

medieval ceramics **Reviews**

[page 56 / blank]

Catherine Hills and Sam Lucy**Spong Hill . Part IX**

Chronology and synthesis

2013 . McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research

Cambridge

Hardback, 424 pages, 166 illustrations

ISBN 978 1 902937 62 5

Price £59

Alex Bayliss, John Hines, Karen Høilund Nielsen, Gerry McCormac and Christopher Scull**Anglo-Saxon graves and grave goods of the 6th and 7th centuries AD**

A chronological framework

2013 . Society for Medieval Archaeology . London

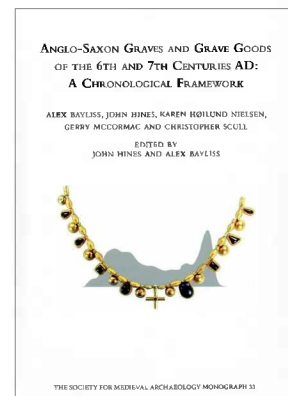
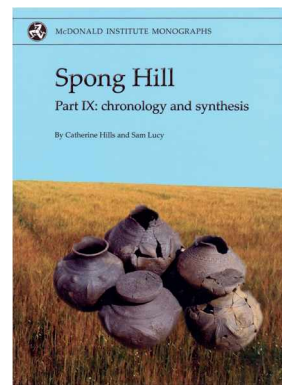
Hardback, 616 pages, 500 illustrations

ISBN 978 1 909662 06 3

Price £45

Two enormous books, in terms both of physical size and importance to Anglo-Saxon archaeologists, were published in 2013. Both are based on long-term projects and both aim, at least in part, to provide a workable chronology for the Early Anglo-Saxon period, based on finds from funerary sites. One covers the period from the beginning of the 5th century AD to approximately the mid 6th century and focusses on a single but very large burial ground, whilst the other covers the second half of the period and includes a wide range of assemblages. The complexity of these chronologies has meant that seminars have been held to introduce them to specialists working in the field. Despite their similarities, the two books are very different in character.

Spong Hill first came to my attention when I was a schoolgirl, volunteering at Norwich Castle Museum. One of my favourite artefacts on display in the old archaeology galleries there was a seated ceramic figure, affectionately known as 'Spong man', in my opinion the most unusual and evocative lid to a cremation urn ever recovered from such a site. Even back then the project was old, and a number of volumes of catalogues had already been published in the East Anglian Archaeology monograph series. Later, I worked at the Norfolk Archaeological Unit's headquarters in Gressenhall, where Jacqui McKinley was working her way through the bone from 2,323 cremation burials. One of the offices at the unit had been known as 'The Spong Room' for many years by then. The project felt as though it was part of the furniture, but it was intangible to those of us not working on it, and of course unfinished. Many years – and volumes – later, the project has finally drawn to a close with the publication of volume 9. This brings together all the evidence and uses it to construct a chronology which, whilst internal to the site itself, has implications for the dating of Early Saxon pottery in East Anglia and beyond.



The book itself follows a fairly standard pattern, starting in Chapter 1 with a useful background summary of the site, including its pre-Saxon use and Anglo-Saxon context. Chapter 2 provides a classification of the surprisingly broad array of grave and pyre goods, mainly of metal and bone, and looks at their distribution across the site. However, it is Chapter 3 onwards which will be of most interest to pottery specialists. This chapter focusses on the chronology of the site, based in large part on the pottery vessels.

The chapter begins by providing a context for research into early medieval chronologies, then outlines the evidence for grouping the pottery vessels stratigraphically, by stamps and by decorative style. The work has been based in part on statistical analysis and the methods and results of the Correspondence Analysis (CA) are presented. The chapter is readable and generally easy to follow, and the introduction to the statistics behind seriation is particularly useful, but there are some themes and arguments which are difficult to understand without referring to previous volumes in the series (some of which are now out of print). In particular, the 'stamp-linked groups' are not illustrated in this volume, although the 'style groups' (based on decoration) are illustrated in full in Appendix 6. This may be because the stamps were not found to be particularly useful in establishing a chronology. In fact, a review of the burial groups showed that very few could actually be used to confirm the results of the CA. Nevertheless, the phasing which resulted from the analysis provides a broad sequence, even if it cannot be taken as an absolute indicator of chronology. There are a few elements of the chapter which suffer from confusing presentation. For example, there are various descriptions of the phased pots throughout the chapter, but in particular there is a first attempt at a summary of the phases on page 187, which is updated

and outlined again on page 212, but not illustrated until page 230. Not really a major complaint, though, given the accessibility of much of the data. A full list of cremation burials and their phasing is included in the appendix.

Chapter 4 looks at the internal structure of the cemetery and some key issues relating to cremation burial rites. One of these is the study of urn size in relation to the age and sex of the individual interred in the pot. Various measurements, ratios and statistical analyses are presented, but the main result simply appears to confirm a long-held belief that smaller pots were used for children. However, many of the definitions (based on ratios) used for pot forms overlap considerably, as do the scatter plots showing the heights versus maximum diameters of the vessels (although it would have been helpful if the same scales had been used for each of these). Other information, such as the quantities of vessel forms by phase, might have been better presented by proportions rather than actual figures, although it is a simple matter to calculate these oneself. Another theme considered in this chapter is whether the stamp groups show any correlation with social identity, which it appears they do not. Instead, it is argued that clusters of stamp groups might demarcate burials of family or (?kin) group members, and by extension that there are 'family plots' within the cemetery. The rest of the chapter considers other classes of grave goods using similar methods, looks at the way the cemetery evolved and some related structures within it, and the local context of the site.

Chapter 5 provides a broader context and includes several very useful comparisons with the pottery from a number of contemporary cemeteries on the Continent, and from other cemeteries in eastern England. These cemeteries are also presented in summary form in Appendix 1. Some of the similarities suggested between individual vessels may be somewhat subjective and, in the context of the wide range of decoration seen on Early Anglo-Saxon pottery generally, many do not appear to be all that similar. The interpretations currently lack any comparison of the fabrics of the 'similar' pots, and this is acknowledged as an area still needing study. Finally, the discussion and conclusions sum up the results of the synthesis, and place the work in a British and European context. The findings suggest that the rite of cremation at Spong Hill belonged largely to the 5th century and did not continue much beyond that. Phase C, the final phase at Spong, which appears to be contemporary with the settlement there, equates to the earliest phase of Penn and Bruggmann's (2007) chronology of four East Anglian cemeteries.

The chronological framework set out in Bayliss, Hines *et al.* also starts towards the end of the period of use of Spong Hill. As noted above, this book has some similarities with the Spong Hill publication,

but considers a much broader group of inhumation cemeteries. It should be noted that this is not a 'reading' book in any sense of the word, and should perhaps be approached as a series of inter-related reference papers. This is exemplified by the inclusion in the foreword of a 'note to the reader' which sets out how to use the book. It begins in earnest with a summary and background about the study of Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. This is followed by a background to the methods used for dating and the Bayesian statistics upon which much of this chronology is based, and a chapter on the aims, methods and research agenda of the project itself. Chapter 4 provides an interesting but brief summary of the human remains used in the study, together with some information on the scientific analyses carried out. In Chapter 5, we are presented with new typologies for several of the key artefact types (mainly metalwork and beads). At the very end of this chapter, there is a single paragraph headed 'Pot', in which it is explained that 'only ceramic vessels that are close to complete have been included here', resulting in a small sample size of only 45 vessels. Male and female chronologies are presented separately in the next two chapters, much of which involves the presentation of many radiocarbon dating charts and related probability distributions, but pottery hardly figures in this – not surprising given the small quantity included. Chapter 8 presents an attempt to integrate the male and female sequences, again using numerous charts and statistical analysis, and there is a comparison with European chronologies. The coin evidence is presented separately in Chapter 9, and finally the results and their implications are summed up in Chapter 10, perhaps the most useful part of the book to read in detail.

At the time of writing this review Bayliss, Hines *et al.* had been on the shelves for almost two years, and during that time there have been numerous reviews by both specialists and generalists working in the period. It is clear that many feel the book is not hugely accessible (another reason for the seminars mentioned at the start of this review), and this is certainly the case. There are also review articles which provide critical analyses of the statistical methods used and the conclusions reached (*eg* Baxter 2014a & b), and it would be prudent to consider these alongside the relevant chapters before attempting to use the same methods. In terms of establishing a chronology – which the authors strongly urge the reader to follow – it has completed its aims, and provided a 'framework for Early Anglo-Saxon chronology into which those fields of burial evidence which it has not attempted to deal with can be fitted and so be correlated with the substantial range of material we have analysed' (page 518). Whether Early Anglo-Saxon pottery ever makes it into that framework in any meaningful way is down to us as pottery specialists.

References

- Baxter, M, 2014a, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronology I – the male graves: A commentary on Chapter 6 of Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework'. Available at *academia.edu*
- Baxter, M, 2014b, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronology II - the female graves: A commentary on Chapter 7 of Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the 6th and 7th centuries AD: A Chronological Framework'. Available at *academia.edu*
- Penn, K and Bruggman, B 2007, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Burial: Morning Thorpe, Spong Hill, Bergh Apton and Westgarth Gardens*. East Anglian Archaeology 119.

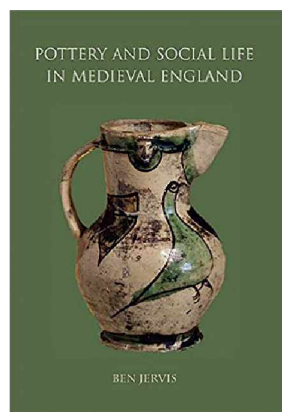
Ben Jervis**Pottery and social life in medieval England**

2014 . Oxbow Books . Oxford and Havertown

Hardback, 160 pages

ISBN 978 1 78297 659 2

Price £45.00



The appearance of a book which takes as its theme the relationship between pottery and social life in medieval England is a rare event and one that is to be unreservedly welcomed. Derived from his PhD thesis but incorporating a wider body of work, Ben Jervis' book will baffle some, enrage a few and please others

with its self-confidently 'theoretical' approach to its subject matter. The aim of the book is 'to demonstrate how ... pottery studies can play a central role in our understanding of medieval social life' (page 1) and in doing so to take a stand against the marginalisation of pottery studies within medieval archaeology generally and the commercial archaeological sector in particular. Those who come to the book looking for a guide to medieval pottery will be disappointed but those who are looking for evidence of a maturing of the discipline of medieval pottery studies will find much to interest them, even if they do not entirely accept the theoretical stance adopted by the author.

The book begins with an outline of the development of medieval ceramic studies in Britain, focussing on the relationship between pottery studies and the wider disciplines of medieval history and medieval archaeology. Jervis highlights the problems inherent in the marginalisation of pottery studies, the result, he suggests, of the volumes of material to be considered and the need for the discipline to deal with large assemblages, while constructing chronological frameworks and producing studies of trade and exchange through typology and the characterisation of fabrics. He correctly identifies some of the positive effects of the processual paradigm in furthering

scientific analysis but also picks out the dangers of a self-indulgent empiricism at the expense of interpretation. The penultimate section of the chapter covers the turn towards post-processual approaches and the broadening of ambition amongst ceramicists. The final section sets the scene for the argument of the book as a whole and leads on to the establishment of a theoretical framework which is set out in chapter 2.

Initially the author notes the close relationship between his relational approach and post-processualist approaches more generally but draws a distinction between the two with the relational approach conceived of as a response to the perceived anthropocentrism of post-processualism. In pursuing this argument, Jervis draws extensively on the work of Bruno Latour and John Law in the field of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and of Olsen, Knappett, Witmore and Webmoor in archaeology specifically. It is essential that the reader pays close attention to this chapter as it consists of a detailed discussion of the theoretical issues which underpins the case studies presented in the chapters 3 to 6. There is no doubt that this commitment to an explicitly theoretical approach to medieval pottery will divide the readership. Such a mixed response tends to go with the territory and should not surprise the author. Personally, although I remain to be entirely convinced by some aspects of the relational approach, it is a relief to see new and innovative ideas being applied with confidence and commitment to medieval pottery.

Chapter 2 introduces the concepts which define the relational approach, some of which appear at first sight to be counter-intuitive. Jervis sets out the scope of his approach by noting that 'relational archaeology focus[es] on the processes through which humans and non-humans form relationships and the effect of these relationships on the emergence of social contexts, identities or objects' (page 17). The notion of 'agency' is the key concept in this discussion (and in the book as a whole) and must be understood if the author's argument is to be appreciated. Agency, the author