Current Perspectives on Early Medieval Migration, Mobility, and Material Culture

Society for Medieval Archaeology Annual Conference 2022

24–26 June, Rewley House, Oxford

Conference Booklet

Conference programme

6.00pm   Registration at Rewley House (bar open for hot and cold drinks)
6.45pm   Welcome
              Toby Martin & Duncan Sayer
7.00pm   Keynote: Rethinking early medieval migration: context, periodisation, and
              disciplinary boundaries
              Robin Fleming
8.00pm   Wine reception at Rewley House

SATURDAY 25 June
9.00am   Registration (bar open for hot and cold drinks)

SESSION 1: MOBILITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE (chaired by Toby Martin)
10.00am   Untangling 'local and 'non-local' display in death
              Emma Brownlee
10.30am   Natives and newcomers: how Saxon were the East Saxons?
              Steven Rippon
11.00am   Migrating material culture? Supporting arm brooches and the 'earliest migrants' in
              fifth- century Britain
              James Gerrard
11.30am   Coffee/tea

SESSION 2: MOLECULAR PERSPECTIVES ON MOBILITY & KINSHIP (chaired by Toby Martin)
12.00pm   Isotopic evidence for a "long" Migration Period in England: connectivity, gender, and
              regionalisation
              Sam Leggett
12.30pm   The Anglo-Saxon migration and formation of the early English gene pool
              Stefan Schiffels and Joscha Gretzinger
1.00pm   Lunch
2.00pm   Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and the implications of new ancient DNA data
              Duncan Sayer
2.30pm   Big (biocultural) data for big questions: funerary archaeology, migration, and
              communities in fifth-century Britain
              Janet Kay
3.00pm   Coffee/tea

SESSION 3: CURRENT & RECENT FIELDWORK (chaired by Duncan Sayer)
3.30pm   A new Anglian community on the Suffolk Fen Edge: the sites at RAF Lakenheath
              John Hines
4.00pm   A sense of belonging? Mobility, community and the Croft Gardens (Cambridge)
              cemetery
              Katie Howarth
4.30pm   Migration waves or cultural melting pot? A new evaluation of Basel's early medieval
              burials
              Margaux Depaermentier
5.00pm   Exploring migration and kinship at Hinkley Point cemetery (5th-7th century)
              Sharon Clough
5.30pm   Conference disperses to reconvene 7pm for conference dinner at Rewley House

SESSION 4: SYNOPTIC PERSPECTIVES (chaired by Duncan Sayer)

9.00am	Migration Theory and the Migration Period Revisited: The scale and impact of migration and mobility on lowland Britain, fifth to seventh centuries Helena Hamerow
9.30pm	Changing attitudes to Anglo-Saxons over the past hundred years: invading warriors or North Sea style zone? Catherine Hills
10.00am	When the data takes you by surprise. Reflections on thirty years of later Roman and early medieval site analysis Sam Lucy
10.30am	Was migration really a 'thing'? Let's talk about other approaches to the 5th and 6th centuries Susan Oosthuizen
11.00am	Ethnicity/Migration: the problem of conceptual conflation James Harland
11.30am	Coffee/tea
12.00pm	Meet at Rewley House for optional walking tour of medieval Oxford (finishes c.2pm)

Paper abstracts

KEYNOTE
Rethinking early medieval migration: context, periodisation, and disciplinary boundaries
Robin Fleming

The periodization widely used by archaeologists and historians focusing on early medieval migration and mobility not only divides the Roman from the early medieval period, but it has created two quite distinct fields of study, bodies of evidence, and specialists. Academic fields and their chronological boundaries are not, however, natural, and they do not arise out of the past itself: they have histories of their own, and they become entrenched because scholars come of age in and live within disciplines, departments, undergraduate curricula, historiographies, conferences, publications, and journals. My lecture will argue that 410—the traditional end of the Roman period in Britain—has too often served as a hard stopping or starting point for scholars working in the period. This has profoundly distorted our understanding of the first century of the Middle Ages in Britain and its evidence.

The withdrawal of the Roman state from Britain, the collapse of its economy, and the unraveling of complex systems of production lead to the disappearance of whole categories of durable (and therefore archaeologically visible) material culture. This material collapse should feature prominently in our efforts to evaluate the impact of both newcomers moving into Britain and the new material culture package developing there.

SESSION 1: MOBILITY AND MATERIAL CULTURE
Chair: Toby Martin

Untangling 'local and 'non-local' display in death
Emma Brownlee

Besides the scale of movement, one of the central questions surrounding migration in the early medieval period is whether or not migrants can be identified through their grave goods. Previous isotopic studies (such as Leggett 2021, Montgomery et al 2005 and Hughes et al 2014), have shown few differences in the burials of locals and non-locals, although some have suggested a lack of wealth in the graves of immigrants (Hughes et al 2018). However, these studies have focused on samples of individuals from single sites. Their analysis is therefore hampered by small sample sizes, and it is difficult to get a sense of how representative they are.

With isotopic analysis now being an established technique, we have ever larger numbers of burials which can be assigned a local or non-local origin. This paper is based on 450 individuals from 31 cemeteries from across England, buried between the fourth and eighth centuries. Rather than focusing on the style of grave goods and whether they are 'foreign' or not, it will focus on the way in which different categories of object are used in the funerary rite, paying particular attention to gendered, chronological, and regional differences. It will consider what it meant to be a first-generation migrant in early medieval society, and the extent to which this is reflected in burials.

Natives and newcomers: how Saxon were the East Saxons?
Stephen Rippon

The East Saxon kingdom has provided us with some of our most famous Anglo-Saxon sites and artefacts such as the settlement and cemeteries at Mucking, and the Prittlewell burial. The large amount of developer-funded archaeology, as well as metal detecting finds reported to the PAS, mean that this is now a thoroughly explored landscape. The distribution of the sites and artefacts suggestive of communities with an Anglo-Saxon identity is, however, far from evenly spread across the landscape. This paper will suggest that this was because a substantial population descended from Romano-British inhabitants continued to occupy large areas, most notably on the claylands away from the coast (where Anglo-Saxon colonisation is evident). The 'East Saxon' kingdom therefore comprised a range of communities with diverse identities and this in part may account for the high degree of continuity within the physical fabric of the countryside.

Migrating material culture? Supporting arm brooches and the 'earliest migrants' in fifth-century Britain
James Gerrard

Supporting arm brooches are a rare form of early fifth-century and supposedly 'Anglo-Saxon' brooch. Commonly referred to by the German name *stützarmfibeln* these artefacts are often seen as indicators of the earliest Anglo-Saxon migrants in Britain. This paper combines new data from Britain and the Netherlands to illustrate some of the difficulties with the orthodox interpretations of this object type. Critical theoretical approaches to identity can then be used to develop an alternative interpretation of these objects and their significance.

SESSION 2: MOLECULAR PERSPECTIVES ON MOBILITY & KINSHIP
Chair: Toby Martin

Isotopic evidence for a "long" Migration Period in England: connectivity, gender, and regionalisation
Sam Leggett

Almost two decades ago Catherine Hills (2003:57-67) identified the need and potential for biomolecular evidence to answer questions about the nature and scale of early medieval migration to England. Large-scale isotopic data are now available to integrate with the other lines of evidence to fill this gap. In this paper isotopic data are used to address questions about the amplitude and nature of migration to England and around Europe in the first millennium AD.

Previous isotopic studies of early medieval mobility and migration have mostly been site specific, focussing on the identification of outliers within the cemetery, occasionally comparing data to a baseline or other sites for context. This paper presents the results of a large-scale synthetic analysis of mobility in early medieval England, but also western Europe more broadly. It identifies first generation migrants, hypothesises on regions of origin, and re-frames narratives of migration from the end of the Roman period to the eleventh century AD. The paper tackles questions of connectivity and cross-cultural contact evident in the isotopic and funerary data, with a specific focus on the "*Adventus Saxonum*" and Scandinavian settlements in England. It demonstrates that migration into England and around western Europe was a continuous phenomenon, fluctuating over time but never stopping, with regional and gendered patterns emerging.

The Anglo-Saxon migration and formation of the early English gene pool
Stephan Schiffels and Joscha Gretzinger

A series of migrations and accompanied cultural changes has formed the peoples of Britain and still represents the foundations of the English national identity. For the most prominent of these, the Anglo-Saxon migration, the traditional view outlined that the local Romanised British population was forcibly replaced by invading Germanic tribes, starting in the fifth century AD. However, to which extent this historic event coincided with factual immigration that affected the genetic composition of the British population was focus of generations of scientific and social controversy. To better understand this key period, we have generated genome-wide sequences from 280 individuals from 22 early medieval cemeteries in England and from 195 additional individuals from contemporaneous sites in continental north-western Europe and Ireland. We combined this data with previously published genome-wide data to a total dataset of more than 750 ancient British genomes spanning from the Early Bronze Age to the Early Middle Ages, allowing us to investigate shifts and affinities in British fine-scale population structure during this phase of transformation. Here we present two results: First, we detect a substantial increase in continental northern European ancestry in England during the Early Anglo-Saxon period, replacing approximately 75% of the local British ancestry. Second, we highlight the yet continuous presence of ancestry identified in Iron Age and Roman individuals during the Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon period. Our observation of a culturally homogenous but genetically diverse Anglo-Saxon population demonstrates that admixture between Britons and continental immigrants was not a geographically restricted or exceptional phenomenon.

Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and the implications of new ancient DNA data
Duncan Sayer

There is no genetic signature for an early Anglo-Saxon person. Ancient genetic information has been highly anticipated for decades, but it is only now that we are in the midst of the archaeo-genetic revolution that the wider implications of the evidence are becoming apparent for our understanding of the early Middle Ages. On its own, DNA data cannot tell us who was a migrant, and who was not. But it can tell us about the biological impact of migration. The results of 210 individuals from 9 cemeteries will change the narrative, at the very least it moves the conversation from *if* there was a migration, to what *was* the impact of migration. But what has been less anticipated is what DNA deviance can tell us about the people themselves. About gender difference and migration, who was related to who, and how the cultural impact played out at a national, regional, and local level.

Big (biocultural) data for big questions: funerary archaeology, migration, and communities in fifth-century Britain
Janet E. Kay

Recent trends in Big Data projects have demonstrated the usefulness of larger-scale approaches to older historiographical questions and have the potential to change how archaeologists and historians tackle familiar concepts and paradigms. These new methods, however, also come with new interpretative challenges, even as they open possibilities to ask new questions and find new answers. This paper will present an overview of my current Big Data project, which examines how communities in Britain were formed during the long fifth century in the aftermath of Roman rule and before the consolidation of early medieval kingdoms. Rather than rely on later textual sources, I use a biocultural approach standardized to the more than 11,000 burials from archaeological sites excavated and published over the past seventy years. This paper will present the methodological goals and challenges of a cohesive Big Data approach that works across periods of considerable change in material culture,

population migration, and community formation. Using this approach, I argue that fifth-century communities in Britain did not define themselves in terms of distinct "ethnic" identities (as we think of and often try to identify them archaeologically) and that there was no universal response to either the withdrawal of the Roman administration in Britain or the arrival of new people from the continent. Rather, the veneer of standardized Roman identity and funerary rites in Britain gave way to local practices, community cemeteries, and distinctly personal burials.

SESSION 3: CURRENT & RECENT FIELDWORK
Chair: Duncan Sayer

A new Anglian community on the Suffolk Fen Edge: the sites at RAF Lakenheath
John Hines

Between 1998 and 2007, a remarkable group of three separate but closely neighbouring burial grounds, including 33 graves excavated in the late 1950s and published as 'Little Eriswell', contained the burials of some 450 individuals from the mid-5th to the third quarter of the 7th century. There had been Roman settlement, datable up to c. AD 400, nearby, but there is no evidence of anything but a period of discontinuity before the new cemetery areas came into use. The material culture of the communities using the burial grounds is entirely characteristic of Anglian England, within which, nonetheless, subtle distinctions within the groups and particularly important exchange links across and around the Fens are apparent.

This presentation will outline the chronological framework of the sites, highlighting the important evidence of major thresholds of change across a period up to the mid-8th century, especially in relation to the size of the burying population. The very earliest burial horizon is elusive because it is represented by a severely truncated cremation zone. Nevertheless both isotopic and genetic data yield a clear case for a substantial new population having settled here from across the North Sea from around the mid-5th century. The principal focus of discussion will be the evaluation and interpretation of the data, with particular reference to the potential for future work building upon them as well as upon the limitations to what is known so far.

A sense of belonging? Mobility, community and the Croft Gardens (Cambridge) cemetery
Katie Howarth

The decision to bury someone within a communal cemetery is a powerful statement of belonging, and indeed most early medieval burial grounds are thought to represent communities drawn from a single associated settlement. Decisions about how, where and with what objects to inter the deceased were probably made collectively, by those intimately familiar with the dead person. On the other hand, the living community was almost certainly never static; instead there was likely a flow of people leaving and joining the group, for different reasons, moving through networks of connectivity of all scales. Cutting-edge scientific techniques, particularly aDNA and stable isotopes, can tell us much about the individuals who had moved across long distances during their lifetime, but undoubtedly there was also considerable mobility on a much more local scale. Using the recently excavated fifth- and sixth-century cemetery at Croft Gardens, Cambridge as a case study, this paper will outline ways in which we might think about these very local networks of communication and mobility and consider what it might have meant to be a 'newcomer' to an early medieval community, both in life and in death.

Migration waves or cultural melting pot? A new evaluation of Basel's early medieval burials
Margaux L. C. Depaermentier

Early medieval archaeology has long been influenced by the traditional interpretation of the ancient/roman written sources. In this context, tracing the expected migration of barbarian groups on the large scale as well as the impact of their arrival on the local scale has long been the main focus of early medieval studies. This applies also in Basel, a city that has developed on both sides of the river Rhine, where the western riverbank remained within the Western Roman Empire until its administrative collapse in the late 5th century, whereas the eastern riverbank already belonged to the so-called *Alamannia* from the late 3rd century onwards – after the Upper Germanic-Rhaetian Limes was given up by the Romans. Here, more than a thousand late antique and early medieval burials (spanning from the late 4th to the early 8th century AD) have been discovered. They represent either large burial grounds (including ca. 40 to 600 graves), small burial groups (comprising less than 30 burials), or single graves scattered all over the city – mainly along streets. On the contrary, settlements mostly remain unknown. Based on the expected migration waves of various barbarian groups, the grave goods were mainly interpreted ethnically, and Basel's early medieval burials were systematically divided into local Romans on the western and immigrated Alamans or Danube-Suebians (mainly) on the eastern riverbank. From the 6th century onwards, Franks were expected on both riversides as well. Not only a bioarchaeological approach, including isotope and aDNA analyses, but also a new evaluation of the grave goods now opens new perspectives regarding the interpretation of past mobility patterns and cultural influences in early medieval Basel.

Exploring migration and kinship at Hinkley Point cemetery (5th-7th century)
Sharon Clough

Excavations by Cotswold Archaeology in advance of the construction of Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, Somerset, revealed a 5th-7th century cemetery. Excavated in its entirety the c.300 burials provided an opportunity to explore the development of the cemetery through radiocarbon dating and Bayesian analysis, migration through isotopic analysis and kinship through aDNA.

The almost complete absence of material culture meant that scientific analysis was vital. 51 radiocarbon dates were modelled and while hampered by poor resolution in the radiocarbon calibration curve the burial ground is suggested to have been in use from c. AD 420 until AD 660. Strontium, Oxygen, Carbon, Nitrogen and Sulphur isotopes were all examined to explore mobility, diet and environment. The data suggested some mobility for some individuals, although this may have been within Britain. mtDNA from 44 individuals was extracted and there were 26 different haplogroups. Likely maternal kinships relations were observed in multiple graves or adjacent graves.

SESSION 4: SYNOPTIC PERSPECTIVES
Chair: Duncan Sayer

'Migration theory and the Migration Period' revisited: reflections on the scale and impact of migration on lowland Britain, fifth to seventh centuries.
Helena Hamerow

In her book, *The Material Fall of Roman Britain*, the historian Robin Fleming observes, in noting the evidence for large numbers of immigrants in parts of Britain in the fifth and early sixth centuries, that 'it does not necessarily follow that *all* people burying their dead in new cemeteries, in new ways, and with new-style objects were newcomers to Britain' (2021, 157). The present writer made a similar point in a paper published in 1994. After nearly 30 years of research, why is it still necessary to spell

this out? My paper examines current thinking in relation to the scale and impact of migration into lowland Britain between the fifth and seventh centuries, bearing in mind that scale and impact are very different things. The contribution of scientific analysis – above all stable isotope studies and aDNA – to questions of scale and impact will be given special consideration. Large amounts of funding (relative to other areas of archaeological research) have gone into such analyses. Have they delivered in clarifying the scale of migration in the so-called Migration Period, and is this providing the basis of a new consensus and new understandings? Finally, can we reconcile the fact that, as the significance of migration in shaping post-Roman Britain is being downplayed by some (and the term 'Anglo-Saxon' is coming under ever closer scrutiny), science is increasingly pointing to high levels of mobility in this period.

R. Fleming, *The Material Fall of Roman Britain* (2021).
H. Hamerow, 'Migration Theory and the Migration Period'. In: B. Vyner (ed), *Building on the Past* (1994), 164-77.

Changing attitudes to Anglo-Saxons over the past hundred years: invading warriors or North Sea style zone?
Catherine Hills

Many other topics than migration have occupied most of those who have studied the peoples living around the North Sea in the second half of the first millennium AD. Pots and poetry, houses and jewellery, coins and cattle. However, as this conference has shown, migration is still very much a live topic. Approaches towards this theme have varied over the centuries depending more on changing politics and ideology than any actual "facts", from Bede to the present day by way of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Reformation, Civil War, British empire, world wars etc.

I want to focus on the relationship between history and archaeology in the mid/late twentieth century when medieval archaeology was establishing itself as an independent discipline, because I think this may have something to tell us about current debates between archaeologists and geneticists. I will look at this mainly through the works of Vera Evison and J N L Myres, both very influential in their time and still today. Individual scholars in the past and now are both influenced by and shape the views of their own times and later- and we are often inconsistent, not holding narrowly defined and neatly bounded sets of ideas, not to be pigeonholed into categories of thought.

When the data takes you by surprise. Reflections on thirty years of later Roman and early medieval site analysis.
Sam Lucy, Newnham College, Cambridge

Drawing on a number of different case studies, including Mucking and Spong Hill, this paper will discuss how unexpected patterns revealed through detailed data analysis can challenge pre-existing frameworks of knowledge, and up-end expectations about settlement structure and burial practice in the fourth to sixth centuries AD. It argues that primacy has to be given to original site data in any discussions about the nature of social change in this period, but that historical and theoretical frameworks must always shape revised interpretations.

Was migration really a 'thing'? Let's talk about other approaches to the 5th and 6th centuries
Susan Oosthuizen, University of Cambridge

This paper examines in greater detail some aspects of the arguments presented in *The Emergence of the English* (ARC-Humanities Press, 2019). In summary: the book took an empirical approach to testing the premise that migration into England from north-west Europe between *c.*400 and *c.*600 CE was the driving factor behind the fifth-century adoption a new material culture and changes in burial practices, and of the widespread use of Old English by the end of the sixth century. It concluded that there is currently little evidence to support that premise and, until new research can demonstrate its solidity, explanations for cultural change across the period should instead revert to a default: that the history of change in sub-Roman and early medieval England was predicated on post-imperial political, social and institutional evolution that adapted to changing circumstance and process, in which innovation rather than migration stimulated new directions.

This paper takes a more abstract approach to the assumption of the primacy of migration than the one adopted in the book. It explores in greater detail the possibility that there are *intrinsic* errors in the premises, arguments and structure of the prevailing discourse.

It briefly examines the problems inherent in challenging an established discourse.

It moves on to discuss alternative narratives drawn from work on resilience and sustainability that offer explanations and interpretations of greater complexity than that of the *Adventus* for historical (and thus archaeological) change. And it concludes that such an approach offers new, possibly transformative, directions for research whether or not they confirm the reliability of the existing paradigm.

Ethnicity/migration: the problem of conceptual conflation
James Harland

Debates have recently resurfaced in early medieval British archaeology regarding the scale and impact of migration from across the North Sea between the fourth and sixth centuries, and its role in the transformation of cultural identity in lowland Britain. I wish to propose that some of the conflicts we are witnessing in this debate lie in a problem of framing, especially of conflation between two distinct phenomena, namely, migration and ethnicity. In this paper, I make a theoretical case for the erroneous nature of this conflation and outline how it has produced problems in scholarly discussion as we currently encounter them. I hope to set out a position that can allow reconciliation of some currently opposed viewpoints and set out a more firm footing for our language choices when we discuss and analyse the large quantities of new material culture with roots in the North Sea and Scandinavia which appear in lowland Britain in late antiquity.