UNIVERSITY OF YORK - YORKSHIRE WOLDS PROJECT

COWLAM ANGLIAN SETTLEMENT

PROJECT OUTLINE AND RESEARCH DESIGN 2003

1.0 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The overall research strategy for the Yorkshire Wolds Project identifies the Anglian / Anglo-Scandinavian settlement transition as a key area for examination:

> "discussion has been dominated by questions of numbers of successive waves of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian settlers, and their impact on landholding patterns, generally inspired by historical or linguistic models. With the re-emergence of urban and high status secular and ecclesiastical centres the questions of town-hinterland relations and economic models for trading patterns also become central to the study of landscape continuity." (YWP 2003).

By building on previous work at Wharram Percy and Cottam, and linking with related work by Dominic Powlesland in the Vale of Pickering, the central aim is to:

> "Understand the development of economic and societal complexity in the early medieval period - specifically the transition from lordship to feudalism, the development of a market economy, and agricultural and industrial intensification."

Three specific objectives are identified:

(1) Visibility: Investigation of new crop mark forms e.g. conjoined curvilinear complexes, and correlation with metal-detector derived evidence for so-called "productive" sites, developing archaeological "fingerprints" for settlement types.

(2) Settlement evolution: Further mapping of Wolds landscape development, 7th-10th centuries, at the micro-level e.g. Cottam A/B, Cowlam (to compare with Vale evidence) and its socio-economic interpretation. Looking at transitions and settlement nucleation within the early medieval period but also considering the transition from late R-B and early Anglo-Saxon (Elmswell, Crossgates, West Heslerton) at the start of the period, and to post Norman Conquest (Wharram etc) at the end.

(3) Economic: Collection of rural faunal and artefactual assemblages for 7th-10th centuries (to compare with York and West Heslerton) and of environmental evidence for agricultural intensification for the Wolds.

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 Previous work

Early medieval settlement in Yorkshire has been the subject of two major excavations: at West Heslerton (Powlesland forthcoming) and Wharram Percy (Milne and Richards 1992; Stamper and Croft 2000). Both sites have thrown important light on chronology, settlement organisation and continuity, and emphasised the importance of further work.

During the 1990s intensive prospection by metal detectorists led to the discovery of many new foci of Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian settlements. These sites were often described as “productive” but it has been questioned as to whether they are really a discrete class (Richards 1999). To date only one of these sites, at Cottam, has been investigated by excavation (Richards et al 1999; 2001). The discovery of early medieval metalwork at Cowlam, some 1.5km south-west of the Cottam excavations now provides an opportunity to examine a further site in a localised landscape which is becoming better understood.

In fact, excavation revealed that the site at Cottam is not just one productive site but three, developing and shifting through time. Each of the sites is related to a trackway which skirts the edge of a dry valley and is still visible on aerial photographs (Figure 1). It appears that this communications route goes back at least as far as the Iron Age, and is of a type found throughout the Yorkshire Wolds (Stoertz 1997). It continued in use during the Romano-British period and survived to influence the Anglo-Saxon settlement pattern.

Cottam A began as a Romano-British ladder settlement, from which metal-detectorists recovered a range of brooches and coins. However, they also recovered a relatively small number of Northumbrian stycas, strap-ends and dress-pins, numbering some 20 Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian objects in total (Haldenby, pers comm).

Excavation found few clear Anglo-Saxon settlement traces, other than a few post-holes reflecting ephemeral structures. It seems as if the main focus of the site in the ninth and tenth centuries was a large quarry hole, which may have been used as a watering hollow by herdsmen following the line of the trackway from the sites at Cottam B, to the north (Richards, in prep).

Cottam B was first discovered by a group of metal-detector enthusiasts in 1987. Over sixty pieces of eighth and ninth century date were found over the following two autumn seasons, during approximately 200 man-hours of searching by five metal detector enthusiasts (Haldenby, 1990, 51). The importance of the site was appreciated at an early stage and the non-ferrous metal finds were systematically plotted (Haldenby, 1990, 1992, 1994). No attempt was ever made to recover non-metallic artefacts, other than unusual finds, although the presence of pottery and bone was acknowledged by the metal detector enthusiasts and substantiated by the results of field-walking (Didsbury 1990). The detected finds from Cottam B include some 68 dress

pins, 34 strap-ends, 7 rings, 4 brooches (including one with Jellinge-style decoration), 8 lead weights, over 35 iron knife blades, and 2 so-called Norse bells. There are also some 19 Roman coins, 3 eighth-century sceattas, and 22 ninth-century stycas.

By plotting the metal finds it became apparent that there are two main concentrations. These clusters are believed to be real as the surrounding fields were also intensively detected and did not yield these densities of artefacts. Activity was clearly focussed on these two areas. The southern concentration coincided with the crop mark enclosure but there was also a general spread of metal artefacts to the north of this. Excavation has revealed that the southern enclosure includes a number of post-built structures, over at least two phases. The settlement debris includes thatch weights and ceramic lamps, as well as several whetstones which had clearly been used in the sharpening of metal tools, possibly including scythes and sickles as well as knives. There was also a weathered female skull in a pit, sealed by a layer including a coin of Aethelberht of Wessex, AD 858-62. The pit also acted as a trap for frogs and voles and probably dates to the abandonment of the enclosure, which is therefore placed in the late ninth century.

At that stage settlement shifted to the north, where although it was invisible as crop marks, magnetometer survey revealed a series of sub-rectangular farm enclosures, with a massive entrance-way with bank and ditch, and gatehouse. This settlement shift and the replacement of the Anglian enclosure by an Anglo-Scandinavian enclosure is reflected in the distribution of pottery recovered by field-walking. All the Torskey ware, which was introduced in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, is found in the northern area. The metal-detector evidence shows the same pattern. Objects datable to the eighth and ninth century are generally in the southern group, whilst those of the later ninth and tenth century are in the northern group. Most of the stycas were also found in the southern group; this would also be consistent with a settlement shift to the north as coin usage on rural sites in Northumbria is believed to decrease in the tenth century (Blackburn 1993).

The Anglo-Scandinavian site is itself short-lived and abandoned later in the tenth century. In the Cottam final report (Richards 1999) it was suggested that settlement now shifted in favour of nearby medieval villages, represented by earthworks of deserted medieval villages at Cottam and Cowlam. The former is a scheduled site, whilst the latter was descheduled and ploughed-out in the early 1970s (see below). However, metal-detecting in the area of the ploughed-out remains has yielded exclusively tenth-century and post-Conquest artefacts, supporting the theory that the site of the medieval village was established in the tenth century, following nucleation of earlier settlements in the adjacent areas.

2.2 Description of the area/site to be examined

The site of the former village of Cowlam (SE965657) lies on the Chalk Wolds between Malton and Driffield. The site is now farmed from Church Farm,

which lies adjacent to the ploughed-out village remains. Within the farmyard lies the small 19th-century church of St Mary, which contains a carved Norman font, a survival from the medieval chapel that once stood there. The site lies 1.5km south-west of Cottam B, at the head of Cowlam Well Dale, a side arm of the dry valley known as Philip's Slack on which the Cottam sites lie. It is also connected to Cottam by the system of trackways visible on aerial photographs (see above)

When the village earthworks were threatened with destruction by ploughing in the early 1970s, the late T.C.M. Brewster carried out rescue excavations of four structures within the "courtyard farm" complex of one croft (Brewster and Hayfield 1988). Aerial photographs of Cowlam taken after the ploughing reveal that it was a three-row, 'T-'shaped village whose regular alignment of croft boundaries suggests a planned layout (Brewster and Hayfield 1988, 33). Brewster's excavations demonstrated that this courtyard farm represented the amalgamation of two earlier croft units, probably sometime towards the end of the medieval period. The courtyard farm had been abandoned in the late 17th century, in common with a number of Wolds villages. The excavation also revealed that settlement in this area began with a number of timber buildings. It was not possible to assign a clear date to these structures, but sherds of Torksey ware suggest 10th-century activity. Metal detecting has supported this view with the finds recovered from the core area of the ploughed out earthworks being no earlier than the 10th century. The Domesday entry records that, before the Conquest, Cowlam formed part of the estates of Torbrant, and that it was a sokeland of the manor of Buckton. Its name is thought to be of Old Norse origin, meaning "at the hill tops".

All the finds recovered to date have been found in ploughsoil, close to the surface. The site has been regularly ploughed to a depth of c.30cm for cereal cultivation but bulldozing of the earthworks of the deserted medieval village has also led to considerable disturbance of archaeological deposits. In some areas broken chalk is visible on the surface, and the site may have suffered from topsoil erosion from raised areas; in other places it appears that soil survives to a depth of at least 50cm. Several of the metal items are quite corroded, having suffered from agricultural disturbance, whereas much appears to have only been ploughed up in recent years and is still in a good state of preservation. The finds are spread over a wide area and several appear to have been broken in antiquity.

In April 2002 detecting in the south-east corner of the field, adjacent to the trackway and valley head, recovered the first finds of Anglian date. This was swiftly followed by the recovery of many more objects of 8th and 9th century date, totalling to date 3 knifes, 2 hones, 4 strap-ends, 9 dress-pins and 5 coins, including stycas and two secondary sceattas, possibly die-linked to a specimen from Fishergate, and probably minted in York. One of the coins is also die-linked to a coin found at Cottam, demonstrating close economic links between Cowlam and Cottam. One arm of some tweezers can also be closely paralleled at Fishergate, and at Whitby. The density of finds suggests another Anglian settlement focus, broadly contemporary with the Anglian phase at Cottam. Given the current state of information, therefore, the Cowlam Anglian

settlement may be seen as another farmstead which immediately precedes the establishment of the nucleated village. In turn this has implications for our understanding of the development of lordship, and the disruption to settlement patterns caused by the Viking raids and land partitions of the late ninth century.

Exploratory magnetometer and resistivity survey indicates that the metal finds coincide with settlement features. Excavation will be necessary to establish if the features are contemporary with the finds, and to ascertain the nature of activity. In comparison with Cottam surface assessment suggests that a greater depth of soil may survive, at least in some parts of the site, raising the prospect of preservation of occupation levels. The site is also adjacent to the valley head in which lies a well-head, presumably one of the few sources of water in this area from an early date, and one of the reasons for choosing this location for settlement. The proximity of the valley may also mean that there is a greater depth of soil. At Wharram Percy there had been a build up of several metres of archaeological deposits in the valley bottom due to soil creep down the valley sides. The availability of the Anglian settlement at Cowlam for excavation therefore now provides an opportunity to examine another "productive" site and define its place in an emerging pattern of settlement evolution and economic development before it disappears completely under the plough.

2.3 Site Objectives

In line with the overall Wolds research design for the early medieval period the objectives of the evaluation at Cowlam are:

- To establish the depth, extent and survival of archaeological deposits on the site
- To identify the extent of the eighth and ninth century activity and to determine the development of the site
- To establish the relationship of the metalwork finds and the geophysics features
- To collect environmental and artefactual samples
- To determine the nature of the eighth and ninth century activity on the site
- To explore the nature of sedimentation in the dry valley

3.0 METHODS STATEMENT

3.1 Anticipated data, methodology for data gathering and processing

In order to address the project aims a range of investigative techniques will be employed. (Areas of responsibility are shown in brackets)

- Input of distribution of coordinates of all metal detector finds combined with a digitised and rectified plot of the crop marks and geophysics

surveys into project Geographical Information System (GIS) (JDR & MSc in AIS)

- Further magnetometer survey to complete coverage of the area from which Anglian metalwork has been recovered, following removal of game cover against edge of field. (MA in Field Archaeology)

- Further metal-detector survey, in cooperation with evaluative excavation (Dave Haldenby)

- Up to three evaluation 2m square trenches will be dug in the area marked (Figure 2) between 24 March and 4 April 2003, in order to assess the depth, survival and nature of the site features, in accordance with the project aims. The trenches will be positioned to allow comparison of up-lying areas where it is anticipated that the ploughsoil will be thin with areas downslope where soil creep may have occurred. (Tony Austin, Jon Kenny, and MA in Field Archaeology)

- A further series of test trenches will be excavated from 28 April to 23 May 2003, to complete evaluation of depth, survival and nature of the site features, in accordance with the project aims. The trenches will be sized and positioned according to the results of the magnetometer survey and initial evaluation. (Madelaine Hummler, FAS, and First Year field school)

- A series of bore holes will be undertaken from the excavation area and continuing down the side of the dry valley to assess the process of valley formation and sedimentation (TPOC and First Year field school)

- Full processing, conservation and analysis of artefact assemblages will be undertaken (MRH and first year field school; YAT Conservation Laboratory)

- Faunal, molluscan and macrobotanical assemblages derived from the excavated areas will be examined and processed, and the potential survival of palaeoenvironmental material will be evaluated (TPOC, HKK and ARH and first year field school)

- Production of full stratigraphic report (MRH and first year field school)

- Production of interim summary and synthetic reports (JDR)

3.2 Staffing and equipment

The main excavation element of the evaluation will be conducted over four weeks by four teams from the University of York, led by Dr Madelaine Hummler. There will be an average of twelve personnel on site at any one time, with a ratio of c 1:6 experienced to inexperienced staff. The excavations will have a training brief.

The tenant farmer, Mrs Diane Atkin, has agreed that York University shall have access to set aside land between Church Farm and Crow Wood up to September 2003, in order to conduct some limited evaluation by excavation. Following the excavation the subsoil and topsoil will be reinstated and the land returned to agriculture.

Initial assessment in March should enable the use of topsoil removal using a JCB, after which excavation will utilise appropriate equipment. Contexts will, as appropriate, be sampled for palaeo-environmental analysis; where possible contexts will be sieved to maximise artefact recovery. Metal detectors will be used on site to screen overburden and cleared areas. The FAS recording system will be used throughout the project

Appropriate tool stores and toilet accommodation are located in farm buildings adjacent to the site; primary records and archive will not be left on site; records will be duplicated regularly. The site supervisors will be aware of health and safety requirements and a Risk Assessment will be undertaken.

3.3 **Publication and presentation**

A full report of the evaluation will be drawn up and placed in archive, with synthetic and summary articles placed in county and national journals as appropriate.

The full results will also be fed into the work of the Yorkshire Wolds Project, and will feature in more general works of synthesis resulting from the project. Outputs of the project will also be entered into the Geographical Information System being developed for the Wolds Project, and to the appropriate county Sites and Monuments Record.

The potential for display and publicity while the project is ongoing is limited due to the rural location and current agricultural practice; it is also undesirable given the continued threat from unauthorised metal detector users.

3.4 Archive deposition

It is proposed that all finds resulting from this evaluation shall be retained for study by the Yorkshire Wolds Project for a period of up to two years; thereafter they are to be deposited with Hull Museum. The digital archive will be deposited with the Archaeology Data Service.

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