

NEWS AND REPORTS

The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project: the archaeology of the Gewisse

By Helena Hamerow¹, Christopher Ferguson¹ and John Naylor²

Background

Wessex was ultimately the most successful of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. It is popularly assumed to have originated around its later capital, Winchester, but in fact its origins lie in the Upper Thames Valley, with the emergence of a people referred to by Bede as the Gewisse; it was they who, by the late seventh century, had come to be known as the West Saxons. From around the middle of the seventh century onwards, the Upper Thames Valley was also at the centre of a fierce territorial struggle between the West Saxons and Mercians. We are fortunate that this region, so important in the early history of England, also contains an unsurpassed density and diversity of archaeological sites dating from the fifth to seventh centuries. A recently completed six-month pilot project has explored the potential of these sites to shed light on the origins and development of the first post-Roman polity here. It is hoped to obtain external funding for a major three-year project. The purpose of the current note is to present some of the preliminary results of the pilot.

The pilot project focused on the stretch of the Thames between Abingdon and Wallingford (Fig. 1). We were, however, also able to collate some data from across the region as a whole, spanning broadly the period from the late fourth to mid eighth centuries and drawing on the Portable Antiquities Scheme, the Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds, and the Treasure Annual Report, as well as published cemeteries and settlements. Although many details remain to be added, not least from unpublished excavations, the resulting map (Fig. 2) makes clear that the region contains hundreds of find spots from across nearly 250 parishes.

Fig. 2 also reveals several 'hot spots' of activity. Some of these are unsurprising; it has been recognized for many years that the confluences of the Thames and its tributaries at Dorchester-on-Thames, Eynsham and Abingdon attracted early Anglo-Saxon settlement (Hawkes 1986). These places were also the sites of important minsters; indeed, Dorchester famously became the seat of the first Bishop of the West Saxons in the seventh century. Fig 2, however, also reveals some unexpected concentrations of activity, for example at Watlington, the area around Cricklade, and at West Hanney, where, a metal-detectorist found an apparently isolated female grave in 2009 containing a garnet-inlaid composite disc brooch, manufactured around the middle of the seventh century (Byard 2011). The brooch is

strikingly similar to two others found in a poorly recorded cemetery at Milton, just south of Abingdon (Avent 1975, nos.182–3). This recent find thus suggests that West Hanney was linked to a string of high-status seventh-century communities living along the Upper Thames and Ock valleys, which include the royal vill at Benson, Dorchester-on-Thames, and undocumented centres at Long Wittenham and Sutton Courtenay, about which more is said below. Newly identified concentrations of finds such as these require closer examination.

The digital data we have collated will also enable us to analyze the distributions of a variety of types of object. A preliminary assessment of the distribution of coinage, for example, already suggests the existence of a 'riverine' zone during the later seventh and early eighth centuries, characterized by foreign coins whose usage appears not to have penetrated as far inland as contemporary English issues. It may eventually even be possible to examine whether one particular type of coin (the series U sceatta, type 23b) was actually minted at a site in the Upper Thames Valley as has been suggested (Metcalf 1972; 1994, 556–62).

In addition to analyzing the distributions of different object types, the Origins of Wessex Project will also undertake new analyses of old excavations as well as new fieldwork with a view to investigating two particular 'time horizons' in more detail: the fifth century and the period from c. 570–650.

The fifth century

The fate of the Britons in the fifth century assumes an added dimension in the Upper Thames Valley, since written sources indicate that it saw significant levels of British survival. Indeed, the names of several of the founding fathers of the Gewisse point to British origins (Yorke 1990, 138–9). One question that the Origins of Wessex Project aims to explore is whether some of the late Romano-British elite survived by reinventing themselves as Gewisse, much as the late Iron Age elite survived by 'becoming Roman', centuries earlier. Recent fieldwork at Dorchester-on-Thames points to heightened economic activity there at the very end of Roman Britain, as well as the presence of a dominant, arguably military, group which buried its dead in an ostentatious way in Iron Age earthworks to the south of the Roman town, potentially well into the fifth century (Booth *et al.* 2010). The potential of this region to illuminate the fate of British communities is not limited to Dorchester, however. The project will explore the late Roman context for the Gewisse by examining the latest activity at several key Roman sites. Radiocarbon

¹ Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford

² Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

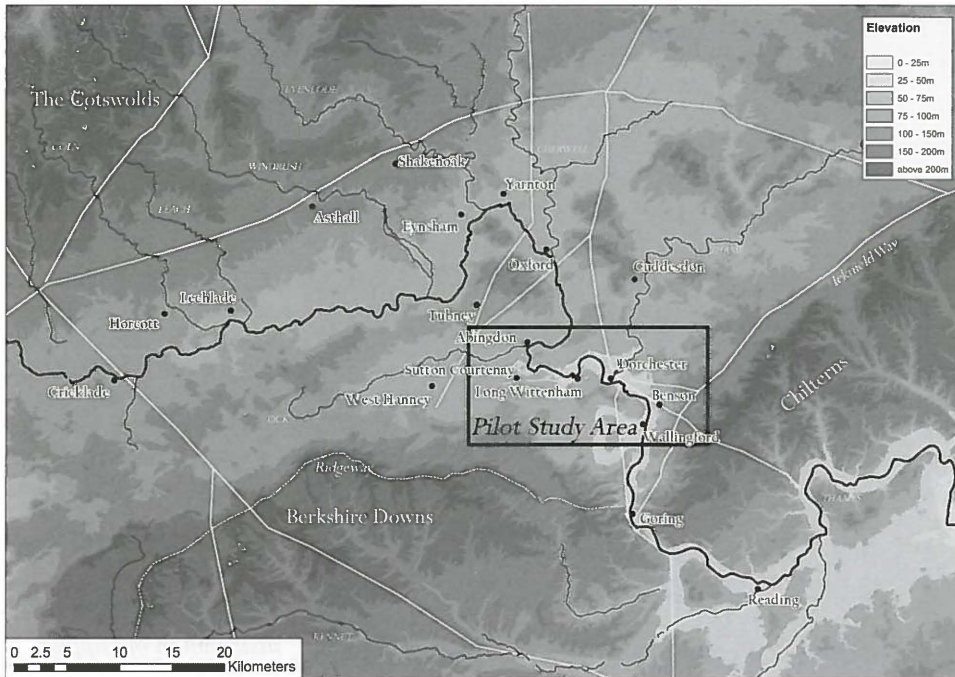


Figure 1 The Pilot Project area.

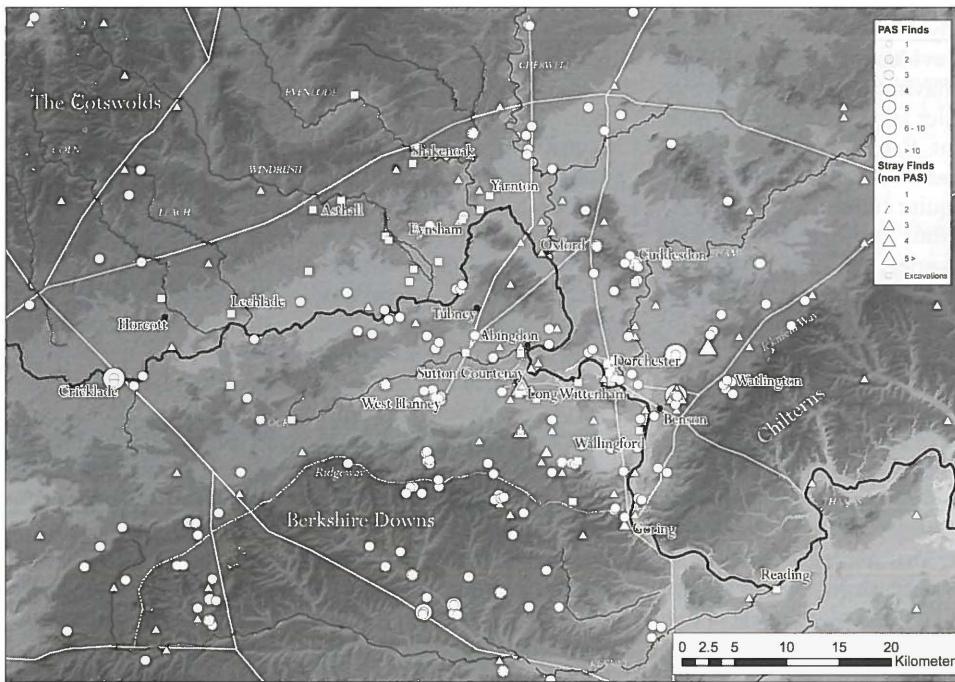


Figure 2 Distribution map showing all 5th- to mid-9th century stray finds and coins (including those recorded on the PAS) as well as published excavations where precious metal and imported objects were found, recorded for the whole of the study region.

dates have already demonstrated that a group of unfurnished, mostly male, burials aligned on the ruins of a Roman villa at Shakenoak (Oxon) date to the fifth or sixth century, while groups of late Roman burials at Tubney (Oxon) and Horcott (Glos) have very recently produced radiocarbon dates indicating that ‘late Roman’ burial practices, namely unfurnished inhumations in nailed coffins, continued in these places through the fifth and into the sixth century (Simmonds *et al.* 2011). Isotopic work is being carried out at Oxford University on these and other Late Roman burials to compare the dietary practices of the late Roman and post-Roman communities at these places. It is further planned to develop a radiocarbon programme to test whether

other late Roman burials – such as the latest burials in Roman cemeteries at the northern suburb of the town of Alchester and Radley Barrow Hills, both in Oxfordshire – also date to the fifth century or beyond. Metalworking activity associated with the latest occupation at several villa sites and seemingly linked to the dismantling of certain buildings and the recycling of iron, would also be dated where possible.

The distribution of clipped silver siliquae in the region provides further evidence of this elusive period (Fig. 3). It has been argued that most of this kind of clipping took place after coin ceased to be imported into Britain – i.e. after the first decade of the fifth century – and that it may even have been in some sense ‘official’ (Abdy

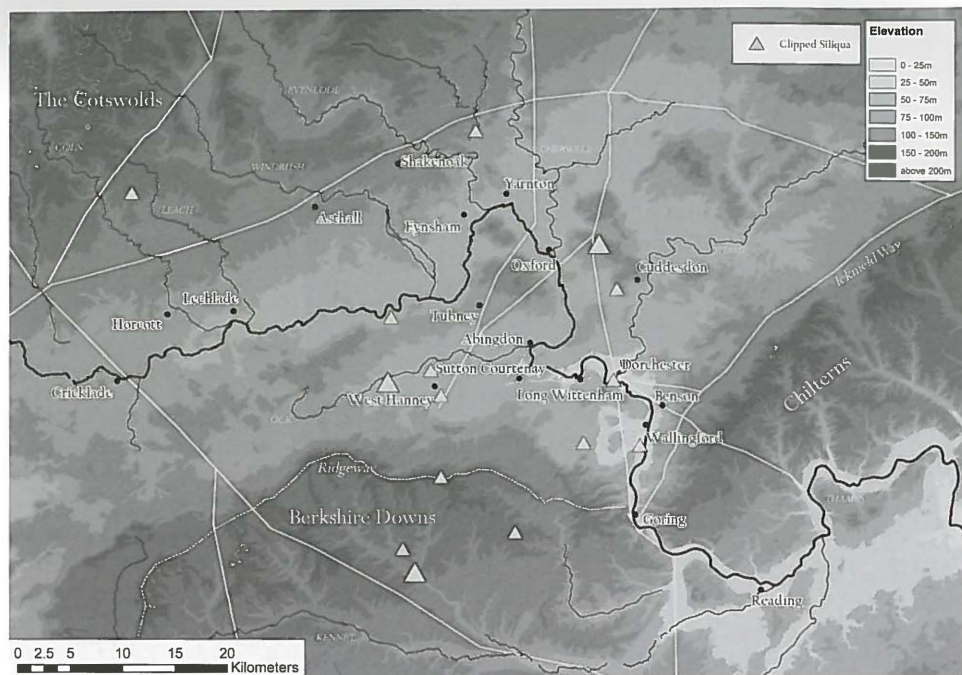


Figure 3 The distribution of clipped siliquae.

2005, 84–8). We have already identified several areas that have not produced any evidence of Early Anglo-Saxon occupation, despite having yielded numerous metal-detector finds from earlier and later periods; these may point to the presence of British enclaves where ‘native’ forms of settlement and burial persisted. Such ‘gaps’ in the evidence too require further investigation. The Upper Thames Valley thus presents exceptional potential for illuminating a variety of Late Roman to post-Roman trajectories.

The late sixth to mid seventh centuries

The project’s second chronological case study concerns the period c. 570–650. This period saw socio-political structures change decisively across much of England, with the emergence of leading families who were able to mobilize resources in new ways and who lived and buried their dead in a manner that marked them out as distinctive. The narrative accounts we have indicate the emergence in the late sixth century of a more stable polity in the Upper Thames Valley – ostensibly under Ceawlin and his successors (Yorke 1990; Blair 1994). Several burial and settlement sites dating to this period have been identified and these too point to a major socio-political watershed. It is hoped to undertake targeted fieldwork to resolve certain questions about these sites and the social changes they represent. The first lies at Sutton Courtenay, or rather, straddles the parish boundary between Sutton Courtenay and Drayton. Aerial photographs, metal-detector finds and limited excavation have demonstrated the presence there of what was almost certainly an undocumented royal vill, whose layout and architecture demonstrate the close links that existed between the leading families in this region and those in Northumbria and Hampshire, the later heartland of Wessex (Hamerow *et al.* 2008). The discovery nearby of a large number of mid Saxon coins in a field that also produced metalwork of the kind found in Early Anglo-Saxon graves suggests

that a fifth- to seventh-century cemetery at Sutton Courtenay was succeeded in the early eighth century by a market, perhaps with one or more adjacent Bronze Age barrows – now surviving only as ring ditches – serving as a visible landmark. Andrew Reynolds has recently argued that some pre-Christian Kentish cemeteries had an ‘after-life’ as the sites of markets and meeting places (Reynolds 2011, 348–67). Sutton Courtenay strongly suggests that something similar was happening in the Upper Thames Valley; this is something we hope to explore further by identifying those sites that show clear signs of Early to Mid Saxon continuity.

The work undertaken at Sutton Courtenay demonstrates the value of using geophysical survey to add detail to crop-mark sites on the Upper Thames gravels, and following this up with targeted excavation. It is an approach we hope to pursue at other sites, notably at Long Wittenham, only a few kilometres to the east. A much less well-known set of crop-marks indicates the presence there of a ‘Great Hall’ complex (Hawkes 1986, 89) lying adjacent to an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery that was partly excavated in the nineteenth century (Akerman 1860). The latter contained a number of richly equipped burials containing weaponry and imports from Northern Gaul, including a remarkable late fifth-century bronze-bound bucket or ‘stoup’ depicting Biblical scenes. As part of the pilot project, the National Mapping Programme’s transcription of the crop-marks has been updated to show the main features more clearly. This reveals a settlement similar in scale and layout to the Great Hall complex at Sutton Courtenay, although the relationship of the two sites – indeed even whether they were contemporary – is impossible to determine without further fieldwork. LiDAR images indicate that some of the Roman enclosures visible as crop-marks still survive as upstanding earthworks. This suggests that one or more of the Anglo-Saxon buildings was deliberately positioned in relation to these. The likelihood that at least some of the crop-marks adjacent to the Great Halls

are *Grubenhäuser*, as recently demonstrated at Sutton Courtenay (Hamerow forthcoming), is greatly increased by the discovery of a letter dating to 1861 describing what was almost certainly a *Grubenhäuser* lying at the eastern edge of the cemetery (E.T. Leeds Archive, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

The stretch of the Upper Thames Valley investigated in the Pilot Project also demonstrates the potential for using GIS to investigate the role of visibility in determining the placement of Anglo-Saxon sites. We have used so-called 'banded' viewsheds, which show not only what was visible from different sites, but also the degree of clarity with which different features could be seen. When applied to the Pilot Project area, this approach demonstrates that Long Wittenham, Sutton Courtenay and Dorchester-on-Thames had relatively distinct 'zones' of visibility.

Detailed analysis of the Pilot Project landscape also suggests that the obvious importance of the 'Thames highway' for transport and communication has distracted attention somewhat from other routeways that would have connected communities. We have, for example, established that a late Iron Age to Roman trackway, still visible in places as a crop mark, in fact connected the Great Hall complex at Long Wittenham directly to that at Sutton Courtenay as well as with Dorchester.

Conclusion

We hope soon to be able to explore the intriguing possibilities raised by the Pilot Project by extending our analysis across the whole of the Upper Thames Valley. The Origins of Wessex Project will examine, in addition to the questions raised here, the relationship of Anglo-Saxon sites to late Roman farms and villas, as well as to prehistoric monuments, minor routeways, woodland cover, and soil types. Such an approach should enable us to understand the emergence of this region as a political hub and to consider it within the wider context of developing relations between Wessex and Mercia, as well as within the picture that is emerging of kingdom formation across early medieval Britain and Europe.

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