‘Special Deposits’ in Anglo-Saxon Settlements

By HELENA HAMEROW

WHILE THE archaeological evidence for ritual activity in Later Prehistoric and Romano-British settlements is reasonably plentiful, there has been little discussion of such evidence from Anglo-Saxon settlements. This paper presents a preliminary survey of ‘special’ deposits, primarily of humans and animals, within Anglo-Saxon settlements and considers what the composition, context and placement of such — presumably votive — deposits tells us about the nature of Anglo-Saxon ritual. This evidence is compared to that from Iron-age and Roman Britain, as well as Continental NW. Europe. In particular, the relationship of special deposits to buildings, boundaries and entrances is considered.

The burial of animals, humans and ‘special’ objects in settlements of the later Germanic Iron-age and Migration Period (4th–7th centuries A.D.) in regions bordering the North Sea has long been recognized as a distinctive phenomenon.¹ These often occur in association with buildings, have generally been regarded as the remnants of a ritual act and are conventionally referred to as ‘foundation deposits’, implying that they were deposited during the construction of a building and were intended to protect it and its occupants. When comparable deposits have been found in Anglo-Saxon settlements, however, they have received little attention and indeed the whole question of ritual activity in these settlements has been largely overlooked. In contrast to the study of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, where the role of ritual has long been given emphasis, analyses of settlements have invariably, and perhaps understandably, focussed on settlement layout, economy and the functional aspects of buildings.² This paper offers a preliminary survey of the evidence for such ‘special deposits’ in Anglo-Saxon England and is largely restricted to settlements that have been excavated on a sufficient scale to allow the context of these deposits to be understood.³ What

¹ E.g. A. E. van Giffen, ‘Het bouwoffer uit de oudste hoeve te Ezinge (Gr.)’, Helinium, 3 (1963), 246–53.
³ Here, the term ‘special deposits’ (following A. Grant, ‘Ritual behaviour: the special bone deposits’, 533–43 in B. W. Cunliffe, Danebury: An Iron Age Hillfort in Hampshire, Vol. 2 (CBA Res. Rep. 52, London, 1984)) is preferred as most, in fact, have no direct association with the construction of buildings.
follows is thus not an exhaustive account but merely a starting point, based primarily, though not entirely, on published sources.

The special deposits investigated here mostly comprise animal or human remains deposited within settlements (in pits, ditches, buildings but also graves) where deliberate and careful placement appears likely, e.g. due to the completeness and position of the deposit. This paper addresses the following questions: Can different categories of ‘special deposit’ be identified in Anglo-Saxon settlements? Are they sited in particular places within those settlements — might they, for example, have marked the sites of ritual consumption, or liminal zones? Did the nature of special deposits change over time (is there, for example, a change in ritual activity apparent in the Middle Anglo-Saxon period, as seen in the cemeteries and burials of the so-called ‘Final Phase’)? Finally, how do Anglo-Saxon special deposits compare with similar deposits in Iron-age and Roman Britain, and with other regions of the North Sea Zone?

PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

As Hill has demonstrated, it is in fact far more difficult to distinguish ‘ritual deposits’ from ‘rubbish’ in archaeological sites than is usually assumed and even waste can be deposited in ways that were ritualized or symbolically structured. Indeed, it has long been recognized that it is not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between ritual and ‘economic’ behaviour. Quite apart from difficulties such as this which plague any attempt to identify ritual in the archaeological record, particularly within settlements (let alone to infer the meaning of ritual acts), the identification of special deposits in Anglo-Saxon settlements is hampered by a number of further obstacles: first, the misidentification or poor recording of such deposits (which may have been considered by the excavators to be merely ‘rubbish’); second, the difficulty of dating such deposits and thereby establishing their association with other settlement features; third, the poor preservation conditions on a number of settlements (including some of the most extensively excavated, such as Mucking, Essex), where bone survives poorly if at all; finally, the possibility that post-depositional processes, e.g. preservation conditions, may be responsible for the completeness and apparently ‘special’ character of some deposits. Add to this the comparatively small number of Anglo-Saxon settlements that have been extensively excavated, and it is easy

4 This paper does not consider the full range of potential evidence for ritual in settlements, e.g. features such as the free-standing post or ‘flag staff’ at Cheddar, or evidence for so-called ‘structured’ deposits of the kind identified in Iron-age pits: P. A. Rahtz, F. W. Anderson et al., The Saxon and Medieval Palaces at Cheddar: Excavations, 1960–62 (BAR Brit. Ser. 65, Oxford, 1979), 166–7; J. D. Hill, Ritual and Rubbish in the Iron Age of Wessex: A Study on the Formation of a Specific Archaeological Record (BAR Brit. Ser. 242, Oxford, 1995).


6 Hill, op. cit. in note 4, 16.

7 At West Stow, Suffolk, for example, two articulated dog skeletons found in the fill of SFB 16 were believed by the excavator to have died in the hollow below a suspended floor (West, op. cit. in note 2, 23); Tipper has subsequently argued that they were deliberately placed there after the building fell into disuse: J. Tipper, Grubenhäuser: Pit Fills and Pitfalls (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000), 205. Similarly, the present writer described the pig skull on the floor of a sunken-featured building from Mucking, Essex (GH 10) and the dog bones found in its E. posthole as ‘rubbish’ (Hamerow, op. cit. in note 2, 14)!
to see why so few examples of special deposits can be established with absolute certainty. Even the examples identified in this study must, with one or two exceptions, be regarded as merely probable and are the result of a selection process that has inevitably contained a degree of subjectivity.

**SPECIAL DEPOSITS IN ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENTS**

Despite the small number of examples — this study has identified 42 probable ‘special deposits’ from sixteen settlements in England (Tab. 1) — it is possible to characterize them in broad terms. Eighteen (45%) comprise complete skeletons that were certainly, or probably, originally articulated; of these, twelve were human inhumations (Fig. 1). A further eleven deposits (28%) consisted only, or primarily, of skulls or parts of skulls. Three deposits (8%) consisting of articulated limbs or a trunk were identified, while seven examples (18%) were found of disarticulated bone apparently deposited en masse. It should be noted, however, that the last category is particularly difficult to identify with certainty as such deposits are particularly prone to be regarded as ‘rubbish’ by excavators who may only have recorded that a particular pit or sunken-featured building (hereafter SFB; also known by the German term, Grubenhaus) contained ‘a large quantity of animal bone’. As a result, this category of special deposit is probably underrepresented. Two examples of a fifth type of special deposit have been uncovered at Friars Oak, near Hassocks in West Sussex, where relatively small-scale excavation revealed traces of several Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon pits and structures, although not enough to establish the character of occupation or indeed whether these represent part of a larger settlement. The fill of a probable SFB at Site A contained a large piece of fire-fractured flint within a deposit of charcoal and ash. Within this were two concentrations of burnt animal and human bone that have been interpreted as re-deposited material from a cremation pyre. A pit sited 29 m to the north-east contained a similar deposit. At Site C, some 200 m from the SFB, an unusual, square timber building was uncovered which had been destroyed by fire. Although no special deposits were found in association with it, its unusual form and construction have led the excavator to postulate that it was a ritual structure or shrine.

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8 This figure excludes five special deposits of pottery and other items from Mucking, which are considered separately, below. Where two or more apparently separate deposits have been recorded from a single feature (e.g. Mucking GH 10), this has been counted as one example.
9 One of the deposits classified here as a ‘complete’ articulated burial, that of a cow from Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire, in fact lacked a skull (N. Finn, pers. comm.). In some other examples, the bone was too poorly preserved to be certain that the body was complete, although it appears likely that it was.
10 At Sutton Courtenay, for example, House XII (a SFB) and Pit 8 are both recorded as having contained large quantities of disarticulated bones, but little further detail is provided. E. T. Leeds, ‘A Saxon village near Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire (Second Report)’, *Archaeologia*, lxxvi (1927), 12–80, at 63–4, fig. 2; idem, ‘A Saxon village near Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire’, *Archaeologia*, lxxiii (1923), 147–92, at 163–5, fig. 8. Similarly, SFB 44 at West Stow is described as having contained ‘a heap of animal bones, mainly ox . . . half way down the fill in the South East corner’ (West, op. cit. in note 2, 37).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Age/Sex</th>
<th>Species</th>
<th>Butchery</th>
<th>Date (century)</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholme</td>
<td>?Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Burial 3617 dug into infill of SFB, at entrance to E1, next to major trackway</td>
<td>Kinsley 2002, 40–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheddar</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Pre-930</td>
<td>Inhumation burial at entrance to ditch G (HB 2)</td>
<td>Rahtz et al. 1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cottam</td>
<td>Skull, minus mandible</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>2nd half 7th/8th</td>
<td>Pit fill</td>
<td>Richards 2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cowdery’s Down</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>Cow</td>
<td>Begun, not completed</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Pit 6, next to W. entrance of Building C13</td>
<td>Millett 1984 (op. cit. in note 2), 221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Kettleby</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton, incomplete</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?6th</td>
<td>SFB 2769 in fill, c. 0.2 m above base</td>
<td>N. Finn, pers. comm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Age/Sex</td>
<td>Species</td>
<td>Butchery</td>
<td>Date(century)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eye Kettleby</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton Infant</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?6th</td>
<td>SFB 1626, position unknown; + complete pot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eynsham</td>
<td>Disarticulated bones Mixed</td>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Early/mid-8th</td>
<td>Pit 394</td>
<td>Hardy et al. 2003 (op. cit. in note 41), 45–6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friars Oak</td>
<td>Redeposited pyre debris ?</td>
<td>Human +</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>8th/9th</td>
<td>SFB, ‘secondary fill’</td>
<td>Butler 2000 (op. cit. in note 11), 6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friars Oak</td>
<td>Redeposited pyre debris ?</td>
<td>Human +</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>9th/early 10th</td>
<td>Pit 7, fill</td>
<td>Butler 2000, 6–7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mucking</td>
<td>Articulated dog skeleton, incomplete? + pig skull</td>
<td>Dog + Pig</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>5th/6th</td>
<td>GH10, posthole (dog) and on base (pig skull)</td>
<td>Hamerow 1993 (op. cit. in note 1), 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mucking</td>
<td>?Articulated skeleton Adults</td>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>GH 79, on base</td>
<td>Hamerow 1993, 78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennyland</td>
<td>Skull Skull ? Adults Horse (two)</td>
<td>Ox</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>SFB 4, on base</td>
<td>Williams 1993 (op. cit. in note 2), 61</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sutton Courtenay</td>
<td>Skull, incomplete + disartic. bone</td>
<td>Ox</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>House XII, centre of base, with mass of other disartic. bones</td>
<td>Leeds 1927 (op. cit. in note 10), 63–4, fig. 2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sutton Courtenay</td>
<td>2 articulated skeletons + 3 skulls</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>2 Human, ?complete, 2 ox skulls + 1 horse skull</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Pit μ</td>
<td>Leeds 1947 (op. cit. in note 32), 86</td>
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<td>Context</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sutton</td>
<td>Artic. skeleton (horse)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Horse + dog</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Pit 8ft W. of House VII</td>
<td>Leeds 1923 (op. cit. in note 10), 163–5, fig. 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Courtenay</td>
<td>Skull &amp; disartic. bones (dog) + animal bones ‘in profusion’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sutton</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Inhumation burial in or abutting House X</td>
<td>Leeds 1923, 169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtenay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Articulated skeletons (2)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>2 dogs</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 16. One on base, one in upper fill</td>
<td>West 1986 (op. cit. in note 1), 23, fig. 75</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Young Adult, ?female</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td></td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Inhumation burial in settlement</td>
<td>West 1986, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Young adult, female</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td></td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Inhumation burial in settlement</td>
<td>West 1986, 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Disarticulated bones</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>‘Mainly ox’ + 1 cat</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 44, ‘halfway down fill’</td>
<td>West 1986, 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>2 skulls</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Horse + ox</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 45. Horse ‘a few inches above base of pit’; ox on top of primary fill.</td>
<td>West 1986, 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>‘Large pile of bones’. Includes 2 ox skulls and artic. cat skeleton</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Mixed, including ox and cat</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 57, halfway up fill, in centre of pit</td>
<td>West 1986, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>dog</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 52, upper fill</td>
<td>West 1986, 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Large number of animal bones</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Mixed, mostly sheep + ox</td>
<td></td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 63, just above base</td>
<td>West 1986, 49, fig. 63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Age/Sex</td>
<td>Species</td>
<td>Butchery</td>
<td>Date(century)</td>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Stow</td>
<td>Skull</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Ox</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>5th–7th</td>
<td>SFB 65, 15 cm above base</td>
<td>West 1986, 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wharram Percy, South Manor</td>
<td>2 skulls (Ox and dog) &amp; ‘other bones’</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Ox + dog</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>7th/8th</td>
<td>Pit 76159, Primary deposit</td>
<td>Stamper &amp; Croft 2000 (op. cit. in note 45), 37, Pl. 4 Milne &amp; Richards 1992 (op. cit. in note 16), 84–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wharram Percy, South Site</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>Human</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>First half 7th</td>
<td>On ground surface</td>
<td>Hey 2005 (op. cit. in note 15), 74 &amp; 183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarnton (Cresswell Field)</td>
<td>4 complete cattle skulls + frags. of horse mandible</td>
<td>Prob 2–3 yrs., 2 prob female</td>
<td>Cattle + horse</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>5th–mid 7th (C14)</td>
<td>SFB 7395, on surface of primary fill, along with large frags. limestone and Roman pottery</td>
<td>Hey 2005, 75 &amp; 183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarnton (Cresswell Field)</td>
<td>1 cattle skull (minus maxilla) + 2 horse skulls + mandibles of at least 5 horses</td>
<td>Horse: 12–13 yrs., Horse: 2.5–3.5 yrs.</td>
<td>Cattle + horse, no, Cattle: possible chop-mark</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>Pit 3888, Burial in top of pit Grave AX, Immediately outside E. door of Bldg A4</td>
<td>Hey 2005, 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarnton (Cresswell Field)</td>
<td>Articulated skeleton</td>
<td>? Goose</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Late 6th/7th</td>
<td>Pit complex immediately N of D3</td>
<td>Hope-Taylor 1977 (op. cit. in note 12), fig. 25, 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeavering</td>
<td>Disartic. bone, mostly long bones, no skull</td>
<td>mature</td>
<td>Mostly ox</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Late 6th/7th</td>
<td>Pit, just N. of eastern entrance to D2</td>
<td>Hope-Taylor 1977, 98–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeavering</td>
<td>Skull ‘stack’</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>97% cattle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Late 6th/7th</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most common species represented in these deposits is cattle, which is present in at least eighteen of the 42 deposits (i.e. 43%: in two cases, both at the Northumbrian royal vill at Yeavering, large numbers of individuals were represented in a single deposit); humans were present in fifteen of the deposits (36%); eight (19%) contained dogs, six (14%) contained horses, and two (5%) contained sheep, while pig, goose and cat were represented in a single deposit each (2.5%). Twelve deposits contained more than one species. The percentage of dogs and horses is disproportionately high when compared with animal-bone assemblages for Anglo-Saxon settlements as a whole. It is particularly striking that dogs and horses actually outnumber pig and sheep in special deposits, whereas in animal-bone assemblages generally, the latter greatly outnumber the former.

Twenty-one (50%) of the ‘special’ deposits identified in this study were found in SFBs (Fig. 2). Two of these (in both cases the articulated limbs of a dog) were placed in the postholes of the buildings: Mucking GH 10 and Sutton Courtenay, Oxfordshire, House XVII where, remarkably, two hind limbs were recovered from the E. posthole, and two front limbs from the W. posthole. At least thirteen (62%) of these deposits were placed on the base of the sunken hollow, or on the basal/primary fill; two had either been dug into the infill of an abandoned building or been placed in the SFB as part of the process of backfilling (West Stow SFB 16 and Catholme, Staffordshire, Burial 3617) and a further two contained one special deposit on the base and another higher up in the fill (West Stow SFB 16 and SFB 45; Fig. 3). Most if not all of these deposits appear to have been associated with the abandonment or dismantling of the buildings.

12 In addition, Grave AX from Yeavering (discussed below) apparently contained a goat skull, although given the extremely poor state of preservation, this identification must be regarded as tentative: B. Hope-Taylor, Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria (London, 1977), 69.

13 Hamerow, op. cit. in note 2; Leeds (1927), op. cit. in note 10. 71.

14 The position of two of the SFB deposits is unknown, i.e. SFB 2294 and SFB 1126 from Eye Kettleby (Leicestershire).
Thirteen deposits (31%) were found in pits, while a further six (14%) were inhumation burials of the kind normally found in cemeteries (Catholme Burials 3617 and 3666; Cheddar HB 2; West Stow Graves 1 and 2; Yeavering Grave AX). In one highly unusual case at Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire, an infant had apparently been carefully laid on the ground surface in the centre of a back-filled ditch, close to a sunken-featured building and the partly butchered remains of a sheep. A boulder with ‘an unusual veined appearance’ found nearby may have been used to mark the deposit.

Most of these special deposits are not clearly associated with specific locations within settlements, although in the case of small-scale excavations such patterning is unlikely to emerge. There is, however, a direct association in several cases with entrances and boundaries. In these cases at least, not only had the deposited items been ritually treated, but the special deposits themselves acted to reinforce the liminal, transitional nature of the locations where they were buried. At the settlement of Catholme, Staffordshire, all three special...
deposits (two human and one bovine) were placed near the entrances to ditched enclosures which appear to have defined ancestral properties (Fig. 4): Burial 3666 lay just to the north of entrance E12; Burial 3617 was dug into the infill of an SFB that lay at entrance E1, next to one of the major trackways running through the settlement; and the articulated limbs of a cow were placed in a pit to the south-east of entrance E10. At the royal vill of Cheddar, Human Burial 2 was positioned just inside the entrance to a ditched enclosure. Although the burial has been assigned to Period 1 and the enclosure (Ditch G) to Period 2, there are no clear stratigraphic grounds for doing so and the phasing of the ditch is described by the excavator as ‘indecisive’; it seems most unlikely that the positioning of the burial was coincidental.

20 Rahtz et al., op. cit. in note 4, figs. 10, 12 and 29.
21 Ibid., 55.
Three out of the four deposits associated with ground-level buildings were also positioned at entrances. At Cowdery’s Down, Hants., a pit containing a cow and a fragment of boar skull lay immediately next to the W. entrance of Building C13 (Fig. 5). At Yeavering, Grave AX, which contained an extended inhumation and a unique, enigmatic object tentatively identified as a form of surveying device or staff, was placed immediately outside the E. entrance of the ‘Great Hall’, Building A4, and was carefully aligned along its main axis (Fig. 6). An intriguing echo of this configuration is found in two possibly Viking-age poems contained in the Poetic Edda: *Baldrs Draumar* describes the burial place of a sorceress (interestingly, a *völva*, or, ‘staff-bearer’) as lying by the E. doors of Niflhel (a region of Hell) while in *Gróagaldr* 1, a sorceress is buried ‘by the door of the dead’. Furthermore, at the eastern (foot) end of Grave AX lay a posthole

22 Millett and James, op. cit in note 2, 221.
23 N. S. Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Uppsala, 2002), 113; I am grateful to John Blair for drawing these examples to my attention.
that ‘appeared deliberately to have been partially packed with fragments of bone when its post had been removed . . . On top of this packing of one a flat piece of sandstone lay horizontally across the socket . . .’. 24 Also at Yeavering, a large number of cattle skulls placed into a pit dug into the foundation trench of Building D2 (which also acted as a focus for human burials and has been interpreted by the excavator as a ‘temple’) may have been stacked up against the inner wall, immediately north of the E. entrance to the building (Fig. 7; see below for a further discussion of this deposit). 25

Boundary ditches also appear to have acted as a focus for special deposits. Grave 1 at West Stow lay immediately adjacent to a boundary ditch (and possible entrance), while Grave 2 lay a short distance away, within 5 m of the ditch. 26 The infant placed on top of a back-filled ditch at Wharram Percy has already been noted. 27

Special deposits thus occur in a wide range of contexts and no clear correlation between, for example, species, context and form of deposit has emerged from this, admittedly limited, study. Some distinctive characteristics of these

24 Hope-Taylor, op. cit. in note 12, 67.
25 Hope-Taylor, op. cit. in note 12; Blair, op. cit. in note 14. A number of other features of a potentially ‘ritual’ character were identified at Yeavering, a site that appears in its early phases to have been essentially cultic. Discussion here, however, is restricted to the most unambiguous examples of ‘special deposits’.
26 West et al., op. cit. in note 2, fig. 7.
27 Merrifield has observed that rituals accompanying the filling-in of ditches were common in Roman Britain: R. Merrifield, The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic (London, 1987), 38–40.
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While exact stratigraphic position is not always recorded, most special deposits (i.e. at least eighteen of those in pits and SFBs), lay on or just above the base of the feature in which they were placed, as opposed to eleven placed higher up in the fill. Furthermore, of the human special deposits, one-third were infants, a much higher proportion than is normally found in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (on average c. 6%). The disposal

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of the remains of infants outside of cemeteries and separate from the rest of the community has been interpreted in various ways. Crawford, in her study of childhood in Anglo-Saxon England has, for example, suggested that infants were not considered to ‘be full persons’. 29

Several of the human burials also exhibited unusual traits. The position of Human Burial 2 from Cheddar suggested to the excavator a ‘hasty burial’: ‘The left arm was sharply bent at the elbow; the right arm was under the torso, slightly bent at the elbow with the right hand under the left radius’. 30  An adult male buried in, or abutting, a SFB at Sutton Courtenay (House X) was covered with ‘a blanket of clay’. 31  Another burial at Sutton Courtenay was deposited in a large pit nearly two metres in diameter. 32  In it, the body of an adult female lay at a sharp angle, head downwards, with ‘arms half-outstretched . . . towards the remains . . . of an infant . . . Behind the woman’s head and over the body of the child there was a layer about six inches thick of earth and gravel which must have been stamped hard . . . Behind the woman’s head were three animal skulls, two oxen and a horse’. 33  Yeavering Grave AX, at the entrance to Building A4, appears to have been marked by a post standing at its E. (foot) end (Fig. 6). Although bone and metal were extremely poorly preserved, the outline of an adult inhumation could be discerned. 34  As well as the metal staff already mentioned, what appeared to have been a goat’s skull lay at the foot of the grave. The burial was almost certainly associated with the construction of the building and was thus a ‘foundation deposit’ in the true sense. 35  Finally, at Cottam, the partial skull of an adult female was found half-way down a pit, ‘resting upon the primary collapse and fill’; a block of chalk had been placed next to the skull and the overlying fill contained significant quantities of animal bone and several metal and other objects. 36  The skull appears already to have been old when buried and has been interpreted as that of an execution victim; however, as it represents re-burial within a settlement, it is treated here as a ‘special deposit’ rather than as an execution burial. The infant apparently placed on the ground surface at Wharram Percy has already been noted. How unusual the practice was of exposing bodies in this way is unclear, but certainly the archaeological survival of such remains is remarkable.

29 S. E. E. Crawford, Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England (Stroud, 1999), 77–89. It is interesting to note in this connection that at West Stow, fragments of human bone found in a variety of contexts within the settlement came mostly from infants, representing at least four individuals; Grainger, in West op. cit. in note 2, 50. The remains of a number of infants were also recovered from SFBs at West Heslerton, Yorkshire: D. Powlesland, ‘Discussion’, H. Härke, ‘Early Anglo-Saxon social structure’, 125–70 in J. Hines (ed.), The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century (Woodbridge, 1997), at p. 164, and two infants were found in rubbish pits at Hamwic: A. D. Morton, Excavations at Hamwic (CBA Res. Rep. 84, London, 1992), 52.

30 Rahtz et al., op. cit. in note 4, 96.

31 Leeds (1923), op. cit. in note 10, 169.


33 Ibid.

34 Hope-Taylor, op. cit. in note 12, 67–9, fig. 25.

35 Ibid., 69.

Deposits of large quantities of disarticulated bone that can reasonably be interpreted as the remains of ritual consumption at large gatherings are comparatively rare. This survey has identified only three relatively uncontroversial examples. Two occurred at Yeavering and date to its early phase. The deposit of ox bones, mostly skulls, in Structure D2 has already been noted. A second deposit of a quite different character was found associated with Structure D3, which was contemporary with, and only some 5 m distant from, D2. An irregular ‘working hollow’ (possibly roofed) which contained substantial quantities of small bone fragments, mostly of ox long bones ‘angularly cut’, lay immediately to the north of Structure D3; a clearly related complex of pits lay at the W. edge of the building (Fig. 8). The floor of the working-hollow is described as ‘irregularly scooped and pitted’, the worn floor seen as an indication that the structure was ‘put to some practical, everyday use’. Structure D3 was unusual in

FIG. 8
YEAVERING, NORTHUMB.
Building D3 and associated ‘working hollow’ and pits. After Hope-Taylor (op. cit. in note 12).

37 Hope-Taylor, op. cit. in note 12, 105, fig. 47.
having a clay floor and two hearths and was interpreted rather prosaically by the excavator as a kitchen or ‘cookhouse’ and the working hollow as a ‘butcher’s shop’. The pit-complex is described as ‘a series of large but shallow holes dug and refilled successively’ — i.e. no more than one or two were open at any one time — whose fills also contained substantial quantities of animal bone. The bone fragments were larger than those from the working-hollow but were also ‘invariably cut and split’. The lack of teeth or skull-fragments from building D3, the working-hollow or pits seems to point to a connection with the ‘temple’ D2 and its stack of ox skulls. The excavator interpreted these deposits as feasting debris, with the ox skulls described as ‘selected baked-meat residues’.

The third example comes from the site of Eynsham Abbey, in Oxfordshire. A large pit (Pit 394) coin-dated to the early/mid-8th century contained substantial quantities of animal bone. The pit was over 2 m in diameter and nearly 3 m deep. The faunal assemblages from the upper and lower fills are distinct. The material from the lower layers included skulls, limb and foot bones, and appeared to represent primary butchery waste. The upper layers, which contained the majority of the animal bone and small finds and seem to represent rapid infilling, also included kitchen and table waste. Pit 394 also contained an unusually large number of complete skulls (thirteen) and an exceptionally wide range of species, including prime meat bones of red and roe deer, as well as fish, oyster and various types of bird, including crane and partridge, all of which point to high-status consumption. The pit appears to have stood open for some time and the large number of individual animals represented (including 12 cattle, 45 sheep and 22 pigs) suggests either ‘a collection of material over a significant period of time, or from a substantial group of people’, or indeed both. The pit was filled at a time of ‘intense activity’ on the site as evidenced by ‘numerous hearths, burnt areas and pits’, although no buildings were found within the excavated area. It nevertheless seems likely that the site of the later minster was already an important centre by this time.

**CHRONOLOGY**

Most of the deposits described in the preceding sections cannot be closely dated and it is not possible to draw conclusions regarding chronological trends from such a limited survey. The earliest probably include examples from Eye Kettleby, Sutton Courtenay, West Stow and Mucking, where a 5th- or 6th-century date is indicated. At least six date to between the mid-6th and mid-7th centuries (those from Yeavering, Cowdery’s Down and Wharram Percy, South

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38 Hope-Taylor, op. cit. in note 12, 105–6 and 327.
39 Ibid., 106.
40 Ibid., 108.
42 Ibid., 135.
43 Ibid., 357.
44 J. Blair, ibid., 7.
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Site, and possibly a further three from West Stow). The latest examples identified in this survey are the partial skull deposited in a pit at Cottam, radiocarbon-dated to the second half of the 7th or the 8th century, the ox skull placed on the base of a sunken-featured building at Pennyland during the late 7th or 8th century, the ox and dog skulls placed in a pit at Wharram Percy, South Manor in the 7th or 8th century, the 8th-century pit at Eynsham and the burial at Cheddar, dated to 'pre-930' but presumably 9th- or early 10th-century in date. The 8th- to early 10th-century deposits at Friars Oak would not only be amongst the latest special deposits identified in this study, but may also provide evidence for cremation at an extraordinarily late date, unless the redeposited pyre material originated from a much earlier cemetery.\textsuperscript{45}

OTHER FORMS OF SPECIAL DEPOSIT

Although this study has focused on deposits of animal and human remains, it is clear that other forms of special deposit occurred in Anglo-Saxon settlements, although they are equally likely to have been interpreted as waste or casual losses and to have received little if any detailed treatment in excavation reports.\textsuperscript{46} Where, however, complete or semi-complete objects, especially pottery vessels, are found lying on the base or primary fill of a feature, against a background of an otherwise highly fragmented finds assemblage, this is strongly suggestive of careful placement.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, SFB 1626 at Eye Kettleby contained both the remains of an infant and a small, complete lugged pot; as the infant remains were only recognized during post-excavation analysis, it is impossible to know whether there was an association between the two, although it seems likely.\textsuperscript{48} Mucking produced a number of probable special deposits: \textit{Grubenhäuser} 42, 93 and 105 all contained substantial quantities of pottery resting on or just above the base of the hollow, in the case of GH 42 and 105 representing assemblages of at least seven complete or semi-complete vessels, clearly deposited at the same time.\textsuperscript{49} In GH 42, the layer containing the pottery was recorded as black and charcoal-rich. In addition to the pottery, this layer contained two complete 7th-century brooches, one lying on the base of the hollow, the other just above the base; furthermore, several large pieces of iron, subsequently

\textsuperscript{45} Richards, op. cit. in note 36; Williams et al., op. cit. in note 2, 61; P. Stamper and R. A. Croft, \textit{Wharram, A Study of Settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds} (York, 2000); Rahtz et al., op. cit. in note 4; Butler op. cit. in note 11.

\textsuperscript{46} Several of the SFBs at Puddlehill, Beds. for example, contained objects described as lying on or just above the floor, but these are interpreted as accidental losses — e.g. a coin, four dress pins, an amber bead and a weaving-beater from Building 1: S. Hawkes and C. Matthews, 'Early Saxon settlements and burials on Puddlehill, near Dunstable, Bedfordshire', \textit{Anglo-Saxon Stud. Archaeol. Hist.}, 4 (1985), 1–115, at pp. 67 and 99.


\textsuperscript{48} N. Finn, pers. comm.

\textsuperscript{49} Mucking excavation notebooks. A study of neolithic/Copper-age settlements in south-eastern Europe has found compelling evidence for the deliberate fragmentation of ceramic vessels and the removal of parts of the vessel prior to deposition: J. Chapman, \textit{Fragmentation in Archaeology: People, Places and Broken Objects in the Prehistory of South Eastern Europe} (London, 2000), 58–65. The deliberate smashing of vessels is interpreted by Chapman as providing communities with ‘a mechanism for the symbolism of fission and rupture’: ibid., 42–3.
identified as hearth bottoms, were found higher in the fill.\textsuperscript{50} The black layer overlay one of the postholes of the structure, leading the excavators to conclude that it was formed after the building had been dismantled. GH 93 also contained a large quantity of pottery in one corner of the structure, including a semi-complete bowl lying beneath a number of clay loomweights on the base of the hollow. The plan of GH 105 suggests that a number of complete and/or semi-complete vessels had been placed on the base of the feature and then broken \textit{in situ}; also on the base of GH 105 were found c. 30 raw clay loomweights.\textsuperscript{51} The three sceattas found on the floor of GH 168 might also be regarded as a special deposit.\textsuperscript{52} All of these deposits are likely to date to the 7th century and could reasonably be interpreted as the remnants of rites associated with the termination of use of the buildings in which they were placed. Finally, Pit 12413, which contained two near-complete vessels above a layer of burnt bone, lay within the ‘footprint’ of a ground-level timber building (PHB 22) although it cannot be established whether the two were contemporary.\textsuperscript{53}

In a recently published excavation report on the Anglo-Saxon settlement at Godmanchester, Cambridgeshire, Gibson has considered whether the presence of articulated animals and complete or semi-complete objects in SFB fills could indicate that the backfilling of these buildings involved ‘a ritual component’.\textsuperscript{54} She notes in particular the prevalence in such deposits of artefacts associated with textile production, above all spindlewhorls and clay loomweights, including extremely fragile unfired loomweights. The rows of loomweights found lying on the base of some SFBs have generally been interpreted as the result of the burning down or abandonment of a building with a warp-weighted loom \textit{in situ}.\textsuperscript{55} Gibson notes, however, that it is difficult to understand why such objects would not be retrieved for re-use. She cites the evidence from a SFB at Upton, Northamptonshire, in which, despite the destruction of a loom and apparently the entire building by fire, many of the weights remained \textit{unfired}, suggesting that they had been placed there as part of a termination ritual after the conflagration.\textsuperscript{56} A still more striking example of such a deposit comes from Posthole Building 2 at Spong Hill, Norfolk.\textsuperscript{57} Just inside the S. doorway were two postholes, interpreted by the excavator as emplacements for a loom; one of these contained thirteen complete and twelve incomplete loomweights, as well as...

\textsuperscript{50} Helena Hamerow, \textit{op. cit.} in note 2, 17, figs. 73, 105 and 106.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., figs. 77, 135 and 139.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., fig. 79.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., tab. 4, 20; Tipper, \textit{op. cit.} in note 7, 28. At West Heslerton, three structures (at least one of which is a ground-level timber building) are described as being associated with small pits containing unusual assemblages incorporating such items as broken girdle-hangers: D. Powlesland, ‘The West Heslerton assessment’, \textit{Internet Archaeol.}, 5 (1998).
\textsuperscript{56} Gibson and Murray, \textit{op. cit.} in note 54. Chapman has also found evidence from prehistoric settlements in south-eastern Europe that objects were sometimes placed in houses prior to deliberate firing of the structures, perhaps to ‘form an idealised set specific to the mortuary house’: \textit{op. cit.} in note 49, 106.
\textsuperscript{57} R. Rickett, J. Bayley et al., \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill, North Elmham} (Gressenhall, 1995), 135–6, fig. 65 and pl. VIII. I am grateful to Sally Crawford for drawing this example to my attention.
‘special deposits’ in anglo-saxon settlements

‘other smaller fragments’. Some of these were clearly stacked and must have been deliberately placed in the posthole when the building, or at least the loom, went out of use. Spinning and weaving were not only essential economic activities, but were intimately connected with female identity in Anglo-Saxon society; indeed there are many semantic links in Old English between women and cloth production. The discovery at West Heslerton of several special deposits which include girdle-hangers also appear to connect such deposits specifically with women. A final intriguing, if poorly recorded, example of such a deposit was found in a SFB excavated in the 1920s at Car Dyke, Cambridgeshire, which contained not only an articulated dog skeleton on top of which had been placed a sherd of Romano-British pottery, but also a ‘female’ assemblage: five glass beads, three needles (one bronze, two bone), three spindlewhorls and what appears to have been a fragment of an ivory bag-ring, as well as a silvered disc which could derive from a square-headed brooch. Further research into this question would undoubtedly yield many more examples of this kind of ‘female’ deposit.

SPECIAL DEPOSITS IN IRON-AGE AND ROMAN BRITAIN

In comparing the nature of special deposits in Anglo-Saxon settlements with those of Iron-age and Roman Britain, it is unsurprising to find both similarities and differences. Perhaps the most obvious difference relates to context: most special deposits in Iron-age settlements have been identified in disused storage pits, rather than in buildings. Indeed, at some settlements, a high percentage of storage pits contained such deposits: at Houghton Down, Hants., for example, nineteen out of 28 storage pits contained special deposits. In contrast, special deposits in Anglo-Saxon settlements are most likely to be found in SFBs (see above). If, however, as has been suggested elsewhere, one function of SFBs was to store grain, the similarities between Iron-age and Anglo-Saxon practices may be closer than they at first appear. The apparent contrast may, furthermore, be due in large part to the fact that Iron-age settlements simply contain many more storage pits than do Anglo-Saxon settlements while, on the other hand, Iron-age house gullies are comparatively shallow features compared to SFBs, and so are less likely to preserve such deposits. Some special deposits have,

59 Powlesland, op. cit. in note 53.
62 Cunliffe and Poole, op. cit. in note 61, 123.
nevertheless, been found associated with Iron-age house gullies and in postholes and, as in Anglo-Saxon settlements, the overwhelming majority of Iron-age special deposits were placed on or just above the base of the feature in which they were found (over 80% at Houghton Down).  

Special deposits in secular contexts are widespread in Romano-British settlements and are found in a range of features including wells and shafts, as well as buildings and pits of various kinds. Fulford has argued that they appear in many respects to represent a continuity of practice from the Iron Age, although he stresses that these similarities are primarily in ‘the special or structured nature of the deposits, rather than of the substance of the deposits themselves’. There are, however, certain similarities of substance, too. It is notable that infants figure prominently in Romano-British, as well as in Iron-age and Anglo-Saxon special deposits. In Roman Britain, ‘the strict Roman law requiring burial outside towns does not seem to have been applied to infants’, whose burials are sometimes found associated with buildings. Scott has observed further that the infant and animal burials associated with Romano-British villas can be seen as comparable to rituals carried out at Romano-Celtic temple sites, and notes the prevalence of animal skulls in votive deposits at villas. She also identifies an ‘apparent proliferation of animal and infant burials in the fourth century’, a phenomenon that she links to economic stress. The prominence of dogs and horses in special deposits is another feature shared by Iron-age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon settlements, and is most likely explained by the special status that dogs and horses often occupy because of their close relationship with humans and their role, at least in the case of horses, as ‘status symbols’. There are, nevertheless, important differences. Complete or near-complete vessels, usually ceramic, form ‘the most frequently occurring common denominator’ of Romano-British special deposits in pits. These special deposits are, furthermore, likely to include a wide range of carefully placed objects and/or animals, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon examples. Both Iron-age and Romano-British deposits are also more likely to show signs of elaborate placement, such as stones used to form a platform or cover, or the positioning of animals in life-like poses. This survey has found no comparable evidence from Anglo-Saxon settlements apart from the ‘bone stack’ at Yeavering and a pit at Wharram Percy, South Manor, which contained an ox skull, minus the lower...
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...jaw, on top of which had been placed a cow metatarsal and an inverted dog skull, also without the lower jaw; rough chalk blocks and one flint ‘were carefully placed around the E. and N. sides of the skulls’.73

POST-ROMAN BRITISH SITES

Very few post-Roman settlements have been excavated which can confidently be identified as ‘British’. Of these, the settlement at Poundbury in Dorset is the most extensively investigated. The main features of the post-Roman settlement comprised some fifteen buildings as well as a number of pits, grain driers and four small ditched enclosures.74 The settlement was on the site of, and appears to have developed from, a Roman cemetery, elements of which — including several mausolea — conditioned the layout of the settlement.75 One might expect, therefore, evidence for ritual behaviour to be particularly marked. It was initially thought that a considerable number of inhumation burials belonged to the post-Roman phase (including the uncoffined burials of eight infants and one adult in a corner of one of the enclosure ditches); in the subsequent publication of the cemeteries, however, all but three of these are discounted.76 The three burials are as follows: Grave 512, a badly disturbed burial cut into a post-Roman ditched enclosure and containing three limestone slabs; Grave 1188, a tightly contracted burial placed in a pit cutting another enclosure; and Grave 1341, a male adolescent crouched burial. Graves 512 and 1188 are thought to date to the 6th or 7th century, and Grave 1341 to the 5th century. Such crouched or contracted burials are unusual in a post-Roman context.77 A further possible special deposit was found in the lower fill of one of the post-Roman enclosure ditches, in which were found ‘sections of articulated backbone, some ribs and the skull of an ox’.78

The Late- and post-Roman hilltop settlement at Cadbury-Congresbury in Somerset also yielded a number of special deposits, albeit of a very different kind.79 Of the postholes lying at the entrance to Structure II, a building interpreted as a possible shrine, one contained two amphorae handles and another, bone and copper-alloy pendants, deposits interpreted by the authors as ‘votive’.80 A collection of pottery sherds and other finds were associated with a platform and timber emplacement (feature YF129), possibly for a wooden tub, which are interpreted as forming part of a zone of cultic activity, probably

73 Stamper and Croft, op. cit. in note 45, 37 and pl. 4.
75 Ibid., 90.
77 Green et al., op. cit in note 74, 90.
78 Ibid., 89.
80 Ibid., 243.
dating to the 6th century.\textsuperscript{81} Finally, at Cadbury Castle, an Iron-age hillfort that was also the site of a 5th- and 6th-century settlement, an axe-hammer and Anglo-Saxon ring or brooch were found incorporated into a road surface leading to a gateway into the settlement.\textsuperscript{82} Both are plausibly interpreted as deliberately placed deposits, intended to confer supernatural protection on the entranceway into the settlement.

THE CONTINENTAL NORTH SEA ZONE

Special deposits in Roman Iron-age and Early Medieval settlements elsewhere in the North Sea Zone fall broadly into two categories. The first includes high-status, sometimes obviously cultic, objects, almost always associated with buildings in elite centres. These occur primarily in southern Scandinavia. Thus, at Uppåkra in Skåne, now in south-western Sweden, a 6th-century bronze and silver beaker and glass bowl were found deposited beneath the floor of a house, with guldgubber (small, embossed gold-foil plaques depicting human figures) in the main, roof-supporting postholes, along with other gold objects, glass fragments, and a door knocker.\textsuperscript{83} Also associated with the building was evidence for large-scale ritual consumption in the form of animal bones and fire-cracked stones, while spearheads found a short distance to the south have been interpreted as a votive deposit.\textsuperscript{84} Other examples include a 6th-century longhouse at Dankirke in western Jutland, which contained fragments of glass vessels and a probable 5th-century building at the elite centre at Gudme on the island of Fyn which contained a hoard of gold bracteates and other precious objects deposited in one of its main roof-supporting postholes.\textsuperscript{85} These buildings have all been interpreted as serving some kind of ceremonial and cultic function.\textsuperscript{86}

A second category of special deposits comprises human and animal burials most often found in settlements of apparently ‘ordinary’ status. As in Britain, such deposits have generally received scant attention, and little exists in the way of a general survey.\textsuperscript{87} Most examples of this kind of special deposit date to the

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 244 and fig. 36.
\textsuperscript{82} L. Alcock, C. Musson et al., \textit{Cadbury Castle, Somerset: The Early Medieval Archaeology} (Cardiff, 1995), 29–30, illus. 2.17.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} It should be noted, however, that high-status settlements can also contain other kinds of special deposits. Thus the Migration-period settlement at Sorte Muld, on the island of Bornholm, which has yielded over 2,000 guldgubber, included a SFB in which the skull and lower limbs of a horse, presumably the remains of a hide, were found: T. Capelle, ‘Eisenzeitliche Bauopfer’, \textit{Frühmittelalterliche Stud.}, 21 (1987), 182–205, at p. 201.
Roman Iron Age and many are associated with houses. The most extensive published evidence comes from the *Wurt* (settlement mound) at Feddersen Wierde, on the coastal marshes of Lower Saxony. Here, 24 animal burials were recorded spanning the 2nd to 5th centuries A.D.: eight horses and two horse skulls; five cattle and one cow skull; two burials of either horse or cow; five dogs; and one pig or boar. Most are likely to have been articulated complete or semi-complete animals. Only one deposit, a cow skull, was identified in a posthole, but the excavator acknowledges that there may have been more special deposits in postholes than were recognized during the excavation.

It is notable that, as in Anglo-Saxon England (and in common with the Dutch settlement of Wijster, discussed below), horses, cattle and dogs predominate among the special deposits at Feddersen Wierde, while sheep and pig — economically far more significant than horses and dogs — scarcely figure, an indication, perhaps, of their lower social value. There is, furthermore, little evidence to suggest that these remains were the result of ritual consumption, i.e. bones were generally not broken up and did not show signs of burning.

The distribution of animal burials at Feddersen Wierde indicates that these were placed mainly around the edges of the settlement and along trackways: one horse burial was positioned adjacent to an enclosure fence; a further three horse burials as well as a horse skull placed upright in a pit lay next to major trackways leading into the settlement. There is also evidence to suggest that some of these were originally visible, particularly to those entering the settlement, most notably a horse burial contained within a special timber structure erected on a small mound near the main trackway leading to the ‘chiefly farmstead’ (*Herrenhof*). Entrances to buildings were also favoured positions for such deposits. Thus, three of the five dog burials were placed at the E. (gable end) entrances to houses; in two cases, they were placed directly under the threshold and the excavator has speculated that they were placed there to protect the house and its occupants. Other deposits at the entrances to buildings include a horse buried adjacent to the gable entrance of the ‘assembly hall’ (House 35); in one of the

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88 The practice in this region has roots extending back at least to the pre-Roman Iron Age. At the Dutch *terp* (settlement mound) of Ezinge (prov. Groningen), three animals (a horse, a dog and a cow) were discovered carefully placed between the wattle wall and external raking posts of one of the oldest Iron-age houses in the settlement (4th century B.C.) (van Giffen, op. cit. in note 1, fig. 4). This practice is echoed over a thousand years later at the 9th- to 11th-century *Wurt* settlement of Elisenhof (another settlement mound, at the mouth of the Eider), where an ox skull was placed between the wall and an external raking post of a house, while two halves of an ox mandible had been placed beneath another external raking post: A. Bantelmann, *Die Frühgeschichtliche Marschensiedlung beim Elisenhof in Eiderstedt: Landschaftsgeschichte und Baubefunde* (Bern, Frankfurt/M, 1975), 135 and Abb. 113.2.


90 Ibid., 223.

91 Hamerow (2002), op. cit. in note 63, 127–33.

92 Haarnagel, op. cit. in note 89, Abb. 52.

door posts of the same entrance a cow skull had been placed, and a dog lay buried beneath the threshold.\textsuperscript{94}

Four infant/child burials were also found within different phases of the settlement, each associated with a particular house, so that these burials appear to have been part of a household ritual.\textsuperscript{95} In one case (House 10), an infant was found buried beneath a hearth. Another child, three or four years of age, was buried between the S. wall of the ‘chieflly’ farmstead and the fence that separated it from a trackway; a third was found outside the W. gable end of House 14; the fourth was placed adjacent to House 2. In addition, thirteen adult burials were found.\textsuperscript{96} These were unusual not only in that they were in direct association with a settlement but also that they were, with one exception, not cremations — the prevailing rite in this region — but inhumations. In contrast to the child/infant burials, they lay largely at the edges of the settlement, with three exceptions, one of which was a crouched burial adjacent to the longwall of House 20, north of the entrance;\textsuperscript{97} their distribution again indicates a preference for locations near trackways and boundaries.

Infants and children appear widely in special deposits in the North Sea Zone over a period spanning several centuries. At the settlement of Tofting, near the mouth of the River Eider, an infant was buried in a 2nd-century well-shaft filled with dung, over which was constructed a house whose hearth was positioned directly over the well.\textsuperscript{98} Another was placed in a wooden cradle and buried beneath the central aisle of the byre of a longhouse;\textsuperscript{99} a ceramic cup placed near the head dated the burial to the 3rd century A.D. The practice of burying infants and children in settlements continued into the Merovingian period and beyond. In the 7th- to 10th-century Wurt settlement of Hessens (near Wilhelmshaven in Lower Saxony), a child was buried beneath a hearth, having been stabbed and garrotted.\textsuperscript{100} Two examples were found at the Viking fortress of Trelleborg on the island of Sjælland.\textsuperscript{101} The remains of four horses, five pigs, two sheep, a calf, and a dog were found in a well together with two children, both around four years of age. The other deposit, dating to the 10th century, was also found in a well in which two children, aged approximately four and seven, had been buried.

Looking further south, the Frisian terp of Wijnaldum, home to an elite household during the Migration Period, has also produced a number of special deposits: five newborn infants were buried within the settlement, one in direct association with a building.\textsuperscript{102} Another appears to have been buried in

\textsuperscript{94} Haarnagel, op. cit. in note 89, 226. In the preceding building phase, a pig or wild boar had been buried beneath the hearth of the same building which clearly served some special, probable cultic, function: ibid., 238.

\textsuperscript{95} Haarnagel, op. cit. in note 89, 231–2.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 232–8.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 235.

\textsuperscript{98} A. Bantelmann, \textit{Tofting, eine Vorgeschichtliche Warft an der Eidermündung} (Neumünster, 1955), 47.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., Taf. 16.

\textsuperscript{100} Haarnagel, op. cit. in note 89, 231.

\textsuperscript{101} P. Nørlund, \textit{Trelleborg} (København, 1948), 36–43; Bantelmann, op. cit. in note 98, 47.

association with two horse foetuses and a group of seventeen rim sherds, each from a different pot, which date the deposit to the 5th century.

Lying still closer to the border with the Empire, the 2nd- to 5th- /6th-century settlement at Wijster (Prov. Drenthe) contained some sixteen animal burials, all apparently articulated skeletons. Most were horses, while cattle were surprisingly rare, given their prominence in the rest of the animal bone assemblage from the settlement. Eight of the burials date to the late 4th-century phase of the settlement (Phase IIIb) (Fig. 9). At least six (and possibly all) of these lay immediately adjacent to ditched enclosures and, as at Feddersen Wierde, near trackways. Indeed, a large pit (Dr 40/2), over 6 m long and containing around six animals (cattle and horses), was dug into the middle of a trackway, immediately outside a ditched farmstead enclosure. Just inside the enclosure lay the E. gable end of a longhouse. Two further animal burials (Eef 47/8) lying immediately adjacent to another farmstead enclosure may have flanked an

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**FIG. 9**

**WIJSTER PHASE IIIB.**

Position of animal graves. Arrow indicates the position of a possible entrance to ditched enclosure. *After van Es (op. cit. in note 103).*

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104 Ibid., plan VII.
entrance to that enclosure. The fact that, in one case, a horse burial was cut by the later burial of an ox, suggests the presence of a grave marker of some kind.

Other forms of special deposit are also present in the Continental North Sea Zone, but (as in Britain) these are more difficult to detect in the published literature, because of the tendency to view deposits of animal bone and broken pottery as waste. At the settlement of Bremen-Grambke a complete or near-complete pottery vessel lay on the base of a SFB (Grubenhaus 1298), apparently broken in situ. Unusually, this SFB had been rebuilt on the same spot. At the settlement of Kootwijk in the Central Netherlands, several of the postholes belonging to a large 7th-century house were filled with pottery, querns, loomweights and pebbles, following the building’s destruction by fire.

Given the absence of a detailed survey of the evidence for special deposits during this period, and the lack of attention devoted to ritual in most publications dealing with Early-medieval settlements, it is unfortunately not possible within the constraints of such a limited study to do more than make reference to isolated archaeological examples. Nevertheless, it would appear even from these few examples that special deposits in settlements around the Continental North Sea Zone exhibit certain shared traits: infants, horses and dogs figure disproportionately; favoured locations are within or adjacent to houses, beneath a hearth, or adjacent to entrances (especially the gable-end entrance in longhouses), trackways and boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Several general trends emerge from the preceding overview. First, true foundation deposits — indeed all forms of special deposit directly associated with dwellings — appear to have been less common in Anglo-Saxon England than elsewhere in the North Sea Zone or in Roman Britain (although even on the Continent, these were more common in the Iron Age than in the post-Roman Period). The few unambiguous examples of Anglo-Saxon foundation deposits — at Yeavering and Cowdery’s Down — appear to follow a north-western European tradition seen at settlements such as Wijster and Feddersen Wierde. On the Continent, however, such deposits are not exclusively associated with elite residences or ‘chiefly’ settlements, although they are most prominent at such places. The practice of depositing precious, high-status artefacts within houses, as seen at elite southern Scandinavian settlements like Gudme and Uppåkra, is so far unattested in Anglo-Saxon settlements. Although many,
'SPECIAL DEPOSITS' IN ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENTS

perhaps most, ritual activities will have left no archaeological trace, true foundation deposits are likely by their very nature to have been placed in the ground, whether in building foundations or associated pits, so their rarity in Anglo-Saxon England is likely to be genuine and not merely the result of poor preservation or incomplete recording.\(^{109}\)

The second clear trend is that ‘termination deposits’ of animals, humans and, less commonly, ceramic vessels and other items, are relatively widespread in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly in SFBs. It is even possible that they are more common here than elsewhere in the North Sea Zone, although it would be premature to draw firm conclusions on the basis of such a limited survey. Thirdly, infants, dogs and horses are particularly prominent in special deposits in Anglo-Saxon settlements, as they are across the whole of the North Sea Zone and within Germania generally, as well as in Roman and Iron-age Britain; indeed their prominence can be traced back to the Bronze Age.\(^{110}\) Finally, there is a clear association of human and animal burials with entrances and boundaries. The wide-ranging chronological and geographical affinities of these latter characteristics should warn us, however, against invoking ‘cultural continuity’ to explain them.

As already noted, no clear chronological trends emerge from the small number of Anglo-Saxon special deposits identified in this study, although only one two examples — from Cheddar and Friars Oak — are likely to post-date A.D. 800. It is, nevertheless, interesting to consider what the attitude of the Church would have been to the rituals that lay behind such deposits. There are no specific references in Anglo-Saxon sources such as law-codes and penitential handbooks to such rituals; indeed there are very few surviving Anglo-Saxon texts that preserve elements of pagan practices.\(^{111}\) A letter from Pope Gregory to the Abbot Mellitus preserved in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* refers to the pagan Anglo-Saxons’ ‘habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils’ — a description which is not inconsistent with the evidence for ritual consumption at Yeavering — and urges Mellitus to replace such practices with religious feasts on Christian holy days.\(^{112}\) Also of possible relevance is an Anglo-Saxon charm dating to the late 10th or early 11th century, known as the *Æcerbot* (‘Field Remedy’), which was meant to ‘heal’ land that had been subjected to harmful magic or which was unproductive. The charm involves a fertility ritual that, while Christianized and requiring the participation of a priest, clearly preserves elements of pagan practice which may be distantly related to special deposits.\(^{113}\)

The relevant passage instructs that four turves should be cut, one from each side

\(^{109}\) It is, however, instructive to note that in certain parts of Norway, for example, it was still the practice in the early 20th century to place a single grain of barley beneath each cornerstone of the house, a ritual which is most unlikely to leave any archaeological trace: Zimmermann, op. cit. in note 87, 194!

\(^{110}\) Leube, op. cit. in note 93.


of the field, that a wooden cross should then be placed in the bottom of each cut and the turves replaced.\textsuperscript{114} In general, however, written sources for the period suggest that the Church for the most part tolerated or was even indifferent to popular religious practices, as has already been noted in relation to accompanied burial.\textsuperscript{115}

While settlements in certain periods and in certain places appear to have been ‘permeated by ritual activity’ (e.g. Neolithic Central Europe), Anglo-Saxon settlements have produced comparatively few special deposits and, as yet, none containing obviously ‘ritual’ or high-status objects;\textsuperscript{116} even deposits of deliberately broken pottery or animal/human burials in direct association with dwellings are rare in comparison either with contemporary Continental settlements or with Iron-age and Roman Britain. This may be in part because such deposits have generally not been recognized by archaeologists, yet there appears to be a genuine difference. The remainder of this paper will consider whether this difference could indicate differences in the role of settlements and, in particular, of houses as a locus for certain kinds of ritual activity.

While foundation deposits are rare, this survey suggests that termination deposits, particularly those associated with SFBs, are comparatively widespread in Anglo-Saxon settlements.\textsuperscript{117} Their precise meaning(s) are unlikely ever to be reached through archaeological evidence alone although, if some SFBs were indeed used for grain storage, the concentration of special deposits in these structures could point to a fertility ideology in which such sacrifices were a means of offering thanks to chthonic powers and calling on them to protect the stored grain and ensure future fertility. This is no more than an intriguing possibility, although one strengthened by the association of infant burials and other special deposits with grain processing and storage facilities in Iron-age and Roman Britain.\textsuperscript{118} Indeed Scott’s suggestion that infant burials in Romano-British villas (particularly in pits and wells) represent the re-introduction of Iron-age traditions during a period of economic stress, but ‘using elements of the new material culture’,\textsuperscript{119} may have relevance for understanding infant burials in Anglo-Saxon settlements. The siting of special deposits in Anglo-Saxon England, as elsewhere in the North Sea Zone, also suggests an emphasis on transitional places (i.e. entrances and boundaries).

We may be unable to grasp the exact purpose and symbolic meaning of special deposits, but the fact that they are rarely if ever associated with dwellings

\textsuperscript{114} Jolly, op. cit. in note 113, 6–8.


\textsuperscript{117} They are by no means unknown elsewhere in the North Sea Zone, however, as the example from Sorte Muld demonstrates (see note 86).

\textsuperscript{118} Cunliffe and Poole, op. cit. in note 61; Scott, op. cit. in note 68, 117–18.

\textsuperscript{119} Op. cit. in note 68.
in Anglo-Saxon England nevertheless raises some interesting questions. I have argued elsewhere that the type of building commonly referred to as ‘the Anglo-Saxon house’ is essentially derived from the Continental North Sea Zone, as is the SFB; and furthermore, given the social and symbolic significance of the house, that the absence in England of the longhouse and associated enclosed farm complexes of the kind seen elsewhere in the North Sea Zone implies important differences in the organization of social and resource-controlling groups. The lack of an association between special deposits and dwellings may be a further indication that social groups in Anglo-Saxon England were structured differently from those in the ‘longhouse zone’ of north-western Europe, as well as those of Roman Britain. These differences are expressed in certain functional changes: unlike the Continental longhouse, for example, the Anglo-Saxon house did not accommodate cattle — the chief form of wealth throughout the North Sea Zone. There were also differences in the way grain was stored: whereas on the Continent storage took place in the rafters of houses as well as in post-built granaries, very few examples of the latter have been identified in Anglo-Saxon settlements. If SFBs began to be used more widely for grain storage instead of houses, one may speculate that the need to associate dwellings with the fertility of the earth was diminished. Finally, the evidence suggests that in most cases the Anglo-Saxon house was not the focus of an ancestral farmstead of the kind seen in so many settlements in southern Scandinavia, north-western Germany and the Netherlands; such complexes were composed of enclosed farmsteads with longhouses as their focal point but often also contained other dwellings, and were sometimes rebuilt several times on the same plot of land. In short, the longhouse represented a particular socio-economic and symbolic system that differed in important ways from that which emerged in Anglo-Saxon England.

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121 Hamerow (2002), op. cit. in note 63, 46–51 and 94–5.

122 Ibid., 50–1, 129–31 and 149.

123 Hamerow (2002), op. cit. in note 63, 25–6 and 144. A decrease in the number of post-built granaries and an increase in the number of SFBs are in fact apparent in many parts of the North Sea Zone in the 5th and 6th centuries: ibid., 34 and 37.

124 T. Hansen, ‘Die Eisenzeitliche Siedlung bei Nørre Snede, Mitteljütland’, Acta Archaeologica, 58 (1987), 171–200; Hamerow (2002), op. cit. in note 63, 55. Those rare instances where human burials were placed in direct association with a timber building or enclosed farmstead as seen at Yeavering and Catholme, indicating a close association with ancestors, are the exceptions that prove the rule.

125 It is worth noting in this connection, that considerations other than the purely practical influenced or even governed decisions about building and abandoning houses. The majority of Anglo-Saxon timber buildings show little or no evidence of repair or burning, or of salvaging major timbers upon abandonment. The abandonment of buildings while they were apparently structurally sound suggests that social, rather than practical, issues were dominant in the decision to abandon a dwelling and build a new one: F. Gerretsen, ‘To build and to abandon: the cultural biography of late prehistoric houses and farmsteads in the southern Netherlands’, Archaeol. Dialogues, 6(2) (1999), 72–97. Such issues might, for example, include the death of an important member of the household; cf. Bradley’s discussion of LBK houses in the Balkans: op. cit. in note 116, 24–5.
The fact that the clearest examples of special deposits associated with Anglo-Saxon timber buildings relate to high-status buildings — i.e. ‘Great Halls’ — is also suggestive. The Great Hall was not strictly a dwelling but rather a piece of ‘competitive architecture’, distinct from, albeit related to, ordinary houses.\(^{126}\) The situation at Yeavering and Cowdery’s Down may thus be akin to that in Scandinavia, where special deposits were another means of emphasizing the exceptional status of buildings associated with leading families.

This paper has done little more than draw attention to a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked in the study of Anglo-Saxon settlements. It is nevertheless hoped that a growing awareness of the potential of seemingly mundane material to shed light on the ritualization of everyday life in Anglo-Saxon England will contribute to a general broadening of archaeological perspectives on Anglo-Saxon settlements.

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