6
The Anglo-Saxon Period

TONY BROWN AND GLENN FOARD

This account will present the archaeological evidence for three interlocked themes in the history of the Northamptonshire landscape: the dissolution of Romano-British society and its replacement with a tribal system, with a landscape which contained a fluid settlement pattern; the exercise of royal power in the form of the house of Mercia, and the imposition of a degree of stability; and finally, after the Danish interlude, and carrying forward the effects of that and the Mercian achievements, the development of a Midland common-field landscape which underpinned the economic expansion of the high Middle Ages.

TRANSITION FROM THE ROMAN PERIOD

Clearly the infrastructure of imperial government disappeared. The walled towns of Towcester, Irchester and Bannaventa (Whilton Lodge) ceased to function and some elements of the road system fell into disuse. The villas of the landowning class could not be maintained. Coins were no longer used and most of the industries which characterized Roman Britain and which are so clear in the archaeological record – stone quarrying, tile making and in particular pottery production – came to an end. All this has the effect of making the surviving Romano-British population archaeologically invisible; many of the peasant farmers could well have remained and been assimilated with the newcomers. What happened to the Christian communities attested archaeologically at such places as Oundle and Rushden in the face of the pagan Anglo-Saxons is quite unknown.

At the level of the individual site, the contribution which Northamptonshire has made to understanding the transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England is growing. At Brixworth a genuine continuity of use is evidenced by the discovery that, in the post-Roman period, a room in a small villa was fitted out with two parallel rows of posts, presumably to support the roof (Woods 1970). Recent excavations at a villa site at Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford, have shown how in the 5th century the east wing was deliberately levelled. Two metalled stone surfaces were created, one to be used as a yard and the other as a base for a timber hall with substantial posts. At Redlands Farm, Stanwick, a very run-down villa building continued to be occupied into the 5th century at the same time as three sunken structures, of broadly the same type as those widely used by the Anglo-Saxons, were functioning 70 metres away. The number of instances of Saxon pottery turning up on Romano-British sites of all kinds is increasing, for example from the upper filling of a ditch associated with a recently discovered villa at Aynho, and from the topsoil over a temple at Cosgrove (Quinnell 1991): however the significance of these finds is by no means clear. One can point to sites which would if opportunity offered repay more extensive excavation. At Wollaston, there is early Anglo-Saxon pottery from the upper fills of ditches associated with a villa west of the village, and some sunken-featured structures and post-holes near by, but the evidence for what happened to the villa itself still lies unexcavated (Chapman and Jackson 1992). There has been nothing as yet to compare with Orton Hall Farm in the parish of Orton Longueville, in Northamptonshire until 1974. Here excavation in advance of road works has enabled the claim to be made that a large farm concerned with both grain and animal husbandry and in its final phases part of a larger establishment quite possibly in imperial ownership, was in the 5th century taken over in working condition by Anglo-Saxons, who continued to run it until a point early in the 6th century, gradually replacing Roman masonry buildings with their own timber ones as required (Mackreth 1996).

Taking a wider perspective, general arguments which turn upon the location of Anglo-Saxon sites in relation to Roman ones can be produced to suggest that the Anglo-Saxon takeover did in fact take place within a Romano-British framework. At Duston a small Roman town clearly occupied in the 4th century had close to it a mixed (but mostly inhumation) cemetery belonging to the period 450-

6.1 Early/Middle Saxon sites in Northamptonshire as known to the end of 2000

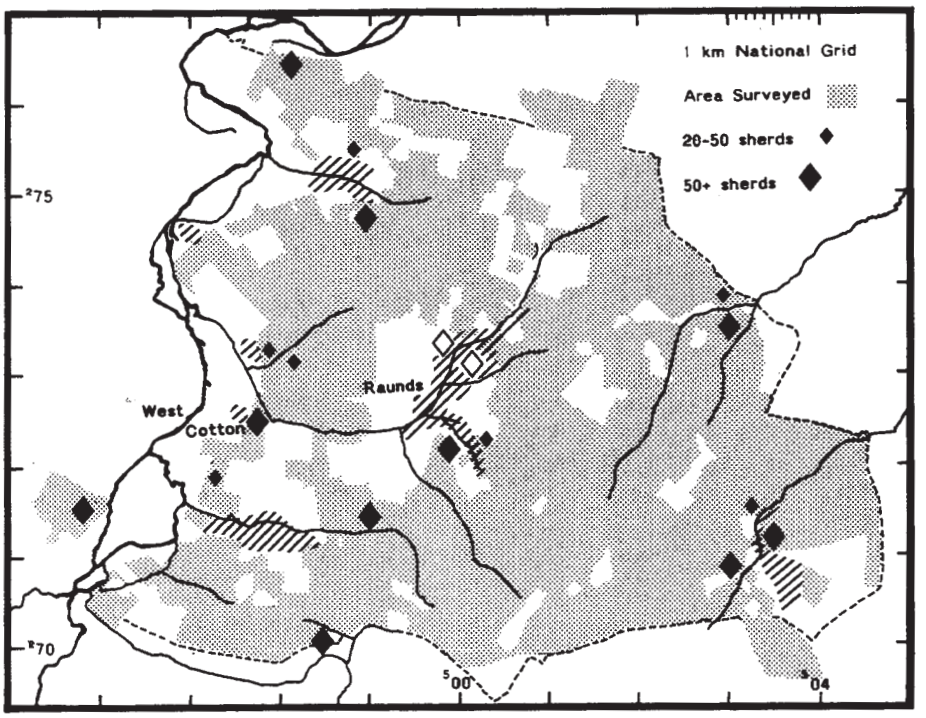
550, part of a country-wide pattern of quite early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries outside Roman urban centres. A more significant example comes from North Kettering, where a sizeable mainly cremation cemetery on Stamford Road, containing some urns considered to be early 5th century, but extending in date into the 6th, lay one kilometre to the south-east of another large Roman period settlement. The particular interest here is the place-name of the neighbouring village Weekley, which incorporates the Anglo-Saxon word *wic*, which in this case could derive from the Latin word *vicus*, meaning 'village'. The Anglo-Saxons who gave this name must therefore have appreciated the kind of place Roman North Kettering had been. Elsewhere a degree of continuity in the units of land exploitation might be suggested. The parishes of Stanford on Avon and Marston Trussel both have significant Roman

occupation sites in the middle of them. Another possible example is in the north-east of the county, where a huge villa sits at the centre of the combined parishes of Cotterstock and Glapthorn, which in their present form are the result of the subdivision of an earlier, larger land unit.

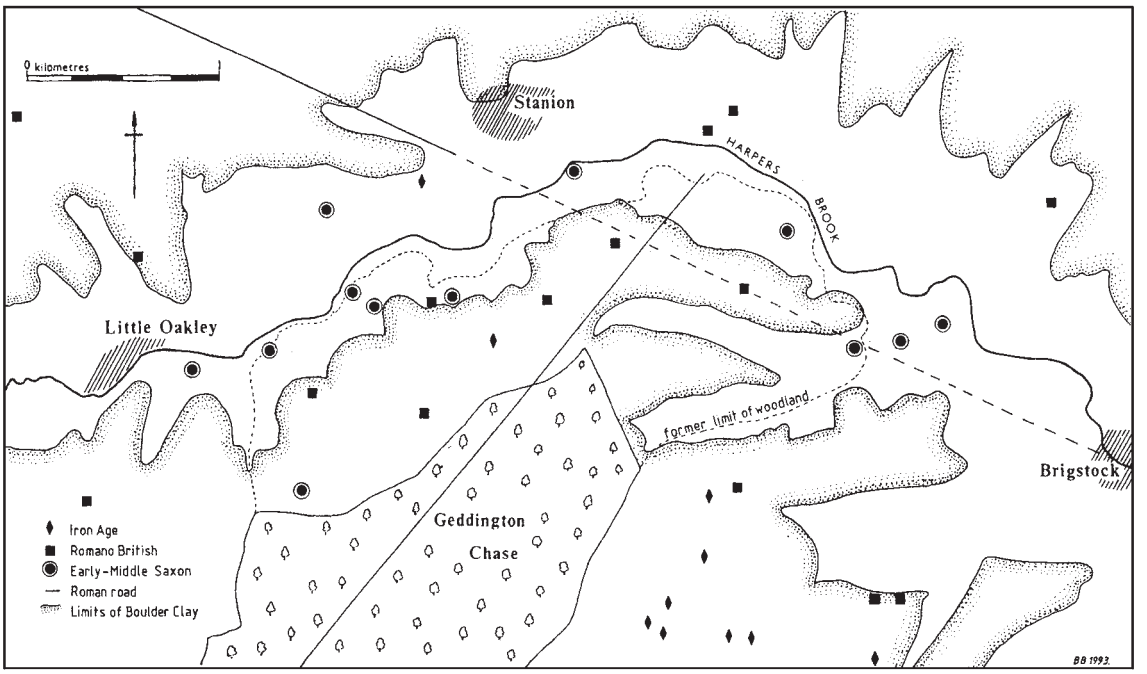
There are instances in which deserted Roman sites were used for burial some point in the sub- or Anglo-Saxon periods. At Easton Maudit a villa had seven inhumation burials inserted into it. The old find of a skeleton with a gold ring and a spearhead from the villa at Piddington might be an Anglo-Saxon burial, and other better attested ones have been found in recent excavations. The skeleton with a spearhead beside it in one of the rooms of the bath house of the temple or villa on Borough Hill, Daventry could belong to this period. Such burials are not unusual, and while there is clearly a discontinuity at the level of the individual site, nevertheless the implication is that people were still living nearby, as was indeed the case at Easton Maudit, where a sunken-featured building was cut into one side of the villa

THE EARLY SAXON PERIOD (*c* 450-650)

One of the achievements of the 1970s was the recognition that the pottery of the Early and Middle Saxon periods could be identified in the ploughed fields of Northamptonshire in the same way as the long-recognized Iron Age, Romano-British and medieval material. Despite a great deal of fabric analysis, however, it has so far not proved possible to provide narrow dating brackets for the various types of wares. Up to the end of 2000 some 122 sites had been recorded in this way (Fig 6.1). About 25% of these coincide with Roman period sites. While there are a variety of ways in which this can be explained, continuity of occupation of some kind will be a possibility for a proportion of them. Field surveys regularly show the continuation of a trend visible in the late Roman period for a shift of settlement from the higher claylands to the lower and more easily worked permeable soils of the river valleys. During the years 1985 to 1990 the fields of the parishes of Raunds, Stanwick, Hargrave and Ringstead were



6.2 The Raunds area survey: distribution of early-mid Saxon surface scatters. Shaded areas show the extent of villages in the medieval period. Location of excavations at Furnells and Burystead shown by open lozenges. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology © Northamptonshire County Council



6.3 Early-Middle Saxon sites in the valley of the Harper's Brook. Reproduced by permission of Burl Bellamy

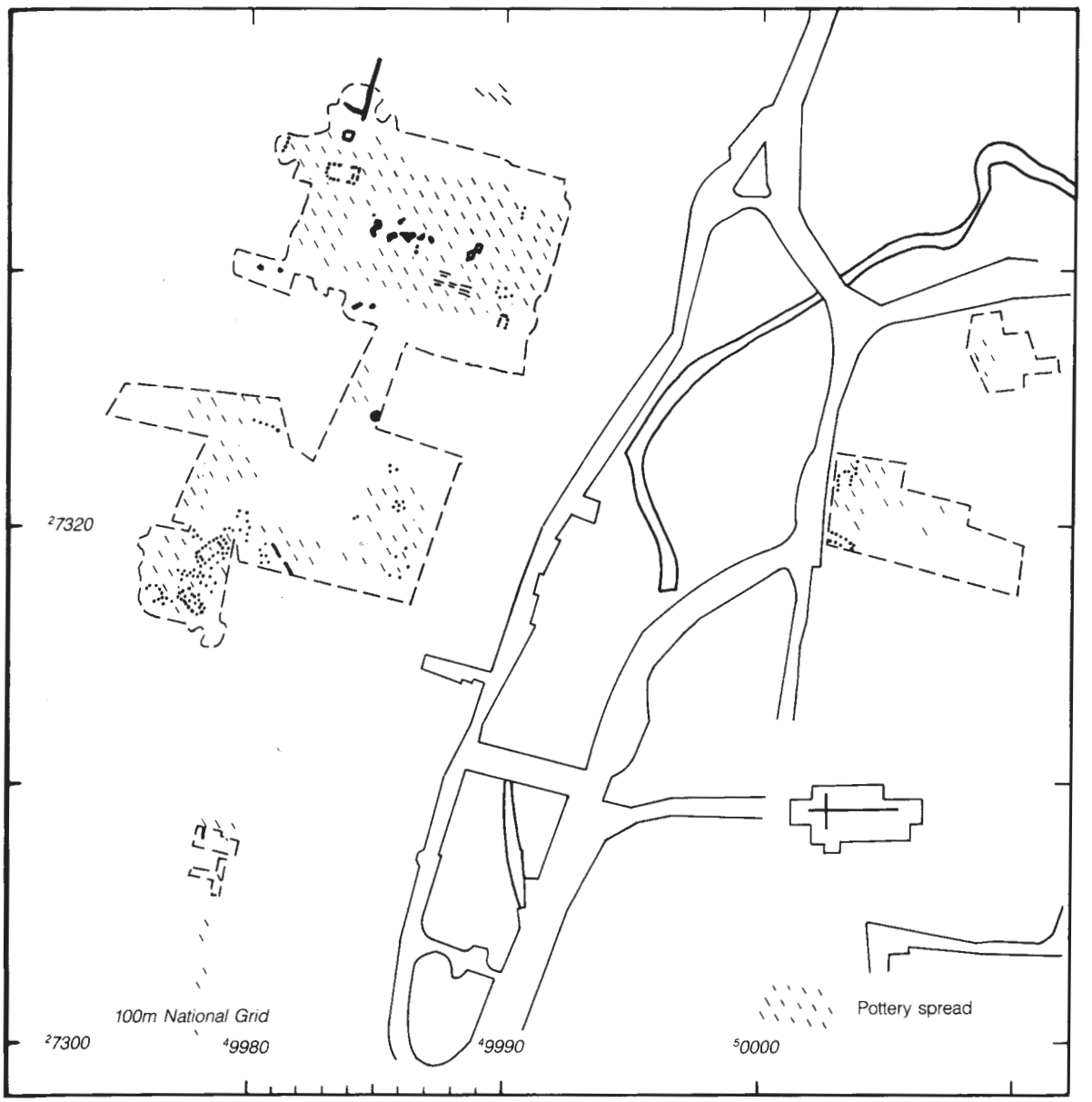
walked in a controlled way in lines at intervals of 15 metres, resulting in the discovery of 14 sites of this period, in this case hardly any coinciding with Romano-British ones but all on river gravels, quite often in pairs facing each other across a stream (Fig 6.2). To judge from the slight halo of contemporary pottery around them, the result of the deposition of domestic rubbish on cultivated land to manure it, these sites were farmsteads (Parry 1994). The survey gave a crude ratio of one settlement for every 2.9 square kilometres, in contrast with the figure of one settlement per square kilometre for the Roman period. Even taking into account the knowledge that not all Roman period sites were occupied at the same time the impression remains of a decline in population, quite possibly a continuation of one that was going on already. The ditches of Romano-British field systems, as at Wollaston, were allowed to silt up, and it is highly likely that from now on there was a greater emphasis on pastoralism.

The contraction of settlement from the clay-lands will have had the effect of permitting the regeneration of woodland and scrub on land previously under cultivation. This is not to say that the forests of Rockingham, Salcey and Whittlewood owed their existence entirely to regrowth in the Anglo-Saxon period; woodland must have existed here in the Roman period to underpin the iron and pottery industries. But that the area under some kind of tree cover did expand can be shown archaeologically in for example the area of Corby and Brigstock, where well-authenticated blocks of medieval woodland have Roman sites inside them. Outside the forests, areas bearing the names *-wold* or *-ley*, and therefore carrying tree cover of some sort in the Saxon period when the names were given, have in places Roman period sites and manuring scatters. An important exception to the lack of sites of the Early/Middle Saxon period in woodland areas comes from Rockingham Forest. Extensive fieldwork in a zone between the River Welland and the Willow Brook, in the parishes adjoining the Harpers Brook and around Easton-on-the-Hill, has revealed mounds and patches of iron slag as well as actual smelting furnaces. Charcoal from these has yielded C14 dates, providing clear evidence for a very substantial Early/Middle Saxon iron smelting industry which continued into the Late Saxon period and beyond (Fig 6.3; Bellamy 1994; Bellamy *et al* 2000-01).

Northamptonshire has produced the same range of structural remains known from elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England: rectangular timber halls of various degrees of size and elaboration, with walls formed around posts set in post-holes or later on in trenches; and quite small sub-rectangular sunken structures, with post-holes at each end to support a roof. These were relatively humble ancillary structures for craft use, but they could be lived in; they are not generally thought to have had Romano-British antecedents. Large-scale excavations elsewhere in England have uncovered a variety of sites including well-organised groups of halls arranged to form farm units set within fenced enclosures; and large straggling sites with halls and sunken buildings in various proportions showing little obvious planning which represent a relatively small number of farms rebuilt as required in slightly different places. In Northamptonshire the largest area of early-middle Saxon rural settlement so far excavated is at Raunds; this shows this kind of site movement. Here work has taken place on both parts of a site divided by the Raunds Brook. On the western side, three sunken-featured buildings, four post-built structures, some pits, a kiln or hearth and various post-holes which could not be joined up in a meaningful way to make buildings, were found. A C14 date from the hearth gave a probable 6th century date. These buildings were abandoned after the mid-7th century and 100 metres to the south a residential hall 8½ by 4½ metres and at right angles to it another, larger, building were constructed, forming a kind of yard. This contained a circular timber structure, quite possibly a haystack for what looks like a farm. On the other side of the valley, there was certainly occupation at the same time. A great deal of pottery was found, including Ipswich and Maxey wares as on the site just described, but later damage meant that the contemporary ditches and post-holes could not be understood (Fig 6.4; Dix 1986-87).

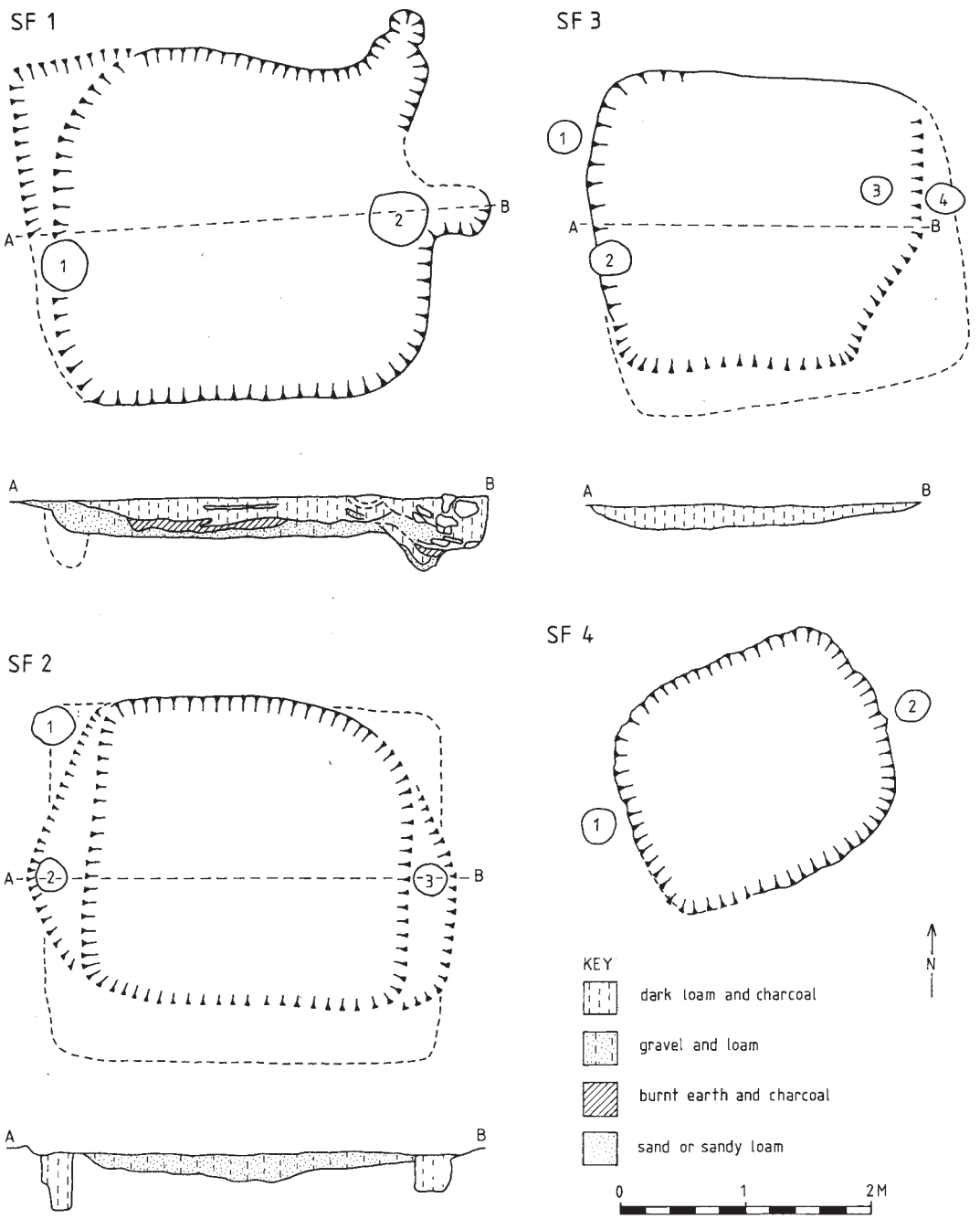
Excavation has been able to show how the scatters of pottery found during fieldwalking can indicate settlements. At Brixworth, a parish subjected to intensive fieldwalking which has produced over 19 Anglo-Saxon sites, a small pottery scatter (seven pieces) indicated a site which on excavation turned out to contain a boundary ditch, seven similarly aligned post-built buildings and four sunken structures besides numerous post-holes, pits and hearths. The site, to judge from decorated pottery fragments, began in the 5th century and continued in use possibly into the 8th (Ford 1995). This was probably a single farm. At Upton forty-five sherds covered a sunken building, several post-holes and possible boundary ditches. This formed part of a much larger area of dispersed or shifting occupation (Shaw 1993-94: Ford 1995). In 1965 an unusually large sunken building 9 by 5½ metres excavated in advance of road works, was, on the evidence of the 60 loom weights inside it, clearly a weaving shed (Jackson *et al* 1969). At Courteenhall the excavation of four Anglo-Saxon scatters produced virtually no features – there was one sunken-featured building – but analysis of the precise location of the pottery finds led to the conclusion that despite the lack of structural evidence temporary, short-lived occupation had in fact taken place. Sunken-featured buildings are by no means uncommon in Northamptonshire. At Grendon, four examples could have been associated with furnaces used for the smelting of bog ore for iron, and a group of at least three found on Northampton Sand at Briar Hill, Northampton can be linked with a group of sites in the Hunsbury Hill area where a smelting furnace and various pits, ditches and post-holes relate to the exploitation of the local ore. Anglo-Saxon pottery has been found in the hill fort (Fig 6.5; Jackson 1993-94, 1995)

Until the second half of the 7th century the Anglo-Saxons in this part of the East Midlands were pagans. Northamptonshire has some 58 pagan cemeteries, almost all of them brought to light through chance discoveries made by workmen digging for minerals or stone or during building work in the 19th or earlier 20th centuries. They are therefore badly recorded. On the basis of the information which has survived, none of the Northamptonshire cemeteries was particularly large. Kettering, Stamford Road and Duston certainly had over 100 burials, but none is known to have approached the thousand or so occasionally known from cemeteries in Norfolk, Suffolk and Humberside (Meaney 1964). It is clear that both inhumation and cremation were practised from the earliest days of the period, and there are many mixed cemeteries, but cremation was more popular in the 5th century. All the known cemeteries lie on permeable geologies and so match the distribution of Early/Middle Saxon sites and in some cases it looks as if they lay close to the settlements they served. At Raunds excavations 100 metres south of the church have revealed the edge of a probably 6th-century cremation cemetery which



6.4 Raunds, early Saxon occupation, 6th-7th centuries. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

would have belonged to one of the settlements described above. At Upton it is possible that a reticella bead (a polychrome ornament formed of glass rods wound around a core, and a high status item) and a swastika brooch, both surface finds, could derive from a cemetery which served the early/middle Saxon settlements. Some burials made use of features derived from the prehistoric past. At Pitsford fourteen cremation urns were found in 1882 in the possible Neolithic long barrow known

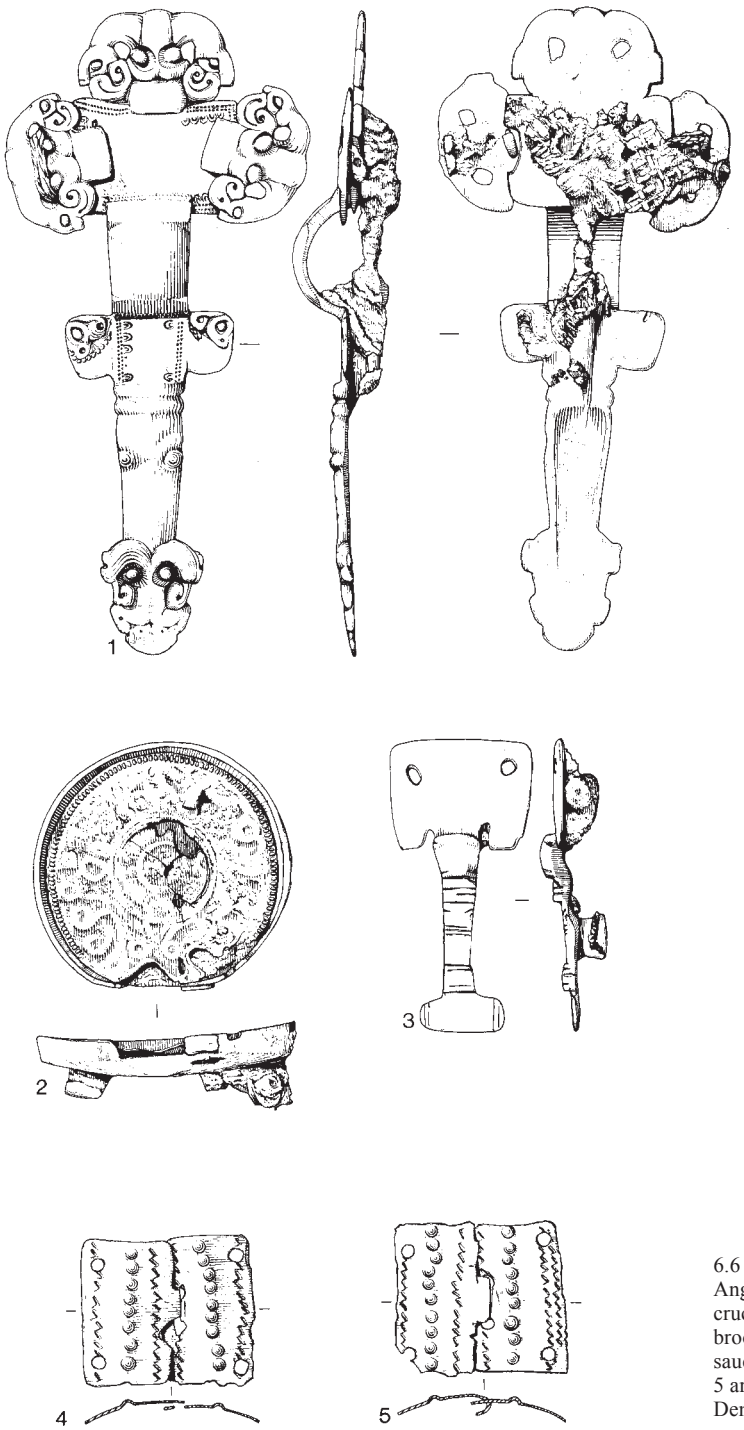


6.5 Sunken-featured buildings, Grendon. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

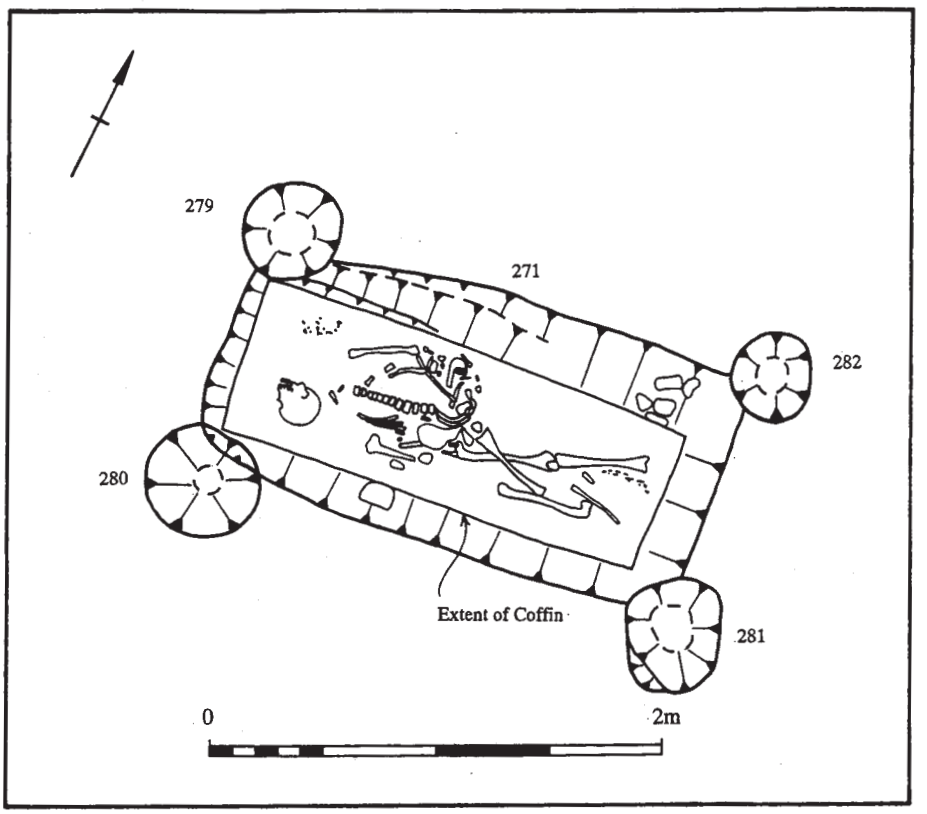
as Lymans Hill. At Borough Hill, Daventry, an inhumation burial of the late 5th-early 6th century with a brooch, buckle, pin and glass beads came from one of the barrows. Recent excavations ahead of road widening at Tansor found the inhumation burials of a woman and a child set in a circular Neolithic or Bronze Age mound. The rather small number of grave goods – beads, silver wire rings, a silver pendant and a plain pot – suggest a 7th century date (Chapman 1996-97).

In the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* the Venerable Bede (*c*673–735) identified with precision the particular areas of Denmark and northern Germany from which the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came. During the last century the pioneer of pagan Anglo-Saxon pottery studies, J N L Myres, showed that there were sometimes quite striking parallels between pottery found in cemeteries in England and that discovered in the home areas of the invaders, thus in his view enabling the territorial origins of the occupants of some cremation cemeteries to be located. The work has not been without its critics, but nevertheless it is still worth while looking at what he has to say about Northamptonshire cremation urns, because his conclusions about the mixed origins of the settlers here in the 5th century is borne out by the metalwork included in their inhumation burials in the 6th. He thought that some pots with line and dot decoration and with chevrons from the cemeteries at Kettering and Brixworth were of 5th century date and resembled vessels from the lower Elbe region, from which the Saxons came. A pot from Barton Seagrave decorated with facetting he regarded as similar to vessels from this area and from the Weser-Ems coastline, also Saxon. But the Kettering cemetery also produced pots with decoration like vessels of early 5th century date from the Danish island of Fyn and from Schleswig, and so Anglian. The general picture derived thus from the funerary pottery and from the size of the cemeteries so far known is of relatively small groups with traditions originating in a number of north European regions. He was able to point to knobbed pots (*buckelurnen)* from both Kettering and Barton Seagrave which used identical decorative stamps and schemes to those employed on pots from a 6th century cremation cemetery at Girton near Cambridge, evidence maybe of the transference of decorative ideas between regions by women, the traditional makers of pottery, on marriage (Myres 1977).

This mixture of cultural traditions appears again when one considers the metalwork placed in the inhumation cemeteries of the later 5th and 6th century. This shows a highly stratified society concerned with the expression of status, group identity and lineage. Certain men were given weapons, swords being the most prestigious; very few burials of this date range from Northamptonshire had these, and the records, which suggest sword burials at Badby, Cransley and Thorpe Malsor, are early and not very reliable. Others might be given shields and spears, the traditional indicators of free status, or just a spear or a knife; other burials might be unaccompanied. The types of these objects from Northamptonshire male graves tend to belong to the same broad classes as are found elsewhere in south-east England. The ornaments found with female burials are different. The collections of jewellery from richly furnished graves show how women, presumably of a certain status, had a folk costume consisting of a dress fastened at both shoulders with brooches, with underneath it a shift with long sleeves closed at the wrist with fasteners (a fashion derived ultimately from Norway) and held to the dress at the front by a third brooch. Women who lived in the Saxon areas of the Thames Valley had similar overdresses but different undergarments which did not require wrist-clasps; and whereas Anglian women preferred cruciform and certain types of annular brooches, as well as some types of the small-long brooch (a cheap variant of the cruciform brooch), Saxon women used round brooches, particularly saucer-shaped ones, and different forms of the small-long. In Northamptonshire, an Anglian area, we find graves in which both Saxon and Anglian types occur, although the latter predominate. As an example may be cited the overwhelmingly inhumation cemetery of 6th-century date excavated at Wakerley. The majority of the 85 burials were female, and few people were over 45. The jewellery consisted mainly of annular, cruciform and small-long brooches, with poor graves having brooches of the swastika variety; these were all types characteristic of the East Midlands. But there were also four circular brooches belonging to the tradition of Saxon England (Fig 6.6). Of the male graves, the 18 burials just with spears belonged to people aged 17 to 25; the burials with spears and shields (10) were of older men, 25–35, the difference in equipment perhaps an indicator of this. The name of the settlement to which the cemetery belonged could



6.6 Wakerley cemetery, grave 74. A mixture of Anglian and Saxon jewellery. No. 1 is a florid cruciform brooch and No. 3 is a small-long brooch, both Anglian types; No.2 is an applied saucer brooch of Saxon derivation. Nos. 4 and 5 are wrist clasps. Reproduced by permission of Dennis Jackson



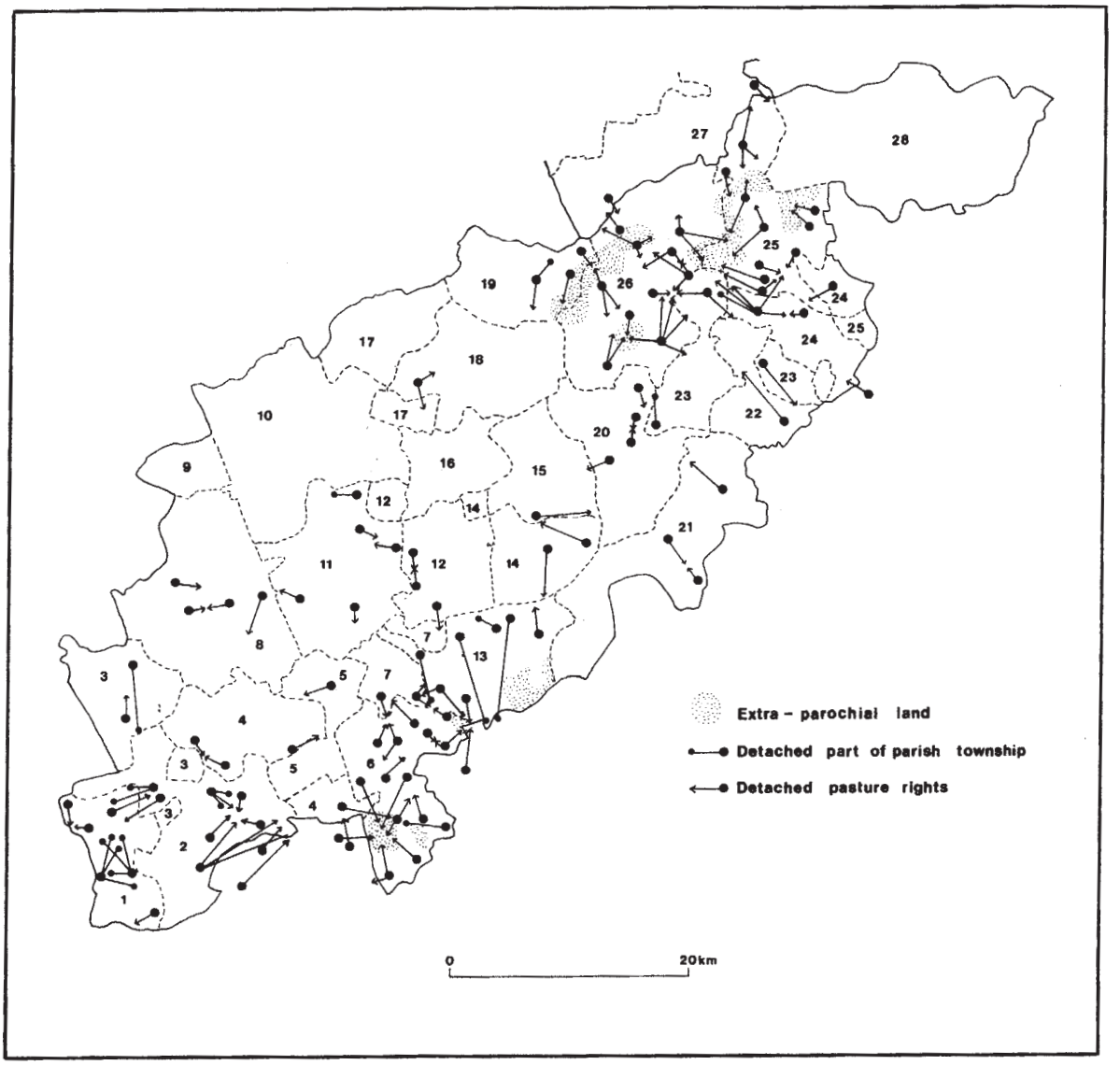
6.7 Great Houghton, late 7th century inhumation cemetery with timber mausoleum. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology © Northamptonshire County Council

have been Boseley, the name borne by a field some 950 metres away to the west, which has produced some Anglo-Saxon pottery (Adams and Jackson 1988-89).

It was during the 7th century that the kind and also the quantity of jewellery deposited with women changed. Brooches are much less common and we get wire rings, necklaces and pins, sometimes fastened together, all part of a country-wide style of female dress based on aristocratic models derived from late antique prototypes and indicative of an important shift away from a tribally-based society. A small inhumation cemetery of this type containing eight sparsely furnished burials, some with silver wire rings, lay 200 metres to the north-west of the 6th-century example at Wakerley (Jackson and Ambrose 1978). In 1996 a small inhumation cemetery (23 burials) was excavated south-west of Great Houghton. The burials were unfurnished and carefully orientated east-west; a C14 date would indicate a late 7th century date. These were almost certainly the graves of Christians (Fig 6.7; Chapman 2000-01). At Whitehall Farm, Nether Heyford, recent work has uncovered an inhumation cemetery (five burials so far); one of them, of a young man in a semi-crouched position, was accompanied with a sword and iron knife, clearly a member of the warrior class. Carbon-14 gives a date somewhere in the late 7th to late 8th century; the sword burial was aligned east-west, cutting through an earlier north-south one, and this has led to the suggestion that we may be seeing here evidence for the transition to Christianity.

THE MIDDLE SAXON PERIOD (c. 650-850)

The Christianisation of this part of the Midlands came about because of political changes. In 653 the pagan Mercian king Penda made his son Peada



Key to hundreds:

1. Sutton
2. Alboldstow
3. Warden
4. Foxley
5. Towcester
6. Cleley
7. Collingtree
8. Gravesend
9. Alwardsley
10. Guilsborough
11. Nobottle
12. Spelhoe
13. Wymersley
14. Hamfordshoe
15. Orlingbury
16. Mawsley
17. Stotfold
18. Rothwell
19. Stoke
20. Navisland
21. Higham
22. Navisford
23. Huxloe
24. Polebrook
25. Willybrook
26. Corby
27. Witchley
28. Uptongrene

6.8 Northamptonshire: hundreds, and detached rights of townships and parishes.
Reproduced by permission of Glenn Foard

princeps (*ie* sub-king) of the Middle Angles, a group of peoples inhabiting the East Midlands; the price of a marriage between him and a Northumbrian princess was the acceptance of a Christian mission in Middle Anglian territory.

A key instrument used by the Mercian kings to maintain control over their territories was the monastery; these in addition to religious activities fulfilled important functions in the machinery of government. One of the greatest in the whole of England had been established in the late 7th century at Peterborough. In Northamptonshire nothing is left of the monastery at Oundle, which was according to his biographer Eddius the location of Wilfrid's death in 709. Nor are there remains at Weedon, founded by Werburgh, the daughter of the 7th-century Mercian king Wulfhere, although a ditch containing sherds of Ipswich ware has been located. At Brixworth, however, where a monastery was established from Peterborough in perhaps the 7th century, there survives one of the best preserved churches of late 8th to early 9th century date in the whole of north-west Europe (Colour plate 9). Excavations in the vicarage garden have uncovered part of a lay cemetery of this date and a length of the ditch which demarcated the monastic precinct on the western side. Very detailed analysis of the building stones of the church has shown how it was constructed out of re-used materials, presumptively of Roman origin, taken from a wide area, including tiles and stone fragments with dowel holes, one with a fragment of an inscription (Cramp *et al* 1977; Sutherland and Parsons 1984).

It is now that the range of available evidence - scrappy references in historical sources from the 8th century, place-names, back-projection of information from Domesday Book, the general distribution of natural resources and the structures of medieval ecclesiastical government – permits a beginning to be made in understanding the administrative organization of the region (Foard 1985). The units of government and land exploitation which emerge from this vary in size. Some were large: Bede refers to the *provincia* of Oundle, his word for a kingdom or sub-kingdom, and the land unit around King's Sutton seems to have been substantial, extending well beyond the present county boundaries.

Within these major units were other centres, such as Fawsley, Brigstock and Yardley Hastings, which had access to a variety of natural resources and had around them places which owed dues and services based on these, many of which could be subsumed in the Old English word 'soke'. Irthlingborough is an example of such a centre. It is known that Offa was there in 780, because it was at *Yrtlingaburg* that he confirmed a grant by the *dux* (ie sub-king) of the South Saxons to St Pauls of Earnley, Sussex. Clearly there was a royal establishment here, named after a fortified place, which was presumably the focus of a royal estate which could provide the food and other resources necessary to underpin the activities of the king and his entourage. Just where this fortified place might have been was became clear in 1986 when trial excavations through the defences of a hill-fort revealed by aerial photography (see Fig 4.2) showed that this originally Iron Age site had been reoccupied in the Anglo-Saxon period (Dix 1986-87).

At the time of Domesday, some three hundred years later, Irthlingborough appears as part of the soke of Finedon, a place-name name which incorporates the Old English word *thing ,* a meeting, and thus the 'meeting place on a hill'. This 'soke' had extensive dependencies north of the Nene but also several south of it in Raunds, Rushden, Irchester and Knuston. In Domesday Book these places were components of a substantial estate centred on Higham Ferrers, evidence perhaps of a once very large unit of administration on both sides of the river. Higham means the 'high *ham*' or home farm, indicative of its function as a central place. On its northern outskirts, aerial photography, fieldwalking, geophysical prospection and finally excavation have revealed an oval ditched enclosure over 100 metres across, largely empty, with to the north-west and south timber structures of the Early and Middle Saxon periods (Spandl 1996). The whole thing looks as if it was intended for the management and collection of stock, not inappropriate for an estate focus at a time when pastoralism was important. The site also shows how the origins of significant physical elements in these centres can sometimes be taken back by means of archaeology to a period far earlier than we might suspect from the historical sources alone.

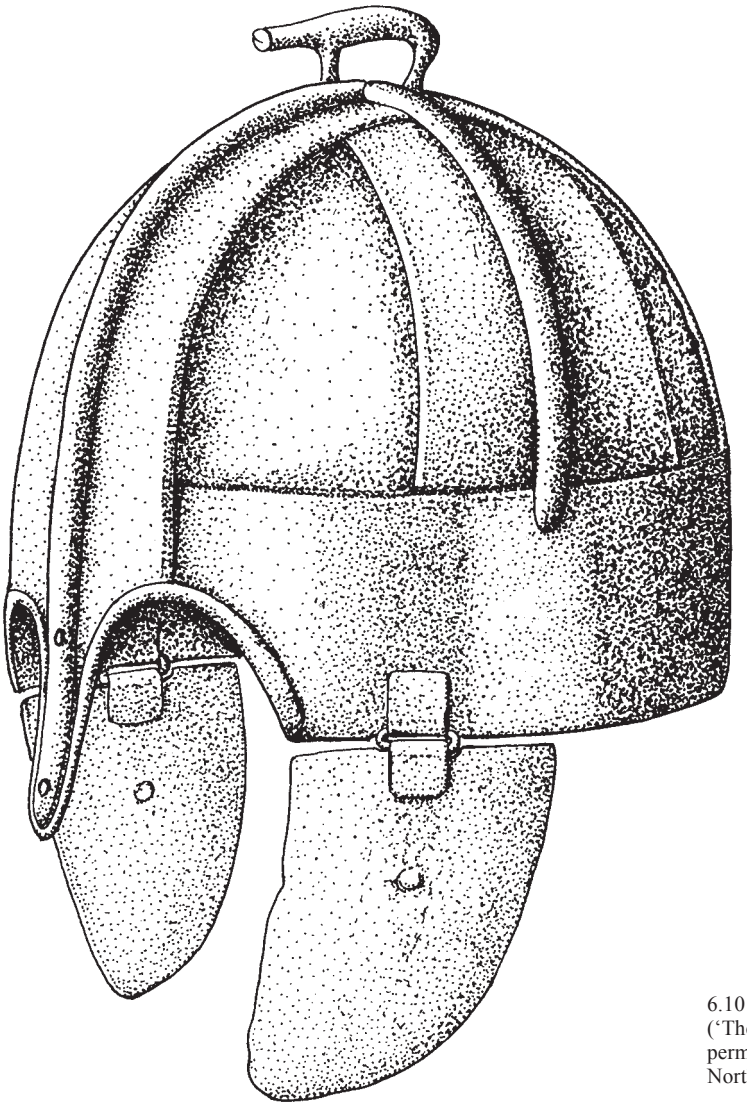
Two outstanding richly furnished graves take on their full meaning when viewed against the Middle Saxon administrative background. In 1876, during ironstone digging at Desborough, an inhumation cemetery of 40 graves was found within a rectangular earthwork. The graves were very poorly recorded, but no one could miss the fact that one of

6.9 The Desborough necklace reproduced from Archaeologia, 1880

them contained one of the most remarkable pieces of jewellery to have survived from this period, a necklace consisting of alternating gold and garnet pendants separated by gold wire spacer beads, with an equal-armed cross of sheet gold tubing hanging at the centre (Baker 1880). The significance of the cross is that it is without much doubt a symbol of Christianity, but the obviously high status of the piece is entirely appropriate for someone associated with the fortified residence (Deor's *burh*) within the territorial unit described in Domesday as the royal manor of Rothwell.

Still more significant was the male inhumation burial found in 1997 during gravel extraction beside a Roman road which ran along the southern parish boundary of Wollaston. An oval grave contained an expensive pattern-welded sword within a wooden scabbard. A bronze hanging bowl, an item of high-status feasting equipment, had been clearly an heirloom when deposited in the grave. Most important was the very rare iron helmet, with a simple crest in the shape of a boar (Fig 6.10).

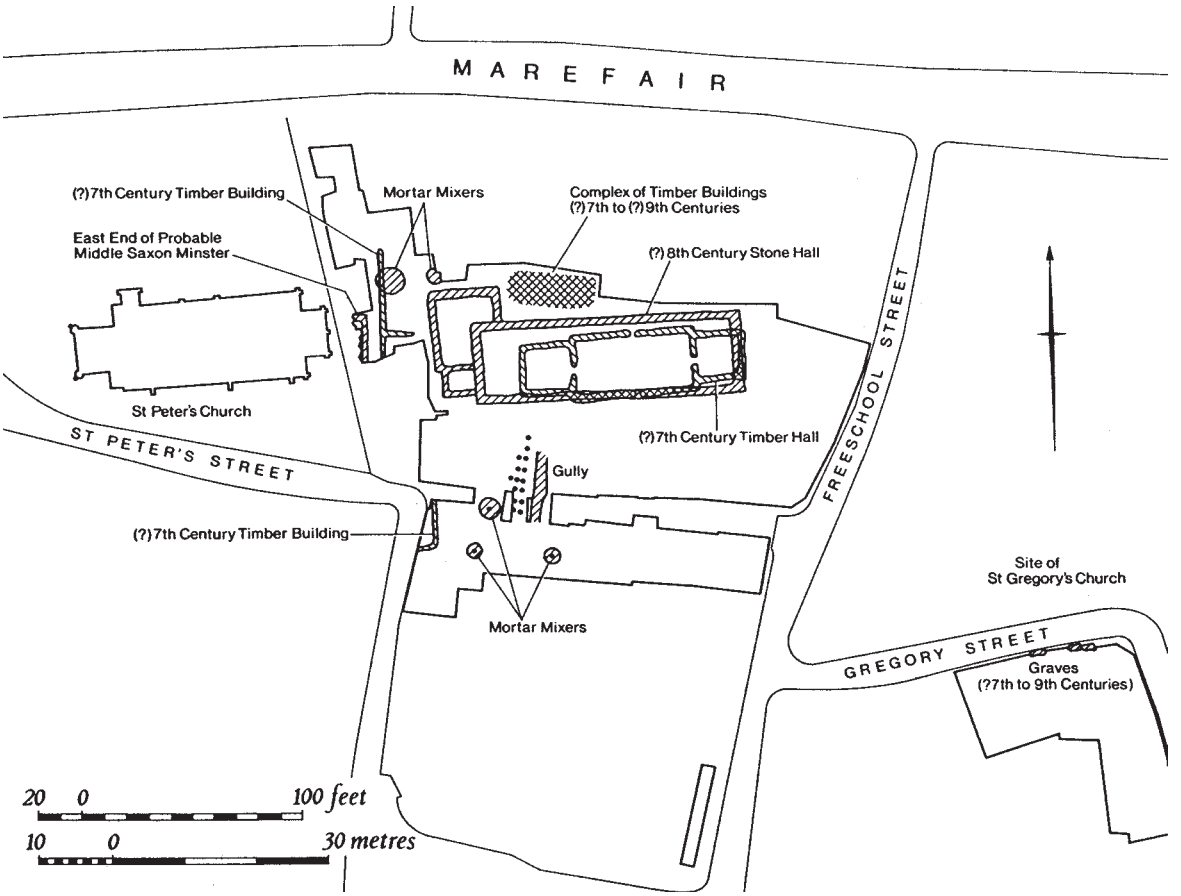
This is an exceptional grave of princely status; it belonged to the later 7th or early 8th century and its



6.10 The Anglo-Saxon helmet from Wollaston ('The Pioneer helmet'). Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology © Northamptonshire County Council

location on the southern boundary of the Hundred of Higham Ferrers would indicate a person associated with the soke belonging to Higham Ferrers and Irthlingborough or just possibly the princely house of the *provincia* of Oundle. A burial in this position was making a statement about territoriality. The statement might originally have been enhanced by a barrow, but this if it existed did not survive (Meadows 1996-97).

The most spectacular excavated structural evidence for the Middle Saxon period comes from Northampton. Evidence for early Saxon settlement has been found in the south-western segment of the medieval walled town in the form of sunken-featured structures, some incompletely preserved post- and trench-built buildings, a scatter of early pottery, some of it stamped, going back to the late 5th to early 6th centuries, a couple of early brooches and a few fragments of glass vessels. On this evidence, early Saxon Northampton looks like an unremarkable rural settlement. But large-scale excavation during urban redevelopment from 1980



6.11 Northampton, Saxon 'palace' complex. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

to 1982 has shown that at a point in the mid-8th century a very imposing timber hall was built on a site east of St Peter's church (Fig 6.11).

The structure, 29.7 by 8.6 metres overall, consisted of a central hall with annexes at both ends; there were opposing doorways in the centre of each of the long sides. The building had been extremely accurately set out using a module of 1.85 metres (six feet); the bottom of the foundation trench did not depart from the level by more than two centimetres. There were other quite substantial timber buildings to the north-west, but not enough remained of them to appreciate their plans. Then, *c.* 820 the building was demolished, to be replaced with a remarkable rectangular structure, 37.6 by 11.4 metres, constructed of ironstone and limestone slabs taken from elsewhere, with some Roman tile. There was evidence for wall plaster with a white lime wash on one side, probably from the inside. At a later date two rather less substantial stone structures had been added on the west. Also, between the hall and St Peter's church was found the square east end of what can reasonably be regarded as the predecessor of the church, constructed in the same way as the additions to the hall. Equally remarkable were five mortar mixers, most of them circular basins 2 to 3 metres across, lined with wattlework and operated by a beam carrying paddles (Fig 6.12).

The site was interpreted at the time as a royal palace, on the basis of analogies with comparable, undoubtedly royal, sites here and abroad. This interpretation would fit in well with general notions

6.12 Northampton, Saxon 'palace' complex: 8th century mortar mixer. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology © Northamptonshire County Council

of the consolidation of royal government in the *regiones* of the Middle Angles during the Mercian supremacy (Williams *et al* 1985). It has recently been suggested however that the site should be regarded as a monastery (Blair 1996). That there was an ecclesiastical connexion is undeniable. St Peter's church is clearly an integral part of the layout, and, since it had parishes subordinate to it in the Middle Ages, Upton and Kingsthorpe, it would qualify as a minster church, one served originally by a group of priests responsible for a wide area. There is also the location of St Gregory's church

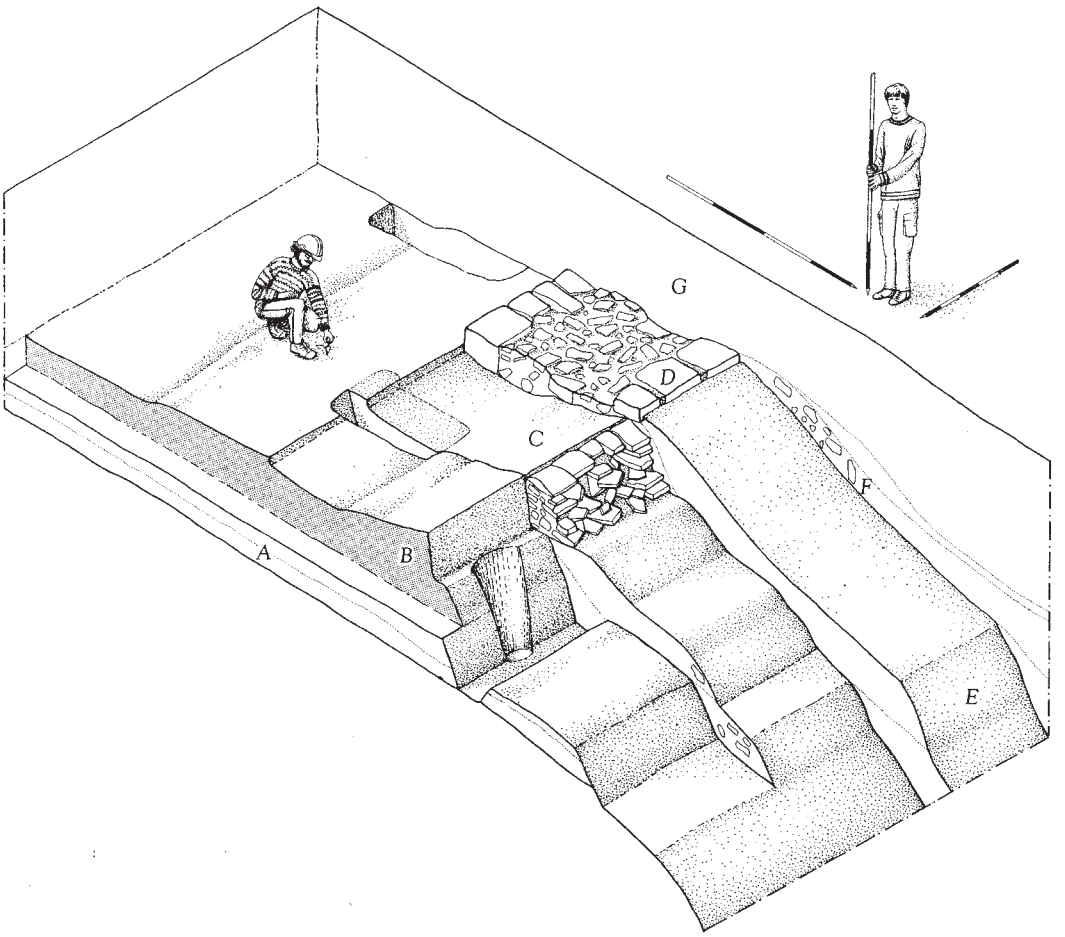
to be considered, only some 50 metres to the east of the halls, on the same general alignment and so producing the kind of overall axial plan known from monastic sites elsewhere. That St Gregory's was an early ecclesiastical site is shown by the 7th-9th century C14 dates obtained from its graveyard. However, the evidence in favour of monasticism is not absolutely conclusive and it is notoriously difficult to distinguish in this period between monastic sites and high-status secular sites. The name of the place, *Ham tun* , 'home farm' or more significantly, 'central residence', is not encountered until 914; however it is unlikely to have been new at that date and probably predated the Danish invasions. The name is more in accord with notions of secular authority than monasticism.

An increasing number of villages in Northamptonshire have yielded pieces of Ipswich Ware, a superior type of pottery imported into the region and which began to be made in the late 7th/early 8th century. It appears on high-status sites, for example the 'palace' at Northampton, the monasteries at Brixworth and Weedon, significant places within the territorial unit surrounding Irthlingborough (Irthlingborough itself, Higham and Finedon) and at royal manors such as Passenham. But it is also making an appearance in certain villages, including as we have seen Raunds. Raunds at Domesday was in part a berewick of Higham, a detached part of the lordly demesne, concerned with the production of grain. Maybe therefore the settlement associated with this function was already in the 8th century on the site of the present village. Many Northamptonshire villages have produced evidence of Middle Saxon occupation; these sites were the foci around which the Late Saxon and medieval villages were formed. The pottery derived from the excavation or fieldwalking of Middle Saxon sites outside these villages does not contain pieces in Late Saxon fabrics – they had been deserted before *c*850 when these pottery types began to be used. In some cases furlong and field names have preserved the names these places had, more often than not containing the element 'cot' or 'cote' ie cottage, an indication of their subordinate position. It was in the Middle Saxon period therefore that the process began whereby settlement started to concentrate on the places which became medieval villages. There are a number of villages which have embedded in their plans the outline of an oval enclosure, which in the light of the example from Higham Ferrers could go back to this period or before. There are good examples at Badby, Brixworth and Brackley. At Daventry the oval formed by the street pattern, and within which the church stands, has to the north of it occupation of 6th-century date. At Grafton Regis the medieval village was arranged around the periphery of an enclosure which had occupation of the Iron Age and the Roman and Early/Middle Saxon periods inside (Brown 1991; Brown and Foard 1998). Such layouts may result from the greater and more systematic demands being made by the agencies of royal government and by the church, with its monasteries and minsters. Such demands would have prompted more intensive exploitation of resources as well as a greater definition of rights and obligations within defined territories. The conditions for the creation of the Midland champion landscape were being created.

THE DANES

In 873 the kingdom of Mercia collapsed in the face of Danish invasions. Following the wars with the Wessex of Alfred, the boundary between the areas subject to the Danes and to the English was fixed along Watling Street. Northampton became the focal point for one of the Danish armies. Place-names in Northamptonshire ending in *-by* and *-thorpe* are concentrated east of this line and show the reality of the Danish presence. As part the process of conquering the Danelaw Alfred's son Edward the Elder constructed fortified *burhs;* the *Anglo- Saxon Chronicle* tells us that in 920 one of these was made at Towcester. The Danes of Northampton and Leicester attacked this and failed. Later in the year Edward went to the royal manor at Passenham and remained there while Towcester was given a stone wall; the Danes of Northampton as far north as the river Welland thereupon acknowledged his authority. It was the combining of this tract of Danish territory with a number of Saxon land units west of Watling Street which formed what was to become the county of Northampton.

Archaeological material which might be attributed to the fighting between English and Danes is scanty. There are battleaxes and spears from Borough Hill, Daventry, and a stirrup and other finds from Finedon bridge. The refortification of Towcester seems to have entailed the refacing of the remains of the massive Roman wall and evidence for this may perhaps be seen in the form of the town wall's robber



6.13 Northampton: isometric reconstruction of the defences at Green Street. Key: B. Timber revetted late Saxon clay bank C. Later limestone revetment D. 12th century town wall. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

trench. A defensive ditch could also have been dug at this time (Woodfield 1992). As for Northampton, in 1954 Alderman Frank Lee pointed out in a famous article how the layout of certain streets in the south-western corner of the medieval walled area seemed to define an earlier enclosure of some 80 acres and suggested that this indicated the outline of the Saxon fortified town. Until recently excavations along this line have been inconclusive, but in 1995-6 the south-western defences were located in Green Street. They initially consisted of a clay bank 6 metres wide and over 2 metres high, with a timber revetment and a wide ditch in front; the revetment was later replaced in stone (Fig 6.13). At this point the defences were cut by a metalled road and there were the remains of a timber gatehouse on its southern side. This had been the original access road from the west; the present principal east-west street, Marefair, is the result of a reorganization of the street system when the much more extensive medieval defences were brought into being. The dating of the pre-Conquest defences depends on pottery and is imprecise. The earlier 10th century is suggested, but it is not possible to say whether the construction date falls within or just outside the period of Danish control (Lee 1954; Chapman 1998-9).

THE LATE SAXON PERIOD (*c.* 850 to MID-11TH CENTURY)

The Late Saxon period brings to the fore aspects of the archaeological record which show that we are clearly entering the medieval world. The formation of the county, first heard of in 1016, entailed also the creation of subordinate units, the hundreds, which in some cases cut through the areas dependant upon the earlier soke centres. The population rose. The open fields can be recognized for the first time, as can the parishes and villages with which we are familiar. The 168 mills recorded in Domesday attest a significant concern with grain production. There is also a greater use of money, an expansion of trade both internal and external and as a result an approach to urbanism. Most of these things may well have had their roots in earlier centuries, but they become visible now in sharper focus and more developed form. A common factor in both rural settlements and field systems is the application of techniques of planning on a large scale.

At Northampton, the Middle Saxon stone hall was abandoned; its walls were robbed for their stone at various times in the 10th century. Much humbler structures appear in this area; there were several sunken-featured buildings, one in the ruins of the hall, and the slots and post-holes of timber buildings, which were loosely arranged around a courtyard entered by a gate. Similar structures appear wherever excavations take place in the south-west of the historic core of the town. Anglo-Danish Northampton seems not to have been a densely built-up place. There is no doubt however about the nature of the activities which went on there. Furnaces, slag, crucibles, turnings and fragments of sheet metal attest the working of iron and copper alloy. The hard grey pottery known as Northampton Ware was manufactured; a fragmentary kiln has been discovered. There is evidence for the working of bone and antler and items of equipment indicate the manufacture of textiles. A site north of Marefair produced crucibles for the working of silver, of particular interest since we know that, from the reign of Eadwig (955–959), Northampton was the location of a mint. Internal trade is indicated by the presence of pottery from Stamford, Thetford and Leicester. A number of stone hones from Norway have been found. All these discoveries are indicative of urban activities and it is therefore not surprising to find Northampton referred to in 1010 as a *port* or place of trade (Williams F 1979; Williams J H 1979, 1982; Williams and Shaw 1981). But commercial activity was growing generally in the Late Saxon period and by the time of Domesday Book (1086) markets are mentioned at Higham Ferrers, Oundle and Kings Sutton, all of them important centres earlier in the Anglo-Saxon period

The common fields of medieval England fell into a number of types. Northamptonshire was in the heart of the Midland system. The dispersal of land throughout the township (the smallest unit of communal land exploitation); the maintenance always of one of the great fields as fallow, for grazing and the retention of soil fertility; the standard farm units (yardlands or in Latin virgates) with their fixed sizes and rights in the keeping of fixed numbers of animals, all show how the system was intended to achieve self-sufficiency and the regulated sharing of resources. The parcelling-out of the arable was achieved by means of the ridge and furrow which until recently was such a familiar feature of the Northamptonshire countryside (Hall 1995). This regularly oversails the early and middle Saxon pottery scatters found during fieldwalking and so post-dates them. Also, the dark, shelly pottery known as St Neots ware, introduced into this area from the late 9th century and appearing in greater quantity from the mid-10th, and which is commonly taken as a marker for the start of the late Saxon period, only appears in ploughed ridge-and-furrow fields as a generalized manuring scatter derived from the villages from which they were worked. This suggests that the fields and their associated settlements did not come into being before the late 9th to 10th centuries. The physical components of these fields were not static, and there is evidence to indicate that in places the original plough ridges had been much longer. Also, where sufficient documentation exists, it can sometimes be shown just how carefully these fields were laid out. For example, the two townships in the parish of Daventry were originally rated at twenty hides (a unit used for the calculation of tax liabilities). Each standard hide had four virgates, and each standard virgate thirty (taxation) acres. This would give a nominal taxation rating for the two field systems combined of 2400 acres. But the unusually extensive medieval and later documentation shows that that was the number of acres the field systems actually contained, in real terms; the Anglo-Saxon surveyors had laid out a system of exactly the size they wanted (Brown 1991).

But exactitude and planning extended beyond this into what might be called the social organization of a field system. There are places, for example Great Doddington and Earls Barton, in which the land belonging to different classes of owner or tenant – the lord, freemen and villeins or customary tenants – was laid out in separate blocks in the fields.

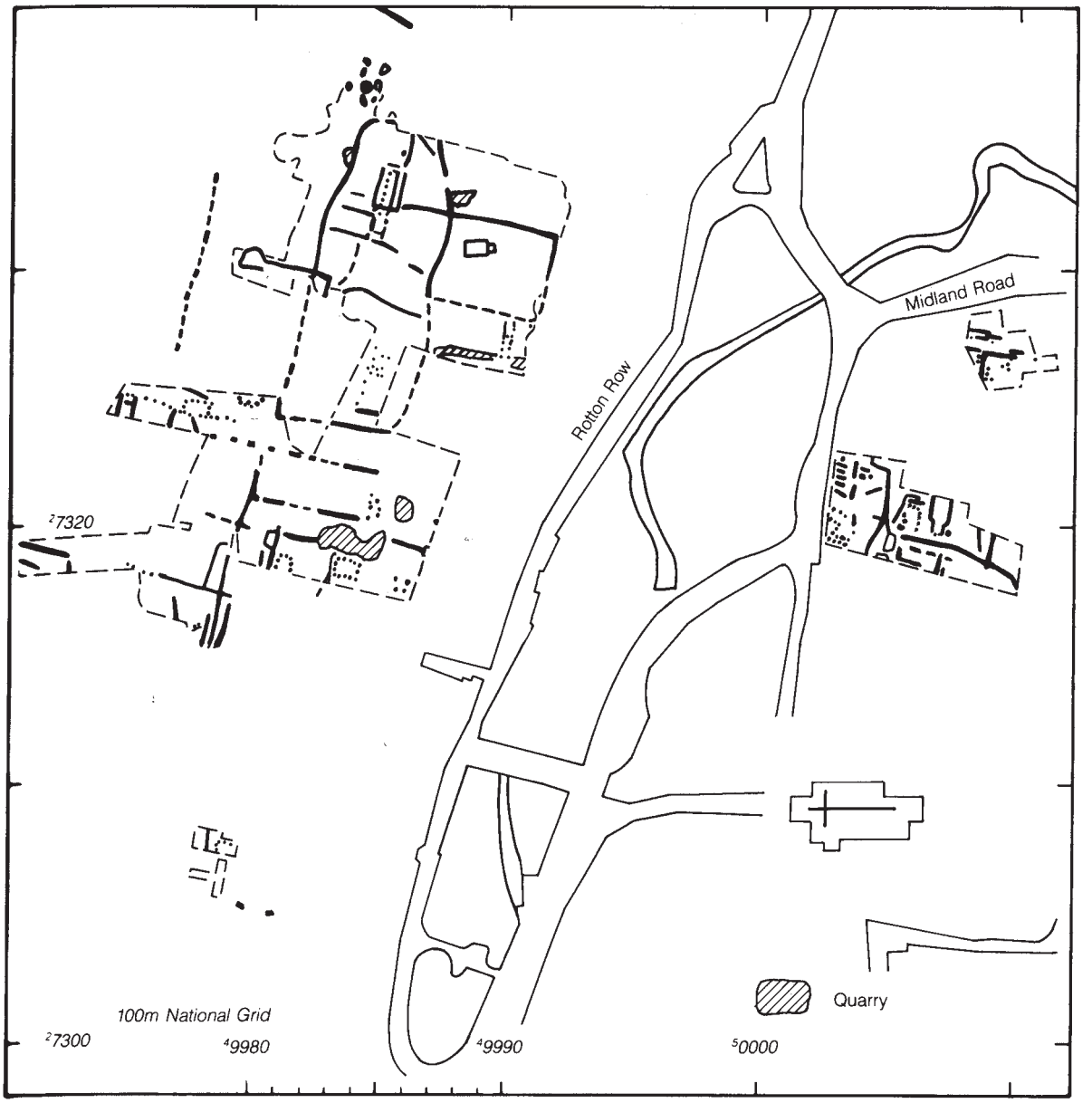
The archaeological evidence makes it clear that the process of manorialisation was well under way in the Late Saxon period. Estates were held by lords who were maintained by the produce of demesnes worked by villeins, as well as by dues and services from other tenants, a development which reduced the cohesion of the sokes described earlier. The excavations at Raunds provide an example of this (Fig 6.14).

Here, after apparently a gap in the occupation sequence, the Early/Middle Saxon farm on the western side of the Raunds Brook was replaced at a point between the later 9th and early 10th century, and so within the Danish phase, by a set of four rectangular post-hole buildings grouped around a yard; one of these, well built and with opposed doorways in the long sides, was a residential hall. Subsequently a trapezoidal ditched enclosure was made along the southern side of the yard, with entrances aligned with those of the hall. One of the post-hole buildings lay inside the enclosure. The site at this time looks like a peasant farm. But around 950-975, and so after the English conquest, a dramatic change took place. A ditch was dug at least 230 metres long running north-south and extending outside the excavated area in both directions. At the northern end of the site, this formed the western side of a ditched enclosure an acre in area (0.4 ha), within which was a long timber structure with foundation trenches 37.4 by 4.8 metres, in the northernmost part of which was a hall. This was probably from the beginning, but certainly later, separated by a ditch from domestic parts of the same range. An empty enclosure to the south, again attached to the north-south ditch on the west, was probably for stock. To the south again, and still linked to the long boundary ditch, was a series of rectangular enclosures, some of them containing timber buildings. There can be little doubt that the structures at the northern end of the site represent a manor, the residence of a lord and the place from which his demesne farm was exploited. The size of the structures, the way in which the hall is marked off from the domestic buildings and above all the known subsequent history of the site – it can be identified with confidence as the manor held by the king's thegn Burgred in Domesday Book, to become known later as Furnells after the de Furneus family who held it in the 12th century – all combine to show that manorialisation has taken place. The buildings to the south of the manorial complex might have been the farms of the tenants (Cadman 1983; Dix 1986-7).

On the opposite, eastern, side of the valley, were more rectangular ditched enclosures in series, also containing timber buildings. The enclosures were on the same general alignment as those on the western side and apparently part of the same phase of major reorganization. What we are looking at is the foundation of what became the medieval village.

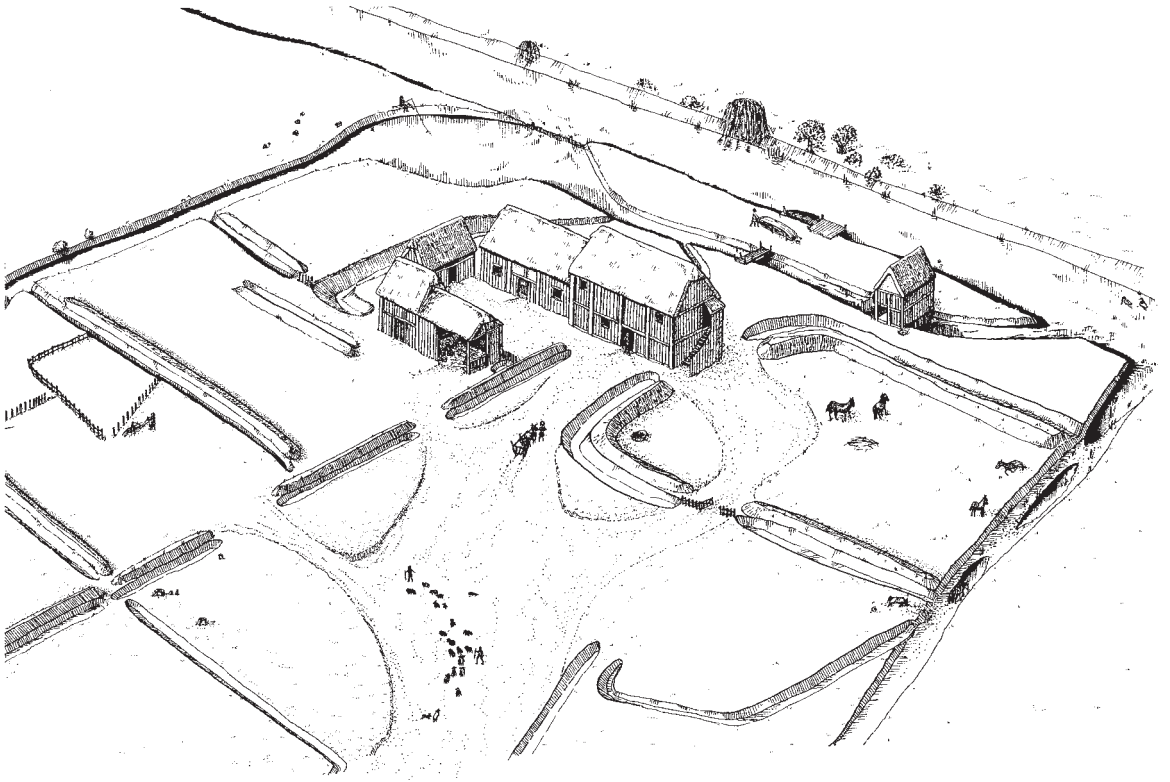
Other examples of late Saxon manorial structures are known in Northamptonshire. At Sulgrave the Norman ringwork was found to have below it a hall of sill beam construction, with a central hearth and benches set against one of the walls. There was a service room and detached kitchen at the western end and a solar block, for the private use of the lord and his family, at the eastern end. Perhaps early in the 11th century a free-standing stone building, 7.6 by 3.6 metres, was added north of the hall and an attempt made to fortify the site with a bank and ditch (Davison 1977). The use of stone at this time for a secular building is of great interest. At Nassington, excavations inside the Prebendal Manor House by its present owner (while at the same time living in it) have revealed the post-holes of a structure dateable to *c.*1000, but the full plan was not recoverable. It apparently had no relationship to the manorial hall of sill-beam and post-in-trench construction which was built in the subsequent century (Foster *et al* 1989). At Yardley Hastings, small-scale excavations north of the present manor-house and church have uncovered part of a rectangular post-in-trench building of the 10th-11th century, which however overlay a ditch containing pottery of the 7th or 8th century, as well as fragments of mortar, indicative maybe of an earlier high-status building at the centre of the soke of Yardley (Jackson and Foard 1993-94).

West Cotton was a small medieval settlement, originally with its own field system, 2½ kilometres to the west of Raunds, close to the River Nene. Its partial excavation in advance of a major road scheme has shown that it was an entirely new foundation of the mid-10th century, at about the same time as the creation of the manorial layout at the Furnells site. Like the Furnells site, it was very precisely



6.14 Raunds, late Saxon phases, 9th-11th centuries. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

planned, a near-square of six acres divided into one-acre ditched plots. The northernmost part of the site was occupied by a long timber building rather similar in plan but smaller than the manorial range at Furnells, consisting of a hall with an attached domestic range to the west. There were two empty half-acre enclosures on the south. To the south of these could have been a similar set of buildings and enclosures. The eastern part of the site, substantially undug, on the evidence of domestic rubbish, might

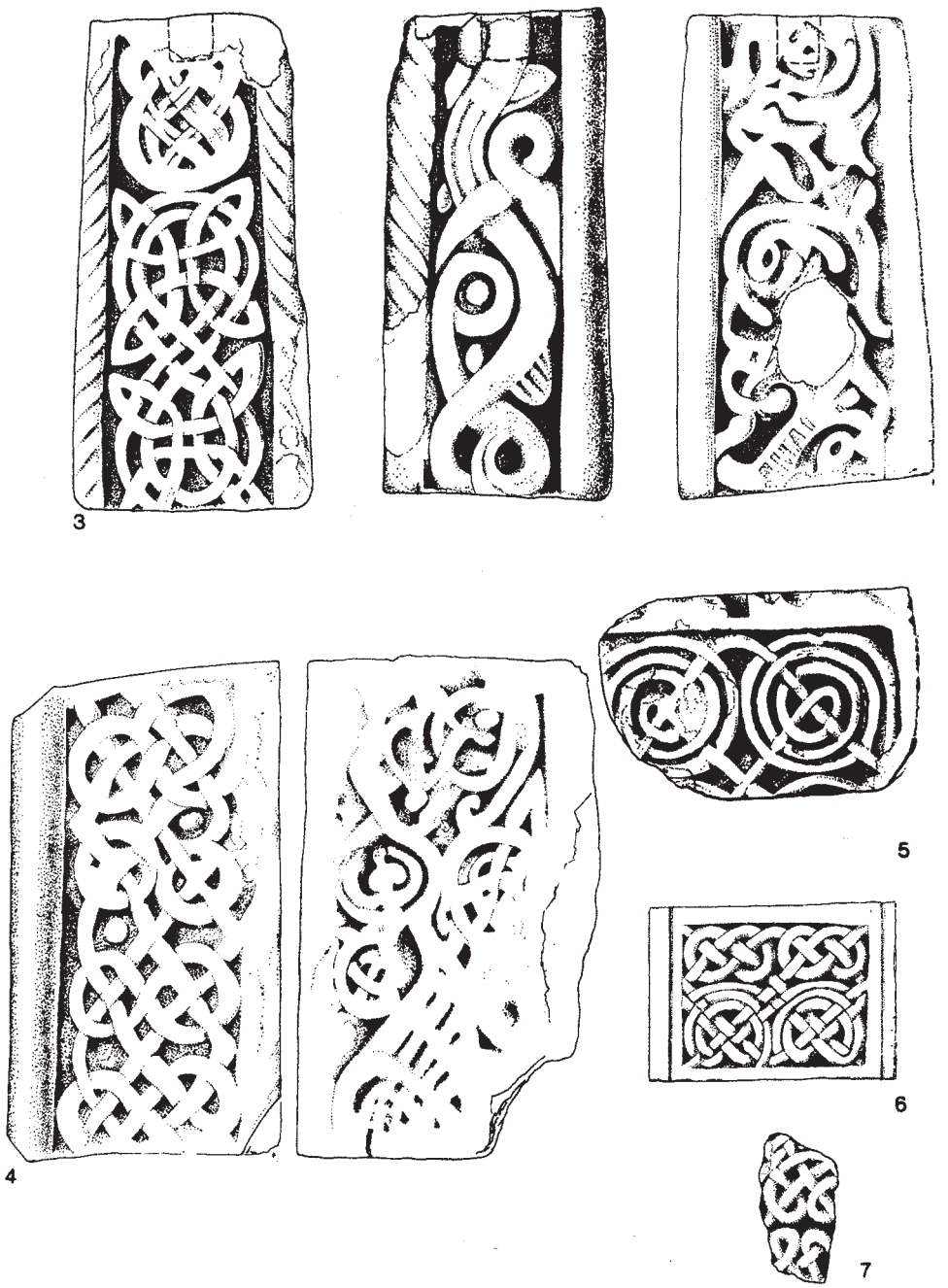


6.15 West Cotton: late Saxon timber buildings and watermill. Reproduced by permission of Northamptonshire Archaeology

have contained peasant tenements. What we seem to have here are the holdings of people of lesser social rank than the manorial lord of the Furnells site, but nevertheless members still of the landowning class. To the north-west of the northern holding was a watermill, at first of undershot type but replaced early in the 11th century by a horizontal wheel and quite probably one of the mills recorded for Raunds at Domesday (Fig 6.15; Dix 1986-87; Windell *et al* 1990).

The West Cotton site provides evidence for the growth in population thought to have taken place during the Late Saxon period. The taking in of land for occupation can also be demonstrated at Daventry, where the site north of the church lay empty for over 300 years; it was then subjected to a phase involving the digging of boundary ditches and pits and the construction of a timber buildings (Soden 1996-97). At Naseby, the settlement known as Nutcote attached to the south of the village was laid out at this time on the evidence of the dating material found in the boundary ditches which demarcated the plots (Mudd 1995).

Northamptonshire contains several churches with Anglo-Saxon masonry still surviving, mostly of 10th or 11th century date, as at Brigstock and Nassington, both of which, like St Peter's at Northampton, stood at the centre of large dependant land units and may have originated as minsters (Franklin 1984). But most of the parish churches of the county were not like this and started life as one of the appurtenances of a rural manor. Sulgrave is almost certainly an example; the parish church is near to the manor house, is axially arranged in relation to it and has a Saxon triangular-headed doorway re-set in the tower. The Furnells site at Raunds provides a better example. Here a tiny single cell church of stone, only 8 by 3½ metres externally, was built around 975 to the east of the manor house, overlapping the eastern side of the manorial enclosure and making



6.16 Stone crosses and grave slabs, Stowe Nine Churches. Nos 3 and 4 are from crosses of late 9th-early 10th century date; no.5 could have been part of a grave slab of 9th century date; nos 6 and 7 are similar in style and could have belonged to a tomb, shrine or cross of the 9th or 10th century. Reproduced by permission of Paul Woodfield

necessary the cutting of a new boundary further west. A small chancel with a bench for clergy was added; there is evidence for a bell cote from the start. The graveyard, in due course demarcated by ditches, contained 360 burials, including one with a decorated stone cover and possibly a standing cross, interpreted as the grave of the Saxon lord who established the church (Boddington 1996). Such associations with lordship, in the form of patronage, may well explain some of the ten or so Late Saxon cross fragments which still remain in Northamptonshire churches (Fig 6.16).

The celebrated tower at Earls Barton, of 10th or early 11th-century date, is an even more spectacular example of a manorial church (Colour Plate 10). The lowest storey of this, with its monumental western doorway and double windows, is shown by the crosses set on its western and southern faces to have been for religious use, representing the minute nave of the church belonging to the lord of the manor. The storeys above this could well have held bells, and also had a defensive function; but the nature of the tower as a symbol of lordship was probably paramount, since the possession of one was one of the indicators of thegnly status. The tower is placed in a very prominent position at the end of a spur defended on the north by a rampart fronted by a deep ditch, within which the lord's residence probably lay. The name of the place is indicative of the high rank held by him (Audouy *et al* 1995).

Northamptonshire has a dozen or so of the documents known as to the Anglo-Saxons as landbooks, which record the grant of land by the king usually but not exclusively to ecclesiastics. They can be used by historians for a variety of purposes, but their archaeological interest resides in the fact that a number of them contain clauses which define the land by means of points set along its boundaries. Quite often the points can be identified and the boundaries reconstructed. When this has been done, as has proved possible in the case of the three sets of boundary points of 10th and 11th century date belonging to the area around Badby, one can see precisely how parts of the landscape looked at that time (Brown *et al* 1978). The main point to emerge is the similarity between the Late Saxon landscape and the present-day one: many of the roads and tracks, the location of bridges and of woodland, and even certain hedge banks, still remain much as the Anglo-Saxons described them. The physical links between our world and that of the Anglo-Saxons are closer than many people imagine.