

Book Reviews

The Archaeology of the East Anglian Conversion

Richard Hoggett

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Triggered by two quotations - one from T. Insoll, who notes that "the relationship between archaeology and religion as having been one of neglect", and one from Tom Williamson saying that the challenge of understanding early Christian Norfolk is one for "archaeology to answer", Dr Richard Hoggett has produced a scholarly, deeply researched study with a massive bibliography that draws, inevitably, on a wealth of material from the two fields of archaeology and history of religion. The book focuses on the interlocking of these themes as they affected East Anglia from Siegberht (630-631), the "beginning of the East Anglian conversion proper", and Felix, the first East Anglian bishop, to the end of the Late Saxon period.

These two themes, which Hoggett ran side by side, very clearly throughout the whole study, are clearly related at every stage. The lack of documentary evidence from the early period of East Anglian history has meant that distant and not always contemporary sources such as Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English" had to be used for background material. This shortage of material has led to the question of how might we attempt to recognise concerns in the archaeological record of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia? What Hoggett terms the 'numinous' elements in these relationships were the rituals that can be unearthed from that record.

The discussion of the establishment of missionary stations, the former Roman sites later reused by the newly arrived churchmen, forms the next section. This includes a discussion of the evolution of the bishopric, minsters and parish churches. Gregory in 601AD laid out a vision of a Christian Britain using the earlier Roman layout, a vision of a continuation of Roman culture - Romanitas - as Hoggett terms it. The reuse of Burgh Castle, Caister-on-Sea and Caistor St Edmund, amongst Roman sites, all with Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, provides Hoggett's argument for there being focal points of Early Christian burials, though only in the case of Caistor St Edmund does a church lie within the earthworks. Many other sites called 'productive sites' such as Wormegay and Bawsey, are also quoted as Middle Saxon sites of both economic and religious importance.

This leads to the core chapter of the interpretation of finds from Anglo Saxon sites and the guidance they give as to the impact of Early Christian inhumations. Hoggett argues that the development of increasing numbers of inhumations is a major, if not the only, evidence of the spread of Christianity; and a valuable set of maps examines the balance of cremations and inhumations in a range of cemeteries. The changing nature of burial evidence is clearly illustrated by the contrasts between two Spong Cemetery graves. Most inhumations were clothed and female graves were concerned with dress and a remarkable range of ornaments such as beads, as shown in Spong 37, whereas male graves contained external items such as weapons, as at Spong 36. The final phase of burials was marked by the spread of Christian "Romanised" forms of grave goods and various crosses begin to appear and Hoggett notes that pectoral crosses, of "incontrovertible Christian significance" worn by upper class women, often showed similarities to some Sutton Hoo work. The Conversion is seen as visible in the burial record; evidence is that it was widespread and not merely the preserve of the upper classes.

Hoggett then moves to a study of the landscape as a whole and the relationship of cemeteries to settlements. So far churches have not been discovered in the early walled cemeteries but a number have been found outside the walls as at Burgh Castle. The East Anglian landscape is seen to have undergone a dramatic restructuring during the Middle Saxon period and some of these upheavals can be demonstrated to have occurred as a result of religious conversion. Cemeteries became a part of the settlements during the Conversion partly because of changing ritual beliefs, which affected where the dead were placed in the landscape.

Surviving churches containing Saxon evidence may well postdate original timber churches, as has been illustrated at St Michael Palace Plain in Norwich, for example. Many churches may well conceal this first phase; and cemeteries lie around these early sites.

So from circa 600AD, by the re-examination of the nature of Early Saxon and Mid Saxon cemetery remains, we are given a continuous record of the general spread of Christian influences, with first the use of the former Roman sites, clearly defined as burial areas, then the spread of minsters (and later of parishes) and finally the coalescence of outlying cemeteries with settlements. This gives us a well argued evolutionary picture of the spread of Christianity, as revealed in the burial traditions and the changing form of the landscape, as cemeteries and churches began to coalesce into a new form of settlement - the villages of today.

Hoggett concludes by pointing out how many key sites, such as Burgh Castle, of which only a fraction was excavated, merit further detailed work. He also notes that in many early excavations the grave goods were not always examined in as much detail as they should have been.

This is a big book in its scope and Hoggett points out that comparisons between East Anglia and other regions need to be made as well in order better to understand how conversion spread after 720AD and in what forms.

Chris Barringer