

V

Thirlings Building C: a Pagan Shrine?

Colm O'Brien

Building C in the Early Medieval settlement of Thirlings is distinctive in being the largest of the set and having an annexe at its east end (fig. 1a). Its excavators (O'Brien and Milet 1991, 89–90) placed Thirlings within a settlement hierarchy, as a centre for production, servicing sites such as Yeavinger at the apex of the hierarchy, where state revenues were consumed in the form of a food-render. Within this interpretation, they suggested a community-wide role for Building C, possibly as a store for produce, but they ascribed no particular function to its annexe.

A recent study by John Blair (1995), however, now makes it possible to suggest another role for this structure. He has identified a type of pagan Anglo-Saxon shrine which reflects a tradition of square ritual enclosures stemming from Romano-Celtic shrines and pre-Roman prototypes. These are sometimes, though not always, associated with burial.

Blair draws on Hope-Taylor's analysis of ritual components in Area D at Yeavinger; in particular he develops the excavator's idea (Hope-Taylor 1977, 97–116 and 158–61) that a small square enclosure annexed at the end of Building D2 (fig. 1c) is the ritual successor to the square enclosure which had been superimposed in post-Roman times on the prehistoric Western Ring Ditch. The D2 annexe, which is associated with burials, occupies an area of some 20 square metres. Blair sees this as integrating into the settlement the concept previously expressed at the Western Ring Ditch, though now in a scaled-down form. He compares it with a free-standing structure at New Wintles Farm, Oxfordshire (fig. 1d) (Hawkes and Gray 1969) and the annexe at the end of Building A1 at Cowdery's Down, Hampshire (fig. 1b) (Millet 1983).

Cowdery's Down A1 is comparable in its form with Thirlings C, which suggests that the annexe in the latter could be another example of a pagan shrine. In both cases, a solidly-built rectangular structure has a small, more lightly-built annexe at the east end. In the Cowdery's Down case, the annexe foundations are post holes while the main part of the building is founded in a continuous trench; it has a floor area of 19.4 square metres, which is 22% of the floor area of the main part. In Thirlings C, both annexe and main building are trench-founded, but the annexe is a secondary feature built from lighter planking. Its floor area is 15.6 square metres, which is 16% of that of the main building. In both cases there is an entrance in the east end of the main building giving access to the annexe and in both annexes there is a central post hole. Blair (1995, 19) judges the Cowdery's Down annexe to be unroofed, though he acknowledges the possibility that Pope Gregory's description, cited by Bede, of *fana...bene constructa* could indicate roofed shrines (1995, 3). It is, in fact, possible to argue that the annexe of Cowdery's Down *was* roofed and the same interpretation can be given to the Thirlings case because a beam, resting on a wall plate or higher support above the east end door, could have been attached to the central post in the annexe to form the basis of a roof system linked to the main building. Similarly, a case could be made for roofing New Wintles and the Yeavinger D2 annexe, for F.W. Charles (1982) showed some time ago how irregularly-spaced posts can be linked together in a structural system by a wall plate or ring-beam which distributes roof load around the building and through the posts.

So, in architectural terms, the Cowdery's Down and Thirlings annexes look very similar.

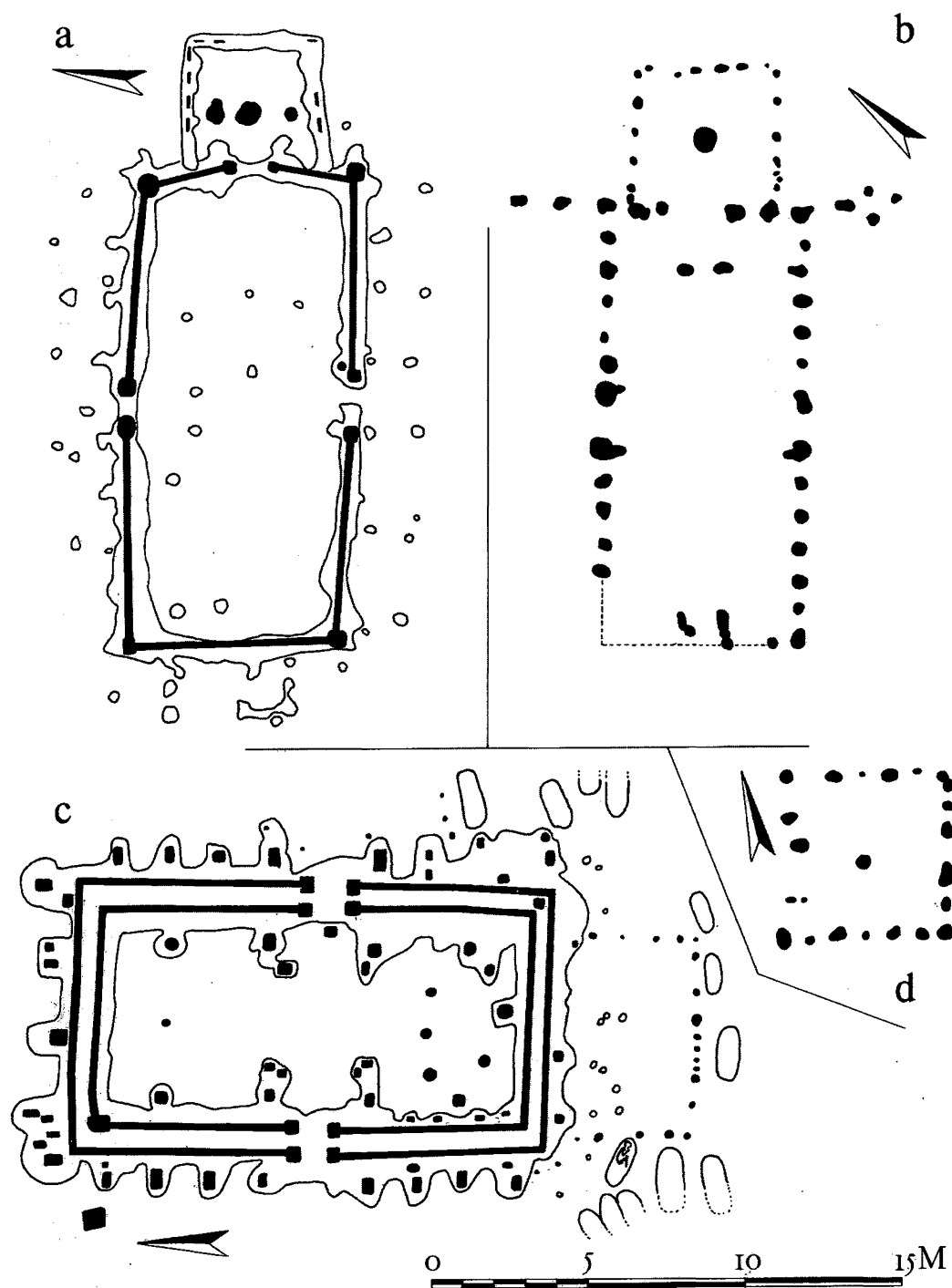


Fig. 1 Ground plans compared – a: Thirlings Building C; b: Cowdery's Down Building A1; c: Yeavering Building D2; d: New Wintles.

The question comes over function. D2 at Yeavinger has clear evidence of ceremonial use from the treatment of cattle skulls within the building, while its annexe is associated by position with a burial in which a cow tooth is used. However, as Blair acknowledges (1995, 19), the case for considering the Cowdery's Down annexe as a shrine, on the comparison with Yeavinger, is conjectural. To interpret Thirlings C in these ritualistic terms is also a conjecture, since neither architecture nor artefact record gives any positive supporting evidence. Yet this is hardly surprising when original floor surfaces have not survived and when simple, standardised architectural forms are the norm throughout the country (James, Marshall and Millett 1984). Leslie Alcock's search (1988, 24–5) for barns at Yeavinger, where others have seen kings' halls, emphasises just how difficult it is to ascribe function to buildings of the Early Medieval period.

Nevertheless, the speculation is worth making as a corrective to any too-easy acceptance of a particular mono-functional interpretation. To suggest that Thirlings C annexe could be a shrine, within the terms which Blair has proposed, is not, however, necessarily to deny a socio-economic function for the site as a whole. We need look no further than Yeavinger and to the alignment which links the north boundary

of the inhumation cemetery with post-pit BX, grave BX, post-pit AX, grave AX, the central axis of building A4 and the focal point of the auditorium (Hope-Taylor 1977, figs. 61–3), for an idea of how the domains of the sacred and the secular can be integrated in planning the layout of a site and its buildings.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALCOCK, L. 1988 *Bede, Eddius and the Forts of the North Britons*. Jarrow Lecture.
- BLAIR, J. 1995 "Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes", *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 8, 1–28.
- CHARLES, F. W. B. 1982 "The construction of buildings with irregularly-spaced posts", pp. 101–112 in P.J. DRURY (ed.), *Structural Reconstructions*. [BAR. No. 110], 101–12.
- HAWKES, S. C. and GRAY, M. 1969 "Preliminary note on the early Anglo-Saxon settlement at New Wintles Farm, Eynsham", *Oxoniensia*, 34, 1–4.
- HOPE-TAYLOR, B. 1977 *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*. HMSO.
- JAMES, S., MARSHALL, A. and MILLETT, M. 1984 "An Early Medieval building tradition", *AJ*, 141, 182–215.
- MILLETT, M. 1983 "Excavations at Cowdery's Down, Basingstoke, Hants. 1978–81", *AJ*, 140, 151–279.
- O'BRIEN, C. and MIKET, R. 1991 "The Early Medieval Settlement of Thirlings, Northumberland", *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 7, 57–91.

