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The Dark Ages

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Our views on the period between the end of the Roman administration and the establishment of the Kingdom of England have undergone an extreme shift in the period since the founding of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. The view prevalent then, and probably up to the 1960s, was essentially historical and primarily based around Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Bede, following the British writer Gildas and his own Northumbrian knowledge, painted a picture of the Britons, abandoned by the Roman army, being attacked by the Picts and Scots. To counter this, the surviving Britons employed Anglo-Saxons as mercenaries to defend them. The mercenaries saw that there was more to be gained by attacking the Britons and drove them by fire and slaughter into the west. The Anglo-Saxon period began in 447AD. The Saxons were then converted to Christianity by Augustine and settled into kingdoms which gradually coalesced into England (mostly by conquest and with a little complication from Viking armies in the ninth century). The period came to a neat, if unfortunate, end in September 1066.

Today, in contrast, the emphasis has more to do with continuity than change. This is, in part, an overall shift in the way that archaeologists see the motivating force behind cultural change and also a healthy scepticism when examining the historical sources. These have led to the realisation that we actually know very little about the period in question and an increase in the sophistication with which it is studied. Similarly the increasing study of the Roman period from a non-military point of view has shown that the picture of the army sailing away in 410 is equally false. Late-Roman Britain is still poorly understood but this is changing (eg Esmonde Cleary 1989).

So what changed in Somerset in the years around 400? Probably not a lot. Most people were farming – either on large estates in the east of the county or on smaller holdings to the west. As Frances Griffith's work shows (this volume, see for example Figure 2.3 on page 10), large numbers of small defended enclosures are being discovered by aerial photography and, by analogy with similar sites elsewhere in western Britain these are likely to represent long-lived family farms from the late prehistoric through the Roman period and beyond (Williams 1988; Williams and Mytum 1998). A new project to study these on (and below) the ground of the southern Quantocks will be starting next year, directed by Keith Wilkinson from King Alfred's College, Winchester. In the east the villas and towns were still occupied, although perhaps less intensively than in their heyday.

One of the great problems of archaeology is that it is only really able to see change as the introduction of *new* things and this causes great problems in this period. The end of imperial control would have produced a huge economic change, principally because of the cessation of money to pay the army and civil service. The large industries (or at least the pottery industry – the one archaeologists can see most clearly) seem to have been stagnating for several decades and cease production at around this time. Thus, the two artefacts (coins and pots) that have provided chronology within the Roman period are not available for study. That is not to say that

people stopped using them but that no change is visible in the archaeological record. How could we tell if Ilchester was still occupied in 450 if the only pottery in use looked the same as that of 50 or 100 years earlier?

The work carried out by Peter Leach and others at Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet (Leach 1990; Leach and Evans 2001) has suggested that here the small town did continue into the fifth century. Whether the famous amulet is genuine or not, the presence of cemeteries of east-west burials late in the sequence would suggest the presence of one new feature of the late and post Roman period – Christianity. We do not know what was happening in Ilchester but work in towns such as St Albans (Frere 1983) and Wroxeter (Barker *et al.* 1997) has shown that they were continuing well after 400 but in ways that are extremely difficult to see without good luck and careful, extensive excavations. In Bath there are questions about its urban nature during the Roman period which add complications to its post-Roman evidence (Bob Sydes pers comm).

Figure 13.1: *Sherds of imported Mediterranean pottery found at Carhampton. Scale 5cm.*

The one new artefact type that we have is small amounts of pottery imported from the Mediterranean. The trouble is that this material is so rare that its absence is not a good indicator of lack of occupation in the fifth and sixth centuries. We are also uncertain of the mechanism by which it arrived in Britain and was then distributed. Originally it was thought to have been imported for church use but its presence on high status secular sites now suggests otherwise. Even when it is found it often poses more questions than it answers. The recent discovery of B ware amphora sherds at Carhampton by Charles and Nancy Hollinrake (McCrone 1995) is an example: the location (at the foot of a hill by a river) of this suggests that this is not a high status site but was it a monastic site? The presence of two later chapels supports this, and parallels can be drawn with the location of Whithorn where Hill (1997, 13-14) suggests that 5th-century monasteries in Galloway were located in obscure "hidden" positions a short distance from the local political centres. In the case of Carhampton the obvious high status site is Dunster, although there is little evidence for this at the site. However, the main factor in the discovery of the importance of the site at Carhampton is likely to have been that it was excavated by someone who was looking for this material. Small body sherds can look very like post-medieval tile...

The other key site that has (re)emerged in recent years is Cheddar. The area of the palaces, excavated by Philip Rahtz with a keen eye for continuity (Rahtz 1979), has continued to provide tantalising evidence of this. To the east, further work by Hirst and Rahtz (1973) located a complex sequence of roads and buildings and on the vicarage lawn they investigated a "villa" seen on aerial photographs (Rahtz 1979, plate I). The finding of wall plaster and other material suggested supported the identification of the villa but the parchmarks are worryingly aligned on the present vicarage and many appear to be recent garden features. There is clearly, however, a substantial Roman building in the area. To these can now be added an extensive area of Roman occupation to the south of the palaces – identified by geophysics and limited excavation (Figure 13.2 on the facing page). So far only one stone building has been located, of "aisled barn" type, but spreads of metalling may represent the floors of wooden structures and there are clearly enclosures similar to those seen within the Roman town of Shepton Mallet (Leach and Evans 2001).

We may be looking at more of a small town rather than a villa here. This then begs the question – why were the palaces built on a greenfield site at the edge of a Roman settlement abandoned centuries earlier. If it was abandoned... a recent 5th-century radiocarbon date (Hollinrake pers comm) from a field boundary to the north of the palaces adds to the growing evidence of continuity, of Cheddar as an important focus of settlement from the Roman period to the present day.

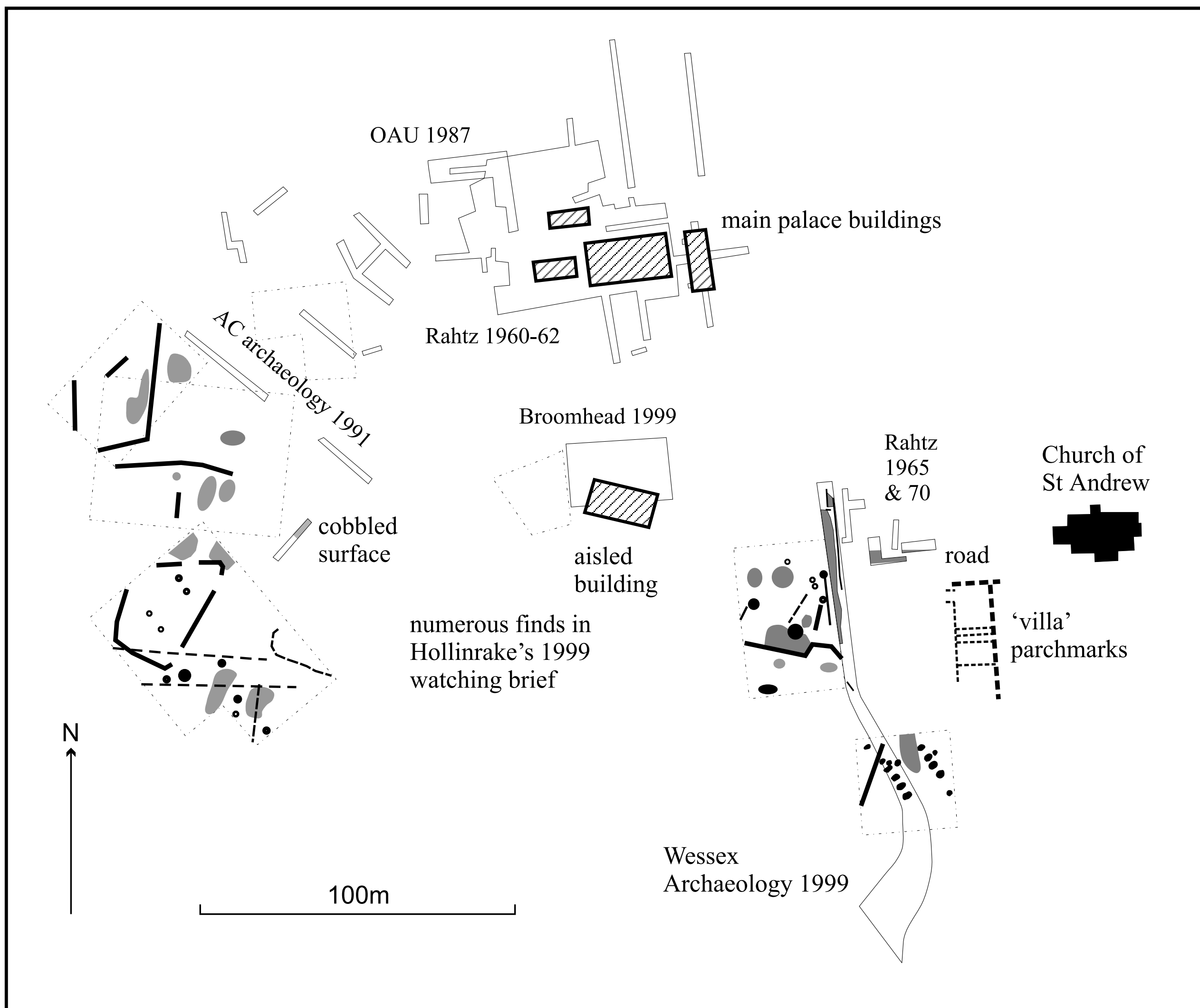

Figure 13.2: *Excavations (solid lines) and geophysical surveys (broken lines) in the area of the Kings of Wessex School, Cheddar. Extensive areas to the south have also been surveyed with largely negative results. Information from Somerset SMR.*

Wells is another key site where continuous settlement is likely. Warwick Rodwell's excavations (Rodwell 2001) suggested a late Roman focus for the origins of what became the cathedral. Ongoing work in the area of the Bishops' palace and springs may provide more information.

South Cadbury remains the most important site that we know of in Somerset in this period. This probably reflects its position at the southern end of Selwood (which remained a significant boundary into the Late Saxon period) overlooking the route now known as the A303. It is also close to the important Christian site at Sherborne and the Roman administrative centre at Ilchester. The sheer scale of the defensive work at Cadbury implies strong political control over a wide area, presumably the successor territory to that of Ilchester (Alcock 1995).

Turning to historical study, perhaps the biggest change has been to assess the early writers for what they can tell us about their own time rather than believing their historical tales. Rereading Gildas in this way, for instance, has enabled Nicholas Higham to suggest that Gildas may have been writing in Dorset (Higham 1991). However, wherever Gildas was writing in the mid-6th century, he was working in a society ruled over by kings and wholly Christian. Indeed the church had had time to become (in Gildas' view) corrupt. This approach to historical evidence is very different from sterile, circular arguments about subjects such as, for example, the loca-

tion of the Battle of Badon. Whilst knowing this would be instructive in terms of the political situation, our only real guide to its location is an assessment of the supposed political situation!

The church may be one of the few areas that are approachable by other than chance finds. As Hase (1994) has noted the appearance of the Late Saxon church is the same in both eastern and western Wessex which suggests that prior to the take-over the organisation of the British church was similar to that in the east. This would suggest that later minster sites may have earlier origins and that they should be sited near the centres of royal estates.

The Anglo-Saxons

So what of the Anglo-Saxons? The traditional date for the defeat of the British kingdoms in the region has been the battle of Dyrham in 577. Even if this date can be believed, (the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is extremely suspect in the fifth and sixth centuries, Yorke 1995) it is referring to activities to the north of Mendip and we have no indication of what followed – was it just a raid?

The first solid historical evidence suggests a date in the later 7th century which may support the *Chronicle* date (658) of the battle at *Peonnum*, presumed to be at Penselwood. Certainly there was a Saxon abbot at Exeter in c.680 and charter evidence from Glastonbury and Sherborne indicates Saxon royal patronage. Indeed it may be that these grants reflect former British property acquired by the king. The fact that the laws of Ine (688–726) show that Britons were recognised as normal, if second-class, citizens (rather than slaves) of Wessex suggests a (fairly) peaceful incorporation of Somerset into Wessex.

None of this is visible archaeologically. Whilst the presence of Mediterranean imports can date sites to the fifth and sixth centuries (when they are found) there is little comparable in the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries. This is clearly not because the county was uninhabited but must be due to a lack of survival of, or recognition of, any diagnostic material. There are a few "Saxon" burials and stray finds but most of these are antiquarian finds and poorly recorded. One of the few sites is Cannington cemetery where a sequence of radiocarbon dates is evidence for use from the Late Roman period through to the early medieval (Figure 1.1 on page 5; Rahtz *et al.* 2000). More recently, work by Exeter Archaeology on behalf of the Environment Agency, at the Baltmoor Wall between Athelney and Lyng, has recorded a bank which may be running around Athelney island and is sandwiched by calibrated radiocarbon dates of 445–663 below and 604–774 above. This clearly suggests that Athelney was an important place before Alfred.

None of the urban and royal centres that we know from documents have produced any archaeological evidence to speak of and Shapwick, the most intensively studied parish in Somerset (Gerrard this volume), has so far failed to produce any material that could be considered to date from this period (Gerrard pers comm). Of the four sites listed in the *Burghal Hidage*, Axbridge, Langport, Lyng and Watchet, only the site at Daws Castle, Watchet (McAvoy 1986), has has produced archaeological evidence. No artefactual evidence is known and the walls at Daws Castle were dated by radiocarbon.

Future directions

So, the Dark Ages remain pretty gloomy, and, in archaeological terms, perhaps more so in the later than the earlier centuries. The obvious approach to this gap in our knowledge is from either end. We must examine Roman sites with the question "when did the occupation *really* end?" in mind. Are the latest finds in the latest contexts or are there "undated" features which could suggest longer occupation (although Rahtz's story from Bath, this volume, provides a cautionary tale). We should, wherever possible, use scientific dating. The, oft-repeated, statement that radiocarbon dating is a waste of time in the Roman period is only true if the date really *is* in the Roman period. We should also consider "undated" features from all sites, in the absence of other evidence too many of these may be assumed to be prehistoric. The dates from Cheddar and Baltmoor Wall are examples.

We also need to target work. The opportunities for this are limited and the work at Wroxeter has shown that you can only identify timber buildings built on Roman rubble with large area excavations (Barker *et al.* 1997). The conditions need to be right – how much of the latest layers of Fosse Lane, Shepton Mallet have been ploughed away? What is machined away in the hurry to "get down to the real archaeology" (I suspect that at most sites the latest layers

(of whatever period) are removed before they are recognised or understood). Is there anywhere in Ilchester where medieval occupation has not disturbed the latest Roman deposits – or should we be looking in Northover?

At the end of the period, I suspect that landscape studies will continue to prove fruitful. Work by Mike Costen (1992c) and others has shown that large estates can be seen at places like Brent and Shapwick which become properties of Saxon monasteries. Similarly places with Roman origins that become royal properties (such as Cheddar) should also be examined carefully. The increase in small-scale excavation work, funded by development, in settlements should help to provide a background scatter of information.

In the wider context the historical sources need re-examining not as "history" but for the light they shed on landscape and settlement. And the questions raised by Baillie on possible catastrophic events (Rahtz this volume) need to be evaluated. It is possible that the evidence may lie in the Somerset peat, if suitable deposits can be found and sampled.

Figure 13.3: *The isolated church and manor site at Aller showing two enclosures in the fields in the foreground and a ring-ditch on the low hill behind (Photo: W Horner, Devon County Council (21/7/1995). Copyright reserved.)*

We also need to indulge in a little lateral thinking and question the obvious. Two examples will suffice. The first concerns Alfred who after defeating Guthrum at Edington (presumed to be the one in Wiltshire, judged on where the protagonists were based) converted him to Christianity and baptised him at Aller (Keynes and Lapidge 1983. Why Aller? Recent aerial photographs (Figure 13.3) have shown not only several ring-ditches (presumed to be ploughed-out, bronze-age barrows) but several enclosures near the isolated church and manor house. This site could well repay detailed examination.

The second question is, I suspect, unanswerable. The heraldic beast of Somerset is the Red Dragon following on from the standard of Wessex. The Red Dragon is better known for its Welsh connection and this can be shown to have early origins: Nennius writing in the 9th century records a legendary occasion when Ambrosius (a late Roman) was shown red and white worms fighting which he was able to interpret as the Red Dragon of the British fighting the White Dragon of the Saxons. What does this, taken together with the fact that the legendary founders of Wessex have anglicised British names, tell us about the ethnic origins of "England"…