

Prologue

This book takes a holistic approach to understanding cemetery development, and in its simplest reading it offers a new way to explore horizontal stratigraphy which depends on the local context and the layout of the cemetery. Mortuary archaeologists know that approaches to horizontal stratigraphy are problematic (Ucko, 1969; Parker Pearson, 1999). The same is true of using objects to describe gender, social hierarchy or social status, and yet these approaches reluctantly dominate the contemporary interpretive narrative (Gowland and Knüsel, 2006; Šmejda and Turek, 2004). Approaches to gender tend to be described in cultural terms defined by the difference between biological sex and the social construction gender; see, for example, Sofaer, 2006. Past approaches to gender can be embodied in cultural universality, but should not be seen as passive categories, for example ‘housewife’, ‘warrior’, ‘slave’ (Lucy, 1997: 164). Our own contemporary social context, however, does not support the use of these narratives because our experience of society is pluralistic and institutions like family or household influence the expectations and expressions of gender identity (Reay, 1998). Modern Australian, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, English or American societies all have subtly, and not so subtly, different approaches to the body, family, marriage, childbirth, social class, gender and age or education, based on wider cultural contexts like history, religion or law. Most importantly there is not in fact a single approach to these ideas in any of the places described. Indeed, your own attitude to family, for example, might depend on your past, your background and, importantly, the regional or class context of your upbringing. In this case then there are in fact multiple societal attitudes towards gender or the family, just as people’s experience of family varies widely. This book uses a comprehensive exploration of the early Anglo-Saxon mortuary context to drill down into the local history and development of cemetery sites to explore the role of family and household and their impact on localised expressions of gender, life course and wealth.

This exploration is a case study in mortuary archaeology which proposes a way of looking at the visual aesthetics of mortuary space, to understand local *leitmotifs* as part of the expression of community history. Different agents working from different experiences within a unique and complex mortuary landscape created each funeral and, as a result, no two burials and no two cemeteries were the same. What this means is that any two persons' experiences were not the same. This book shows that each site contained a number of different attitudes towards the body, the display of gender, the use of the past or the use of objects in mortuary display. As a result, the attitudes of a funerary party, and the way they valued the location of a grave and its relationship to those graves around it might be a better indicator of social rank/identity than the number of objects within it. The past then is complex, dynamic and pluralistic, and this can be seen most obviously in the way that people negotiated the expression of mortuary identities within the public sphere. Many mortuary sites were intended to be visited: they were places to tell stories, places to build relationships and places to create or share identities (Price, 2010; Williams, 2002a). Uniquely, the approach outlined in this book places kinship, family and household in the foreground because it is these relational contexts that are at the heart of Anglo-Saxon society as seen in the poems and stories which reproduced it. The institutions of family determined and/or reproduced localised or personal attitudes towards gender, age, status and identity; and so an understanding of family and relational archaeology is essential: it is the keystone in the construction of a social approach that encapsulates the complexity of the lived past.