

Preface

Archaeology is frequently considered to be the study of artefacts, sites, graves or environments which result from the relationships that existed between people in the past. As a consequence, archaeology can be the study of people and their relationships with artefacts, with landscapes and, most importantly, with each other. Unfortunately, this last part, the interaction of people, is often overlooked because relationships are imprecise, difficult to define or have multiple qualities. Previously, for example, anthropologists have been critical of archaeological approaches to kinship, because they are often perceived as two-dimensional in nature, relying on rigid models derived from the metrics of artefact assemblages (Sayer, 2009: 147).

This book is informed equally by science and sociology; it is the result of over ten years of research and aims to revisit this vital subject from a holistic, multi-scaled perspective. My interest in early medieval cemeteries originated in 2002 when I read for a Master's degree titled *Death and Society*, based in the University of Reading's Sociology Department. Wishing to examine the topic further, I embarked on a PhD at Reading in 2003. The PhD was funded with a university studentship and was supervised by the shrewd and meticulous Dr Heinrich Härke. The degree was completed successfully in 2007 but I felt it was incomplete; there was a lot more to explore on the subject.

The nine sites I investigated in my PhD project provide a point of departure for this book, but my research has moved on profoundly since those postgraduate origins, and this comprehensive study has taken a further ten years to complete, with one hundred and eleven sites investigated in detail (see Figure 1.2). This more in-depth investigation has been as much a physical journey as an intellectual one. The project started in 2006 when I joined the teaching staff at the University of Bath to contribute to a new *Death and Society* Master's course. It was in this role as an adjunct teacher that I started to comprehend the value that social science subjects have for archaeology. In 2010 I moved to the

University of Central Lancashire and was able to explore statistics, geographical information systems and skeletal archaeology in more depth. The actual process of writing the book started in 2012 with a Livesey Fellowship. However, the project would not be thorough until, like the early Anglo-Saxons themselves, I had first-hand experience of early medieval mortuary space. This opportunity arose in 2010 when Richard Mortimer and I embarked on an ambitious five-year archaeological project at Oakington, Cambridgeshire. Funded by the University of Central Lancashire and the Institute of Field Archaeology we focused our attention on a large sixth-century cemetery. Through physical excavation the Oakington Project influenced my rationale, because climbing into a grave to locate, clean, record and lift artefacts or human remains is as close to the burial context as an archaeologist can be. The excavators, like the people who laid out the body, must climb into a grave, and in doing so they become entwined with the objects and the person, becoming part of their history. These events share another similarity because, where possible, the excavation of human remains, or the preparation of a corpse, is best done in collaboration with others.

Excavation is one method employed by a professional field science, but it is also a personal and sometimes an emotional experience. Many aspects of a funeral were intended to be emotive; for example, artefacts were selected deliberately for inclusion and so, once 'owned', they became invested with meaning and intertwined with emotion (Lupton, 1998: 143). When embedded with significance, material culture can take on a special character, becoming part of personhood (Gell, 1992). Consequently, we use our materiality to communicate things about ourselves and others, be it an outward identity or a group membership expressed from a cache of shared semiotic knowledge. Social relationships are themselves influenced by the space within which interaction takes place, and equally objects are entwined with social process, embedded within corporeal communication. Today, unfortunately, physical messages have often been undervalued in favour of the verbal or written form (see Moreland, 2001). Nevertheless, interpersonal communication is complex, where words originate from bodies and are enmeshed with materiality, place and the physical spaces of personhood, society and identity.

Our predecessors communicated in a variety of physical ways and, consequently, the archaeological record is as complex and diverse as was the human experience. This comparison has been made before. For example, Hope-Taylor sought to appreciate cemeteries as if they were a written account:

The Anglo-Saxon cemetery in Britain has never been studied as a complete phenomenon, as the deeply revealing local entity it certainly is. It

ought by now to have been recognised as an unwritten form of historical document roughly equivalent (though at once broader in scope and less exact) to the parish register of later times, and investigated as such. (Hope-Taylor, 1977: 262)

This quote envisages cemeteries as a physical communication, like documents; they are capable of providing historical insights that parallel those of the parish register of the post-medieval period. The textual metaphor can also be seen in the work of some archaeologists, for example Arthur Saxe (1970: 7), who suggested that social personae operated within grammatical possibility; he argued that there were similar rules or universal ways in which society was organised. Ray Corbett (2009) and others have drawn on this approach to identify social ‘norms’ as the ‘grammar and syntax of the dead’. Historian Guy Halsall considered that burial customs could be likened to grammar because, ‘The norms act, in a way, as the grammar of display, necessary for any public symbolic act to be understood by its audience’ (Halsall, 1995a: 44). Universal behaviours are not often visible in the archaeological evidence, and on closer inspection every burial was unique and each cemetery was different, in locally, regionally and chronologically significant ways. However, describing the combination of material culture and physical space as a form of communication remains a powerful metaphor.

Physical communication, like a book, needs a semantic structure, and each cemetery, and to a degree, each burial, relied on different shared semiotic knowledge as communities negotiated the cemetery space. In this book I extend the communication metaphor by investigating the ‘Syntax of the cemetery’ (Chapter 2) and considering each site as the multi-part composition of numerous agents. The ‘Mortuary metre’ (Chapter 3) refers to timing because those agents operated at different times with different influences, employing a complex localised grammar to create graves (Chapter 4) and express broader cultural elements like gender, age or social position. The decisions which assembled a funeral event were the results of the selective ‘Intonation’ (Chapter 5), stressing particular characteristics depending on situational circumstance, personal relationships and lifeways. These ideas intentionally use words which describe communication. For instance, in linguistics ‘syntax’ is the way in which elements come together, and poetic rhythm or time is called ‘metre’. In writing, ‘grammar’ provides structure to allow comprehension, and for spoken delivery, ‘intonation’ is used to emphasise a particular point. Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries provided a physical prop for poetry and a place for communities to tell stories about the dead, the living and their histories.

It was my ambition with this book to understand the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery as a complete phenomenon, one which existed at different scales, from the grave to the region and from a holistic multi-dimensional perspective. My approach is holistic because it combines the cemetery, grave, material culture, text and bodies as evidence, and it is multi-dimensional because it explores physical space, chronological difference and social time to arrive at social interpretation. By necessity each chapter builds on the last and contributes to an increasingly sophisticated examination of cemetery space.

Chapter 1, 'Negotiating early Anglo-Saxon cemetery space', provides an introduction to the subject by describing how archaeologists have approached early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. It uses this historiography as a foundation upon which to describe several cemetery sites, starting with a double burial from Oakington and then focusing on the description of two complete cemeteries at Orpington, Kent and Apple Down, West Sussex. This chapter illustrates the problem with traditional monothematic approaches and describes how spatial layout, material culture and skeletal characteristics can be used together to explore the social arena. It also defines the philosophy which underpins the book. Based on interdisciplinary perspectives, Chapter 1 explores the causal agency embedded in relationships, material expressions of identity, transformative objects and aesthetic selection. Artefacts exist within the social world, and so the sociology of shoes and modern-day gravegoods are useful examples which are analogous to how more ancient objects interfaced with people. Society is pluralistic, but its physical remains are created from an amalgamation of factors, including the manifestation of identities and aesthetics derived from shared semiotic knowledge.

The 'Syntax of the cemetery' (Chapter 2), describes cemetery organisation thematically; it introduces the structural language of the cemetery and is the foundation of subsequent chapters. It starts by describing pre-existing topography and introduces the use of spatial statistics to identify distinct grave plots. The relative density of graves, rows of graves, the orientation of graves and the rituals used in the cemetery are alternative ways used to identify group affiliation(s). This chapter also investigates patterns in the material included within graves, and compares those patterns to the multiple methods used to organise funerary space. Chapter 3, 'Mortuary metre', considers the chronological construction of sites, investigating the development of cemeteries and the chronological transformation of funerary display. Building on the new chronologies proposed by John Hines and Alex Bayliss (2013), and Catherine Hills and Sam Lucy (2013) this chapter looks at seven sites: Spong Hill, Sewerby, Apple Down, Wakerley, Oakington, Deal and Orpington. It also presents an in-depth investigation of the chronol-

ogy at Buckland, near Dover in Kent, because this site has been central to previous discussions of early Anglo-Saxon chronology. This chapter highlights discordant chronologies within sites, highlighting the use of different rituals by different identity groups within the same community.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate graves and the people found in them. Chapter 4, 'The grammar of graves', explores *leitmotifs*, cultural themes in funerary display. These include social hierarchy, core burials, sex, gender and age. Plots or groups of graves were often arranged around significant burials. This focus may have been on the core groups of graves, which sometimes encircled specific individuals. Interestingly, graves with mounds on them were targeted by contemporary grave robbers, but some types of grave were deliberately avoided. Elaborate burials with exposed markers were a tool used by a community to distinguish key ancestors who formed powerful parts of the communal identity. Chapter 5, 'Intonation on the individual', builds on the previous three chapters to locate the lived experience. It uses skeletal archaeology to examine the distributions of skeletal trauma, diet and height. This focus on the body was developed in order to explore in more detail the differences in social attitudes expressed within the mortuary environment. Diet, and trauma, may provide insight into different lifestyles, whereas height and teeth metrics may reveal a degree of relative biological connection across the cemeteries investigated.

Finally Chapter 6, 'Kinship and community', places the cemeteries back in their cultural context by discussing the legal and textual evidence. Whereas each preceding chapter built on the last to introduce new thematic elements, this chapter – like Chapter 1 – explores whole cemeteries as complete social phenomena. It establishes cemetery space as a unique and local creation. Each cemetery used different methods to differentiate between groups of graves and identify distinguished individuals from different generations. However, the creation of these burials was not solely to reconstruct the personhood of the deceased; it also recreated a community narrative with a 'scopic regime'. This localised way of seeing used gender and life course as well as situational, political and regional identities within a conglomerate, multi-layered mesh of characteristics. As a result, the dispositional difference between graves, between sites and across regions, can be used to discuss the nature of Anglo-Saxon society.