworth, where a pre-Viking monastery was probably established (Sidebottom 1999:217-8). By the 940's land holdings were given in carucates rather than hides and the distribution of Danish place names indicates extensive settlement or take over and fragmentation of estates, particularly in the north and east of the county. By the time of Domesday book there is an impression of a large number of settlements across Derbyshire. As Roffe points out (1986) care needs to be taken not to assume that all of these were nucleated settlements as, particularly in the upland areas of the county, settlement would have been dispersed and based on pastoral farming. In reality little is known about the origins of the patterns of settlements and field systems which were apparent by the later middle ages.

Suggestions for future research

The early medieval archaeology of the county has been dominated by the Anglian burials of the Peak District and the Pecsaetan of the Tribal Hideage. Jones's recent excellent review of these burials and the contrasting models proposed by Hodges and Unwin for the development of post-Roman settlement in the White Peak, along with the new interpretation of the significance of the stone crosses by Sidebottom, offer a firm foundation for further research and the targeting of future fieldwork in the White Peak and its fringes. There is clearly great scope for a re-examination of the nature of the Anglian burials in the Peak. As Jones points out there has been no excavation of a primary Anglian burial in the Peak District this century. Also there is a pressing need to determine whether the level of funerary activity demonstrated at Wigber Low is unique or more widespread. The degree of survival of

population from the Roman period is also a key issue in terms of understanding the burials and the alternative settlement models proposed by Hodges and Unwin. The importance of the lead industry as a basis for the wealth and importance of the White Peak also needs to be reassessed, despite the attendant difficulties in addressing the origins of the industry.

Outside the White Peak the base level of knowledge for the period is depressingly poor and any opportunity to increase this for the Trent Valley and the eastern areas of the county needs to be pursued as a matter of urgency.

The early development of the few early urban centres in the county is largely a blank and opportunities should be taken to learn more of the Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods in Derby and the origins of Chesterfield, Wirksworth and Bakewell. In the north and east of the county generally the period is largely a blank and approaches need to be developed to understand the origins and development of settlement outside, as well as within, the Peak District.

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