

## Section 59 Reflections on how the interpretation of La Grava developed, and on a range of dating issues

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Cross-references to Printed Synthesis in brown

This section is a late addition to the digital report, finalised only in May 2012. It attempts to reflect on some of the issues raised in the primary report, but is firmly built upon it rather than seeking to supersede it. In that sense it represents the proper use of the site archive as a research resource, even if it is by the original excavator.

This further discussion was only possible in the unusual circumstances of the La Grava project, outlined elsewhere (Baker 2011, 194–211). Gaps in post-excavation funding for a pre-PPG16 project and the early retirement from local government of the present writer created voluntary opportunities that would not have existed in a tightly programmed timetable, to consider further the documentary evidence, on-site spatial analysis, and some ceramic issues. No criticism is intended of the highly experienced specialists who have contributed so much to the overall report. Anna Slowikowski, the Ceramics Manager for Albion Archaeology, who prepared the ceramics report, was aware of this work in progress, and it is a great sadness, personally and professionally, that she did not live to discuss it in its final form.

### The development of the interpretation of La Grava

The five-year funding period initially allocated to post-excavation by English Heritage had to cover virtually thirteen years of continuous excavation, and was imposed without the benefit of a costed project design. It proved wholly inadequate and offered no scope for finds specialists to revise their reports in line with later enhanced structural periodisation and the insights from wider research.

Problems in fine tuning arose *after* the finds reports were drafted using the partial data obtained with limited funding. The present writer undertook all subsequent revision of structural evidence, more documentary research, and spatial analysis when it became apparent that considerable dividends could be realised from this approach. Many more contexts were phased, and this supplementary information was utilised selectively by specialists, principally Duncan and Slowikowski, in their reports. Given more specialist time this process could be taken further.

Key subdivisions which have now been identified within two of the early periods, namely two phases in Period 3 and three in Period 4, could not be reflected in the pre-existing specialist reports, but the fact that they produced relatively little associated material to some extent ameliorated this deficiency. However, the scope for understanding the material culture and buildings of those periods increased substantially when the structural report on the Flixborough excavations became available (Darrah 2007; Loveluck 2007). This pointed towards the probability that some of the La Grava pottery could be redated to the middle Saxon period (a possibility which is also discussed above [52, 57]).

These insights, together with spatial analysis, recognition of early site planning within its landscape, and individual building investigation, were obtained outside the funded project, as were further documentary work and consideration of its implications for site changes. The discovery that the Royal Manor of Leighton and La Grava were one and the same tract of land for much of their history enabled Stephen Coleman to carry out significant parish and documentary research. This was followed by further investigation of various tempting strands of interest and relevancy to the site in its national and international roles.

This work of refining the interpretation of La Grava included a number of landscape issues: Richard Gem (pers comm) had already pointed out the probability of a wider royal estate including much of modern Buckinghamshire, allowing the plotting of the seemingly planned carving up of the territory. Sue Oosthuizen (pers comm) steered this initial landscape planning towards the Romano-British period rather than the Anglo-Saxon, and this led to the possibility of pre-Anglo-Saxon planning of the site and its immediate landscape [6.01]. The likelihood of a probable middle-Saxon designed site [6, 11, 33] had been long suspected, a theory supported by the recognition of the extended lives of some early middle-Saxon wares by Slowikowski [11]. The site's location and status within the Danelaw was examined independently, but is confirmed by work by Hill (1981) and Haslam (2005, 2009). Examination of charter evidence of neighbouring Chalgrave and Linslade [3.05] and the tracking of demesne holdings within the manor seemed obvious next steps, although Coleman has other theories regarding the evolution of the demesne [65.04].

Identification of probable works by Henry I, Henry II, and the mother house of Fontevrault stemmed from Coleman's research, but the discovery of the probable posthumous bequest from Queen Joanna and the rebuilding for the Procurator of the Order were partly due to serendipity.

From there research carried on into various aspects of the monastery and its owners and custodians. La Grava was repudiated as a 'proper' monastery, and appeared in all historical coverage as a simple monastic grange instead of the Procurator's 'Palace' it became. There was much to glean about the changing status of the house and its complex relationships with Fontevrault, its English Houses, the Leighton Prebendary, and the Crown. It was thanks to Charles Baily and Patricia Bell that information about the crucial agreement with the Prebend of Leighton came to light, along with the snippet about a disgraced Prior of La Grava being outlawed and the property forfeited [8].

Identification of Alice Chaucer as the builder of the 15th-century manor house was also broadly based on Coleman's archive, but the final form of her building was pieced together from scattered remnants and discussions with John Goodall and Edward Impey. The people of the manor, staff at all levels, and the complex, even incestuous associations of royalty, high churchmen, and nobility, became a fascinating challenge: it was indeed astonishing how incestuous the links were between royal and noble custodians of the estate, and their role in international and national politics.

### Linked phasing in post-excavation analysis

One of the principal characteristics of La Grava is that activity on much of the site presents a steady continuum rather than sharply defined phases of activity, so linked phasing rather than single phases more accurately reflects the circumstances of many deposits. Excavation and post-excavation recording systems recognised that the phasing of many deposits (such as accumulating and churned spreads in yards, or other indeterminate horizons) could not be

precisely focused on single phases because they ostensibly covered several that could not be individually distinguished. This was partly due to the restricted nature of the colours of the component deposits, where Munsell charts proved to be inadequate. Rather than impose a default position of latest dating, linked phases have been assigned to long-lived contexts as appropriate, restricting allocation of single phases to contexts where dating is unambiguous. Longer-lived deposits have therefore been accorded the full time span which more correctly describes their prolonged existence. Thus, any finds recovered from a context spanning phase 5.2 (late 12th century) to phase 5.5 (mid- to late 14th century) could have been deposited in any one of those four phases, giving a range of perhaps two centuries. Finds specialists have usually employed a standard procedure for dating contexts with mixed-date finds by allocating material from them solely to the final phase of their duration. This has inevitably introduced a late bias since it is not possible to say whether finds belong to their beginning, middle, or end. Without dependable intrinsic or hard independent dating, an object (and its context) that may have been deposited in the late 12th century was automatically ascribed to the latest possible phase, perhaps mid- to late 14th century.

However, catalogues of registered artefacts are provided with full contextual information, likely date ranges, and published parallels, so specialists may determine their own interpretation. The extended ranges for selected artefacts were given in some tables, for example in [44]; in others, such as [46.01], the final phase only was specified. Section [9] notes that of the 54% datable items, 21% were late pins; 200 objects that were possibly pre-12th century had extended date spans.

Most surviving architectural stonework and stone tiles were not in their original context, had probably been reused, and sometimes had been removed from their original building for an entirely different purpose, so Harris [39] accorded stones their intrinsic date and function [eg 13.02].

With environmental evidence, the report on plant and invertebrate remains gave linked phases which were associated with the duration of the context in which they were found [64]. The animal bone specialists decided that the quantities of identifiable bone from some individual phases were often too small to provide reliable statistical analysis; 59% could not be identified to species. Thus animal bones were treated in whole Periods rather than by phase, with all bone from the early to mid-12th century through to the late 14th to mid-15th centuries treated *en bloc* as Period 5 [61, 62].

The extensive catalogue of illustrated pottery provides linked phasing for individual vessels where applicable [51.01]. On the other hand, extended time spans are not presented in table [57.01], where all pottery has been assigned to the single latest phase of any given linked-phase context. This table was compiled on the basis of the initial phasing, which (as noted above) had fewer subdivisions than were later identified, and amalgamates Early phase 5.1 (early to mid-12th century) with Late phase 5.1 (mid- to late 12th century), on the basis of the dating framework presented by Harris in his initial structural analysis. As this is a crucial time span for the development of the site, covering construction of probable Henry I manorial structures, documented rebuilding consequent on the Anarchy, the handover to Fontevrault and their initial works [67.06], followed by periods of deliberate site reordering and rebuilding, any greater refinement in the dating of the material culture was to be welcomed. A similar issue arises with table [4.85] which assigns all vessel forms to the latest phase.

A major attribute of pottery is its ability to be used as a principal source of dating. However, in this report Slowikowski also widened her research into how ceramics can inform the study of material culture, helping to identify functions

within buildings, modes of cooking, methods of disposal and dispersal, and status. Interesting results were achieved by observing sooting, abrasion, or degree and type of wear and their causes ([58], Moorhouse and Slowikowski 1987), as well as movement and distribution across the site, and the potential for obtaining information through cross-joins. Nevertheless, lack of funding, time, and the space needed to analyse such a huge assemblage precluded deeper investigation than is presented in her report [51–58] and in archive.

### The problem of dating

It was in 1985 that Martin Carver wrote his paper on urban pottery seriation, but there is still a major gap in our understanding of the mechanisms of pottery deposition. A decade later Duncan Brown (1995, 5) noted the vexed problem of a circular argument when he wrote:

Furthermore, finds that are later than the date of deposition are also horribly common. This infuriating phenomenon undermines even further the efforts made at dating archaeological deposits, for it is not necessarily true that contexts can be dated by the latest finds they produce. This serves to emphasise the fragility of our most common dating techniques.

Excavators use pottery to date their deposits but few medieval wares have such firm dating that it cannot be challenged if, for example, the structural evidence suggests an alternative framework. Carver suggested that one class of possible certainty in phasing used ‘Chronologically diagnostic finds for which no absolute date can be ascertained, but which retain characteristics that suggest a date-range for the period of their creation...’ This is a reasonable definition for several La Grava fabrics, especially the ubiquitous and unprovenanced C60 (Hertfordshire-type greyware). It is encouraging that dating by seriation provides both a range and a consensus for dating a deposit, but work is needed.

On the other hand, revisions to interpretations during the long gestation of this report demonstrate that such consensus are not always set in stone. This does not only relate to refined phasing of contextual evidence. A case in point is fabric A16 (Mixed quartz-tempered type): through work in the region subsequent to the main La Grava ceramic analysis and ongoing, its original designated duration of 6th to 7th century has now been extended into the middle Saxon period on some sites [11, 52]. This probable redating (or, rather, extended dating), along with data about well-stratified buildings at Flixborough, makes better sense of some of the building evidence at La Grava.

To blur the situation still further there remains the difficulty of confidently dating structures and finds allocated to Period 4. The question then is, could that time span, given as starting around the mid-11th century, stretch back into the middle Saxon period or at least to the 10th century, or should a middle Saxon period be inserted between Periods 3 and 4? This has major implications for the interpretation of the site, and indeed for the recognition of middle Saxon settlements elsewhere. Rather than attempt a major revision of this report in order to integrate this new dimension, it was decided to insert sufficient amendments and caveats to alert readers to possibilities which could be explored by others in the light of a changing and developing archaeological context [4, 6, 11, 33].

### A north–south divide?

The predominance of shelly wares in the north of the historic county of Bedfordshire and sandy wares in the south is as yet poorly understood and

barely reflected in the County Type Series. A similar north–south divide seems apparent in Buckinghamshire, emphasising the need for more work in both counties to clarify the reasons for this apparent segregation. Given that the Leighton estate was probably the northern portion of a much larger one extending well into Buckinghamshire, any analysis must embrace the material from both counties.

Blair (1994) suggested that the great upsurge in the use of shelly wares, like St Neots Ware in Oxfordshire, can generally be associated with Danish presence. This may apply to Bedfordshire, and particularly to Bedford itself, situated in the north part of the county and within the Danelaw. Blair explains this as the result of opening trade networks that brought new commercial goods and practices into the region, rather than the ethnicity of the local population. Edgeworth (2007, 96, 97) emphasises the invisibility of Scandinavians in the 9th and 10th centuries, with everything from their sites to everyday artefacts such as pottery and bone tools being hard to recognise. He notes ‘there are growing concerns that the use of the “blanket” term “Anglo-Saxon” may have led to a whole period of post-Roman interaction between British and Saxon populations being effectively “squeezed out”, and there is an increasing realisation that the impact of Danish settlement in the region may have been underestimated.’ Successive waves of settlers were incorporated into the indigenous population ‘so the two material cultures, if there ever was any difference, became one and the same.’

In his discussion of late Anglo/Saxo-Scandinavian pottery in the 9th to 11th centuries Vince considered that

In the late 9th and early 10th centuries on either side of the Danelaw boundary of Watling Street, there was a break in ceramic traditions, related to the major social and economic changes which swept through lowland Britain at this time. Investigations at most medieval county towns show evidence for a growth in population, accompanied with the setting out of new streets and, in some cases, the establishment of pottery industries. Fieldwork also shows a reorganisation of the rural landscape, varying in character and detail from region to region, but probably implying an increase in population. These settlements seem in many cases to have relied on urban centres for the supply of pottery, especially where the pottery was wheelthrown, and sometimes glazed. (2005, 228).

The northern land of the Leighton manor adjoined Watling Street to its south, and fluctuated between Scandinavian and Mercian possession; Chalgrave abutted the north side of Watling Street, and in AD 911 was bought from the Danes [3].

The site at Stratton (near Biggleswade) which occupies a location in central Bedfordshire may prove to be in a key position halfway between Bedford and La Grava. Extensive excavations at Stratton have produced groups of sunken-floored buildings of middle Saxon date, which indicate shifting settlement over a wide area, developing into something more like a village in late Saxon times (Edgeworth 2007, 93). One timber building there may be interpreted as a (pre-parochial?) chapel, since it was associated with burials of middle Saxon date. This site illustrates a general problem, which is the lack of visibility of Saxon occupation sites. They do not seem to show on aerial photographs as some Iron Age and Romano-British sites do. Hall and Hutchings (1972) found that they could collect very little Anglo-Saxon pottery when field walking in Bedfordshire, but recovered large quantities from earlier and later periods. In fact, a recently excavated, and supposedly wholly medieval site, Tempsford in the northern part of central Bedfordshire (Maul and Chapman 2005), proved to have a long history going back to the middle Saxon period and beyond. Post-excavation analysis for Stratton is ongoing, but it seems most likely that fabric A16 (Mixed

quartz-tempered type) found there extends well into the middle Saxon period (Slowikowski pers comm and [52]; Abrams *et al* 2005; Abrams 2005b, Wells in prep).

### The Bedfordshire Pottery Type Series and the changing scene

The Bedfordshire Pottery Type Series, initially devised by the author and Jane Hassall (Baker and Hassall 1979c, 147–240), was originally based on ceramics from over 30 sites in Bedford town and castle using criteria of fabric, form, and decoration, each being assessed individually and independently before being grouped into wares and their variations. The chief quantifying method then was by fabric and sherd count rather than by weight, although weight was recorded. Slowikowski's analysis of the La Grava assemblage used fabric and sherd count to estimate vessel numbers [51]. Brine (1988, 40–6) used weight and estimated vessel equivalents ('eves', % of rims present) for the Chalgrave pottery, cited here as a significant parallel for some of the La Grava fabrics. Brine used software developed by Paul Tyers for analysing the Chalgrave pottery and published a summary of the results by phase. The original Bedford Type Series has been augmented by many additions from La Grava and more recent sites such as Stratton (Wells in prep). Once the Stratton post-excavation analysis has been completed, the whole Type Series for Bedfordshire will require complete revision and synthesis, also incorporating important middle Saxon and medieval material from excavations in St Paul's Square, Bedford, and other later interventions in the town (Edgeworth 2007, 130; Irving 2011, 37, 38).

Very few Roman sherds were recovered from the 1967–77 Bedford excavations, but 287 sherds were recognised as early middle Saxon (Types A1 to A7) and middle Saxon (Types A8 to A12). The petrology of nineteen sherds of early middle Saxon pottery was analysed by David Williams, with one sherd being possibly as early as AD 400. Baker and Hassall wrote of the early middle Saxon group 'The pottery as a group is likely to relate to the early part of the middle Saxon period, but it is acknowledged that there is great difficulty in dating hand-made domestic pottery. The forms do not show much stylistic change over a long period of time, and the fabrics appear in great variety' (Baker and Hassall 1979c, 154).

Baker and Hassall noted that two shell-tempered local fabrics, Types A11 and A12, of 9th to 10th-century date, gave way to fabrics B1 and B4, and 'some overlap is to be expected'. Fabric B4, local to Bedford, was not recognised at La Grava, some 20 miles away. At Bedford Castle (probably founded in the late 11th century) B1 occurred in both pre-Conquest and 12th-century contexts, while it was particularly abundant during the 10th and 11th-century pre-Conquest contexts at St John's Street, Bedford. Slowikowski has noted that the Bedford B1 and La Grava B01 (St Neots ware) probably equate with B01A at Stratton where it is dated to the 11th and 12th centuries, and Northampton T1(3) dated to AD 900 to 1150 (Denham 1985, 54) [53]. It was already possible to differentiate between 'early' and 'late' St Neots Ware in Bedford, but none of the earlier type was found at La Grava.

Maxey (Northants) ware overlaps with coarse St Neots ware in the 9th century, suggesting a possible development from one to the other, but no Maxey ware, Thetford, or Ipswich ware, was identified at La Grava, though a single sherd was found on Leighton territory (Edgeworth 2007, 97; Irving 2011, 38, SEM15–17). Perhaps this might not be surprising since the 1985–86 excavations at Walton in Buckinghamshire produced only three sherds of Ipswich ware out of a total of 986 possible middle Saxon sherds (Dalwood *et al* 1989, 161). Maxey-type wares have been recorded only in the north of Buckinghamshire, at Chicheley, about

20 miles north of La Grava (Farley 1980), Great Linford (Mynard and Zeevat 1992), and at Wolverton (Preston 2007) among other places. Nor did those excavations produce a wealth of Anglo-Saxon artefacts: Crummy's report (Stone 2009, 25) gives only five objects, three of which are slag fragments, with one fragmentary antler comb and a portion of glass bead. As for Saxo-Norman wares, the excavations at Walton produced only 7.7% of St Neots ware in the overall assemblage (Stone 2009, 20, 21; Dalwood *et al* 1989, 60). The arrival of the first St Neots ware pottery has been taken to be a late 10th-century indicator and it occurs on or near many settlement sites across the county of Oxfordshire.