

An Archaeological Resource Assessment of Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire and Rutland

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Note: For copyright reasons the figures are currently omitted from the web version of this paper. It is hoped to include them in future versions.

The Nature of Evidence

Until very recently the archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire has largely been found in two sources: the extensive fieldwalking programmes of the last 20 years and the 18th/19th Century recovery of Saxon cemeteries from small-scale quarrying. This is now being rapidly added to by modern excavations, which have substantially added to our knowledge of building types. Leicestershire largely lacks the charter evidence of other parts of the country and has received relatively little attention from our local history colleagues trying to restore patterns of estates from post-conquest (often Domesday) sources. Recent metal detecting has once again begun to add to the almost static list of inhumation cemeteries and has also provided a growing list of sites producing Middle and Late Saxon coins and metal objects.

The Fifth-Seventh Century settlement patterns – continuity and beyond

A key issue is the Roman/Saxon transition. Saxon cemeteries/burials are directly associated with Roman towns at Leicester, Medbourne, Great Casterton, Barrow/Quorn, Kirby Bellars, Wymeswold/Willoughby and Mancetter. Early Saxon material in addition comes from Ibstock/Ravenstone and Goadby Marwood, with a timber hall excavated within the town at the former. Only High Cross, Caves Inn and Thistleton have no reported material (and the last two have large cemeteries within a mile). This suggests that the town sites had enduring significance in the early Saxon period. This can hardly be as continuing urban centres as these are alien to Saxon tradition. Many small towns have their origin in the Iron Age, however, and it has been suggested that these may be estate centres where renders to support “chiefs” were sent in and then re-distributed. This sort of function may have partly survived the Roman monetarisation of society and continued through into the Saxon period. Certainly in the southeast of the County, where a series of fieldwalking surveys have been completed, Roman sites produce Saxon pottery in some quantity. It is interesting to note that these include sites located and even trial-trenched in the 1970’s when no Saxon material was recovered (you see what you expect!). In the Medbourne survey, areas of boulder clay occupied in the Iron Age and early Roman periods were abandoned in the 3rd and 4th centuries and remained unoccupied in the Early Saxon period (and appear as wood pasture in the medieval). A new survey area this season is beginning in the Loddington Hundred area (of predominantly boulder clay) to the north of previous surveys and this may be revealing. Most of the Medbourne survey sites surviving to the end of the Roman period (including the town and three villas) produce Saxon pottery and may be suspected of surviving the transition. If these continued to hold predominantly British inhabitants then a context for a continuation of traditional arrangements may be thought to exist. In addition to these sites already mentioned, another range of Saxon sites was found which were not on Roman sites. These were mostly on ridge-end locations. Naturally, because of the difficulty of dating Anglo-Saxon pottery we cannot sequence the sites in any way and we do not know if one group succeeds the other or if the situation is more complex. Equally we cannot distinguish Middle Saxon activity – with no positively identified Ipswich or Maxey ware from fieldwalking. Whatever the sequencing the early/middle Saxon pattern revealed is one of dispersed settlements that appear to be small (? Farmsteads). Occasionally, larger sites appear in fieldwork – so far Eye Kettleby, Knaves Hill at Stonton Wyville and the Cow Closes at Great Easton – that hint at a different functionality or status. As more of these are found their characteristics may allow us to begin to understand them. It should be emphasised, that although most of what has gone before has been based on the South East Leicestershire block, fieldwork in other parts of the County, suggests similar patterning while many areas have yet to be looked at, Saxon sites have been recovered by fieldwalking from the Vale of Belvoir, Trent Valley and West Leicestershire.

Burials

A typical Leicestershire Saxon cemetery was found in an 18th or 19th century gravel pit, was inadequately recorded, and is now represented by a small (and probably unrepresentative) group of finds in a local museum – if we’re lucky. It is difficult to wring much new information out of these old finds (although we are trying). Cemeteries have proved rare in modern excavations with only cremations (of uncertain date – the old IA/AS problem!) from Enderby and inhumations from Seaton and Cossington in recent years. Thurmaston – the only unequivocal cremation cemetery – was found and excavated under rescue conditions in 1954 and finally published in 1983. All three inhumation cemeteries at Empingham, Rutland are now published (Timby 1996 and Cooper 2000, Sites 2 and 3) while the mixed cemetery at Great Casterton is written up but is log-jammed in EH’s backlog programme. Only a few other old or small sites have also been published (Wanlip, Lutterworth and Wigston). These, however, include two ‘warrior’ burials including swords and horses and this leads us to the role of cemeteries as being status indicators. As people

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were buried fully clothed we would expect that grave goods may closely define status in life. A hierarchy of male burials based mostly on associated weaponry seems plausible while elaborate schemes for female burials have been worked out, based on the number of associated grave goods. So far, North Luffenham cemetery with at least 10 sword burials seems exceptional.

If we can locate settlements associated with high status burials this may help us to recognise high status settlements. Unfortunately, while the cemeteries of Wigston and Wanlip (which had the sword/horse burials) do have evidence of associated settlements, next to nothing is known of their size and character (incidentally a considerable scatter of Saxon pot sherds has been noted in Wymeswold parish immediately across the stream from the Broughton Lodge cemetery that includes horse/sword burials (and overlies a Roman small town!). Burials also give us some possibility of closer dating than settlement sites although this is perhaps more apparent than real. It is possible to say that the earliest types of Anglo-Saxon metalwork (tutulus brooches etc) are not yet known from Leicestershire and Rutland.

It should also be said that the evidence so far is of cemeteries (for the most part) being associated with settlement sites rather than being on boundaries. This can be seen at the Empingham sites but this can now be repeated at a growing list of other sites.

Finally, we can say that the predominant female clothing style was “Anglian” with a typical mix of annular/small long/cruciform brooches and common wrist clasps suggesting sleeved undergarments topped by tube dresses. Unusual finds such as an early 5th Frankish Scabbard chape from Lowesby add variety. Whether this ethnic dress is a social construct or a real reflection of origin is uncertain. It is also still said on occasion that, being Anglian, the predominant burial rite was cremation and this is not true. Cremation cemeteries do, however, occur and may be of more than local importance – perhaps being associated with religious centres (of which we have no other trace except a small number of place names).

Building Types

Until 1995, buildings had been excavated at a small number of sites and these excavations were always so limited that no plans of settlements were recovered. Subsequently the large scale excavations at Eye Kettleby produced at least twenty post built structures and twenty-five sunken featured buildings in three (sometimes rather dispersed) groups. Full analysis of the data will give us more information on how the settlement developed and when it disappeared. Small-scale excavations at the adjacent deserted village site may help us to understand the village formation process. At Castle Donington another large group of buildings has been recorded. These were mostly sunken-featured buildings. A third group of buildings has been revealed in evaluation at Wanlip.

Production and Wider Trade

Traditionally, pottery production has been studied through stylistic analysis and examination of pottery stamps. Necessarily this is confined to large cremation urns. Products of the Illington-Lackford and other ‘pottery studios’ were identified at Thurmaston. What the wide distribution of such pots actually represents is very unclear. More recently work has been on pottery fabrics, which has identified Charnwood Forest inclusions from London to Yorkshire. Does this imply a huge production centre near Mountsorrel? If so, it has yet to be identified (although small 1950’s trial trenches produced huge amounts of Saxon pottery from a Roman small town site at Barrow upon Soar).

Other materials are even harder to pin down as to origin. However, elephant ivory and bear claws are not likely to be local and metal bowls and glass believed to be from the Rhineland have been identified on various sites suggesting international exchange.

More locally, iron was being produced at most of the dispersed settlements in the Medbourne area. Examination of the slag shows that this is smelting rather than smithing and the indication is of a major rural industry. The slag is not intrinsically dateable but the dating seems secure as the slag and pottery scatters consistently overlap but centre somewhat differently.

Middle Saxon Period

The major problem in understanding this period is our inability to identify the pottery of the period despite considerable effort. Recent metal detecting has produced a handful of metalwork, mostly coins but including some brooches, disc headed pins and a few other objects. The fact that there were coins emphasises the changes in society at this time. These include:

1. Economic changes – coinage suggesting a movement from fully embedded to partially market economy. An increasing number of sceattas and a few Mercian coins have been found.
2. State formation and growth – the expansion of Mercia – known mainly from documentary sources.

3. Religious changes – the introduction of Christianity and foundation of minsters – Breedon being the best example.
4. Changes in burial rite – perhaps tied to above. Pagan cemeteries seem to go in the early-mid 7th century. Only one ‘final phase’ cemetery known.
5. First documentary sources – linked to 2 and 3 above – mostly high status to do with church and kings mostly names of council sites, which may be royal palaces.
6. Perhaps, major changes in settlement patterns, so far, the dating of the early Saxon dispersed settlement site is not clear. Hand-made pottery on the majority of these sites is not succeeded by Stamford Wares, (which appears in quantity on medieval village sites). The bulk of the dispersed settlements must then have gone by the late 9th or 10th centuries at the latest. No sceattas or Middle Saxon metalwork has yet been recovered from any of them – but as yet detailed fieldwork has not happened on the handful of sites producing anything like coherent scatters of metalwork. This should be prioritised. The medieval village sites often produce hand-made pottery suggesting that the nucleation was around existing sites.

As yet there is no archaeology to go with the presumptive Royal centres. Legorensis Civitas where there was a Bishop has also not appeared in excavation trenches. Work on “aet Glenne” a council site, associated with the martyrdom of St. Wistan has defined a possible estate associated with the ‘palace’. Some fieldwalking has started here but no conclusions can yet be reached.

Late Saxon Leicestershire

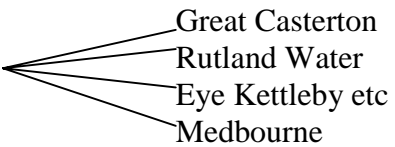
By the later Saxon period the nucleation process seems to be complete. Little evidence exists for how the settlements were arranged at this period but as more archaeological work occurs in the villages the body of data will grow. In the last few years occupation of the period have been recorded at South Croxton, Barrowden and Cottesmore and the new evidence will give us the possibility of dating village layouts. The ability to date Stamford wares and Lincolnshire Shelly wares, which are found widely in the eastern part of the countries, puts us on a firmer footing. A kiln producing grey ware of 10th century date has been excavated at Leicester – the only known production in the area.

It seems not unlikely that the nucleation of the villages was contemporary with the laying out of the core of the open field systems. In the few areas (i.e. Medbourne) where medieval field systems have been analysed and later additions stripped away the ‘core areas’ seem to correspond to manorial scatters of Stamford Ware.

Evidence of churches becomes considerably more common with a parish system being created to supplement the earlier minsters. This is mostly signalled by fragments of stonework built into the structure and only rarely by substantial surviving fabric. The Vikings who loom large in the documentary evidence and place-name evidence remain a shadowy presence archaeologically. A Thor’s hammer, a few coins and a couple of spearheads from the county and a couple of ring headed pins from Leicester are all that can be positively identified, despite Leicester being one of the 5 Boroughs of the Danelaw. As more of the city centre backlog sites are written up more information should become available. There is a growing body of Late Saxon metalwork – stirrup mounts, coins, strap ends etc – that is being revealed by detecting. Some appear chance losses but others are in sufficient groups to indicate sites worth following up.

It is from this period that markets can be expected. Leicester and Melton appear as market centres in Domesday and Breedon appears in an early 12th century document but this is likely to be by no means a comprehensive list. The origin of the medieval small towns has yet to be properly tested archaeologically. Some may spring from Middle Saxon estate centres (? Melton) while others may have been Later Saxon creations and yet others be Post-Conquest.

KEY ISSUES

1. PUBLICATION OF SITES 
 - Great Casterton
 - Rutland Water
 - Eye Kettleby etc
 - Medbourne
2. ROMAN CONTINUITY
3. NUCLEATION
4. STATUS
5. POTTERY PRODUCTION IN CHARNWOOD
6. IRON WORKING IN SE
7. VILLAGE PLANS
8. EXAMINATION OF METALWORK SCATTERS
9. EARLY/MIDDLE SAXON POTTERY DATING