

A. Bayliss, J. Hines, K. Højlund Nielsen, F.G. McCormac & C. Scull: *Anglo-Saxon Graves and Grave Goods of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries AD: A Chronological Framework*. Society of Medieval Archaeology Monograph 33. Maney, London, 2013, 595 pp. ISBN 978-1-909662-06-3

ELNA SIV KRISTOFFERSEN

[Review]

This massive volume (slightly less than 2.5 kg) on Anglo-Saxon chronology, edited by John Hines and Alex Bayliss, is the result of a multi-disciplinary and collaborative project begun in 1997. Prior to the project no comprehensive chronological framework for this period existed. The following quote might express a guiding premise: 'Chronological position, associations and sequencing are therefore fundamental to serious understanding of any of the major historical questions and topics for study' (p. 560, with references).

The report is structured in ten chapters written by nine different specialists in various disciplines: an introductory chapter on Anglo-Saxon grave material and chronology; natural-scientific and mathematical dating methods and their modelling; practical aspects of the project; human skeletons sampled for the radiocarbon dating; typological classification of artefacts; interpretative chronologies for male and female graves; integration and comparison of results from the various analysis in a wider geographical context, an additional discussion on the incompatibility of certain types of coins (late 7th century) and the calendrical dates for the end of furnished burials and, finally, a discussion on the results and their implications.

Three major aims were designed:

- Chronology: to establish a more precise and secure dating for the period c. AD 570–720 by refining the existing archaeological chronology for furnished burials and the material culture sequence on which this is based.
- Methodology: to test and develop the effectiveness of the combination of correspondence analysis, high-precision radio-carbon dating and Bayesian modelling as a reflexive package of methods for chronological analysis.
- Professional infrastructure and skills: to demonstrate the effectiveness of radiocarbon dating for the Early Medieval Period and so encourage its wider use. (p. 91)

Among secondary objects were questions concerning the calibration curve between AD 570 and AD 720 as well as carbon and nitrogen stable isotopes and diet. A precise adjustment for dietary effects on radiocarbon dates from human skeletal material is presented in the report as still unresolved.

The methodological value of the project is considered important, not least the applied, both traditional and new, methods in their combination used within an 'iterative and reflexive style' (p. 3). The recent development of radiocarbon dating and such dating of human bone from graves with artefacts of chronological interest is an important background. This is also the case for the complex statistic, Bayesian chronology modelling. According to the book this offers 'dating of a precision that is otherwise available only in those rare contexts where historically-datable coins are present or wood that can be dated by dendrochronology is preserved. In combination, therefore radiocarbon dating and Bayesian statistics provide an important new approach for understanding chronology in the Early Medieval Period' (p. 87).

The project has, through a highly detailed and technically advanced analysis, produced a new

chronological framework for Early Anglo-Saxon artefact inventory and thereby achieved its objective. The phases are separate for male and female burials, but nevertheless mutually consistent and coordinated. These will allow archaeologists to assign grave-assemblages and a wide range of individual artefact types to defined phases that are associated with calendrical date ranges. The framework can to some degree be extended chronologically and regionally. The simplest and quickest approach is, according to the editor, to apply the 'leading type' method.

To conclude the report, the results and their implications for burial practice and settlement archaeology as well as social, politic, economic and religious history are discussed in Chapter 10, including changes in the later 6th and 7th century and the impact of the conversion to Christianity. The understanding of complexity on various levels and the dynamics of the processes are, in my view, aspects which are particularly worth dwelling on: 'The pace of change, as modelled by our sequences, argues for viewing both material culture and burial practice as dynamic and actively-constituted: both may at any one time embody a range of normative expressions of social and cultural identity, but these are themselves epiphenomena, renegotiated and re-expressed from generation to generation' (p. 528). Through the tight chronology developed in this project it has been possible to demonstrate the complexity of political organization and social hierarchy, such as in the centralization process towards larger kingdoms, which is regarded a competition among the elite as the social space for the aristocracy expanded. There is evidence from the middle of the 7th century that increasing complexity in the settlement record is matched by diversity in the size, location and configuration of burial sites. Furthermore, a more complex set of changes in burial practice is revealed; inhumation practice changed markedly, rapidly and episodically over the period of the mid-6th to late 7th century. A regional and chronological variation of cremations versus inhumations is demonstrated, although it is underlined that the same symbolic vocabulary might have been involved, at least prior to the funeral pyre. From the mid-6th century cremation is a minority practice and increasingly restricted to the higher and elite segments of society. Both are, in the years immediately before they were abandoned, regarded as social strategies of demarcation and distinction, including archaizing symbolism. Concerning the cessation of the regular deposition of artefacts in graves the project has discovered that this happened at an earlier date (by two decades) than suspected, before the end of the 7th century AD.

The artefact types occurring in female graves are dominated by dress accessories (clothed burials). Over time the inclusion of pieces of practical, domestic equipment is proposed. The distinctiveness of the dress accessories from their overseas contemporaries is described as striking. The archaizing character of the latest burials includes spectacular pieces of dress jewellery, which must have been old when deposited, regarded as outmoded and of minor value, without excluding the fact that as an heirloom a brooch might have been attributed value through its use and its life story as a bearer of memory and tradition.

A Final Phase phenomenon is defined for the second quarter of the 7th century with a marked shift to high-quality artefacts in precious metals and exotic materials. This is in contrast to what is seen in the male sequence and contributes to the difference between the female and male graves, which is underlined on various levels through the report and described in terms of a sharpness of gender differentiation within Early Anglo-Saxon society. Another interesting feature of the latest furnished female inhumations is the burial of dress jewellery in bags rather than worn by the corpse.

A similar archaizing symbolism is recognizable in some of the Norwegian late Migration Period (first half of the 6th century) furnished male burials, especially rich burials, for example, Snartemo V where an old, repaired glass vessel as well as outmoded decorated elements on the sword are included. Another familiar aspect is the local or regional distinctiveness of the dress accessories, such as in the Style I decorated pieces, in the female graves, in contrast to the more supra-regional character of the male equipment.

Both the project and the report are an over-whelming pieces of work, masterfully managed towards the results presented in the volume under discussion. The book is voluminous, due to its topic with the necessary background and explanation of new and advanced techniques as well as the many different authors and disciplines involved. The book might, however, have been more accessible if the length in some of the chapters, such as detailed introductions as well as research and project history, had been cut down and a simpler language used in some parts. For this reviewer it

is difficult to evaluate, until it is actually tried out in chronological research, whether it should have been easier to find the dating of the phases and types, bearing in mind how important it is that the complexity of the phasing and dating on the various levels should be kept. The user's manual, with the explanation of how to read the various forms of dates and its suggestions for short cuts, is of great help for anyone who aspires to use the results or understand the methods.

Within the framework of the present review I have not been able to touch upon the possible consequences for Norwegian chronology, connections that might be developed through critical evaluations of the regional and cultural variation at hand. Concerning the methods applied within our chronological debate, there are certainly consequences to be expected. It is a hope that readers will manage to overcome the somewhat scary threshold that this massive volume may represent. A time span that relates to the early part of our Merovingian Period is focused upon within the present project. As such, it is indeed of relevance for the much-discussed transition from the preceding Migration Period. On a more general level the project has demonstrated that such transitions are well understood through a detailed analysis of the stages in a development of material culture. The understanding of the complexity of time and chronology is certainly one of this project's major contributions, an acknowledgement often reached through detailed studies of this kind. In the case of the present study, where high-precision radiocarbon dating is involved, it might be due to the fact that one gets in touch with a past reality. This balanced situation between chronology as a constructed tool in the classification of archaeological objects and chronology in touch with a reality of past time is a fundamental one within archaeology.