Ritual Landscapes in Pagan and Early Christian England

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Abstract: This article explores some of the complex relationships which existed between topographic patterns and social organization in early medieval England. It argues that group identities were not entirely elective in character and random in their boundaries, but were to a significant extent shaped by the structures of the natural landscape. The same was true of the places which particular groups found significant in ritual terms, as meeting places and burial grounds. This is a cross-disciplinary study, in that it applies models developed by English local and regional historians, which are normally used in a later medieval or post-medieval context, to throw light on the character of the location of early medieval ritual sites. More specifically, employing Alan Everitt’s “river and wold” concept, we examine the commonality of the landscape settings of pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and later Christian churches. We suggest that the broadly analogous patterns of location they displayed arose from networks of contact and communication engendered by the configuration of drainage basins and their watershed boundaries. We also identify the conceptual difficulties involved in separating out the recurrent influence of such patterns from simple long-term “continuity” in the importance of particular places.

Key words: early medieval, landscape, Anglo-Saxon, ritual, GIS, spatial humanities

Introduction

This paper examines ritual landscapes in both the pagan and Christian contexts of early medieval England. While not denying the importance of human agency in deciding the locations of ritual and ceremonial sites, we suggest that physical geography strongly influenced such choices and the spatial boundaries of the social groups that these places served. Such locations, once decided, accumulated layers of significance through the actions that were performed there, especially given that they held the remains of human bodies. Bodies are the “things of the past” which most directly connect the ritual landscapes we examine in this paper: crema-
tion and inhumation cemeteries from the fifth and sixth century pagan period, and minsters and parish churches from the subsequent period of Christianization. Although separate in time, and associated with very different belief systems and social forms, important parallels can be seen in their location within the landscape, parallels not previously noted by archaeologists or historians.

These two types of sites are not often studied together for a number of disciplinary and evidentiary reasons. Early English religious history has traditionally been divided into several phases, each often the province of a distinct community of historians. The post-Roman period of the fifth and sixth centuries witnessed the waning of Romano-British Christianity and the flourishing of pagan practices introduced by “Anglo-Saxon” migrants from Germanic-speaking lands across the English Channel and North Sea. A new Christian missionary phase began in 597 with the arrival in Kent of Saint Augustine, whose successors gradually converted the kings of the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and founded large churches—commonly called minsters—throughout lowland Britain. This early minster phase would last through the seventh and into the eighth century, by which time Christianity had taken root to a sufficient extent that Bede could confidently write his famous History of “the” English Church and People. The Viking raids that began towards the end of that century halted the Christian momentum somewhat, leading to a further pre- and post-Viking division of Anglo-Saxon Church history. The final phase, lasting from the 950s through the Norman Conquest of 1066, witnessed a large-scale reorganization of the Anglo-Saxon church under the twin forces of the Benedictine Monastic reform movement and the secular fragmenting of large territories into small estates, each with its own local parish church.

While this periodization is in many ways derived from key historical events, it is also in no small part a result of the variable nature of our surviving evidence. Some periods are extremely rich in source material, while others are relatively lacking. Contemporary written sources, for instance, are completely absent for the Anglo-Saxon migration period of the fifth to sixth centuries. As a result, it is archaeologists who have undertaken the vast majority of research on this period and its religious rituals. Further complicating matters is the archaeological convention that divides the Anglo-Saxon period into three chronological phases (Early, 450–650; Middle, 650–850; Late, 850–1066), which overlap with, but are slightly different from, those defined by historians and discussed above.

Recent interdisciplinary research has begun to break down the walls of periodization and increasingly suggests a greater continuity of ritual landscape than our written sources have led us to believe. Archaeologists have established, for instance, that early Anglo-Saxons often reused prehistoric barrows as locations for their own funeral ceremonies and
repurposed such monuments as central places or sites of assembly.⁶ The Old English word Þing, in fact, originally referred to an assembly—evidenced in the place-names of open-air sites like Thingley (“assembly clearing/wood”) and Finedon (“valley assembly”)—suggesting that ritual landscapes and “things” of the past may not have been as distinct to an Anglo-Saxon speaker as they are to us.⁷ Recent publications on Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical history have also stressed the continued importance to Christian practices of ritual procession and periodic assembly not just at churches, but also at the same sorts of hills, valleys, and other open-air sites that had long been traditionally significant features of the landscape.⁸ This paper employs digital mapping techniques to plot disparate sites of ritual significance across the Anglo-Saxon period against the long-term influences of the underlying topography and hydrology that helped to shape communities across generations.

Although the temporal and spatial remit of this article is limited, we believe that some of the issues it raises may have a wider relevance. In other contexts, both the bounds of social groups and the location of their meeting places and ritual sites may have been similarly structured and shaped by raw topographic form: approaches to the past which emphasize the supremacy and autonomy of human agency and “choice” in these matters may fail to capture the full complexity of the past. The landscape has itself been an actor in human affairs, and many patterns in the past are difficult to understand without considering its influence.

Methodology

Using traditional methods, religious practices and ritual landscapes of different eras are often studied in isolation, and frameworks from one discipline that seem to make sense of one set of data are often not tested against those from a period perceived to be fundamentally different. One of the great benefits of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping software is its ability to combine numerous datasets, linked only by their spatial coordinates, into a single visualization, allowing disparate sources of evidence to reveal new patterns and connections. GIS was originally developed as a tool for quantitative analysis and struggled to gain a following among historians and humanists, whose sources tend to involve ambiguities and uncertainties difficult for a computer to visualize or reconcile.⁹ Advocates of the rapidly developing field of spatial humanities, however, argue that GIS has matured to the point where digital and “deep” maps can further the goals of theoretically informed scholarship by combining multiple stories and perspectives into dynamic representations of geographic space as lived and experienced place.¹⁰ GIS can allow historians in particular to think of their data in terms of the physical environment, since it is all too easy to forget the profound influence that
topography, soils, and access to water exerted on patterns of communication and movement in the pre-industrial world.\textsuperscript{11}

For this analysis, we have constructed an interactive, web-based GIS combining numerous background datasets on the physical environment (elevation and rivers based on modern values, reconstructed areas of marsh and fen in the Anglo-Saxon period), with cultural and later administrative features (the Roman road network, modern county and parish boundary lines). From the elevations we also derived a map of major drainage basins and their watershed boundaries. (Details of each layer and its sources are available in the interactive map linked from each figure and accessible at go.carleton.edu/fragments6_mason_williamson, where these figures can be zoomed, panned, and interrogated in detail.) Against these contexts, we plotted the locations of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries from all the excavations recorded by Historic Environment Record offices for the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, and the locations of all known parish churches of medieval or earlier date. Finally, we identified those churches which were most likely to have been early medieval minsters and added them as a separate layer. The resulting GIS has allowed us to interrogate the commonality of landscape setting between pagan and Christian ritual sites and to notice a number of recurrent spatial relationships, which suggest similar processes were at work structuring the location of key religious

\textbf{Figure 1:} Map of the primary physical and cultural layers in our analysis (go.carleton.edu/fragments6_mason_williamson).
locations across the Anglo-Saxon period. Before we can suggest the reasons why, however, we must first establish our underlying model of landscape history and situate the distribution of cemeteries and churches within it.

River and Wold

Archaeologists have long plotted distributions of settlements and other sites against maps showing patterns of soils and geology and have interpreted them accordingly. But here we argue that a more useful and instructive form of spatial analysis can be employed. In East Anglia, as in many parts of England, the soils within any locality vary in relation to topography, and in particular display a contrast between those found on valley sides, which are often well-drained, at least moderately fertile, and suitable for use as arable land, and those of the intervening uplands, which are often formed in poorly-draining clays or acid drift, or are thinner and less fertile. Most of the significant settlements in late prehistoric, Roman and early Saxon times were thus located in major valleys (often on well-drained gravel terraces) where there was also usually a good supply of water, with the main areas of arable land beside them. In contrast, the higher valley sides and the interfluves (the regions of higher land separating river valleys) were occupied by tracts of woodland and pasture: they were thus areas which were spatially as well as agriculturally marginal.

This broad distinction, between what is often termed “river” and “wold,” was developed by the local and regional historian Alan Everitt into a general model for understanding the development of early settlement in England.\(^\text{12}\) It was used and further elaborated by other members of the “Leicester School,” most notably Harold Fox and Charles Phythian-Adams.\(^\text{13}\) According to this model, the upland “wolds” were exploited in early medieval times—for grazing, pannage, wood and timber—by settlements that were often occupied on a temporary or seasonal basis. Fox in particular emphasized the importance of trees and bushes as a source of sustenance for livestock: we tend to think of sheep as animals that live off grass but they will happily consume woodland vegetation, being particularly partial to ash, ivy, and holly. In the denser stands of woodland, pigs would be pastured in autumn, especially on the acorns, beech mast, and nuts. As population rose in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period, these woodland pastures were gradually opened up for cultivation, and settlements within them became permanent and proliferated. However, such places often continued to be dependent upon, or tenurally subservient to, the “primary” settlements in the principal valleys and generally remained smaller in size. It was in the valleys, rather than the upland wolds, that towns primarily developed. The primacy of “valley” settlements in all periods was also accentuated by patterns of communication. Many rivers, especially in their lower courses, were navigable, and formed

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byways leading to the great highway of the sea; major land routeways often followed the lower ground just above the flood plain.

Everitt’s model, as well as being a useful way of conceptualizing the development of local and regional landscapes and economies, can also help in our understanding of past social and territorial history. As Phythian-Adams has emphasized, because the upland wolds between the valleys were areas of grazing and woodland, and at best only sparsely settled, they tended to constitute cut-off points in patterns of human interaction—to form, that is, the margins of social territories. Communities were focused on particular valleys, or valley systems, developing identities distinct from those dwelling on the other side of a watershed. Even when the interfluves came to be more intensively exploited, established patterns of social interaction tended to continue, not least because some of the valley settlements evolved into market centers, with important roles as the social and economic foci for wider communities. Over time, in other words, social territories tended to approximate to drainage basins.

In this context it is striking that “hundreds”—late Saxon fiscal and jurisdictional units intermediate between the local township or vill, and the “shire,” the major subdivisions of the late Saxon state—had boundaries which often followed the watersheds between major valleys (Figure 2). Although these units were imposed on the landscape by late Saxon administrators they often appear to have developed from earlier, more “organic” territories—early folk-territories or the tribute-areas which developed from these—and often preserved their names, which in turn on occasions reflected their river-based character: Blything Hundred in Suffolk takes its name from the Blythingas, the people of the river Blythe (Figure 2a); Loddon Hundred in Norfolk from the Lodnigas, “the people of the dirty river” (the Chet).

Like all conceptual models “river and wold” should not be pressed too far. Other aspects of the natural topography also structured the configuration of territories in the past. In particular, where rivers widened in their lower reaches and could not easily be crossed, and especially where they became tidal, they often served as barriers to regular intercourse and thus developed as significant territorial boundaries. This is clear in the behavior of hundred boundaries, which tend to follow watersheds between the higher reaches of rivers, but switch to the rivers themselves in their lower reaches.

The idea that early territorial organization, and the spatial organization of society more generally, can be usefully considered within the framework of rivers and watersheds, drainage basins and interfluves has been adopted by a number of local and landscape historians in England. But with a few notable exceptions, it has made little impact on archaeologists or historians of religion. In one such exception, Stephen Yeates has sug-
gested that the many folk-names in Gloucestershire that derive from river names indicate not only a group identity focused on a local drainage basin, but a consistent significance of the Severn River—the main arterial drainage channel in the region—to the religious views of the people living in its valley from the Iron Age right through to the early medieval period. Such continuity from pagan to Christian times is also indicated closer to our area of study, in the valley of the Witham River south of Lincoln. The people living in its basin erected barrow burials and causeways across its waterlogged peat marsh from the Bronze Age through to the seventh century, when the earliest Christian clerics built churches and monastic foundations at the ends of the causeways, mirroring and extending the ancient ritual topography. Studies like these suggest that rivers and their drainage basins could continue to structure ritual performances across major historical and religious break points like those outlined at the start of this paper. In what follows, then, we examine the distribution of religious sites in East Anglia, both early and pagan (cremation and inhumation cemeteries from the fifth and sixth centuries) and Christian (minsters and parish churches), within this broad theoretical framework.
In the fifth and sixth centuries two forms of burial rite, inhumation and cremation, were practiced in East Anglia, as across most of eastern and northeastern England. The former rite involved placing the dead in the ground accompanied by a range of offerings and grave-goods which exhibited, in their styles, clear regional differences. The latter involved the placing of the ashes of the deceased, together with the remains of food-offerings and grave goods, in some kind of receptacle (generally a ceramic urn). Cremation appears to have declined in importance over time, and especially after the start of the seventh century. The predominantly inhumation cemeteries are generally later in date—few appear to have been in use before the mid sixth century—but clearly overlap with the cremation cemeteries in time. Although small cremation cemeteries, or cemeteries containing both cremations and inhumations, are known, many examples discovered in England cover extensive areas and contain large numbers of burials, and it is these large cemeteries which have attracted the most attention from archaeologists.

The size of some cremation cemeteries is remarkable. The Elsham Wold cemetery in Lincolnshire contained some 630 cremations, while Loveden Hill and the recently excavated cemetery at Cleatham in the same county turned up over 1,800 and 1,200 cremations respectively. In East Anglia, examples of large cremation cemeteries include those at Markshall and Caistor by Norwich, excavated by Myres and Green in the 1960s. Over a hundred cremations were excavated from Markshall, and over 700 from Caistor, accompanied in the latter case by over 60 inhumations. Spong Hill near North Elmham, excavated by Hills and others in the 1970s and 1980s, is the largest Anglo-Saxon cemetery yet discovered, containing at least 2,300 cremations and 57 inhumations (Figure 3). It is probable that these figures seriously underestimate the original size of these burial grounds, however, due to the partial nature of the excavations, partial destruction in the past, and earlier looting. Cleatham, for instance, likely contained over 1,500 urns originally, instead of the 1,204 recovered. Vast and completely excavated though Spong Hill appears to be, many of its cremations had evidently been removed long before the twentieth century. Many of the places where only a handful of urns have been recovered, then, may well represent the edge of, or remains of, much larger cemeteries.

In contrast, excavated inhumation cemeteries in the two counties, following the national pattern, tend on average to appear significantly smaller. The one excavated at Bergh Apton, for example, contained only 63 interments and, while not fully investigated, topographical circumstances suggest that it cannot have been more than twice this size. The one at Morningthorpe lies towards the larger end of the scale, with 365 excavated burials, and while again the full extent of the cemetery is
unclear, these were evidently much smaller burial grounds than Spong Hill. Considering pagan Saxon cemeteries in England as a whole, Arnold and others have suggested a connection between the mode of disposal and the distance which human remains were to be brought for burial: namely, that cremated remains were more easily transported. Mode of disposal, territory, and communication were thus intimately connected, an observation that has important implications for our understanding of the topographic context of the act of burial.

Firstly, unlike inhumation, which must occur relatively quickly after death if the body is to remain articulated in the grave, cremation can take place at some remove from final deposition, both spatially and temporally; once placed in an urn, remains could have been carried for some time and distance before their final burial in the cemetery. There are reasons to suspect this was the case, since for all the thousands of cremations that have been excavated there is very little evidence for the pyres on which they must have been burned. The strongest evidence of a funeral pyre comes from the mixed rite cemetery at Snape, in Eastern
Suffolk, where a deposit comprising charcoal and fragments of melted metal mixed with calcined bone was excavated. But this is very nearly the only known case. The massive cemetery at Spong Hill contained no definitive evidence of pyre locations, suggesting that all of the bodies were burned elsewhere. Detailed examination of the cremated bones and debris from excavated urns by Jacqueline McKinley suggest that pyres would have been composed of timber frames filled with brushwood and would have reached temperatures of 900 degrees Celsius, comparable to temperatures in modern crematoria. These fires must have been very large and resource intensive, and the lack of evidence for them at either cemetery or settlement sites is puzzling.

This lack of pyre evidence, in turn, implies that cremation urns may have been not only transported, but curated, that is, deliberately held for a period of time above ground. Ethno-historical parallels confirm such drawn-out practices in other societies, as the Iron Age Finns apparently waited as long as three years before burying the bones of their cremated dead. In Anglo-Saxon England, the best positive evidence for such curation comes from instances of multiple burial. At Spong Hill, for example, there were many instances where numerous urns were buried at the same time in a single pit, suggesting one of three possibilities: that the people died at the same time but were cremated and urned separately, that the pit was left open for some time and slowly filled with urns as more people died, or — what is most likely — that at least one person’s remains were kept above ground in an urn for some time before burial along with others. Spong Hill appears to have been organized into family plots, so these urns would probably have housed the bones of relatives who had gone before and were curated until they could be carried to join the ancestral ranks at the communal burying place.

There is thus an obvious theoretical connection between the larger size of these cemeteries, the dominant mode of disposal within them, and the extent of the territories they served. Several studies, most notably by Howard Williams, have posited that large cremation cemeteries functioned as “central places” for regional communities, which gathered at them to engage in trade and conduct political rites of social reproduction in addition to the burial rituals themselves. Loveden Hill, in particular, seems to have been linked by pathways traversing the upper valley of the River Witham to a number of surrounding settlements and potentially important stopping points on a processional route to the cemetery. These movements through the landscape would have been crucial to forming the sort of territorial group identities envisioned by the “river and wold” model outlined above.

But how extensive were the regional identities facilitated by these communal rituals? Attempts have been made to model the “catchment”
of some of the East Anglian cremation cemeteries, including Spong Hill, which suggest these nascent group identities could be expansive indeed. Even at the time of Domesday the large parish of North Elmham, within which the cemetery lies, had a recorded population of only 132, representing perhaps a real population of a little over 700, assuming a modest “multiplier”—allowing for spouses, dependents and the like—of 5.5. At this time, moreover, the vill included most of the modern parish of Brisley and at least half of Bilney. The adjacent parish of Beetley was then a minor territory dependent on Elmham and contained a further eight individuals, or a real population of around 45. In 1086 North Elmham—covering in all some 30 square kilometers—thus had a population of around 750. A community this size—assuming an average life expectancy of around 30 years—could perhaps have filled the Spong cemetery during the two centuries of its use. But population levels were unquestionably lower in the district in the early Saxon period, to judge from the relative paucity of early Saxon compared with late Saxon settlements recovered by field surveys in the region. So we might assume it served a territory at least twice this magnitude, perhaps more if we assume large losses of urns before excavation. The cemetery, therefore, may well have served a significant portion of the upper Wensum river valley, making a critical contribution to the identity of the group which periodically gathered there to bury its dead.

Church Organization: 
Mapping Missions, Monasteries, and Minsters

Unlike cremation cemeteries, whose origins and ritual practices are entirely undocumented, our understanding of the establishment and organization of the English church comes from a variety of sources—textual, material and linguistic—although here too the picture is far from clear. What follows is our attempt to identify the locations of the earliest recorded Christian foundations—the mission stations, monasteries, and minsters of the early church—which we have coded with varying degrees of certainty on the GIS maps: red for certain minsters, green for probable minsters or mother houses, and blue for known early monastic sites that possibly developed into minsters (Figure 4). We begin with the last category, which predates the others.

Missions

The kingdom of the East Angles, which corresponds broadly to the modern counties of Norfolk and Suffolk (together with parts of Cambridgeshire to the west), was first evangelized in the early seventh century under King Sigeberht. In c.630 Bishop Felix, a Burgundian by birth, came from Kent
and established the first bishopric at a place called Dommoc; a little later, in c.633, the Irish missionary Fursa arrived and established a monastery at Cnobheresburgh. Sigeberht was succeeded by another saintly king, his son Anna, who continued his father’s work of conversion, further endowing the monastery at Cnobheresburgh and establishing others. In 653 the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (but not Bede) records that “Botolph began to build a monastery at Icanhoh.”

There is general agreement that the latter monastery was at Iken, a short distance to the northeast of the principal seat of the first royal family of the kingdom of the East Angles, the Wuffingas, at Rendlesham. The isolated church here, dedicated appropriately to Saint Botolph, stands on a virtual island, prominently positioned overlooking the estuary of the river Alde, a classic site for an early monastery (Figure 4a [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4a]). In 1972 the base of a late ninth-century cross was discovered, built into the medieval church tower, and subsequent excavations revealed evidence of middle Saxon activity on the site, confirming its likely monastic status. But much academic ink has been spilled over the precise location of Dommoc. Some historians still argue that it was at...
Dunwich, later a major city (but now largely eroded by the sea) on the coast some 30 kilometers north of Iken. But most now agree that it was within the old Roman Saxon Shore fort at Walton, at the mouth of the river Deben—a site now completely destroyed by coastal erosion. The parish church of Walton is dedicated to Saint Felix, and that parish appears to have been carved out of the adjacent one of Felixstowe, “Felix’s enclosure or monastery.” The site of Cnobheresburgh—where, according to Bede, the Irish missionary Fursa was invited to establish a monastery by Sigeberht—also remains contentious. Bede describes how:

The monastery was pleasantly situated close to woods and the sea, in a Roman camp which is called in English Cnobheresburg, that is, the city of Cnobber. The king of that realm, Anna, and his nobles afterwards endowed it with still finer buildings and gifts.

The word here translated “Roman camp” is the Latin castrum, “fortified place,” and the site is normally identified with Burgh Castle, the Roman Saxon Shore fort near Great Yarmouth in the far north of the county (it is now in Norfolk). But the use of the term urbs, here translated simply as “city,” as well as the fact that the name incorporates the English term burh, has suggested to some that the place was not an obvious Roman site, for which Bede would have been more likely to use the term “civitas.” Some historians have thus suggested that, rather than being at Burgh Castle, the monastery was in fact at the place called Burgh in southeast Suffolk, some six kilometers to the west of Rendlesham, where a church dedicated to Saint Botolph lies within an Iron Age enclosure containing evidence for Roman occupation. This said, it is probable that some kind of early missionary station was established at Burgh Castle, to judge from the character of the archaeological evidence excavated here. Both locations are therefore included as “missionary” sites on our map, coded blue.

Other probable early missionary sites include Babingley in northwest Norfolk, where the isolated church (the only example in Norfolk to be dedicated to Saint Felix) is associated with a large middle Saxon settlement, the metal-detecting finds from which—including a middle Saxon copper alloy reliquary and styli—suggest a possible monastic character for the site. Lastly, William of Malmesbury relates a tradition that Felix also founded a church at Reedham in east Norfolk, a story repeated in the Liber Eliensis and in the Liber Albus of Bury St. Edmunds: the latter also describes how an inscription in the church at nearby Loddon recorded how “Felix made the church at Loddon and the church at Reedham and the holy church at Babingeley.”
Minsters & Monasteries

In East Anglia—as in the other kingdoms—relatively few churches appear to have existed following initial evangelization in the course of the seventh century. These are generally referred to by modern historians as minsters: each served an extensive parochia, usually with a team of priests. In the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, as population grew and secular territories fragmented into a pattern of smaller estates, the new proprietors—local lords—erected private churches, which developed into parish churches. These were intended to serve the owner and his family, and also the spiritual needs of the inhabitants of his estate. “Minster,” while in wide use, is a difficult term, its meaning and development contested by modern scholars. Debate has focused especially on the nature and extent of the distinction between inward-looking monastic communities following some kind of ordered life—living, that is, according to the Rule of Saint Benedict or otherwise—and the “team ministeries” represented by early minsters. The fact that the former could probably evolve over time into the latter makes such debates especially intractable.

In the more densely-settled areas of England the building of local churches—the emergence of the parish system—was well advanced by the time of Domesday. The earlier pattern of minster parochiae can, however, sometimes be reconstructed through the residual obligations owed by “daughter” to “mother” churches, certain kinds of dedication or endowment, references in wills and charters, and characteristic features of construction and location. Parochiae appear to have disappeared at a particularly early date from East Anglia, possibly because of the effects of the Viking incursions of the ninth century, more probably a reflection of the region’s wealth, and the density of its population, during the later Saxon period.

As a consequence, we are able to map only a relatively small proportion of the “mother churches” that existed in the eighth or ninth centuries, and many of these fall into the “possible” rather than the “probable” column. Some have been identified on the basis of early documentary references, such as North Elmham, Hoxne or Sudbury; others because they have particularly large endowments recorded in Domesday, such as St Mary’s in Thetford, with 712 acres of land; others on the basis of the extent and configuration of modern parishes. A further complication is that the known or suspected minsters we have mapped were not necessarily all of the same age or origins, as the system doubtless evolved over time. While some were established, perhaps quite late in the Saxon period, at or close to major royal estate centers, others evidently developed from early monastic sites that were sometimes placed in more liminal locations.

The minster at Dickleburgh in south Norfolk is an interesting example of the latter (Figure 4b [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4b]). It is referred
to in a charter from the 1040s by which land was left by Osulf and Leofrun to the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds for the minster at Dickeburgh, on condition that:

Four priests should sing, two after Osulf’s day, and two after Leofrun’s day, and each week [they are] to sing twelve masses. And we desire that whosoever is abbot of St Edmunds Bury should be the guardian of the minsters, and their priests must never transfer or surrender them to themselves or their kin.46

At the time of Domesday the manor of Dickeburgh was still held by two priests, and as late as 1454 the church was divided into four separate portions, each served by a different rector who took the services in turn: the Portion in the Marsh, the Portion in the Field, Long Moor Portion, and Sea Mere Portion.47 The first element of the place-name is the personal name, “Dicel” unrecorded in Old English but almost certainly from Dicuill or Dicul, the name of the Irish priest who was, according to Bede, Fursa’s companion at Cnobheresburgh, and who was left in charge of the community there, together with the priest Goban, when Fursa returned to the life of a hermit.48 On Figure 4 we have mapped known early monastic sites which do not appear to have developed into true minsters separately from places like Dickeburgh which did do, and which is simply mapped with the broad population of other certain, or probable, minster sites.

The second element of Dickeburgh is burh, which appears in Bury St. Edmunds (originally Beredicsworth), Sudbury, and Blythburgh, as well as in the names of the early monastic sites of Burgh in Suffolk and Burgh Castle. The element is usually translated as “fort” but it also has the connotation, as here, of monastic enclosure. Recognition of the importance of such names, combined with an examination of location, may help in the identification of possible further minster sites. The name of Happisburgh on the northeast coast of Norfolk, for example, is usually translated as “the fort of Haep,” an individual—real or mythical—who also lent his name to the territory from which the hundred of Happen (“the people of Haep”) developed. But an alternative interpretation is suggested by the parallel of Blythburgh in Suffolk, discussed above, which likewise lies next to the coast, within the hundred of Blything, and was undoubtedly the site of an early minster. It is noteworthy that several of the places identified by Pestell, Scarfe, and other historians as possible or probable early religious sites include in their names the element “stow,” usually translated as “a place of assembly; a holy place”; sometimes evolving into “stoke” (although this is more usually derived from the word stoc, a homestead). Examples include Stow Bardolph, Stow Bedon, Stowmarket, Stoke by Nayand, and Stoke by Clare. Walton Castle, the Roman Saxon Shore fort which is the most likely candidate for Felix’s Cnobheresburgh, lies within the parish of Walton, but this has clearly been cut out of the larger parish of Felixstowe. The names of some early minsters and monasteries, then,
suggest that these sites served similar functions of assembly for their local communities as cremation cemeteries had for earlier generations.

Geographies of Buildings and Burials

Given that the sites we have mapped are identified with varying degrees of certainty; have varied origins; may not all be contemporary; and represent one part of a larger population; then it might be expected that their location, especially in terms of the “river and wold” model, might not display very strong patterning. Yet a number of distinct spatial relationships can be recognized. First, there is a striking correlation between the sites of early monasteries—most of which never became important mother churches—and the coast. Iken, Burgh Castle, Reedham, Babingley, and Walton Castle all lie on the coast, or beside estuaries or former estuaries (Figure 4c [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4c]). Second, “true” minsters, while scattered across the interior of the former kingdom, are clearly found in “river” rather than “wold” locations—close to major watercourses (Figure 4d [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4d]). This pattern has already been noted, in fact, by Norman Scarfe in the case of Suffolk examples: “[I]n general the distribution of minsters seems to be related to the principal rivers, with strings lining the Waveney, Gipping and Stour valleys.” 49 Examples do occur beside minor watercourses, particularly in Norfolk, but this tends to be in circumstances where the distance between major river valleys is considerable, as, for example, in the case of Dickleburgh, which sits at the intersection of a tributary of the upper Waveney and the Roman road between Colchester and Norwich (Figure 4b [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4b]). It is particularly noteworthy that all of the minster sites avoid the central watersheds running north to south across Norfolk and east to west across north Suffolk, with none sited within 4 kilometers of a watershed (Figure 4 [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig4]).

To test the relationship between minsters and river valleys empirically, we generated distance buffers from the modern river locations at 200 meter intervals for the entire study area. 50 Of the 35 certain, probable, and possible early monastic locations we identified, 23 lie within 1,000 meters of a modern river’s course, with the vast majority of those (20 out of 23) 400 meters or less from the water (Figure 5 [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig5]). A slightly higher number of probable sites lie within 200 meters than certain sites, but overall the two categories are broadly comparable. Even the early missionary sites are closer to water than this chart suggests, since estuaries at river mouths are not modeled as rivers on our map. This artificially excludes sites like Iken, which most people would agree is close by the bank of the river.

Beyond mere distance, however, other topographic patterns relating to river systems can perhaps be discerned. A surprising number of minsters
or probable minsters stand close to the confluence of one or more water courses—where two rivers join, or where a river is joined by a significant stream (Figure 5a [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig5a]). North Elmham, for example, lies within 1.4 kilometers of the confluence of the two arms of the river Wensum, and only c.1.7 kilometers north of the point where one of the latter is joined by the Blackwater; the church at Hoxne stands within a kilometer of the confluence of both the Cold Brook and the Dove, and the Dove and the Waveney; that at Bury St. Edmunds at the point where the river Linnet meets the Lark; the church at Stowmarket, just above where the Rattlesden River meets the Gipping; St Mary at Thetford, less than a hundred meters from the confluence of the Thet and the Little Ouse; Sudbury a kilometer from the meeting of the Stour and the Belchamp Brook; Loddon, Wymondham, and the possible minster at Long Melford all lie near to where less significant streams join rivers. Others, like Burnham Overy and Blythburgh, occupy locations—similar to those of the “missionary” sites—where streams or rivers meet the sea, or at former estuaries. Stow Bardolph and West Dereham, in the west of Norfolk, occupy sites on the margins of the marshy Fenland, crossed in middle Saxon times by

Figure 5: Minster and cemetery distances from rivers, in 200 meter bands up to 1 kilometer (go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig5).
a maze of natural waterways (their pattern much altered by later drainage) which gave access, via the Wash, to the North Sea (a location shared by the excavated site at Brandon in Suffolk, for which a monastic role has been suggested). These recurrent relationships—to which there are admittedly a number of exceptions, including South Elmham—are most easily noticed when sites are systematically mapped using GIS.

When compared to the distribution of Anglo-Saxon cemetery sites, a wider set of spatial relationships becomes apparent, suggesting the kind of long-term links between people and the ritual landscapes that are the focus of this paper. Superficially, there is an interesting parallel here, between the varying size and character of early Saxon cemeteries, and the spatial organization of Christianity, as this developed in the course of the middle and later Saxon period. Just as minsters served a larger area than parish churches and were established at an earlier date, so were cremation cemeteries not only in general earlier than those in which the dominant rite was inhumation, but they also provided a central burial ground for more extensive territories. However, although the large size of cremation or cremation-dominated cemeteries has often been emphasized by archaeologists, it is clear that not all covered such extensive areas: the contrast in this respect between cremation and inhumation grounds is easily exaggerated. Not all small concentrations of cremation urns represent the edges of, or remains of, cemeteries like Spong Hill or Markshall. Some, such as the handful of urns placed in a Bronze Age barrow at Risby, are likely to represent the totality of the burials in a particular place. Given that it is unclear which finds of small numbers of cremation urns (or discoveries by metal detectorists of burnt grave goods) represent large cemeteries of the Markshall type, and which represent much smaller burial grounds, we have focused our analysis on those from which more than ten urns have been recovered. In this sense, our dataset is (of necessity) as problematic as that of minsters previously discussed, and it is thus remarkable that there are a number of marked similarities between the two in terms of their location.

Performing the same distance analysis from the river network on the cemetery data, we find that some 70 percent of all the cemeteries identified (141 of 197) were located within 1 kilometer of the modern river system, with the majority of those falling within 400 meters of a water source (Figure 5b [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig5b]). While the small and incomplete nature of our dataset would make statistical analysis problematic, Mary Chester-Kadwell’s study of the landscape of Norfolk found that early Anglo-Saxon sites clustered in a similar range from the nearest river, “markedly closer to water than if they followed the underlying land distribution.” In our study, the overwhelming majority of large cremation sites, in particular, are in coastal/estuarine locations.
(like Sutton Hoo, Snape, Great Yarmouth, North Runcton, Tottenhill) or in significant river valleys. The data follow a broadly similar distribution to the minster locations, with a significant peak between 200 and 400 meters from water. However, there are a number of interesting patterns to note in the distinctions between categories of cemetery site. First, there is a clear distinction between proper cemeteries and those locations where smaller numbers of cremations or inhumations have been recovered; sites with up to 3 inhumations follow a U-shaped curve with peaks at 200 and 800 meters from rivers. These burials of one or two individuals seem to be isolated in more than one sense of the term. Second, it is worth noting how few of the total number of cemeteries comprise isolated cremations: just 2 percent of the total corpus. Cremation was indeed a much more communal rite in this region than inhumation. Third, it is clear that inhumation cemeteries (both large and small) account for a much larger percentage of the overall data, and are much more widely spread, extending out onto “wold” locations between river valleys—although not, as noted for minsters, onto the major interfluves between the drainage basins of the principal rivers. This suggests that the major watershed boundaries may have been more significant, and for longer, than the smaller basins for the formation of emergent regional identities. In spatial terms, then, large cremation cemeteries behave broadly like minsters; other pagan burials, more like parish churches.

This becomes especially clear when we compare stacked area distance graphs of the minsters with only the large urnfields—those with 10 or more cremations, including sites known only through metal detecting, which we assume would have held more than 10 burials (Figure 6 [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig6]). The overall shape of the curves is nearly identical, suggesting that Christian minsters shared more with cremation cemeteries, in this one geographic criterion at least, than they did with the inhumation cemeteries with which they are much more regularly associated in scholarship on England’s early religious history.

What is even more striking, however, is the way in which the large urnfields—like minsters—exhibit a clear tendency to cluster close to points where watercourses meet (Figure 6a [go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig6a]). Spong Hill, for example, lies less than a kilometer from the confluence of the Blackwater and the Waveney, and Roostinghall Quarry cemetery less than half a kilometer from this same point. Caistor and Markshall both lie within two kilometers of the point where the Tas joins the Yare; Drayton just over two from the junction of the Tud and the Yare, and closer to the actual meeting of their valleys. More tenuously, the cemetery at Eye occupies a site 2.4 kilometers from the confluence of the Gold Brook and the Dove, and 3.2 from the confluence of the Dove and the Waveney. Others occupy similar locations with respect to major rivers and water-
courses with a more local significance: Lackford lies 0.4 kilometers from the confluence of the Cavenham Brook and the River Lark; Pensthorpe, c.0.8 kilometers from the meeting of the Wensum and the Washpits Brook; and both Great Walsingham and Hargham less than a kilometer from the confluence of minor, unnamed streams with the rivers Stiffkey and the Thet respectively.

**Conclusion: Explaining Distributions**

Considered within the context of Everitt’s “river and wold” model, the distribution of early cremation cemeteries and middle Saxon minsters thus displays some remarkable similarities. Not only are both classes of site generally associated, perhaps unsurprisingly, with “river” rather than “wold” locations, including in the former category coastal and estuarine situations. They also both exhibit a marked, although admittedly not universal, tendency to cluster near the confluence of significant watercourses. Their affiliation with rivers is, we might note, much more marked than any association with Roman roads. This, in particular, constitutes powerful support for the model, which assumes that the key zones of everyday

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Figure 6: Large cremation cemeteries (10+) and minsters distance from rivers (go.carleton.edu/fragments6_fig6).
movement and interaction were within river valleys; the point where two valleys meet would thus make an ideal place for people to habitually gather. The precise character of such places, however, remains uncertain. They might be purely religious and ceremonial in character; might primarily function as sites of tribal assembly; or as seats of elite power. There are, accordingly, a number of ways to interpret the observed similarities in the location of the two types of site.

One approach would be to see them as evidence of direct continuity of ritual development, with cemeteries in some sense “evolving into” minsters, following Christianization. In this context we might usefully draw attention to the fact that, in a number of cases, minster sites and cremation cemeteries occur in remarkably close proximity, within 3 kilometers in the cases of Walsingham, Spong/North Elmham, and Eye/Hoxne: given the partial nature of the data sets we are comparing, which we have already emphasized, these examples might well represent the tip of a rather larger iceberg. Of particular note is that North Elmham was the most important middle Saxon church in northern East Anglia—the seat of the bishopric established around 680 to serve the northern part of the East Anglian kingdom—while Spong Hill is, to date, the largest known cremation cemetery in the whole of the region. It is hard indeed to see the proximity of these two “primary” sites as entirely coincidental.

The location of such ceremominal sites, we might speculate, arose in part from the way people moved through the landscape, building up powerful resonances through generations of use of particular locales as ritual spaces and meeting places. Manuel Fernández-Götz’s recent work on Iron Age identity formation has stressed the primarily ritual function of those central places in Gaul that later became oppida and the centers of territorial organization for historical sub-ethnic groups; studies of Anglo-Saxon territorial organization increasingly point in a similar direction. From the other end of our period, there is also an emerging consensus that prior to the reorganizations of English religious and secular life that replaced minsters with regular monasteries and local parish churches in the tenth and eleventh centuries, there was a widespread culture of open-air ritual and periodic assembly at hills, boundaries, confluences, and other prominent and traditionally significant features of the landscape.

We can, perhaps, catch a last glimpse of how both landscapes and objects were vital components of traditional communal religious activities in a tenth-century description of a Rogationtide ceremony, preserved in one of the Vercelli Homilies. In this text, the people are enjoined to observe Rogation Days not only with song, fasting, prayer, and attendance at church, but with a “fitting procession” during which “we must carry our relics around our land, the . . . cross of Christ . . . Likewise we must carry the books which are called ‘Gospel.’ . . . Also we must carry other
holy relics that are the remains of holy men, of their hair or parts of their body or clothing, and with all these holy things we must go humbly around our land in these holy days. 56

In the tenth century, then, we have a clear written record that religious rituals were often tied to specific landscapes and that holy “things” included not just books and crosses, but human remains. Christian saints were thought to transcend the divide between the earth and the Heavens by choosing to remain present in the world at their gravesites and in their relics. 57 Indeed, the very materiality of the cult of saints is one of its defining characteristics. 58 Saints cults are well attested in England from the earliest days of the seventh-century conversions, and they often centered on the minsters where the relics of sainted founders were housed. In addition to their role as centers of church services, then, these places would have acted as magnets attracting pilgrims from the surrounding region who came to venerate the saints’ material remains and attend communal celebrations on their feast days. As modern studies of pilgrimage suggest, the journey through the landscape to the church location would likely have formed as significant an element of the religious experience as the ritual observances performed at the end of the journey. 59 In light of the drawn-out nature of cremation practices, which likely involved a similar combination of long-distance travel, public ceremony, and engagement with the physical remains of the dead, we could be seeing the spatial pattern of a persistent style of religious ritual, one firmly rooted in the local landscape of rivers and wolds.

There are, however, alternative approaches. One would consider these two categories of religious site as a kind of surrogate for social and political centers: that is, as part of central zones or areas which featured both secular and religious occupation. It is this sort of center that is, perhaps, now emerging through the recent investigations of the Wuffingas’ “palace” at Rendlesham, 60 the area around which appears to have retained its social and political importance right through the early and into the middle Saxon period. In such a view, similarities in distribution and location would arise from a broad degree of continuity in the configuration of social and political territories (and thus of their central places), from the fifth to the eighth centuries, rather than primarily from any continuity of religious or ceremonial significance. A stability in the social organization of space need not imply an equal degree of stability in structures of power, of course. If, as many writers have suggested, Anglo-Saxon society grew more hierarchical in character through the late sixth and seventh centuries, with the emergence of permanent elites and the progressive amalgamation of adjacent territories, early tribal foci may have gradually developed into sites of lordly or royal power without any necessary disruption of the essential patterns of social geography.

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A third explanation, while similarly accepting the “surrogate” status of the two kinds of sites, would see a much greater degree of fluidity in social-spatial structures over the early and middle Saxon periods. In this view, broad similarities in the location of cemeteries and minsters would arise from the repeated restructuring of secular territories along similar lines, within largely unchanging topographic frameworks. Across this entire period, that is, there would be a tendency for important places, to which people had to travel regularly, to be located in the same kinds of places—in major valleys, and especially at the confluences of valleys. Most plausibly of all, perhaps, the observed patterning is a consequence of all these factors, and of all these possible patterns of development.

Such arguments are not, it should be emphasized, to assert the absolute primacy of environmental determinants in the spatial arrangement of human affairs. Topography does no more (and no less) than provide a contextual frame for patterns of social interaction. Yet at the same time, these patterns suggest that the primacy of particular places or areas within the landscape did not derive from the arbitrary, top-down decisions of secular “great men,” or the prescriptions of church officials. They imply instead that it arose organically, through patterns of social interaction, shaped by landscape. Whatever precise weight we give to the various interpretations presented above, the use of models from other disciplines in the interpretation of archaeological data—in this case, landscape history, local and regional history, and the digital methods of the spatial humanities—clearly opens up new ways of thinking about landscape and territory in England, and more widely, in the early middle ages.

Notes


22. The eighteenth-century historian Francis Blomefield described how laborers removed thirty urns in 1711, and that this encouraged “other persons to make further trial, who found several near to one another. One person employed in the search is said to have taken up about 120.” Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, 10 vols. (London, 1805).


51. Andrew Tester et al., *Staunch Meadow, Brandon, Suffolk: A High Status Middle Saxon Settlement on the Fen Edge*, East Anglian Archaeology 151 (Bury St. Edmunds, 2014).

52. Chester-Kadwell, *Early Anglo-Saxon Communities in the Landscape of Norfolk*, 95. See also figures 7.2-5, pages 96 and 97.


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