

REVIEW

Philip W. Williams, An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Thurmaston, Leicestershire. Leicester Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service. Archaeological Report no. 8, 1983. 79pp;35 figs., 2pl., 4 tables. Price £2.75.

Reviewed in the light of 'Principles of Publication of Anglo-Saxon Cremation Cemeteries'. A report by the Early Anglo-Saxon Pottery Group. Jan. 1984 (unpublished).

Students of early Saxon pottery will welcome the appearance of Philip Williams' report on the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Thurmaston in Leicestershire. The site was discovered by construction workers in the 1950s and was excavated in less than ideal rescue conditions by Leicester Museum staff. The material was housed in the museum until, 30 years later, it was possible to publish the site.

The report includes information about the local topography (part II) and gives two location maps. The excavation report (III) makes it clear that material from only part of the cemetery was recovered. The pottery section (IV) describes the work done on the urns and explains the classification system used; this is essentially based on decorative elements. Each of these classes of vessel is then discussed in terms of form, parallels (both English and Continental) and possible chronology and relies heavily on the work done by J.N.L. Myres. The grave-goods are described by type (V). Human skeletal material is discussed (VI) and the detail is presented in tabular form. Prehistoric material discovered at the site is also recorded and illustrated. The final section (VIII) is a general discussion. There are two plates showing some of the urns during excavation, followed by thirty-one pages of catalogue and illustrations. There is one page of stamp illustrations arranged by motif and another showing a table of stamp-linked groups. The grave-goods are arranged and illustrated according to type. There are four pages which describe the urns and their contents in tabular form and six plans of the site showing the spatial distribution of certain artefacts, skeletal remains and stamp-linked groups.

The general discussion makes some useful points. There appears to be a concentration of early burials (as defined by Myres's interpretation of the Continental pottery parallels) around a Bronze Age barrow (not marked on the site plans), suggesting it was a focal point of the cemetery. There is some interesting evidence for the practice of the cremation rite itself. Attention is paid to possible correlations between the amount of bone present, the urn type, the grave goods and the age and sex of the individual, and in some cases possible patterns can be discerned.

Clearly a great deal of work has gone into extracting every bit of information this site assemblage has to offer. The author was faced with the usual daunting problems associated with writing up a long-neglected site when some of the material is lost, and one cannot be sure of whether labelling is reliable or whether cremations have become contaminated. Williams was obviously well aware of the limitations of his data and states them quite clearly; yet, in spite of these problems, he has published the surviving data in a way which is useful to students of the Early Saxon period.

In trying to assess whether the material has been presented in the best possible way, it is worth looking at this publication together with a document prepared by the

Early Anglo-Saxon Pottery Group who have recently considered the problems of publishing Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. This document (Principles of Publication of Anglo-Saxon Cremation Cemeteries, 1984) appeared after the publication of the Thurmaston cemetery and so it is obviously inappropriate to review Williams' work by judging whether or not it adheres to these principles. It is useful, however, to look carefully at the two publications together to see whether the advice given in the document is helpful in such a case as Thurmaston and whether the application of the principles is always practical.

Firstly, the fact that this material was published at all fulfills the request by the Group that more Anglo-Saxon cemeteries be adequately published. The need for the complete publication of each grave group has also been met. The account of the excavation as it appears in the Thurmaston volume is consistent with the principles laid down. The document calls for plans and sections of each individual grave, however, which it had not been possible to record during the excavations at Thurmaston.

The principles proposed for the production of the catalogue are worth looking at closely. The Group believes that the graves should be numbered and presented in the order in which they were excavated and not classified according to pot form, fabric or decorative elements. Williams does not number the burials as such, but numbers the urns and relates the grave-goods to the urn with which they were recovered. The material is presented in the catalogue according to the urn number but is illustrated according to the classification system based on the decorative features. The figure number is given in the catalogue. The catalogue is, as the Group recommends, a factual description and includes information on the form of the pot (if this is reconstructable), decoration, stamps, fabric, grave-goods and references to pottery parallels. The catalogue does not include information on age or sex obtained from the bone analysis.

It is worth commenting on the question of fabric. The Group recommends that all vessels be thin-sectioned, which it admits is idealistic. In the case of Thurmaston no thin-sectioning was done because of an understandable reluctance to damage complete vessels. All fabric descriptions are based on macroscopic analysis.

The document states that all drawings should be done to a high standard, a requirement that the illustrations of the Thurmaston pots clearly meet. They are drawn at 1:3 scale together with a linear scale as recommended. The Group suggests that where the form of the decoration of the pot has been interpolated by the illustrator it should be made clear what is actually present and what has been reconstructed. This is a valid suggestion and one which Williams seems to have followed. The Group has recommended that the grave-goods appear alongside the associated pot at a 1:1 scale. In the case of Thurmaston Williams has done this at 1:3 scale and includes grave goods illustrated at 1:1 in a separate section of the report. The Group makes a number of recommendations about the illustrating of stamps. These suggestions are based on the presentation of the stamps in the Spong Hill report and Williams has clearly used this report as a guide.

It would seem, therefore, that Williams has almost anticipated the requirements of the Early Anglo-Saxon Pottery Group and produced a publication very much in line with their recommendations. The only instance where this is not so

is in the basic ordering of the material in the illustrations. It could be argued that it is a little clumsy to have to refer to four separate figures to see a complete grave group as is the case with vessels no. 2, and that this hinders the study of the burials as complete entities.

If one had a quarrel with this publication it would be with the organisation of the catalogue, the illustrations and the tabulated data on the urns and their contents (Table 4). Essentially these three parts produce the same information in different ways and in some cases this leads to apparent contradictions and over-simplifications. For example, pot no. 1 is described in the catalogue as: "Pot: sherds of a biconical urn. Decoration: at least four horizontal neck lines above stehende Bogen, bosses covered by two lines separated by single groove." The illustrations seem to bear this out, but in Table 4 the only feature recorded against "pot" is "linear" (presumably referring to the decoration though this is not stated). In the case of pot no. 2 there are several lines describing the form and decoration of the pot ". . . . biconical, hollow-necked. . . . slashed collar. . . . two line stehende Bogen within the arches of which are vertical bands of feathering, set between vertical lines. . . . double line chevrons. . . ." etc. and again in Table 4 pot no. 2 is entered simply as "reconstructable profile" and "linear" as before. Pot no. 2a is described in the catalogue as "Pot: sherds. Slightly out-turned rim, conical neck, pedestal footring base", and is illustrated as such. There is, however, no entry at all under pot no. 2a in Table 4. This is presumably because it exhibited none of the features which had been chosen for inclusion in Table 4. It is not clear, however, why some features had been chosen and others not. One cannot but feel that Table 4 could have been omitted, especially as all the information it contained is produced fully elsewhere. The information on the age and sex of the individuals could have usefully been included in the catalogue.

To return to the document produced by the Early Anglo-Saxon Pottery Group, it is worth considering in the light of Williams' report the Group's comments on the contentious issue of microfiche. The usual general objections of long-term deterioration, rapid obsolescence and the limited availability of microfiche readers are noted, together with the more specific problems of pottery researchers needing to compare drawn material. For these reasons, the Group is very reluctant to make a commitment to microfiche. Nonetheless, it could be argued that some of the material contained in the Thurmaston report could have been microfiched without detracting from the usefulness of the publication. Table 4, if it was felt to be essential, would be one instance. It perhaps shows a regrettable bias in my thinking that I feel the detailed bone report by Ann Stirland need not have appeared in full. Only four out of sixty-three cremations could be sexed with confidence and a further fifteen given a possible sex type. Fifty-one were labelled 'adult', five were "children between 5 and 15 years old" and two were designated "infants". This information is clearly very interesting as is the discussion of the results which contains some useful comments on the rites of cremation. The report, however, gives details of all the bone assemblages, which takes six pages. In this case there was obviously the financial wherewithal to produce the full information in printed form, but where this is not so such information could be given on microfiche.

It is worth considering finally the question of cost, particularly in the light of the Early Anglo-Saxon Pottery Group recommendations. Williams' report

fulfills these recommendations without much in the way of additional material and it required 80 pages to publish approximately 100 burials in this way. The catalogue and the illustrations alone took 31 pages. Consider the cost of publishing in this way a cemetery of 500 urns (400 pages, 155 for the catalogue) or 2000 urns (1600 pages, 610 for the catalogue). For many researchers, alternative methods of publication are likely to be not simply a matter of choice but of necessity.

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