

## The Early Christian Landscape of East Anglia\*

RICHARD HOGGETT

### *Introduction*

This paper explores aspects of the historical and archaeological evidence for the coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon East Anglia with a particular focus on the wide-scale restructuring of the landscape that the conversion precipitated (Fig. 11.1). In order to establish the historical framework within which these events sit, it begins with an examination of the evidence presented by Bede in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Bede draws our attention to some of the ecclesiastical sites established by the early churchmen; a broader consideration of the conversion-period landscape reveals many important sites that are not mentioned in the surviving historical sources. In particular, disused Roman enclosures and topographically distinct locations can be demonstrated to have been of particular significance to the conversion process. The coming of Christianity also caused a great upheaval in the sites chosen for cemeteries, argued to be a direct result of a changing attitude towards the dead, which resulted in the integration of cemeteries and settlements during the Middle Saxon period. Finally, this paper offers some suggestions about how we might take the study of the conversion-period landscape further.

### *The Historical Framework*

One of the main themes of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the gradual conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms – a feat most often achieved via royal patronage, the establishment of the episcopal sees and the encouragement of missionary activity.<sup>1</sup> East Anglia was no exception and Bede emphasises the role

\* This paper is based on doctoral research undertaken at the School of History, University of East Anglia, between 2002 and 2007. The work was funded by a post-graduate scholarship from the School of History and I am grateful to my supervisors, Prof. Tom Williamson and Prof. Stephen Church. Plates XI.1, XI.2, XI.3 and Fig. 11.2 are reproduced with the permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service.

<sup>1</sup> Leslie Barnard, 'Bede and Eusebius as Church historians', in *Famulus Christi*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London, 1976), 106–24; Robert Markus, *Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical History* (Jarrow, 1975).



Figure 11.1. Sites mentioned in the text.

that the East Anglian kings played in the Christianisation of the region, the most important developments in his eyes being the establishment of the bishopric at *Dommoc* and the encouragement of the missionary Fursa.<sup>2</sup> Yet we must proceed with caution, for Bede was primarily a theologian and his motives for writing the *HE* were more than simply to provide an historical account, as we would

<sup>2</sup> *HE*, II,15; III, 19.

understand it, of the English Church.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, we must be wary of taking the historical framework Bede presented at face value, but at the same time we must make the most of what information we do have.

It is clear from the text of the *HE* that very little of Bede's East Anglian material was derived from East Anglian sources, instead being drawn from Northumbrian sources as well as those of Wessex, Essex and Kent. Bede does not appear to have been in contact with any of the East Anglian bishops, and his episcopal lists and diocesan history doubtless came direct from Canterbury.<sup>4</sup> First-hand accounts were reportedly provided by Abbot Esi (about whom nothing else is known) and King Ealdwulf, while Bede's account of Fursa was clearly derived from a copy of the *Vita Fursae* in his possession.<sup>5</sup> Far from providing a comprehensive account of the East Anglian conversion, in Kirby's words 'Bede's account of the kingdom is fragmentary, the traditions scattered in time and space'.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, there are few other East Anglian sources to which we can refer, meaning that although the veracity of the material within the *HE* can be questioned in this fashion, it is still the only source available to us.

The first East Anglian king to come into contact with Christianity was Rædwald, who ruled the region in the first quarter of the seventh century and was baptised in Kent c.604.<sup>7</sup> Although a king in his own right, Rædwald was subordinate to Æthelberht of Kent at the time of his baptism and his acceptance of the new faith should perhaps be seen as much as a statement of allegiance as a genuine spiritual conversion. In either case, Rædwald's conversion did not last long and on returning to East Anglia he apparently lapsed, establishing a temple in which stood two altars, one to the Christian God and one for devils.<sup>8</sup> But was Rædwald really an apostate? Certainly, he did not adhere exclusively to his new faith, but he did not reject it outright either and it has been argued that Rædwald might have considered himself a Christian of sorts.<sup>9</sup> Whatever his personal circumstances, Christianity clearly did not become the dominant religion of East Anglia during his reign – no attempt was made to develop a diocesan infrastructure, for example – and if Rædwald was the individual buried

<sup>3</sup> James Campbell, 'Bede I', in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, ed. James Campbell (London, 1986), 1–28; Roger Ray, *Bede, Rhetoric, and the Creation of Christian Latin Culture* (Jarrow, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> David Kirby, 'Bede's native sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 48 (1966), 341–71.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica* (Oxford, 1896) I, pp. 163–8; *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum, 4: Passiones Vitaeque Sanctorum Aevi Merovingici*, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hannover, 1902), pp. 434–9.

<sup>6</sup> Kirby, 'Bede's native sources', p. 363.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Stenton, 'The East Anglian kings of the seventh century', in *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Peter Clemons (London, 1959), 43–52; David Dumville, 'The Anglian collection of royal genealogies and regnal lists', *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976), 23–50.

<sup>8</sup> *HE*, II, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Sam Newton, *The Reckoning of King Rædwald* (Colchester, 2003); William Kilbride, 'Why I feel cheated by the term "Christianisation"', *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 17.2 (2000), 1–17, at pp. 5–7.

in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, then those who buried him clearly did not consider him to be a Christian.<sup>10</sup>

Rædwald was succeeded by his surviving son, Eorpwald. In 627, Edwin of Northumbria converted to Christianity and, we are told, ‘he also persuaded Eorpwald, son of Rædwald and king of the East Angles, to abandon his idolatrous superstitions and, together with his kingdom, to accept the Christian faith and sacraments’.<sup>11</sup> By then Edwin had become an overlord in his own right and Eorpwald’s acceptance of Christianity should be viewed in the same context as Rædwald’s baptism under Æthelberht. Again, there is no evidence to suggest that the East Anglian kingdom was converted in anything more than a nominal sense under Eorpwald and his conversion was literally short-lived; he was assassinated not long afterwards.<sup>12</sup>

Following a period during which the kingship seems to have been lost to Rædwald’s family, Eorpwald was succeeded by his brother Sigeberht *c.*630. Described by Bede as ‘a good and religious man’<sup>13</sup> and ‘a devout Christian and a very learned man in all respects’,<sup>14</sup> Sigeberht had been in exile in Gaul during his brother’s reign, where he had become a Christian, and Bede states that ‘as soon as he began to reign he made it his business to see that the whole kingdom shared his faith’.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the reigns of his predecessors, that of Sigeberht saw the true beginning of the East Anglian conversion. Not only was the king a devout Christian himself, he also set a number of religious developments in motion, not least the creation of an East Anglian diocese.

Sigeberht was aided in his efforts by Felix, a Burgundian bishop sent to East Anglia by Archbishop Honorius, perhaps in response to a request from Sigeberht. In 630/1 Felix became the first Bishop of the East Angles and Sigeberht granted him the site of *Dommoec* to establish his bishopric.<sup>16</sup> Felix died seventeen years later and *Dommoec* remained the sole East Anglian see until *c.*673, when Archbishop Theodore divided the diocese and consecrated two bishops.<sup>17</sup> One bishopric continued at *Dommoec*, while a new see was established at Elmham.<sup>18</sup>

*Dommoec* is traditionally identified with the east-coast town of Dunwich,

<sup>10</sup> Howard Williams, ‘Death, memory and time: a consideration of mortuary practices at Sutton Hoo’, in *Time in the Middle Ages*, eds Chris Humphrey and W. Mark Ormrod (York, 2001), 35–71; Martin Carver and Christopher Fern, ‘The seventh-century burial rites and their sequence’, in *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context*, ed. Martin Carver (London, 2005), 283–313.

<sup>11</sup> *HE*, II,15.

<sup>12</sup> *HE*, II,15.

<sup>13</sup> *HE*, III,18.

<sup>14</sup> *HE*, II,15.

<sup>15</sup> *HE*, II,15.

<sup>16</sup> *HE*, II,15.

<sup>17</sup> *HE*, IV,5.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Rigold, ‘The Anglian cathedral of North Elmham, Norfolk’, *Medieval Archaeology* 6 (1962), 67–108; Peter Wade-Martins, *Excavations in North Elmham Park 1967–1972*, *East Anglian Archaeology* 9 (Gressenhall, 1980), pp. 3–11.

although this association is largely unfounded.<sup>19</sup> The descriptive terminology used by Bede and by the signatories of the Council of *Clovesho* of 803 suggests that *Dommoc* was, in fact, a site with a significant Roman past, and twelfth- and thirteenth-century documents clearly identify the site as lying at Felixstowe.<sup>20</sup> This evidence and comparative examples from elsewhere suggest that the episcopal see was actually founded within the walls of the Roman fort at Walton Castle, situated in the heartland of the East Anglian kings. Sadly, Walton Castle was eroded by the sea in the seventeenth century, meaning that one of the potentially most significant conversion-period archaeological sites has been lost to us.

The establishment of *Dommoc* was not the only step towards the Christianisation of the region which occurred during Sigeberht's reign. Bede records that Sigeberht also welcomed the Irish missionary Fursa to the kingdom and encouraged him to found a monastery at *Cnobheresburg*.<sup>21</sup> The location of *Cnobheresburg* is also unknown, but is almost universally thought to have been the Roman fort at Burgh Castle (Pl. XI.1). There is no strong evidence to suggest that this identification is correct, but it is clear from archaeological evidence that Burgh Castle was a site of considerable religious significance during the conversion period, whether it was founded by Fursa or not.<sup>22</sup>

We know that Fursa's missionary activities were by no means unique, for we hear of other missionaries at work in East Anglia, the most notable being Botolph, whose founding of a monastery at Iken is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 653.<sup>23</sup> Botolph is not mentioned in the *HE*, although Bede had almost certainly heard of him, and it is highly likely that Bede only included Fursa's story because he had access to a convenient source.<sup>24</sup>

Here then we begin to reach the limit of what can be inferred from the surviving documentary sources. Fortunately the corresponding archaeological record is very rich and a combination of historical, archaeological and landscape-based approaches yields far more significant results than any individual approach. Having been guided by the historical sources, we turn our attention to a recurring theme in the history of the conversion: the reuse of Roman enclosures.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Rigold, 'The supposed see of Dunwich', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 24 (1961), 55–9; Stuart Rigold, 'Further evidence about the site of "Dommoc"', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 37 (1974), 97–102; Jeremy Haslam, 'Dommoc and Dunwich: A Reappraisal', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 5 (1992), 41–5.

<sup>20</sup> *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, eds Arthur Haddan and William Stubbs (Oxford, 1871), III, pp. 546–7; James Campbell, 'Bede's words for places', in *Names, Words and Graves*, ed. Peter H. Sawyer (Leeds, 1979), 34–54, at p. 40; Rigold, 'The supposed see', pp. 57–8; Rigold, 'Further evidence', p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *HE*, III, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Johnson, *Burgh Castle, Excavations by Charles Green 1958–61*, *East Anglian Archaeology* 20 (Gressenhall, 1983), pp. 60–5.

<sup>23</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, A Collaborative Edition, Volume 7, MS. E*, ed. Susan Irvine (Cambridge, 2004), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *English Historical Documents c.500–1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, *Eng. Hist. Documents* I (2nd edn, London, 1979), pp. 758–70, at p. 759.



Plate XI.1. Burgh Castle looking west. Note the surviving walls of the fort to the left of the frame and the medieval parish church to the right of the frame. It would appear that the church was relocated when the fort was adapted into a castle in the eleventh century. © and reproduced with the permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service

### *The Reuse of Roman Enclosures*

The association between early ecclesiastical sites and extant Roman ruins has long been recognised, but why should such sites have been considered by early ecclesiastics to be suitable locations?<sup>25</sup> One traditional explanation is that they provided a ready source of quarried stone for new churches, yet this cannot be the case in East Anglia where the building of stone churches did not begin in earnest until the Late Saxon period.<sup>26</sup> The real explanation for the association is to be found in the symbolic connotations and *romanitas* that such structures would have held in the eyes of the Christian missionaries, many of whom were of Mediterranean extraction.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Rigold, 'Litus Romanum – the shore forts as mission stations', in *The Saxon Shore*, ed. David Johnston (York, 1977), 70–5; Richard Morris and Julia Roxan, 'Churches on Roman sites', in *Temples, Churches and Religion*, ed. Warwick Rodwell (Oxford, 1980), 175–209.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Morris, *The Church in British Archaeology* (York, 1983), pp. 43–5; Tim Eaton, *Plundering the Past: Roman Stonework in Medieval Britain* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 10–35.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Geake, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion-Period England c.600–c.850* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 121–2, 132–3; Helen Geake, 'Invisible kingdoms: the use of grave-goods in seventh-century England', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 10 (1999), 203–15, at pp. 209–12; Tyler Bell, 'Churches on Roman buildings: Christian associations and Roman masonry in Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeology* 42 (1998), 1–18, at pp. 5–8; Tyler Bell, *The Religious Reuse of Roman Structures in Early Medieval England* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 16–22.

It is clear that a number of the region's walled Roman enclosures played an instrumental part in the evangelisation of East Anglia, as they did in other parts of the country.<sup>28</sup> Once the early ecclesiastics had occupied these Roman enclosures they became missionary stations from which the holy men could begin their work within the local population. A strong case can be made for the Roman fort at Walton Castle having become the site of the episcopal see, from which the authority of the bishop radiated across the region. Further north, the pair of forts which flanked the estuary of the River Yare, Burgh Castle and Caister-on-Sea, each became the focus of a Christian community, the archaeological evidence for which is clear, albeit heavily disturbed.<sup>29</sup> Still further north, the Roman fort at Brancaster may also have housed such a community, although the evidence is currently less certain.<sup>30</sup>

A good indication of the degree of success enjoyed by the early missionaries is provided by the extent of the seventh- and eighth-century cemeteries exhibiting typical Christian burial rites associated with these Roman sites.<sup>31</sup> Excavations at Burgh Castle revealed a cemetery containing perhaps 200 burials, with many more probably lost to plough-damage (Pl. XI.1).<sup>32</sup> The intramural cemetery at Caister-on-Sea was perhaps of a similar size to that at Burgh Castle, while the extensive extramural cemetery was much larger, comprising hundreds or perhaps even thousands of burials.<sup>33</sup> The fort at Brancaster has not been extensively excavated, but ploughed-up human bone might suggest the presence of a similar cemetery here.<sup>34</sup> It can be assumed that one or more cemeteries also formed part of the episcopal complex at Walton Castle.

From the sheer quantity of burials discovered it would seem that each of these missionary stations had a zone of influence which extended far beyond its walls, with individuals from the surrounding area being buried within or close to the fort. This interpretation is supported by the fact that these cemeteries contained a mixture of males and females ranging in age from childhood to old age, indicating that the cemeteries catered for whole communities, rather than any particular section of society.

Although no traces of missionary churches have been found in association with any of these cemeteries, something of the kind must surely have once existed (Pl. XI.1). In many parts of the country such churches were built of

<sup>28</sup> Bell, 'Churches on Roman buildings'; Bell, *The Religious Reuse*.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Burgh Castle*; Margaret Darling with David Gurney, *Caister-on-Sea Excavations by Charles Green, 1951–55*, *East Anglian Archaeology* 60 (Gressenhall, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Derek Edwards and Christopher Green, 'The Saxon Shore fort and settlement at Brancaster, Norfolk', *The Saxon Shore*, ed. David Johnston (York, 1977), 21–9; John Hinchcliffe with Christopher Green, *Excavations at Brancaster 1974 and 1977*, *East Anglian Archaeology* 23 (Gressenhall, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Richard Hoggett, 'Charting conversion: burial as a barometer of belief', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 14 (2005), 28–37.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Burgh Castle*.

<sup>33</sup> Darling with Gurney, *Caister-on-Sea*.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards and Green, 'The Saxon Shore fort'.

stone and many continued to develop on the same site into the medieval period.<sup>35</sup> There are no stone-built conversion-period churches in East Anglia, and their absence here may be explained by the organic nature of the original structures and the post-depositional disturbance which occurred at each of the sites. The East Anglian dioceses were disrupted by the Viking incursions of the tenth century and the fact that only the later diocese of Elmham was re-founded indicates that *Domnoc* had diminished greatly since its seventh-century heyday.<sup>36</sup> Despite this there is historical evidence to suggest that a church survived within the walls of Walton Castle until the eleventh century.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, both Burgh Castle and Caister-on-Sea appear to have floundered during the Late Saxon period and it is possible that they too fell victim to the Vikings, either directly or via precautionary measures taken against attack from the sea. We are left with only the most tantalising glimpses of their former glory.

The discussion so far might be taken to suggest that only Roman enclosures became missionary stations and that there were only a handful of East Anglian examples, but this was not the case. Roman sites were clearly attractive to the first wave of Christian missionaries, but that is not to say that they were occupied to the exclusion of all other sites. Many other sites were also put to a Christian use during the course of the conversion.

#### *Other Enclosures and 'Isolated' Sites*

In the absence of an appropriate Roman enclosure, other earthwork enclosures or a suitably defined topographical setting were often chosen for missionary centres.<sup>38</sup> Extant Iron Age earthworks were reoccupied and put to ecclesiastical use, such as was the case at Tasburgh in south Norfolk, where the parish church sits within an Iron Age enclosure which excavation has shown to contain much evidence for Middle and Late Saxon occupation (Pl. XI.2).<sup>39</sup> A similar situation might also be in evidence at Burgh in south-east Suffolk, where the church stands within a ploughed-out enclosure,<sup>40</sup> and at Thornham in north-

<sup>35</sup> Bell, 'Churches on Roman buildings'; Bell, *The Religious Reuse*.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, 'The pre-Viking-Age church in East Anglia', *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972), 1–22, at p. 1; Tim Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 72–6.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley West, 'The excavation of Walton Priory', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology* 33.2 (1974), 131–52, at pp. 141–9; John Fairclough and Steven Plunkett, 'Drawings of Walton Castle and other monuments in Walton and Felixstowe', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 39.4 (2000), 419–59, at pp. 451–2.

<sup>38</sup> John Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters: a topographical review', in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, eds John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester, 1992), 226–66, at pp. 227–35.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Rogerson and Andrew Lawson, 'The earthwork enclosure at Tasburgh', in *The Iron Age Forts of Norfolk*, eds John Davies, Tony Gregory, Andrew Lawson, Robert Rickett and Andrew Rogerson (Gressenhall, 1986), 31–58, at pp. 31–5, 57–8.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Martin, *Burgh: Iron Age and Roman Enclosure*, East Anglian Archaeology 40 (Ipswich, 1988).



Plate XI.2. Tasburgh fort looking south. The hedgeline in the foreground follows the earthworks of the fort. Note the parish church within the enclosure to the top of the frame. © and reproduced with the permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service

west Norfolk, where a conversion-period cemetery was found within a square earthwork enclosure.<sup>41</sup>

It has often been observed that a number of Anglo-Saxon churches are situated on low hills, promontories or islands in marshy floodplains.<sup>42</sup> Such sites, both topographically separate from the surrounding landscape and yet fully integrated into riverine communication routes, were ideally suited to those who were seeking to combine a traditional life of monastic devotion with the proactive conversion of the surrounding population.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the best known East Anglian example (although one not mentioned by Bede) is Botolph's minster at *Icanho*, the foundation of which is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 653.<sup>44</sup> *Icanho* has been firmly identified with Iken, in south-east Suffolk, where the church is situated on a spur of land which projects into the river, and excavation has confirmed the Middle Saxon foundation date of the

<sup>41</sup> Tony Gregory and David Gurney, *Excavations at Thornham, Warham, Wighton and Caistor St Edmund, Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 30 (Gressenhall, 1986), pp. 1–60.

<sup>42</sup> Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon minsters', pp. 227–35; Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation*, pp. 52–6.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Cambridge and David Rollason, 'The pastoral organisation of the Anglo-Saxon church: a review of the "Minster Hypothesis"', *Early Medieval Europe* 4.1 (1995), 87–104, at pp. 93–4; Sarah Foot, 'What was an early Anglo-Saxon monastery?', in *Monastic Studies*, ed. Judith Loades (Bangor, 1990), 48–57, at p. 50.

<sup>44</sup> See n. 23.

church.<sup>45</sup> A similarly isolated topographic situation was exploited at Burrow Hill, Butley, some 10km south of Iken, where excavation revealed a Middle Saxon cemetery containing over 200 inhumations.<sup>46</sup>

A number of island and promontory sites have also been identified on the west Norfolk fen edge, such as at Wormegay, where field-walking has revealed a substantial scatter of Middle Saxon pottery adjacent to the church, and at Bawsey, where field-walking, metal-detecting and limited excavation have revealed evidence for seventh-century occupation.<sup>47</sup> The major Middle Saxon site excavated at Brandon was similarly located on an island in a river valley and, in addition, demonstrated that it was possible for the ecclesiastical elements of a settlement – in this case a timber church and two cemeteries – to be fully integrated with river-borne trade, arable and pastoralism, and light industry.<sup>48</sup>

The sites referred to here are many and varied, but they are linked by a number of common themes: their symbolic connotations, similar locations, material remains and, in particular, their association with Christian burials. Indeed, burials are one of the most visible classes of evidence for the conversion period and we now turn to examine the place of the dead in the conversion-period landscape.

### *Cemeteries in the Landscape*

The locations chosen for the burial of the dead were not arbitrary and cemeteries are a particularly good indicator of religious change. The contrasting types of site used for pre- and post-conversion cemeteries and the differing relationships between cemeteries and settlements of those periods suggest that the changes which occurred during the conversion period also affected where the dead were placed in the landscape.

Inhumation, cremation and mixed-rite cemeteries all existed in Early Saxon East Anglia and they varied greatly in the number of burials which they contained. It has frequently been observed that Early Saxon cemeteries were sited on higher ground, hilltops or terraces above river valleys, and that, while Early Saxon settlements and cemeteries might lie in close proximity, they remained separate entities in the landscape. It has also been observed that many cemeteries may have served large geographical areas containing numerous settlements.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Stanley West, Norman Scarfe and Rosemary Cramp, 'Iken, St Botolph, and the Coming of East Anglian Christianity', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* 35.4 (1984), 279–301.

<sup>46</sup> Valerie Fenwick, 'Insula de Burgh: excavations at Burrow Hill, Butley, Suffolk, 1978–1981', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 3 (1984), 35–54.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Rogerson, 'Six Middle Anglo-Saxon sites in West Norfolk', in *Markets in Early Medieval Europe*, eds Tim Pestell and Katharina Ulmschneider (Macclesfield, 2003), 110–21.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Carr, Andrew Tester and Peter Murphy, 'The Middle-Saxon settlement at Staunch Meadow, Brandon', *Antiquity* 62 (1988), 371–7.

<sup>49</sup> Catherine Hills, 'The archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England in the pagan period: a review', *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), 297–329, at p. 310; Howard Williams, 'Placing the dead:

Middle Saxon cemeteries, by contrast, are not frequently excavated and, as such, are more poorly understood. This scarcity is partly due to their relative archaeological invisibility, as the vast majority of Middle Saxon cemeteries were unfurnished, but is largely owing to changes in the landscape setting of cemeteries which occurred during the Middle Saxon period. These changes resulted in most becoming obscured by later settlement features, in particular churchyards and churches. The exceptions to this pattern are those cemeteries which contain so-called 'Final Phase' burials, generally interpreted as the Christian successors to Early Saxon cemeteries, founded on fresh sites in the seventh century and eventually superseded by a churchyard located elsewhere.<sup>50</sup>

This 'Final Phase' model has proved very popular and is widely accepted, but it is not without its critics. There were undoubtedly significant changes in the types of grave-goods deposited during the seventh century (argued to reflect the Christian beliefs of those using the cemeteries),<sup>51</sup> but the argument for a linear development of cemetery types – an Early Saxon cemetery succeeded by a 'Final Phase' cemetery and replaced in turn by a churchyard – simply cannot be maintained. This is not least because the total number of 'Final Phase' inhumations falls far short of representing even a fraction of the seventh-century population, meaning that the vast majority of seventh-century burials remain unaccounted for.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, so great is this disparity that 'Final Phase' burial must be viewed as the exception rather than the rule and other explanations for the whereabouts of the seventh-century dead must be sought.

The environs of *Venta Icenorum*, the Roman town at Caistor St Edmund, south-west of Norwich, provide an illustrative case of many of the arguments presented thus far. Roman occupation of the town continued into the fifth century and a degree of continuity into the Early Saxon period is attested by the presence of two Early Saxon cemeteries on the hillsides overlooking the town (Pl. XI.3).<sup>53</sup> Both cemeteries contained substantial numbers of cremations and inhumations and both fell out of use in the early seventh century, in accordance with patterns observed elsewhere in East Anglia. Yet, it is clear that

investigating the location of wealthy barrow burials in seventh-century England', in *Grave Matters*, ed. Martin Rundkvist (Oxford, 1999), 57–86; Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud, 2000), p. 152; Andrew Richardson, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Kent* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 69–77.

<sup>50</sup> Andy Boddington, 'Models of burial, settlement and worship: the final phase reviewed', in *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: A Reappraisal*, ed. E. Southworth (Stroud, 1990), 177–99; Morris, *Church in British Archaeology*, pp. 53–9; Geake, *Use of Grave-Goods*.

<sup>51</sup> Sally Crawford, 'Anglo-Saxon women, furnished burial, and the Church', in *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford, 2003), 1–12; Sally Crawford, 'Votive deposition, religion and the Anglo-Saxon furnished burial rite', *World Archaeology* 36 (2004), 87–102; Hoggett, 'Charting conversion: burial as a barometer of belief', pp. 28–37.

<sup>52</sup> Helen Geake, 'Persistent problems in the study of conversion-period burials in England', in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, eds Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds (London, 2002), 144–55, at pp. 144–8.

<sup>53</sup> John Myres and Barbara Green, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of Caistor-by-Norwich and Markshall, Norfolk* (London, 1973).



Plate XI.3. *Venta Icenorum* looking north-east. Note the parish church within the town's walls. One Early Saxon cemetery lay in the wooded area to the right of the frame and another just to the left of the frame. Harford Farm lies *c.*1km to the north-west of the town. © and reproduced with the permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service

abandonment was not the cause of these cemeteries' disuse, for Middle Saxon settlement evidence has been discovered immediately outside the town wall and new cemeteries were founded in their place. It would seem that the coming of Christianity was the ultimate reason behind their demise.

*Venta Icenorum* was a walled Roman enclosure, albeit a much larger one than many of the examples considered here, and would have been attractive to newly arrived Christian missionaries, all the more so if any administrative capacity or residual occupation remained at the site.<sup>54</sup> The parish church still stands within the walls of the Roman town, in a position typical of a church founded as a part of the missionary process (Pl. XI.3). As we have seen, if the church were founded as a part of the conversion process then it should also have had a concomitant cemetery of Burgh Castle/Caister-on-Sea type. Here then would be one of the successors to the pre-Christian Early Saxon cemeteries. Yet, the churchyard within the walls is only a part of the story.

<sup>54</sup> William Bowden and David Bescoby, 'The plan of *Venta Icenorum* (Caistor-by-Norwich): interpreting a new geophysical survey', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 21 (2008), 324–35.

On a hilltop to the north-west of the Roman town a seventh-century 'Final Phase' cemetery has also been excavated at Harford Farm.<sup>55</sup> Some of the graves were richly furnished and contained artefacts which can be argued to display a Christian influence; it must be concluded that both of these seventh-century cemeteries were used simultaneously by the local population. A select few of the population were buried in the 'Final Phase' manner at Harford Farm, but most must have been buried in newly founded 'churchyard-type' cemeteries such as that presumed to lie within the walls of the town. Both of these new cemeteries would have been employed for a while, but the cemetery at Harford Farm fell out of use in the early years of the eighth century, while the churchyard survives within the town to this day.

This raises two significant points. First, rather than following a simple linear development, it would appear that the Early Saxon cemeteries were sometimes superseded by a choice of Middle Saxon cemeteries and that 'Final Phase' cemeteries and more conventional Christian 'churchyard' cemeteries existed side by side. Second, the *Venta Icenorum* example demonstrates that if a church founded in the seventh-century remains on its original site, all of the evidence for these earlier phases is likely to have been disturbed by and buried beneath up to 1400 years' worth of inhumations and ecclesiastical rebuilding.

#### *Cemeteries within Settlements*

Although several examples of certain and probable missionary stations have been discussed here, recognisable examples are not particularly numerous and they alone cannot have accommodated all of the Middle Saxon East Anglian dead. We are once again brought back to the fact that Middle Saxon inhumation cemeteries are not common archaeological discoveries. In seeking an explanation for this paucity, it is particularly telling that all of the excavated East Anglian Middle Saxon cemeteries were integrated into settlements of one kind or another. This indicates that the separation of settlement and cemetery which characterised the Early Saxon landscape had ceased to occur.

It is widely accepted that a great restructuring of the landscape occurred during the Middle Saxon period, not least the coalescence of the numerous, comparatively transitory Early Saxon settlements into more permanent settlements. A number of explanations for these changes, primarily of an economic, social or environmental nature, have been suggested and many commentators have also attributed the observed fusion of cemeteries and settlements to these same factors.<sup>56</sup> But where might the impetus for this change of attitude towards the placing of the dead have originated?

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth Penn, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass, 1989–91. Part II: The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Harford Farm, Caistor St Edmund, Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 92 (Gressenhall, 2000).

<sup>56</sup> Chris Arnold and Peter Wardle, 'Early medieval settlement patterns in England', *Medieval Archaeology* 25 (1981), 145–9; Martin Welch, 'Rural settlement patterns in the Early

It is clear that the creation of seventh-century cemeteries was intimately bound up with the abandonment of the old cemeteries and this abandonment has, in turn, been argued to be a direct result of the conversion to Christianity. Therefore, the fusion of cemeteries and settlements during this period can also be argued to be attributable to the same process. This coming together of the living and the dead is a characteristic of Christian practice most commonly seen in the conjunction of church and churchyard, yet it is also seen in the incorporation of Christian inhumation cemeteries into Middle Saxon settlements.<sup>57</sup> It is difficult to identify the religious motivations behind this integration by archaeological means alone, but one explanation might be found in the Christian belief in intercession.<sup>58</sup> The integration of the Christian dead into a settlement is a physical reflection of the fact that, under Christianity, the dead remained an important part of the community and Christian cemeteries became a focus of remembrance and worship.<sup>59</sup>

The sites chosen for Middle Saxon execution cemeteries also emphasise the changing attitude towards the appropriate location of the dead in newly Christianised societies.<sup>60</sup> The reuse of extant prehistoric monuments as foci for Early Saxon burials is a trend which has long been recognised and the deliberate association of Early Saxon dead with these monuments is often interpreted as an attempt to forge a link with the past, thereby legitimising authority and defining territory in the present.<sup>61</sup> By the Middle Saxon period these same barrows had come to be regarded as unholy and liminal places, primarily, it seems, because

and Middle Anglo-Saxon periods', *Landscape History* 7 (1985), 13–25; Richard Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* (New York, 1989), pp. 43–68; Helena Hamerow, 'Settlement mobility and the "Middle Saxon Shift": rural settlements and settlement patterns in Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), 1–17; Tom Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes* (Macclesfield, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Boddington, 'Models of burial'; Elisabeth Zadora-Rio, 'The making of churchyards and parish territories in the early-medieval landscape of France and England in the 7th–12th centuries: a reconsideration', *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003), 1–19; Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 26–56; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 228–45; Sam Turner, *Making A Christian Landscape* (Exeter, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Phillipe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (London, 1981), pp. 29–40; Patrick Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (London, 1994), pp. 77–87.

<sup>59</sup> Donald Bullough, 'Burial, community and belief in the early medieval West', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald (Oxford, 1983), 177–201; Helen Gittos, 'Creating the sacred: Anglo-Saxon rites for consecrating cemeteries', in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, eds Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds (London, 2002), 195–208; Thompson, *Dying and Death*, pp. 170–206.

<sup>60</sup> Helen Geake, 'Burial practice in seventh- and eighth-century England', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), 83–94, at pp. 87–9; Andrew Reynolds, 'The definition and ideology of Anglo-Saxon execution sites and cemeteries', in *Death and Burial in Medieval Europe*, eds Guy De Boe and Frans Verhaeghe (Zellik, 1997) II, 33–41.

<sup>61</sup> Sam Lucy, 'The significance of mortuary ritual in the political manipulation of the landscape', *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 11.1 (1992), 93–103; Howard Williams, 'Monuments and the past in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *World Archaeology* 30 (1998), 90–108; Williams, 'Placing the dead'.

of their association with pagan burials.<sup>62</sup> Whereas the revered dead of the Early Saxon period had been buried in locations often at some remove from centres of population, the traditional cemeteries became places to be feared and were therefore considered to be suitable sites for executions, their peripheral location physically mirroring the social exclusion of the executed individuals. East Anglian examples have been found at South Acre in west Norfolk and also at Sutton Hoo.<sup>63</sup> This reversal again emphasises the fact that, as a direct consequence of the introduction of a Christian ideology, the appropriate location for the revered dead in the Middle Saxon period was considered to be ‘closer to home’, in a cemetery that formed an integral part of a settlement.

### *Finding the Evidence*

Tellingly, all of the excavated examples of Middle Saxon settlements and cemeteries referred to here are from sites where the settlement subsequently faltered, was relocated or was abandoned, leaving the Middle Saxon phases undisturbed. At sites where such settlements continued to thrive we are unable to study the earlier phases directly because they are sealed beneath later buildings or have been badly disturbed by subsequent development. Such observations lead to the inevitable conclusion that the vast majority of the archaeological evidence for early Christianity lies beneath later settlements, and in particular beneath later churches and their churchyards. How, then, are we to study it?

Whereas the area immediately beneath a church is effectively reachable only via partial excavation of the interior of the building, the surrounding churchyard is at once both more accessible and considerably more disturbed. Stray finds from churchyards can provide a useful indication of Anglo-Saxon activity on the site, yet stray finds are just that – stray – and as such their presence or absence, while informative, is not necessarily representative of any wider pattern of occupation. Fortunately, in East Anglia we are able to cast our net more widely, as the changes in the settlement pattern that occurred during the medieval period mean that many East Anglian churches are not now hemmed in by development. Phenomena such as common-edge drift and settlement desertion have resulted in many churches now being surrounded by arable fields; in many instances these fields have been investigated as part of systematic field-walking surveys.<sup>64</sup>

A large number of church sites have been investigated in this manner, albeit often as parts of larger surveys, and the presence or absence of surface scatters

<sup>62</sup> Sarah Semple, ‘A fear of the past: the place of the prehistoric burial mound in the ideology of Middle and Later Anglo-Saxon England’, *World Archaeology* 30 (1998), 109–26; Nicola Whyte, ‘The deviant dead in the Norfolk landscape’, *Landscapes* 4.1 (2003), 24–39; Andrew Reynolds, ‘Definition and ideology’, in *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context*, ed. Martin Carver (London, 2005), pp. 347–9.

<sup>63</sup> *Sutton Hoo*, ed. Carver; John Wymer, *Barrow Excavations in Norfolk, 1984–88*, *East Anglian Archaeology* 77 (Gressenhall, 1996), pp. 58–92.

<sup>64</sup> Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, pp. 167–71; Tom Williamson, *England’s Landscape: East Anglia* (London, 2006), pp. 51–6.

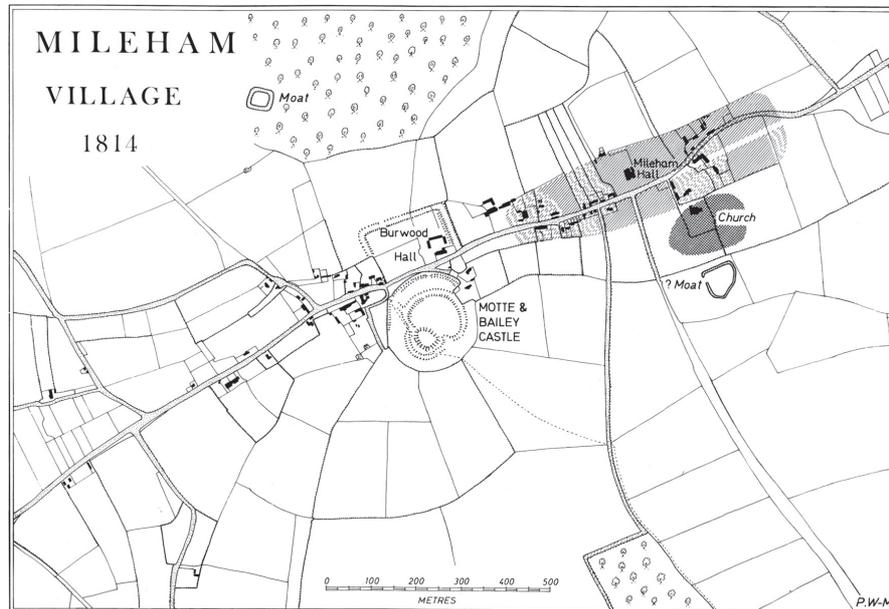


Figure 11.2. Mileham in 1814. Double hatching indicates the scatter of Middle Saxon Ipswich Ware surrounding the church; single hatching indicates the scatter of Late Saxon Thetford Ware to the north. (Reproduced from Wade-Martins, *Village Sites in Launditch Hundred* with the permission of Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service)

of Middle Saxon Ipswich Ware and Late Saxon Thetford-type Ware can be used to draw conclusions about their foundation dates.<sup>65</sup> The evidence is dif-

<sup>65</sup> Alan Davison, 'The distribution of medieval settlement in West Harling', *Norfolk Archaeology* 38 (1983), 329–36; Alan Davison, 'Little Hockham', *Norfolk Archaeology* 40 (1987), 84–93; Alan Davison, *The Evolution of Settlement in Three Parishes in South-East Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 49 (Gressenhall, 1990); Alan Davison, 'The field archaeology of the Mannington and Wolterton estates', *Norfolk Archaeology* 42 (1995), 160–84; Alan Davison, 'The archaeology of the parish of West Acre. Part 1: field survey evidence', *Norfolk Archaeology* 44 (2003), 202–21; Alan Davison with Brian Cushion, 'The archaeology of the Hargham Estate', *Norfolk Archaeology* 43 (1999), 257–74; Alan Davison, Barbara Green and Bill Milligan, *Illington: A Study of a Breckland Parish and its Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*, East Anglian Archaeology 63 (Gressenhall, 1993); A. Lawson, *The Archaeology of Witton*, East Anglian Archaeology 18 (Gressenhall, 1983); John Newman, 'The Late Roman and Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern in the Sandlings of Suffolk', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), 25–38; John Newman, 'Survey in the Deben Valley', in *Sutton Hoo: A Seventh-Century Princely Burial Ground and its Context*, ed. Martin Carver (London, 2005), 477–88; Andrew Rogerson, Alan Davison, David Pritchard and Robert Silvester, *Barton Bendish and Caldecote*, East Anglian Archaeology 80 (Gressenhall, 1997); Robert Silvester, *The Fenland Project Number 3: Marshland and the Nar Valley, Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 45 (Gressenhall, 1988); Robert Silvester, *The Fenland Project Number 4: The Wissey Embayment and the Fen Causeway, Norfolk*, East Anglian Archaeology 52 (Gressenhall, 1991);

difficult to interpret, as many churches are associated with both Middle and Late Saxon scatters, but when this class of evidence is combined with others, such as topography or associations with existing sites, a more comprehensive picture emerges.

Churches solely associated with Late Saxon scatters can be argued to be Late Saxon foundations resulting from the recognised proliferation of parish churches in this period.<sup>66</sup> However, there are some churches that are only associated with Middle Saxon material, usually because the Late Saxon scatter lies elsewhere, and in these instances we can say with some certainty that the church itself must be a Middle Saxon foundation. Such examples are rare, but Wade-Martins' study of village sites in central Norfolk's Launditch hundred revealed that in the parish of Mileham the church stood within a distinct Ipswich Ware scatter, while the Late Saxon scatter lay to the north along the main road (Fig. 11.2).<sup>67</sup>

Many more of the churches are associated with both Middle and Late Saxon artefact scatters. In these instances the artefact scatters do not allow us to say whether the church was founded during the Middle or Late Saxon period, but the presence of the Middle Saxon material indicates that we are at least dealing with a settlement with seventh-century origins. Given the arguments developed here, it is extremely likely that these Middle Saxon settlements contained a Christian cemetery of some kind, possibly with an accompanying church.

### *Conclusions*

The widespread landscape upheavals caused by the conversion indicate that the new religion had an impact on both the living and the dead. The nature and location of cemeteries changed dramatically, while the constituent parts of settlements were also altered by the introduction of a funerary element. Completely new classes of site were introduced to the Middle Saxon landscape in the form of missionary churches; islands and peninsulas were populated; and, for the first time in two centuries, Roman masonry structures were reoccupied.

The progress of the conversion can also be read in the changing landscape context of cemeteries and in particular in the changing relationship between cemeteries and settlements. Whereas pre-Christian settlements and cemeteries had remained separate landscape entities, under the influence of Christianity settlements and cemeteries converged to become a unified whole, providing us with a vivid material indication of the progress of the conversion.

Field-walking also gives us an insight into early Christian foundations which later became parish churches. If each of the church sites associated with a Middle Saxon scatter possessed a Middle Saxon Christian cemetery this would

Peter Wade-Martins, *Village Sites in Launditch Hundred*, East Anglian Archaeology 10 (Gressenhall, 1980).

<sup>66</sup> Richard Morris, *Churches in the Landscape* (London, 1989), pp. 140–67.

<sup>67</sup> Wade-Martins, *Village Sites in Launditch Hundred*, pp. 40–8.

suggest that much of the Middle Saxon population became wholly and actively Christian during the seventh century. If this interpretation is taken to its extreme and it is suggested that all of these sites might have had Middle Saxon churches as well, then we are confronted with the possibility of a very densely populated seventh-century ecclesiastical landscape indeed. Even a more moderate view which assumes that only some of these sites had churches suggests that the number of seventh-century foundations would still be higher than might traditionally have been expected.

All of which conclusions contradict many traditionally held views on the speed with which Christianity took hold in Anglo-Saxon East Anglia and the extent to which it spread through society. Far from supporting the notion of a nominal conversion on the part of the king which had little effect on the lower echelons of society, the archaeological evidence and the evidence of the landscape itself suggest that, even in the mid-seventh century, the conversion of East Anglia was already a significant and wide-reaching process which was widespread at a grassroots level and which changed the nature of the Anglo-Saxon landscape forever.