

Archaeological Resource Assessment of the Isle of Wight:
Early Medieval period

Ruth Waller, August 2006

Inheritance:

It seems likely that an ordered Roman landscape made up of rural villas estates and their lands preceded the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons on the Isle of Wight. Occupation of all of the Roman villas ceased by the early 5th Century AD (Basford 1980).

It is clear that at least two focuses of Roman estate activity at Carisbrooke and Brading continued to be significant in Saxon landuse and settlements at both continue to the present day.

Nature of evidence

Little archaeological evidence for this period had been found on the Island other than burial sites, until the recent contribution of metal detected remains through the Portable Antiquities Scheme and scientific analysis of the coastal zone at Wootton Quarr. With the cemeteries having been excavated in the 19th Century and the last synthesis of evidence having been in the 1980's (Arnold 1982), there is a real need for both systematic archaeological survey to identify and investigate Anglo-Saxon sites and a re-assessment in the light of the metal detected evidence

The documentary evidence for the settlement of the Island in the early Anglo-Saxon period is confusing with Bede ascribing its conquest to the Jutes and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggesting that it was the responsibility of the West Saxons.

The archaeological evidence consists of 71 entries on the County Sites and Monuments Record and over 200 other objects reported to the Isle of Wight Finds Liaison Officer through the Portable Antiquities Scheme and focuses on and to the south of the median chalk ridge, with the wooded clays to the north probably not being brought into cultivation until after the Norman Conquest (Basford 1980).

In the absence of securely dated modern excavations of Saxon sites, there has possibly been an over reliance on archaeological objects to interpret fundamental issues such as the origins and date of any influx of Saxon groups to the Island, rather than assessment of synthesis of the evidence of material culture towards the trading and international communication links of the Island population. Nevertheless, with the increased numbers of Saxon objects being reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, a re-assessment of the material cultural evidence might lead to more accurate predictions of the locations of Saxon settlements and cemeteries and possibly provide updated suggestions for the questions of origins and dates.

Chronology:

Conventional sequencing of Anglo-Saxon activity on the Isle of Wight is confused by the lack of cohesion concerning date and origins between two separate documentary

sources and the archaeological evidence. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that the West Saxon war lord Cerdic seized the Isle of Wight in AD 530 and when he died in AD 544 the land was passed to his nephews Stuf and Whitgar, whilst Bede states that it was the Jutes. However, the Jutish ancestry of the West Saxon Cerdic and his nephews is attested in Asser's Life of Alfred and it may be that both documents are actually referring to the same origins for the early population of the Isle of Wight.

However, the archaeological evidence for this first Saxon occupation muddies the water still further with the two excavated and the five concentrations of metal detected finds which may indicate more cemeteries showing that late 5th and early 6th century burials were being made at least 50 years before the dates suggested by the documentary sources.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle goes on to say that in AD 661 the Christian warlord Wulfhere laid the Island to waste and then sent priests to baptise the people, whilst Bede states that over 1200 families of heathen persuasion were exterminated when Caedwalla seized the Island in 686.

A recent of English Heritage funded series of archaeological recording and investigations within the coastal zone between Wootton and -Quarr abbey has revealed secure scientifically dated structures for this period for the first time (Tomalin et al forthcoming).

Landscape and land use:

Documentary research has recently contributed a great deal to the identification of Saxon patterns of settlement and territorial organisation including attempts to reconstruct the Saxon landscape of parishes (Margham2005 and forthcominga).

From the late 7th century large administrative units or estates developed and these may have followed the further conquest by West Saxons referred to in the documentary sources above. The early Anglo-Saxon estates contained land in most of the Island's topographic zones and seem to have been laid out to allow exploitation of various resources within the landscape. Transhumance may possibly have been practised, with the less productive and more wooded area of the Northern lowlands being used for extensive grazing on a seasonal basis although some new evidence from development-funded excavation suggests more settlement and cultivation of the Northern clays from Roman times than had previously been suspected (Network Archaeology, 2005). Nonetheless, the northern part of the Island remained more heavily wooded than the southern part in Later Medieval times and to the present day, reflecting a pattern that may have existed from prehistoric times.

These early estates seem to have determined the boundaries of the Anglo-Saxon "parochia" or mother-parishes recorded in later charters. These had the form of tall, thin coast to coast slices, crossing the Island from the Solent to the south coast. (Hockey 1982, 1-13). Freshwater, Calbourne, Carisbrooke, Newchurch and Brading provide convincing evidence of such parochial territories in the period before the Norman Conquest and Arreton was possibly at the centre of a further such territory (Margham 2000, 121-123).

The Carisbrooke Parochia has been subjected to a particular study (Hase 1988, Hase 1994). Newchurch Parish survived as a unit of land stretching right across the Island until the 19th century. These parishes seem to have corresponded with the territories of early Anglo-Saxon estates. In origin they may even have pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the Isle of Wight and have been connected with Roman estates (Tomalin unpublished) although this suggestion has been challenged (Sewell 2000).

By later Anglo-Saxon times some of the early estates had been broken up into smaller landholdings, which are described in a number of charters (Margham 2005, Margham forthcoming b) but the boundaries of the ‘mother parishes’ seem to have remained largely intact and to have formed the basis of medieval parochial organisation in which ‘daughter parishes’ were taken out of the territories of the ‘mother parishes’.

Eleven Anglo-Saxon charters refer to land on the Isle of Wight and eight of these have individual grants of land in which the bounds are given. Research on the boundary marks in these charts has been undertaken by Grundy (1921) and later by Arnold (1982) whose comparison of the Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries with medieval parish boundaries revealed some continuity of established boundaries.

A study by Arnold of the relationships between parish boundaries and pagan burial sites has revealed that 4 burial sites are situated on or very near to parish boundaries which supports the suggestion that some medieval parish boundaries preserve much older land divisions.

Certain Bronze Age burial mounds are thought to be mentioned as landscape features within the Anglo-Saxon charters, such as Gallibury Hump which is referred to as “the gemot beorh” (Grundy 1921).

The range of different geologies and topographies within each north to south coast estate varied greatly and would have allowed a broad range of habitats and resources including rivers, woodland, arable and pasture, as well as the communication and trading links from its position as an offshore Island.

The use of the coastline has been demonstrated by the dating of several structures recorded during the Wootton Quarr Project. These include a large V-shaped fishweir constructed from posts and wattle with Quarr limestone rubble on Binstead Beach with two posts radiocarbon dated to 1040±50 BP, cal AD 890-1040 (GU-5399), and 1100±50 BP, cal AD 800-1020 (GU-5398). Two Longshore post alignments at mean low water on Quarr Beach which have been radiocarbon dated to AD 540 to 780 and to cal AD 890-1160, 1010±50 BP (GU-5402). A further Longshore alignment of 32 posts within estuarine silt recorded at Pelhamfields Beach and with 2 posts radiocarbon dated to 1450±50BP, cal AD 540-670 (GU-5411) (Post 2027..1002245 (*Fraxinus* sp.) and to 1320±50 BP, cal AD 630-790 (GU-5592) (Post 2027..1002268 (*Quercus* sp.) respectively. (Tomalin et al forthcoming)

Social organisation

Evidence of social interaction is possible shown in a charter granting land of King Edgar to Wilton Nunnery AD 968, which mentions a mot beorh - 'moot hill' - which could be the hill near Bunts Hill Farm (Kökeritz 1940)

Settlement

There is limited evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement at present on the Island and clues from place-names have been used to suggest that the early small scale settlement may have been focussed on the placenames ending in –ham followed by the later large scale colonisation indicated by the place names with the –ing element. The place name evidence seems to show that the Easter Yar valley was the most densely occupied area during the initial colonisation

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's date for the seizing of the Island by Cerdic and Cynric is proven unreliable by the pagan Saxon cemeteries with clear Jutish origins dating to the Late 5th and Early 6th century cemetery on Bowcombe and Chessell Downs which indicate settlement well before the documentary dates (Arnold 1982). Further evidence from metal detected finds suggest another six possible cemeteries of similar dates could survive, but synthesis of this evidence is required before conclusions can be made.

Recent finds of Middle Saxon date near Froglands Farm to the south-west of Carisbrooke Castle indicate a market at this site (Ulmschneider 2003) and could suggest a possible position for a settlement of earlier date, contemporary with the Carisbrooke Castle and Bowcombe Down cemeteries.

Direct excavated evidence for Middle Saxon settlement comes from only one site, that at Yaverland (unpublished SMR 3353), which was partially excavated by the Time Team in 2001 and which revealed two posthole built longhouses on different alignments and different phases of Saxon occupation on a site previously used by the Romans, lying beneath the earthworks of a former Iron Age hillfort and village. This continuity of use may also indicate the role of this settlement in trade as the site which contains all of these periods of human occupation overlooks the navigable Brading Haven, a natural harbour known to have been in use for mainland and European trade in Roman times.

The distribution of late Anglo-Saxon settlement is indicated by entries in the Domesday Book which records churches at settlements at Bowcombe, Calbourne, Shalfleet and Arreton, with further churches at Carisbrooke, Arreton, Freshwater, Godshill, Newchurch, Niton and Whippingham (Renn 1969).

Some of the church/manor complexes that appear to have been a feature of medieval rural settlement on the Isle of Wight seem to have originated in Anglo Saxon times. Domesday Book records ten churches and approximately 100 manors on the Isle of Wight (Hockey 1982, Basford 1980, Munby 1982). However, many settlements unrecorded in Domesday Book originated in Early Medieval times, as attested by their Anglo-Saxon place-names (Kökeritz 1940, Margham 2003, Margham

forthcoming b). Most manorial settlement probably consisted of the manor house and a few surrounding peasant dwellings, although one or two may have been associated with nucleated settlements. From the 11th century some lords established chapels close to their manor houses and these gradually achieved parochial status during the Middle Ages. The mixed medieval pattern of nucleated and dispersed settlement on the Isle of Wight may have Early Medieval origins but this topic requires further study.

The built environment.

There are no surviving churches of Anglo-Saxon origin on the Island, although two are thought to contain Saxon remains, with a possible 2-cell church within the 12th Century nave at Freshwater (SMR 63) and the possible sundial and north wall of the chancel at St George's Church, Arreton (Taylor and Taylor 1965).

There is very little excavated evidence for Saxon settlements, apart from the post built buildings mentioned above at Yaverland (unpublished SMR 3353).

Ceremony, ritual and religion.

Two Anglo-saxon cemeteries have been investigated, Chessell and Bowcombe which were unfortunately excavated in the 19th Century. Chessell is extremely important and many of its finds are in the British Museum and an overview of the evidence from both sites has been produced by Arnold (1982). Chessell contained over 130 graves originally discovered by marl diggers of late 5th and 6th Century pagan graves with a collection of rich and exotic grave goods which were acquired by the British Museum. An additional grave was discovered near Chessell which contained a sword, spear and beads (SMR 405). In addition 3 Saxon burials dating to the first half of the 6th Century were excavated at Carisbrooke Castle. One grave was a very important male buried with drinking and table vessels, a gold-plated coin and a set of playing pieces (Young 2000). Other cemeteries are listed by Arnold (1982).

Pagan Anglo Saxon graves have also been found inserted into Bronze Age round barrows along the central chalk ridge (Basford 1980). But exciting new metal detected items suggest several other possible cemetery sites with assemblages as important as those in the British Museum, such as the perforated silver spoon and a rock crystal "oracle ball" comparable to those from Chessell Down found within Freshwater Parish.

The documentary sources disagree again about the Christianisation of the Island, with the Anglo Saxon Chronicle attributing its arrival to the conquest of the Island by Wulfhere in 661, whilst Bede dates the conversion to 686 after Caedwalla had laid the Island to waste.

Later Saxon churches are recorded in the Domesday Book at Bowcombe, Calbourne, Shalfleet and Arreton. The Domesday Book also notes that the Abbey of Lyre had 6 churches on the Island and a charter of Henry II states that William Fitz Osbern gave Lyre churches at Carisbrooke, Arreton, Freshwater, Godshill, Newchurch, Niton and

Whippingham. Anglo-saxon architecture survives only at Arreton and Freshwater churches (Taylor and Taylor 1965).

Warfare, defences and military installations.

The site of Carisbrooke Castle, a later Norman fortified stronghold perched on a hilltop overlooking the settlement and wider Bowcombe valley, has recently been shown to have had Saxon precedents by a series of excavations (Young 2000). The earliest use for the hilltop was as a Saxon cemetery in the first half of the 6th Century., however Young has also postulated that the surviving remains of the lower enclosure at Carisbrooke Castle indicate the existence of a late Saxon burgh associated with two phases of timber buildings within it.

As the site was developed into the site of the Norman fortification, was the central place for the Norman occupation of the Island until Newport was built as a planned town in the 12th Century, and overlooks the Bowcombe valley, it is highly likely that the Carisbrooke settlement site has Saxon origins surviving beneath the modern streets and buildings and may have been the central place of landscape organisation in the pre-Norman period.

Although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records Viking raids on the Isle of Wight in the late 9th century, late 10th century and early 11th century (Garmonsway 1972), there is no direct archaeological evidence for this at all. Viking artefacts, such as the sword pommel (SMR2142) once thought to have been lost by raiders can now perhaps be better explained by trading mechanisms. However, the Early Norman tower of Shalfleet Church) suggests a preoccupation with defence in the vulnerable northern half of the Island, near tidal inlets, even after the Norman Conquest (Lloyd and Pevsner 2006).

Material culture.

A re-assessment of the entire corpus of Isle of Wight artefactual material would help to reveal the patterns of material culture between the 5th and 10th Centuries.

Crafts, trade and industries

Late saxon exportation of Bembridge Limestone Formation as building stone from the north-east coast at Quarr (Tomalin et al forthcoming)

Recent finds of Middle Saxon date near Froglands Farm to the south-west of Carisbrooke Castle indicate a market at this site (Ulmschneider 2003)

Transport and communication.

With no known Roman roads on the Island, it is assumed that the internal communication routes followed those set out in prehistoric times and that this use continued into the Saxon period. There is certainly no evidence for Saxon roads on the SMR, although the Island has a large number of “green” lanes and sunken tracks.

No known Saxon ports exist, although the possibility of Roman harbours such as Gurnard, Brading Haven and Yarmouth being used is strong.

The metal detected artefacts reveal wide ranging trading contacts with the continent, including Frisian Sceattas from the late 8th century, silver sceattas from the Lower Rhineland and the Netherlands, as well as English mints at Winchester, Hamwic and Canterbury. A Byzantine follies of Anastasius from the late 5th to early 6th century.

Legacy

Documentary research has shown the substantial legacy of Later Medieval patterns of settlement and territorial organisation on the Isle of Wight derived from the Saxon Period. The long North to South ‘mother parishes’ crossing the Island from the Solent to the south coast. appear to have evolved from the late 7th Century (Hockey 1982, 1-13) and seem to have corresponded with the territories of early Anglo-Saxon estates. In origin they may even have pre-dated the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the Isle of Wight and have been connected with Roman estates (Tomalin unpublished) although this suggestion has been challenged (Sewell 2000).

Compiled by Ruth Waller, Isle of Wight County Archaeology Service, August 2006

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