

7. Early Medieval (c. 410-1066)

7.1 Summary of the Collections

The Museum's Early Medieval collections are relatively small, but have the benefit of being dominated by a group of recently excavated, and well-published, sites. The evidence is firmly focused on the Early and Middle Saxon periods (c. 410-900), with much less in the way of material attributable to the Late Saxon period, aside from some individual objects. It is likely that some of the Saxo-Norman ceramics from Ludgershall Castle, and similar sites, will date to the tenth or early eleventh centuries, however these are discussed together with their wider assemblage (8.1).

The main strength of the Museum's Early Medieval Collections are the archives associated with the excavations of three Early Saxon cemeteries: Collingbourne Ducis (Gingell 1978), Blacknall Field, Pewsey (Annable and Eagles 2010), and Grove Farm, Market Lavington (Williams and Newman 2006). Although the full deposition of the archives is yet to occur, the excavated area at Collingbourne Ducis has recently been significantly expanded (Dinwitty and Stoodley 2016), and an Early to Middle Saxon cemetery at Barrow Clump, Figheledean, has been excavated in a number of phases since 2010 (Figure 7.1) Osgood et al. 2019). Even excluding these soon-to-be-deposited archives, the Museum holds remains relating to c. 180 inhumations dating to between the fifth and seventh centuries, with in excess of 70 more inhumations to be deposited, as well as a much smaller number of cremations. In addition to the human remains, the archives also obviously contain diverse assemblages of grave goods, including weapons, shields, dress fittings, vessels, and even a yew bucket.



Figure 7.1: A yew bucket with copper alloy fittings, from Barrow Clump, part of a small collection of artefacts from the site already deposited with the museum.

In addition to these more recent excavations, two burials discovered during antiquarian barrow exploration also held by the Museum, are of note. These are the burials from Woodyates and Roundway Down, both excavated prior to 1850. Both burials are associated with a rich suite of grave goods, including jewellery (Figure 7.2), and at Roundway Down, the fittings from another yew bucket. Although the ironwork from neither burial survives, the contemporary descriptions strongly suggest that both were also deposited in a wooden structure, such as a bed or coffin. Both appear to be further examples of high-status late-seventh century female burials, part of the same phenomenon as the much better known Swallowcliffe Down Bed Burial, in the south of the county (Speake 1989), and that from

Collingbourne Ducis (Dinwitty and Stoodley 2016), the latter soon to be deposited with the museum.

The material relating to settlements held by the Museum is less noteworthy, but is nonetheless of considerable research value, doubly so as the two main settlement sites, Grove Farm, Market Lavington (Williams and Newman 2006), and Cadley Road, Collingbourne Ducis (Pine et al. 2001), are at least in part contemporary with the corresponding cemetery site. At Cadley Road excavation uncovered ten sunken feature buildings and one possible post-built structure, with occupation dating to the Early Saxon period and continuing into the Middle Saxon period. The material culture from the site is extremely rich, with large and well-preserved assemblages of both ceramics (1,400 sherds) and animal bone (Pine et al. 2001). The evidence from Grove Farm is similar. At this site three Sunken-Feature Buildings and a possible post-built structure were excavated, along with

a number of pits and ditches associated with the settlement. These features produced a slightly smaller assemblage of 1,200 Early to Middle Saxon sherds, along with another large animal bone assemblage (Williams and Newman 2006). The wider small finds assemblages from both sites is more modest, but nonetheless contains interesting material, such as a number of composite bone comb fragments from Cadley Road.

In addition to these two sites, a further Early Medieval settlement assemblage derives from Haslam's excavations of Ramsbury in the 1970s (Haslam 1980). Ramsbury is particularly notable for a detailed sequence of Middle Saxon ironworking furnaces, and with them considerable quantities of metalworking debris (although only a small sample was retained) and iron tools. Early Medieval settlement evidence elsewhere is more limited, such as the assemblage from Wellhead, Westbury (Fowler



Figure 7.2: A necklace from the Roundway Down Saxon burial.

1966) which principally comprises of just 89 sherds of pottery.

7.2 Research summary

7.2.1 Summary

Research interest in the Early Medieval collections has been relatively limited, but represents a good variety of research projects, with particular interest in the human remains. Leggett (2020) has sampled remains from Collingbourne Ducis for a study combining multi-isotopic analysis with machine learning in order to investigate diet and mobility in Early Medieval populations, with these remains used previously by Venn (2017) as part of an MSc thesis, re-evaluating the age and gender of individuals in the cemetery based on skeletal and grave good evidence. A further study utilising isotopic analysis of human remains had been planned, but was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Holmes (2020) has undertaken a detailed reassessment of the animal bone assemblages from Cadley Road, Market Lavington and Ramsbury, providing an assessment of the extent of the assemblage, and the economy of the sites. With this being followed by some radiocarbon dating by McKerracher (2022) as part of the FeedSax project. The final research project identified, and the only project to focus on material culture, was undertaken by Moradi (2019) as part of their MRes thesis, which examined anthropomorphic and zoomorphic depictions on jewellery from Blacknall Field, Pewsey, as part of a study of potential totemic and shamanic beliefs in Early Medieval Wessex and East Anglia.

Although outside of the timeframe of this project, the Museum is eagerly awaiting the final publication of a programme of geophysical

survey and excavation led by Semple and Williams (2001) on Roundway Down. This project had aimed to precisely locate the location of the burial and add new context. In addition to the new archaeological information, it is also hoped that this publication will raise awareness of the burial, with there being very few readily available published discussions.

7.2.2 Research projects and publications

Holmes, M. (2020) *Case study summary report: Wiltshire Sites*, Unpublished report.

Leggett, S. (2020) *Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are': A Multi-Tissue and Multi-Scalar Isotopic Study of Diet and Mobility in Early Medieval England and its European Neighbours*, Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Cambridge.

McKerracher, M. (2022) *Radiocarbon dating of zooarchaeological remains from excavations at Market Lavington, Wiltshire*, Unpublished report.

Moradi, L. (2019) *Animal and human depictions on artefacts from early Anglo-Saxon graves in the light of theories of material culture*, Unpublished MRes thesis: University of Exeter.

Venn, R. (2017) *The age and gender identities of older individuals buried at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Collingbourne Ducis: A holistic study utilising grave goods and a life course approach*. Unpublished MSc thesis: University of Durham.

7.3 Research priorities

The collection of human remains associated with this period is well utilised, however, the collection of animal remains attributed to this

period sees far less use. Holmes' work assessing the principal assemblages could be used as a starting point for more detailed assessments, and in particular the application of isotopic and other methods of analyses as undertaken by Madgwick et. al. on later Prehistoric assemblages (see 5.2). It is hoped that the FeedSax project or associated research will lead to such studies.

The Museum would also like to encourage smaller scale projects which would be

more appropriate for individual student-level research. In particular, the museum would like to see projects which can make much wider use of its collection of grave goods, either through materials analysis, or through more theoretical discussions. For instance, Moradi's (2019) thesis demonstrates that a variety of perspectives beyond traditional discussions of ethnicity and identity can be explored through this material, with these latter concepts increasingly out of favour in modern scholarship (e.g. Harland 2019).