



# The *Archaeological Journal*

## Book Reviews



**ANGLO-SAXON GRAVES AND GRAVE GOODS OF THE 6<sup>TH</sup> AND 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES AD: A CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK.** By Alex Bayliss, John Hines, Karen Høilund Nielsen, Gerry McCormac and Christopher Scull, edited by John Hines and Alex Bayliss. Pp. xix and 595, Illus 480. Oxbow Books (The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series, **33**). Price: £45.00. ISBN 978 190966 206 3.

Despite the wealth of material from furnished burial, there has been no comprehensive chronological framework for early Anglo-Saxon archaeology until now, a problem that has been easier to identify than resolve. Dependence on named periods, such as the 'Frankish Phase' and the 'Final Phase' of furnished burial, has perhaps skirted round the issue by allowing these fuzzily-dated, but sequenced terms, to hold sway. Concurrent intensive work on typology and reference to Continental chronologies has allowed us to sort our data plausibly without ever gaining a true grip on its potential. This English Heritage funded project, which commenced in 1997, faced these issues head-on; the results are presented in this rather intriguing volume of ten papers from a team at the forefront of research into the early Anglo-Saxons. The book, however, will not be an easy read for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of seriation, probability distributions, Bayesian statistics and correspondence analysis, but detailed scrutiny will pay dividends for future work on this period; indeed, it is clearly the intention of the authors that the work will have wider applicability to other archaeological periods and international geographical regions grappling with similar complexities.

By deploying the data from hundreds of the 'best' burials of the sixth, seventh and early eighth centuries (initially, from the period AD 570 to 720, but eventually bringing earlier burials into play as well), and applying a range of analytical techniques within a clearly defined research cycle, it is now possible to make clearer statements, not only about burial chronology, but also the changing social dynamics of the period. Of necessity, the contributors have had to review critically past research techniques and to apply the most recent analytical methods, adapting them to the attributes of the data, to produce a much-needed and sound chronological framework for the period.

As the introductory notes freely admit, there are no short cuts through this work, but the chapters are laid out systematically to assist the reader. First, the archaeological context is provided and key issues defined. The methods and modelling are clearly identified and a very useful overview of the project is given, featuring the issues encountered and the lessons learned (pp. 89–99). A full discussion is given of the scientific analyses of the human skeletal data, before moving on to the comprehensive typological revisions of the major object types (Chapter 5). Such revisions are an activity long overdue, despite the easy attractiveness and common usage of Swanton's 1974 spear typology (*A Corpus of*

*Anglo-Saxon Spear Types*), as well as later works by various scholars on the most frequent artefacts, such as shield bosses and buckles. This illustrated section is perhaps the most immediately useful part for the period specialist and non-specialist alike. Before now, each typology would stand alone, but here they are integrated with, and tested against, a series of other data sets, most notably the high-precision radiocarbon dating of the skeletal material. The graves have been divided and analyzed by gender in the first instance, as a clear separation between male and female artefact types is noted for this period. An interesting and open discussion on the discrepancies between the new refined chronology and that proposed by the numismatic evidence concludes the analytical papers (Chapter 9).

It is not until Chapter 10 that the authors allow themselves the pleasure of interpreting the meaning of their findings, and this is by far the most approachable and thought-provoking part of the volume. One critical outcome is to show that, rather than the AD 720s, the formal furnished burial rite ceased around the AD 680s: a phase that also encompassed the last flourish of high status female burials.

If one is to be critical of this volume, there are some issues with layout and the absence of column headings and an index. The smallness of font required to cram the data onto the page militates against its ease of assessment. The number of coding schema used can produce difficulties for the reader in following the detail of the arguments. If nothing else, this does demonstrate the need for a uniform identification code for each buried individual to allow for future cross-comparisons. Nevertheless, this is a significant work that challenges future researchers to test and augment its findings.

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