

Pennyland And Hartigans: Two Iron Age And Saxon Sites In Milton Keynes

The development of Anglo-Saxon rural settlement forms

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ABSTRACT

A new generation of large-scale, mostly developer-funded excavations of Anglo-Saxon settlements are revolutionising our understanding of the socio-economic development of rural communities in the mid- to late Saxon periods. After characterising the settlement forms seen during the fifth to seventh centuries, this paper traces the diversification in the structure and layout of settlements from the later seventh century onwards and considers its causes, such as the possible relationship between the construction of extensive complexes of ditched enclosures and droeways, and new forms of land use.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-Saxon England, rural settlements, settlement forms, enclosures, farming

INTRODUCTION

In what remains the only attempt at a general overview of Anglo-Saxon rural settlements, Philip Rahtz described the archaeology of these settlements as 'unsatisfactory, incomplete and largely unpublished' (1976, p. 55). Indeed, thirty years ago, so few Anglo-Saxon settlements had been excavated on an adequate scale that Rahtz was able to deal in detail only with buildings; the layout and development of settlements were scarcely considered. Since then, large-scale excavation (and sometimes even publication) of a considerable number of settlements has enabled us to begin to understand how their structure and layout developed through time. The purpose of this paper is to review how our understanding of early, middle and late Saxon settlements is being revolutionised by a new

generation of Anglo-Saxon settlements which have been excavated on an impressive scale, thanks largely to developer-funding. For the first time, we have evidence of sufficient quantity and quality to begin to examine settlements as dynamic social arenas rather than passive agglomerations of archaeological 'features'.

ESTABLISHING SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE

The prevailing model for the fifth to seventh centuries is one of shifting settlement, although what exactly is meant by this term can vary. At the settlement of West Stow, Suffolk, shifting was identified at the level of individual earth-fast timber buildings, which, after they were abandoned, were replaced by a new building sited a relatively short distance away (West 1986, p. 151). This replacement of 'single generational' houses was a widespread phenomenon in later prehistory and appears to have been common in the fifth and sixth centuries (Brück 1999; Hamerow forthcoming). The location of a settlement could thus remain relatively stable, even while the location of individual dwellings changed as buildings were abandoned and replaced.¹ At Mucking in Essex, where a much more extensive area was investigated, shifting on a larger scale was identified: the main focus of settlement in the fifth and sixth centuries lay in the southern part of the site, while by the seventh century it had shifted several hundred metres to the north as well as westwards, away from the edge of the gravel terrace on which the settlement had been established (Fig. 1; Hamerow 1993, pp. 86-91). Whether this involved a gradual 'wandering' as originally postulated, or a single discontinuous shift, cannot be established with certainty. While the phenomenon of shifting settlements has long been acknowledged (Taylor 1983, pp. 120-3),

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