The Archaeology of the East Anglian Conversion, by Richard Hoggett (Woodbridge: The Boydell P., 2010; pp. 207. £50).

In what represents the revival of an old orthodoxy, this book proclaims that the conversion should be isolated as the principal cause of transitions in Anglo-Saxon burial practices over the seventh to ninth centuries AD. Two of the author's conclusions will suffice to give a flavour of the argument: 'The extent of the rite [cremation] and the speed of its decline suggest that the conversion process was quick and widespread at a grass-roots level' (p. 114); 'In the early years of the conversion the teachings of the church *did* [author's emphasis] have profound effects on burial practices and funerary topography' (p. 142). Bristling with statements of this kind, Hoggett's thesis is certainly provocative. But, in a region of Anglo-Saxon England as threadbare in historical coverage as East Anglia, can the material record really be aggregated to deliver a 'bottom-up' narrative of the Christian conversion characterised by rapid evangelisation and a swift realignment of religious affiliation among the masses?

The book begins by reviewing how archaeologists have approached the complex issue of defining religious behaviour in the material record, with a section devoted to models which attempt to elucidate the mechanics of religious conversion. This gallop across relevant conceptual terrain is followed by the construction of an historical framework for the East Anglian kingdom informed by Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*: the progress of the conversion is charted through three developmental stages (familiarisation, active mission and consolidation), and the identity of key sites (those of the early sees of *Dommoc* and Elmham included) placed under critical archaeological scrutiny. The meat of the book considers the archaeological evidence under three chapters (the role of 'missionary stations', 'burial and belief' and the 'landscape of conversion') covering changes in the spatial relationship between cemeteries and settlements and the foundation of the first generation of local churches.

Hoggett's thesis certainly captivates as one is guided through the startling richness and diversity of the conversion-period archaeology of East Anglia—a region which, in addition to the spectacle of Sutton Hoo, is now represented by an impressive and rapidly expanding corpus of excavated rural settlements and which possesses a landscape sown thickly with scatters of datable Anglo-Saxon pottery, coinage and metalwork. But scratch beneath the surface and Hoggett's argument begins to unravel. One of the chief weaknesses concerns an uncritical handling of archaeological dating evidence. Fundamental is the failure to acknowledge the implications of a recent re-dating of Ipswich-ware pottery—the key dating-tool for Mid-Saxon archaeology in East Anglia—now thought to have entered production at the start of the eighth century, not *c.*650 AD as previously estimated. When this recalibration is taken into account, much of the seventh-century activity proposed by Hoggett—the foundation for his fast-paced conversion narrative—disappears from view, a point of greatest relevance to his hypothesised early stratum of local churches dated with respect to surrounding pottery scatters. Further chronological problems arise in his interpretation of burial activity as encountered at putative 'missionary stations', such as Burgh Castle and Caister-on-Sea, occupying the sites of Late Roman fortifications. Without back-up from radiocarbon dating, yet with instances of intercutting graves demonstrating multiple generations of burial, there is no knowing when and for how long such cemeteries were in

use during the Anglo-Saxon period: it is surely stretching the evidence beyond breaking-point to state that 'each missionary station had a zone of influence which extended far beyond its walls, with many individuals from the surrounding area being buried within or close to the fort' (p. 78).

More fundamental are problems arising from the author's desire to divorce religious ideology from a series of interconnected transformations over the seventh to ninth centuries, the impacts of which on Anglo-Saxon communities and landscapes was all-encompassing. Hoggett's monocausal explanation serves simultaneously to dislocate religion from the material practices of everyday life and to simplify the Anglo-Saxon conversion into a clash between two competing monolithic ideologies: as a consequence, little is made of the socially-embedded nature of religious expression or the ideological flexibility proposed by recent models of early medieval religious conversion. The constraints of this approach render many aspects of the discussion unconvincing, particularly with regard to changing burial rites, where the author falls back on largely discredited paradigms—including the argument that cremation is inherently more 'pagan' than inhumation and that the social identity of those buried in so-called 'final-phase' cemeteries was shaped, first and foremost, by a shared experience of Christian baptism.

Similar problems resurface when the landscape context of burial is placed under the spotlight, specifically instances of isolated burials and grave-clusters discovered within the bounds of excavated rural settlements—an emerging theme in Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology which picks up on the complex and fluid burial geography that is now recognised as a feature of the seventh to ninth centuries AD. On the basis of this new understanding, one is hard pressed to view such cases as proto-churchyards constituting an early attempt by the church to regulate burial among the lay populace, documentary evidence for which is totally lacking before the tenth century. In spite of arguments that the author gives to the contrary, it is impossible to interpret such behaviour in isolation from a widespread reconfiguration in rural settlement patterns over the later Anglo-Saxon period, given that this process generated the very spatial framework through which new settings for the dead gained social meaning and agency.

On a more positive note, Hoggett's study does at least strive towards the interdisciplinary engagement surely required if we are to better understand how the Anglo-Saxon conversion played itself out among the sub-aristocratic social classes. A more sensitive and critical handling of the archaeological evidence would have no doubt portrayed the East Anglian conversion as a rather more complex and drawn-out process than the one documented here.

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doi:10.1093/ehr/ces147