THE CROSS GOES NORTH

Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe,
AD 300-1300

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We still do not know for certain why grave-goods were placed in the grave. . . . Who is responsible for the ceremony of burial? Did that person allow a choice of different customs? . . . Or was burial left to the heirs, or to the family? (James 1989, 34)

The question of who was responsible for the funeral in early Anglo-Saxon England, or for the management of burial sites, has often been raised in passing by archaeologists, but has generally not been examined in detail. This is, perhaps, due to the difficulty of finding archaeological evidence for ceremony and its underlying motives which is independent of the analogies available to the observer (Carver 1993, v-vi). This paper represents an attempt to search for such evidence. The identification of who or what might have been responsible for patterns and variations in burial could have far-reaching consequences. If there was some form of social control, this could change the theoretical basis from which we extract meaning from these patterns, as of course the meanings of these patterns will vary depending on who deliberately created them and whose ideologies they reflected. At the very least, it might help us understand phenomena such as the speed and uniformity of change in Anglo-Saxon burial practice across England, or the underlying principles by which the landscape position and layout of pre-Christian cemeteries was planned. Understanding the social control of burial may also shed light on one of the thorny problems of burial practice in the Age of Conversion: the seemingly immense effect of the coming of the Church on burial practices, which took place apparently without any detectable institutional intention. These are wide inferences; let us see how far we can push the evidence to justify them.

After well over a century of analysis, we now know that the process of the disposal of the dead in early Anglo-Saxon England required a great many decisions to be made (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001, 262). The appropriate cemetery had to be selected, and the choice between inhumation and cremation made. If cremation was chosen, the pyre had to be constructed, with another set of
decisions to be made. If the rite was to be inhumation, the grave had to be dug in the correct place, with the right orientation. If there was to be a mound, the height and diameter had to be selected. Coffins and other structures had to be chosen; or, for cremations, a container, such as a pot, of the correct size and with the right decoration. The dead body had to be laid out in the grave on or on the pyre, and any objects had to be selected and added in their correct places.

The focus of funerals today is the lowering of the body into the grave, but in the early Anglo-Saxon period it seems to have been the viewing of the tableau; the body laid out in the grave or on the pyre, with its jewellery or weapons and other accoutrements. To achieve the correct tableau, with the uniform patterning observed by the archaeologist, the task of laying the body out had to be deliberately and carefully performed. In the case of inhumation burials, the dead body would have had to be carefully laid out in the bottom of the grave. If it had simply been lowered in, necklaces would have slipped round the back, pots would have fallen on their sides, swords and spears would have ended up across the body. The person responsible for the laying-out must also have had knowledge of the significance of the placement and dressing of grave-goods. Those responsible for this have usually been loosely categorised as the ‘mourners’ or ‘family’, but these layouts, as well as the assemblages of objects, were complex and meaningful (Pader 1982; Malim and Hines 1998, 34–42) and it has hitherto been unclear how the knowledge for their proper arrangement was disseminated.

Anglo-Saxon cremation burials are similar to inhumations in that they show an equal level of uniformity across the areas of England in which they occur. Experience and special knowledge would have been necessary in order to build the pyre, lay the body out on the pyre with any grave-goods or accompanying animals, light the fire and keep it burning evenly for the right length of time at the correct temperature, select bones and grave-goods from the ashes, clean the bones, select any additional grave-goods, and finally place everything within the correct pot (or other container) for that particular person (Mckinley 1994; Richards 1987).

The decisions made about the disposal of the dead vary across England, but a remarkable synchronic uniformity can also be seen. Although different peoples were doing different things in different places, there are a number of changes that happen swiftly and simultaneously across the country. Most obvious is the steady rate of change over time in the styles of women’s jewellery and other grave-goods such as glass vessels, presumably related to changing fashions in worldly life. Other more peculiar changes might include the relationship between horse burial and harness burial; in the sixth century, horses in human cemeteries are buried in their harness, but in the seventh they are buried naked and bridles appear in the graves of humans (Oxle 1984, 123). More significant shifts in funerary practice include a movement away from cremation in the late sixth or early seventh century; the widespread adoption of mound-burial for high-status graves in the later sixth and seventh centuries (Shephard 1979); the use of new types of grave-goods in the seventh century (Geake 1997; 1999); and the abandonment of grave-goods altogether in the early eighth century (Geake 1997, 125). These changes over time are surprisingly fast and homogeneous across England, and this homogeneity implies that the disposal of the dead is being actively controlled and managed.

When we turn to look at cemeteries which are spatially related to churches, however, decision-making and control is very much harder to see. It is well known now that the major change in burial practice in the eighth century, away from cemeteries containing furnished burials, has surprisingly little to do with any deliberate decision on the part of the institutionalised Church (Morris 1983, 50; Bullough 1983). The Church is not entirely silent on the matter of burial – in the Penitential attributed to Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury from 669 to 690, there is a brief description of the funeral customs of members of the Roman Church (IV.1: MacNeill and Gainer 1938, 202–5; and see below) – but there is no mention of furnished burial at all within Church law, no suggestion that it was thought of as a pagan or heretical rite, and no stricture against it. A generalised effect of the Church on burial, however, is never really called into question by modern scholars. This is probably for two reasons. The first is the remarkable lack of conventionally furnished burials, even of the early seventh century, in or around English churches (Geake 2002); the second is the sudden ending of the use of grave-goods in other cemeteries in the early eighth century (Geake 1997, 125). These combine to imply a sharp break between burial grounds containing furnished burials on the one hand, and churchyard cemeteries on the other. It seems obvious that the Church must be having an effect on burial, but there is little documentary evidence of any intent or decision in this process.

The third phenomenon to look at in an investigation of the control of burial is the landscape position and layout of burials. Some work has been done on the reasons underlying the particular locations of cemeteries, but this has mainly concentrated on identifying nearby parish boundaries or pre-existing visible monuments (Williams 1997; Lucy 2000, 124–30); an exception is the analysis of landscape visibility and prior land-use at the Sutton Hoo mound cemetery (Carver in press). At the moment we cannot explain why certain such visible places, boundaries or monuments should have been used for early Anglo-Saxon burial, yet others ignored. Not only do we know little about how land was held in early Anglo-Saxon society, and therefore which areas would have been available for burial, but our tendency to excavate only small areas of cemeteries means that we are unsure about how they were fitted into the overall Anglo-Saxon landscape and how their boundaries had to relate to other contemporary landscape features.

In addition, the lack of theories about intra-cemetery planning has hampered efforts to interpret early Anglo-Saxon society from its burials. Organisation and discipline is evident in the layout of many sites. At some, such as Spong Hill, the inhumations are consistently orientated and are zoned away from the cremations (Hills et al. 1984, Fig. 3). Even in ostensibly disorganised cemeteries such as Great
Chesterford in Essex, where the cremations and inhumations are jumbled up and there is no clear pattern to the orientations of the inhumations, potentially meaningful groups of burials can be identified (Evson 1994, 36-43; see also, for example, Malim and Hines 1998, 34-42). In most cemeteries burials appear to avoid each other, implying that they were visibly marked (Hirst 1985, 24).

But because we do not know how cemeteries were planned and managed, we cannot be sure that the inferences about society which we draw from these plans - family groupings, special treatment for one age or sex, those outcast from or marginal to mainstream society, high-status individuals whose burials became focal, or were separated from mainstream society, and so on - were real, intended patterns, or can only ever have been coincidences.

If we are to be optimistic, and assume that cemetery layouts were intentional, and that the patterning of graves and their contents within these layouts was meaningful, we must then ask who within Anglo-Saxon society could exercise this intention. One possible answer is that there was a specific person or persons within a community whose role was to make decisions and keep control over all aspects of the disposal of the dead. A burial specialist could have provided knowledge not just of where graves were and in what direction they were orientated, but also of who was buried in each one and what grave-goods had been included in the grave. Without the expert knowledge of burial specialists, the transmission of a meaningful use of space is unlikely over many generations, especially in an oral culture and when much of the relevant information is buried below ground.

The attention has been drawn to the possibility of the control of burial in Merovingian areas, but conclusions have so far been essentially negative. Young has argued that there is no evidence that pre-Christian burial was regulated, citing the apparent indifference of the early Church and the apparent lack of unity within pre-Christian cemeteries (Young 1975, 61-2 and 106; quoted in Hirst 1985, 24). If he is right, the situation in Francia must have been very different to that in England, where pre-Christian burial sites certainly show a high degree of organisation. Churchyard burials in Francia are certainly very different, with well-known rich burials within churches such as at Paris St-Denis and Cologne Cathedral (Werner 1964; James 1992, 247-5; Geake 2002).

In the quest for burial specialists our first port of call should perhaps be the cemeteries themselves. The person or persons who organised burial in a community must also have died and been buried, and it may be expected that those who controlled burial within their communities would have received a special type of burial on their own death, whether or not this event coincided with the transfer of control to another person. The grave of the person responsible for allocating the rite, position, orientation, layout and furnishing of a grave may be unusually cremated, positioned, orientated, laid out or furnished.

A small group of individual graves have been defined by Audrey Meaney as those of 'cunning women' (1981, 249-42). These graves are almost indefinitely strange. They contain female inhumations, and have collections of peculiar small objects of no obvious practical or decorative use, laid out in unusual positions and combinations. In addition, the location and orientation of 'cunning woman' graves within cemeteries seems to imply that they would have been in some way special within the community, or at least that their honouring in death was special.

Identifying 'cunning women' graves as those of ritual specialists on the grounds of their grave-goods alone is risky, as almost every type of Anglo-Saxon female grave-good has, at one time or another, been identified as possessing amuletic or magical significance, if not from its material or form then from its ornamentation. Because of this, all those buried (for whatever reason) with many objects begin to look like jingling, glittering magicians. Case studies must, therefore, concentrate on examples of women who look, in death, so unlike the majority that we are forced to interpret them as something out of the ordinary.

Grave HB2 at Bidford-on-Avon in Warwickshire is so unusual in its grave-goods that it inspired Tania Dickinson, normally a most sober and cautious writer, to talk of 'a glimpse of ritual and superstition' and to suggest that 'this was the grave of someone with special powers' (1993, 45, 53). The grave was that of a young adult woman buried in the first three-quarters of the sixth century. The layout of the grave-goods was unusual. A group of bronze objects consisting of four lace-tags, a disc pendant and twelve bucket pendants stitched to a leather backing, were found underneath the shoulder, implying that the objects were either deliberately concealed or that the body did not receive the full laying-out for viewing typical of the furnished early Anglo-Saxon burial. There were also some peculiar objects, such as an amber core and a very odd long-handled knife, which were found in a bag by the hip together with an iron and a bronze ring. HB2 was found at the extreme northern edge of the excavation, but as the cemetery was not fully excavated it is impossible to know whether this was a truly liminal location (Dickinson 1993).

Grave 27 at Wheatley in Oxfordshire is another candidate for 'cunning woman' status (Meaney 1981, 32-4). The cemetery at Wheatley was excavated in the nineteenth century and at least 70 graves are known. Grave 27 contained a considerable number of objects in two groups. First, in a squarish mass between the left arm and the ribs, were 61 amber beads, 16 glass beads, a bone bead, a bronze wire bead, two dog or wolf teeth, a boar's tusk, two Roman bronze coins, a pair of disc brooches, an ear spoon, an Iron Age pin, and some scraps of textile and iron (Dickinson 1976, 229-30). The location of these objects was unusual: in a bag or box rather than on the body; again as if the objects were either concealed, or as if the person had not been dressed properly for burial.

The second group of objects was between the feet, and consisted of two iron rings, a bronze weight, a triangular bronze plate and a fragment of glass. Further grave-goods were unlocated; half a rectangular bronze plate, half a tinned bronze disc, a bit of a bronze wrist-clasp, an iron rod with a bronze wire ring through a perforation at one end, and one iron and one bronze ring.

This odd collection of scrap is typical of the bag collections cited by Meaney as one of the attributes of the cunning woman. Meaney and Dickinson both interpret
these women as ritual specialists whose roles included those of healers and fortune-tellers. There is no direct evidence to connect them with the control of burial, but as their graves are full of odd objects and do not seem to have received the usual preparation for burial, it seems reasonable to suggest that they could also be the controllers and managers of burial. Modern ethnographic parallels, for example in rural Greece, show that women, particularly old women, often look after mortuary practices. Such women could be termed ‘death-midwives’, taking a person out of this world safely and properly.

It is harder to find possible examples of burial specialists within cremation burials. This is to some extent counter-intuitive; as the rite of cremation involves more difficult techniques and is more complicated, it might be expected to need more specialist expertise. It is of course possible that there was something about cremation burial that made the entire rite inappropriate for a burial specialist. But also we should remember that although cremation burials have received much less detailed analysis, one aspect that does seem certain is that the selection of grave-goods during the cremation rite was very different to that in the inhumation rite. Age and gender are not nearly so clearly differentiated within cremation grave-goods, and it may be that other social roles are also not best approached by studying this dataset. Differences in the laying-out of the body and the grave-goods are also harder to see within a cremation burial, as the bones and objects go through a further process of selection and organisation as they are placed in the burial container. A remaining possibility is that the social role of the burial controller was expressed through a particular type of container; this suggestion may, however, be hard to test using current analytical techniques.

It is often assumed by modern writers that a burial controller, or undertaker, should be connected with other aspects of ritual or spiritual life, even though there is no prima facie reason for this assumption. In fact, the limited view of pagan ritual given us by contemporary writers might be argued to contradict it. Theodore’s Penitential specifies penances both for ‘a woman [who] performs diabolical incantations or divinations’ and ‘he who celebrates auguries, omens from birds, or dreams, or any divinations according to the custom of the heathen’ (I.xxiv; MacNeill and Gaster 1938, 194–5) but these people, in common with the pre-Christian priests mentioned by writers such as Bede or Eddius Stephanus, are not recorded as having anything to do with the disposal of the dead. Theodore also gives no penances for organising inappropriate burials; the furthest he goes is to specify a 3-year penance for those who burn grain when a man has died, for the purification of the house and of the living (I.xxv; Wilson 1992, 97). Of course, these writers are operating in a Christian milieu, and we already know that the ritual specialists of the early Church did not care much about funerals. It could be argued that we should hardly believe them when they imply that their claimed pagan counterparts did not either.

The role of burial controllers may, however, be described in a single non-Christian documentary source, albeit from the other end of Europe, and many centuries later; the famous description by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan of the extravaganza and theatrical burial of a Rus’ chief soon after 920 AD (Warmin 1995). Ibn Fadlan was part of a Moslem embassy sent from Baghdad to Bulgar, on the Volga near modern Kazan, and his description is full of interest for the student of burial.

He tells how the dead man was temporarily buried for 10 days, with temporary grave-goods, while preparations were made for the funeral proper; the making of special clothes is particularly mentioned. On the day of the funeral, the chief’s ship was dragged up onto the river bank and perched on a great stack of wood. The dead man was exhumed, dressed in his elaborate burial clothes and laid in a tent on the ship. Food and drink were laid out around him, together with all his weapons. A number of animals – exhausted horses, cows, a dog and chickens – were killed and cut up and thrown into the ship. The rest of the day was filled with various elaborate sexual and mystical ceremonial involving a ‘volunteer’ slave girl, who is given a great deal to drink and in the end is stangled and stabbed. Finally the closest kinsman of the dead man walks backwards, naked, with a hand over his hab isbithi (“gate of the buttocks”), and with a lighted torch ignites the ship. When it has burnt completely they raise up a mound over it with a post with the man’s name on top.

The significant part of Ibn Fadlan’s account for our purposes is that the entire funeral service is presided over by a woman called by him the Malak al Maut, which can be translated as ‘Messenger of Death’, assisted by her daughters. There has been debate over whether the ‘Messenger of Death’ was herself Scandinavian, or perhaps a local Slav (Warmin 1995, 135; Ellis Davidson 1992, 331). Many features known to be characteristic of north-west European burial practices are contained within the story, however, that it seems inescapable that the ‘Messenger of Death’ knew what was right for Vikings to do; she also appears to have known their language. It seems possible that the ‘cunning woman’, so curiously honoured in death, and the ‘Messenger of Death’ observed by Ibn Fadlan, could have carried out the same function within their societies – women who, perhaps among other spiritual duties (Bierbrauer, Staekzer, Lager, Gräslund, Chapter 27, 29, 31 and 30 in this volume), ensured that the correct burial customs and rituals were observed.

Communication between the burial specialists of different communities would provide a mechanism for the speedy transfer of new burial trends across the country. The comprehensive nature of these new trends – in method of disposal of the body, grave-good types, grave structures, cemetery location, and so on – implies that the burial specialists had a hand in all aspects of the treatment of the dead. Ibn Fadlan’s description of the ‘Messenger of Death’ as being assisted by her daughters might imply that the role was at least occasionally hereditary, which would help in the transmission of knowledge through time as well as over distance.

The identification of a class of female ritual specialists, responsible for the control and maintenance of burial tradition, has wide-ranging implications for many aspects of the interpretation of cemeteries and graves. Not least among
these may be our views on the ideological and political interpretations of burial evidence, which may be heavily dependent on whose ideas and desires could have influenced the burial controllers. These are wide and weighty questions which deserve more considered treatment; this paper will concentrate instead only on the possible implications of this idea on the transition to burial around churches.

The relationship of Christianity to archaeologically observed changes in burial practice is complex. One of the most obvious changes, in the use of grave-goods, coincides with the period of the Christian missions, and another change, in the location of the burial place, follows soon after, around 720 AD (Geiske 1997). Carver has suggested that exceptionally demonstrative burial rites being practised in the early seventh century reflect a high-status reaction to the Christian mission (1998, 136). Those of the later seventh and eighth centuries may be connected with the growing influence not only of the formal Church, but also of other forms of Christianity. The influence of informal Christianity may, perhaps, be detectable in burials outside churchyards, although other linked factors such as the development of dynastic kingship are equally important (Geiske 1997, 132–3; 1999). There is a natural expectation that the Church should have been interested in burial practice, but the available (admittedly negative) evidence suggests it was not.

An early Anglo-Saxon society used to the control of burial practices by ritual specialists, however, might quite plausibly expect the men of the Church, when they took over the role of ritual specialists, therefore also to act as burial controllers. A similar unfulfilled expectation is seen in Bede’s story of the reaction of a group of ‘everyday people’ to the misfortune of some monks who were being blown out to see: ‘Let no man pray for them, and may God have mercy on none of them, for they have taken the immemorial rituals from men and nobody knows how the new ones are to be observed’ (Fletcher 1997, 285–6). The fact that the Church apparently did not tell the Anglo-Saxons what to do with their dead (beyond the neutral description of the custom of the ‘Roman Church’) may not have prevented its members from actually wielding great influence, particularly when some of their structures (such as those against those who perform diabolical incantations or divinations) could be interpreted as warnings against heeding the words of non-Christian ritual advisers.

The factors underlying the siting of churches have been examined by many scholars (Blair 1986; Morris 1989, 274; Pestell forthcoming), and are generally considered to relate primarily to aspects of landholding and aristocratic convenience. However, when an early date for a church has been established by archaeological excavation, it is often found that the earliest features are unfurnished burials, possibly indicating that the church was built on a pre-existing burial ground (Morris 1989, 152; Geiske 1997, 135). A faint echo can perhaps be heard here of the foundation of many urban churches across Europe, within extra-mural cemeteries in which Roman saints and martyrs were buried; it may be that burials attract churches as much as churches attract burials.

The burial rite appropriate to a churchyard, the rows of unfurnished orientated graves, is very specific and recognisable, but is nowhere laid down in Church law. Theodore tells us that:

According to the Roman Church, the custom is to carry dead monks or religious men to the church, to anoint their breasts with the chrism, there to celebrate masses for them and then with chanting to carry them to their graves. When they have been placed in the tomb a prayer is offered for them, then they are covered with earth and stone.

(III:1; MacNeill and Gamier 1938, 194–5)

Even if this was the model followed, there is scope within these parameters to add many additional features, and indeed the English variety of this rite is subtly different from the ‘Christian’ burial practices found in other parts of Europe.

Both the new rite and the initial placing of a new burial site may therefore represent an interpretation of the new ideology by a special group, whose ancestral task had always been the easing of the inevitable passage out of life rather than the censoring of behaviour within it. The new rites may, perhaps, represent the last contribution of the Anglo-Saxon female burial controllers. The supervision of burial is now less demanding. The location is dictated by the church, which also owns the space; grave-goods are absent and do not need positioning; and within the tight confines of the churchyard, graves are routinely cut through and mortal remains disturbed. The burial controllers might instead have turned their attention to pre-burial ceremonies, taking their activities out of the sphere of archaeological visibility.

It may be felt that there is comparatively little positive evidence for the existence of burial specialists – a couple of odd female inhumations, a tenth-century story of Viking activity on the Volga – and that their existence can therefore be dismissed as a flight of fancy. But it has been argued here that circumstantial evidence of decision-making, planning and organisation requires some control of burial practice and management of burial sites. The theoretical consequences of this idea are enormous, as we now have to ask not only ‘what did these burials mean?’ but also ‘whose message were they communicating?’ An answer to the latter question will inevitably change our views about the former.

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