A Well-Urned Rest: Cremation and Inhumation in Early Anglo-Saxon England

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Introduction

Cremation and inhumation practices in early medieval Europe are usually considered separately. This chapter considers the contemporaneous use of these two mortuary corporeal trajectories deployed contemporaneously in one area of early medieval Europe: early Anglo-Saxon England. Cremation and inhumation are theorised as related but distinct technologies of remembrance. They each operated to transform and rebuild the personhood of the deceased by selective social remembering and forgetting, albeit via contrasting tempos and materialities. Focusing on the similarities and differences between cremation and inhumation in the commemorative significance afforded to pottery vessels, the chapter addresses the single-most ubiquitous artefact-type deployed in the burial of the cremated dead in early Anglo-Saxon England and one of a series of vessel-types placed in inhumation graves. For the first time, the study explores how the use of pottery allows us to identify both contrasts and themes linking the burning and burial of the early Anglo-Saxon dead. Specifically, pots are argued to have mnemonically and metaphorically 'rehydrated' and 'nourished' inhumed cadavers, and were likewise placed on pyres with a similar motivation. The difference comes in the post-cremation rites, where cinerary urns had an additional significance by 'storing' and perhaps even 'fermenting' cremains in the grave, interpreted here as a means of corporeal regeneration and animation following death. Hence, the use of pots shows a distinction in how cremation and inhumation practices operated

as commemorative mechanisms through their deployment of material culture, yet equally how these uses of pots in both disposal methods were closely connected to each other and to the pots' daily use. Therefore, I contend that the pots' varied mortuary significances as a commemorative medium were rooted in the *habitus* of early Anglo-Saxon daily life, and in particular, their use to make and store food and drink. In so doing, my approach resonates with a practice-orientated approach to understanding early medieval pottery (see Gosden 2011; Jervis 2011; Perry 2012 a & b) but extending and adapting this approach to consider their use during in the mortuary arena, and in particular, their use in the sequence and tempo of the funeral. This presents a different perspective on the relationship between cremation and inhumation in early Anglo-Saxon England by seeing them as related mortuary technologies operating in dialect with each other, the results of practical choices made by the survivors to negotiate their identities and social memories. This approach contrasts somewhat with previous attempts to regard cremation and inhumation as oppositional indices of specific cultural origins, religious cults, ethnic identities or ideologies. Likewise, it confronts attempts to regard cremation and inhumation as arbitrary choices, either by seeing them as synonymous mechanisms for mortuary display or as interchangeable fashions in corpse disposal (for critiques of previous work, see Williams 2002a; 2011a; for a recent view, see Hines 2011: 979).

The focus of enquiry will be a single burial site chosen because it has received extensive excavation, detailed osteological analysis and its grave catalogues have been published. The site in question is the large cemetery of Spong Hill, Norfolk (Hills 1977; Hills & Penn 1980; Hills, Penn & Rickett 1984; 1987; 1994; McKinley 1994). The cemetery comprises c. 2,500 cremation graves and a small group of 58 inhumation graves. The final chronological and social analysis of this cemetery was only published after this paper was composed (for interim discussions, see

Hills 1980; 1993; 1994; 1998; 1999; McKinley 1994); Lucy and Hills now suggests the burial

ground dated from the early fifth century through to the mid-sixth century, with the inhumations

representing a development of the later part of the cemetery's use (Lucy and Hills 2013; see also

Higham and Ryan 2013).

Introducing Cremation in Early Anglo-Saxon England

The term 'Early Anglo-Saxon England' refers to the lowland south and east of the island

of Britain between the middle of the fifth century and the early seventh century AD (see

Hamerow et al 2011). Direct Roman control of *Britannia* ceased by the second decade of the

fifth century and was followed by socio-economic and political fragmentation. Germanic settlers

and political domination spread through southern and eastern Britain over the next century.

Powerful kingdoms formed by the late sixth and early seventh centuries subsuming both

Germanic and British rival territories. Following conversion to Christianity, the early eighth-

century monk, the Venerable Bede, tells us that the royal families of the kingdoms of his day –

Kent, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria – charted descent from three

Continental tribes: the Angles, Saxons and Jutes (Sims-Williams 1983; Higham and Ryan 2013:

70-126).

Despite the simplicity of Bede's account, both the scale of Germanic immigration and the

level of British survival in the fifth century remain hotly debated (e.g. Brugmann 2011; Härke

2011). The situation in all likelihood fluctuated considerably between localities and regions. As

well as significant native British contributions, Germanic immigrants probably derived from

many more groups than those historically recognised, and may have come from Frankia, Frisia

and Norway as well as Saxony and the Jutland peninsula.

Furnished graves are pivotal to understanding the complex cultural and socio-economic shifts underway in southern and eastern Britain during the 'Migration Period'. They were first described in the late 17th century by Thomas Browne and then by the mid-18th century barrow-digger Bryan Faussett. However, they were only first attributed to the 'Saxons' by James Douglas, a late eighteenth-century barrow-digger (Content & Williams 2010). The political climate of the early Victorian era saw an intense interest in the 'pagan Anglo-Saxon' grave, reflecting contemporary pro-German nationalist and imperialist discourses (Content & Williams 2010; Williams 2006a; 2008). The systematic compilation and culture-historical analysis of early Anglo-Saxon burial evidence had to wait until the extensive work on brooches by E.T. Leeds and pottery by J.N.L. Myres during the early to mid-twentieth century (Williams 2002a). Throughout these studies, cremation as a burial procedure received limited comment, but when it did, burning the dead was regarded as emblematic of pagan Germanic customs.

Over the last half-century, early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology has been the focus of intense debates and rapidly-evolving archaeological theories and methods applied to an ever-expanding dataset. Increasingly, studies have integrated archaeological and osteological approaches together with evidence for burial-position, grave-structures, monuments, cemetery organisation and landscape analyses (reviewed by Williams 2011). Consequently, early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology is important for scholars of early medieval history and archaeology interested in migration, social structure, ideology and religious change, but also contributes an important venue for testing and debating the social interpretation of mortuary data. Traditionally, furnished burial practice – including cremation and inhumation – has been often seen as reflecting Germanic settlement and/or influence (e.g. Hills 2003). Yet in the light of recent approaches and perspectives, death rituals might be more profitably regarded as one important

arena in which identities and memories were negotiated and created from families and households of contrasting and diverse origins (Williams 1999; 2006). Death rituals were constitutive, not simply reflective, of new socio-political formations.

Exploring Cremation in Early Anglo-Saxon England

In the archaeological investigation of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practice, cremation has received less attention from archaeologists in comparison with contemporary early Anglo-Saxon furnished inhumation graves. Yet cremation has been identified throughout southern and eastern England in this period and is found in varying proportions at different cemeteries.

In eastern England, we find a distinct category of large cremation cemeteries where inhumation is the minority rite. The principal large cremation cemeteries of eastern England excavated by modern methods and reaching publication include:

- Cleatham, North Lincolnshire (Leahy 2007).
- Newark, Nottinghamshire (Kinsley 1989).
- Rayleigh, Essex (Ennis 2009).
- Sancton, East Yorkshire (Timby 1993).
- Spong Hill, Norfolk (McKinley 1994; see this paper).

Elsewhere, cremation was utilised contemporaneously alongside inhumations within the same burial sites. Recently-published examples of mixed-rite cemeteries of southern and central England include:

- Alwalton, Cambridgeshire (Gibson 2007).
- Apple Down, Sussex (Down and Welch 1990).
- Great Chesterford, Essex (Evison 1994).

- Mucking, Essex (Cemetery II: Hirst and Clark 2009).

- Springfield Lyons, Essex (Tyler and Major 2005).

- Wasperton, Warwickshire (Carver et al 2009).

- Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire (Hawkes and Grainger 2003).

There are many more cemeteries in which cremation appears as a minority practice, for example at Norton (Cleveland) where 117 inhumation graves were found but only three cremation pits (Sherlock and Welch 1992). Partly, this can be explained by cremation being rapidly abandoned in some areas during the late fifth and sixth century. Yet it must be borne in mind that shallow cremation graves are likely to be under-represented during most excavations, lost to the ploughsoil or machine truncation. Yet, while cremation had become increasingly rare, and perhaps absent in many areas, by the seventh century, there are examples from southern England of late seventh-century cremation graves that serve to illustrate that cremation could be a tenacious or resurgent practice during and after Christian conversion (Stoodley in Birbeck 2005: 76).

Early Anglo-Saxon cremation was a variable technology over time and space but clearly also in relation to the social identity of the deceased and the circumstances of the death (Richards 1987; Ravn 2003; Williams 2000). However, in general terms, it often involved the burning one or more human bodies together with a range of materials, substances and structures. There is evidence that the cadaver(s) were dressed and wrapped when placed on the pyre, indicated by copper-alloy dress accessories fused to cremated human bone (McKinley 1994). Food and drink accompanied the dead, evidenced by fragments of vessels, plant remains and animal bones (most commonly sheep/goat and pig). Whole animals were sometimes placed on pyres with the

cadaver, usually horses but sometimes also cattle and dogs (Bond 1996). From the colour of the cremated bone, burning the dead in early Anglo-Saxon England was usually an efficient and complete process, particularly in the large cremation cemeteries of eastern England (McKinley 1994).

Possible cremation pyres are rarely found but there are some examples of possible pyre-sites and pyre debris deposits on cemetery sites. This suggests that limited excavation and taphonomic factors (particularly medieval and post-medieval ploughing) rather than their absence explain their rarity (e.g. Ennis 2009: 55; Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 252-55; Gibson 2007: 250; see also Williams 2000: 214-222).

We know more about the post-cremation treatment of the cremains. This featured the collection and burial of a portion of the ashes in a cinerary urn. Sometimes this portion might be the whole body (or bodies), sometimes only a handful of cremains, most often somewhere in between these extremes. Some of the ashes may have been left at the pyre or circulated among mourners. The urns used were often decorated with incisions, stamps and/or bosses. Artefacts showing traces of having accompanied the cadaver on the pyre were often included, including items of dress such as glass beads and brooches. Unburned artefacts were sometimes added to the contents of the urns, including fragments of bone and antler combs and toilet implements (tweezes, shears, razors and ear-scoops) of bronze and iron.

The urns were buried in shallow pits, sometimes containing multiple urns. The pits were sometimes protected with stones, flints or reused Roman tiles (Williams 2000: 223-26). Cremation allowed cinerary urns to be placed within close proximity, itself a significant and distinctive aspect of the burial process. It is speculated that many had modest above-ground markers, either low-mounds with or without ring-ditches, lines of posts or fences and single posts

(Williams 2000: 226-32; e.g. Carver et al 2009:27-28). At some southern and central English sites, four- and five-post structures cover certain cremation burials, and indeed, cremated human remains could have been interred above-ground in these structures (Down and Welch 1990:25-26; Gibson 2007:250). It has been suggested on tentative evidence that cremation burials may have been placed in wooded glades (Gibson 2007:291). Cremation burials are found in rows or clusters, and were interred in cemeteries of varying size and duration, together with inhumation graves in varying proportions.

My research has drawn upon the excavation results cited above, and has been inspired by the work of Julian D. Richards (1987) who first addressed the mortuary variability of early Anglo-Saxon cremation practices in a systematic manner. Building on my doctoral studies, over the last decade I have considered the relationship between cremation and inhumation through the following arguments:

1. Victorian racial and religious ideas have had an enduring influence and have tended to stereotype and stylise early Anglo-Saxon cremation in normative terms as distinctively 'Germanic', 'pagan' and 'primitive' in relation to inhumation (Williams 2002; 2006b; 2008). Despite the influential work of Hills (1980; 1993; 1997; Richards (1987) and Ravn (2003), this has continued to stifle our interpretations of mortuary variability within and between the cremation rite and its shifting relationships with inhumation graves.

2. Early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices (both cremation and inhumation) remain susceptible to misinterpretations pervading how we reconstruct graves and funerals through text and images (Williams 2006a; 2007; 2009).

3. The distributions of cremation and inhumation suggest that both disposal methods were prevalent in varying proportions across most of southern and eastern England and

operated to articulate social distinctions in different ways in different burial environments. Excavations in East Yorkshire, the east Midlands and East Anglia (and perhaps also parts of Essex) have revealed a distinctive use of cremation in large cemeteries, possibly a strategy of distinction by certain groups who persisted over many generations with an overtly conservative burial tradition (Williams 2002a).

4. Cremation and inhumation involved contrasting uses of mortuary monumentality and cemetery space and place (Williams 2000). Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries tend to re-use locally-prominent ancient monuments (Williams 1997; 2006a), yet the large cremation cemeteries may had a further and distinctive landscape context as elements of central places with socio-political and cultic functions (Williams 2002b; 2004b).

5. Cremation and inhumation were linked but contrasting technologies of remembrance in which the experience of the cadaver's transformation operated through distinctive forms and different tempos (Williams 2004a; 2006a).

6. Iron items – buckles, knives and weapons – are under-represented in cremation graves, suggesting their recycling and deliberate disassociation from the cremains. The circulation patterns of material culture during the ritual process of cremation might have been significant in the commemoration of personhood in death in contrast to those in operation in inhumation graves where weapon-burials were commonplace (Williams 2005a).

7. The high proportion of animal remains, particularly horse and sheep/goat, suggests that domestic animals were more important in constructing the identity of the cremated dead (Williams 2001; 2005b), whereas animal remains found in inhumation graves are significant, varied but relatively rare (e.g. Nugent 2011a).

8. Certain artefacts held a distinctive commemorative role in the cremation burial rite in contrasts with the material culture found in inhumation graves. The cinerary urn provided a new metaphorical and mnemonic 'skin' or 'body' for the cremated person(s). Unburned items were sometimes added to the cinerary urn after the cremation, suggesting a specific association between hair management and post-cremation rituals. The placing of combs, and both full-sized and miniature tweezers, razors, shears and ear-scoops with the cremains can be seen as items polluted through close association with the mourning rituals and/or the cadaver. As such, they served in mnemonic and metaphorical body-building, providing the cremains with a new corporeality by signalling practices and material culture linked to hair management (Williams 2003; 2006a; 2007).

Extending these arguments, the remainder of the paper wishes to focus on the comparisons and contrasts between the cremation and inhumation in early Anglo-Saxon England, focusing on hitherto under-explored similarities and differences in the use of pottery in the two methods of disposal. This allows us to better understand not only the significance of cremation practices in early Anglo-Saxon England, its relationship with contemporary inhumation practices, and its ultimate decline.

Pottery and the Relationship between Cremation and Inhumation

The underlying arguments addressed by this case study are twofold. First, across many past cultures, humble pottery vessels can be readily-available and convenient receptacles for cremains. Yet for the cremated dead, they can also serve as highly-charged mnemonic media by which the dead are transported, interred, mourned and commemorated (e.g. see Larsson 2009; Williams 2004a). The pottery of early Anglo-Saxon England has been considered in terms of its

economic and symbolic roles from both burial and settlement contexts (Haith 1997; Hamerow 1993; Richards 1987), but its comparative mortuary uses in both inhumation and cremation graves has escaped detailed investigation (although see Lee 2007).

Second, in the human past, cremation is almost always a ritual technological choice situated among other possibilities for the disposal of the dead. It is the exception for past mortuary programmes to involve cremation in isolation. Interpreting cremation in past societies should focus not only upon why groups cremate and what cremation meant *per se*, but upon how and why cremation was utilised in relation to other disposal strategies within the same societies and communities.

Many cemeteries dating to the early Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD 450-650) deployed at least two contrasting mortuary technologies: cremation and inhumation. There might have been other disposal choices, but these have not left a conclusive archaeological trace. Ceramic vessels were deployed in both burial traditions. Past explanations for this variability have been either simplistic or ill-considered. For instance, seeing the distinction as resulting from cremation being more conservative, pagan or Germanic or seeing the disposal methods as contrasting ideologies are misleading (Williams 2002a; 2011a; see also Gibson 2007). Likewise, regarding both as simply alternative ways of doing the same thing – displaying identity in a public ritual arena – overlooks the very different tempos and technologies employed in each disposal method, as well as the very different corporeal and material forms created by each process.

A more satisfactory approach is to regard early Anglo-Saxon cremation and inhumation as neither identical nor complete opposites. Instead, the two disposal strategies might be regarded as *relational technologies* employing different but related chains of techniques in corporeal transformation in order to construct strategies of distinction (Williams 2002a; 2011a).

As such, each did not possess a single meaning or message. Sometimes either cremation or inhumation might have been employed to signal social and ideological distinctions between groups. In other instances, the choice mediated distinctions within communities. In other words, context seems to have defined the significance of the two technologies (see Hills 1999: 21). The implications of this point are widely applicable in the study of past cremation practices. Archaeologists should be less worried about explaining *why* cremation and inhumation were used together. Indeed, multiple disposal methods should be seen as the norm of the mortuary programmes of most societies past and present. Instead we should focus on *how* they were employed in relation to each other (see Williams 2002a; 2011a). If we accept this argument, then the similarities and contrasts in how pottery was deployed may have mediated the creation of distinctions and shared identities linking the living with the dead.

Pots from Cremation Graves at Spong Hill

Thanks to careful and extensive excavations and high-quality grave-catalogues (Hills 1977; Hills and Penn 1981; Hills et al 1987; 1994), together with the detailed osteological research of Jackie McKinley (1994) and Julie Bond (1996), it is possible to regard cremation practices at Spong Hill as involving fiery transformation but also the building of a new ancestral 'skin' or 'body' for the cremains. A large portion of cremains were retrieved from the remnants of the pyre and placed in poorly-fired, hand-made cinerary urns, many with complex incised, plastic and stamped decorative schemes on their upper surfaces (Fig. 6.1). Some pots had lids and many were carefully packed around with flints. A minority of urns (c. 10%) were 'holed' through their walls and/or base before burial. This is often regarded as a ritual act using a tool or weapon, although Perry (2012 a & b) has proposed a convincing alternative suggestion that these were

vessels used to make butter or beer. Certainly, some of the holes were plugged with lead prior to use as cinerary urns, which Perry (2012 a) sees as a practical post-firing repair rather than a ritual act. Indeed, the inclusion of a selection of the cremains together with unburned items added following cremation *within* an urn emphasises the importance of transportation and containment within the post-cremation rituals.

Fig 5.1.   A group of Spong Hill cinerary urns. (Reproduced by kind permission of Norfolk Museum Service).

Pots were not only used to contain the human dead, often animal remains were mixed together in the same pots (see Bond 1996; McKinley 1994). In further instances 'animal accessory vessels' were included, usually dominated by cremated horse remains (Fern 2007; Williams 2005b). The pots therefore contained an identity forged by fire that merged material culture, animals and humans.

Urn size, shape and decoration may have all had a bearing on the pot's role in communicating and constituting the deceased's identity in death (Richards 1987; see also Ravn 2003; Williams 2000). This argument is supported by the evidence that those artefacts preferentially placed with the cremains were items used in hair dressing, plucking, cutting and shaving: combs and toilet implements (Williams 2003; 2007a). Together this evidence indicates that the principal role of the cinerary urn was to protect and constitute an integrity and commemorative wholeness following the destruction and fragmentation of the cremation process; a form of corporeal regeneration.

While Richards (1992) noted that urn decoration, when viewed from above, displays a similar impression to contemporary annular brooches worn as an element of Anglian female costume, Hills has observed how both the motifs employed and the emphasis upon the 'framing' of animal and human cremated material by the decorated cinerary urns, resemble the same relationship identified on the punch-marked surrounds encircling the representation of deities and monsters on South Scandinavian gold bracteates of the sixth century (Hills, 1999; 23-4). These Migration-Period Scandinavian renditions of Roman imperial coins are often seen as symbols of political and sacred authority depicting beasts, birds and human figures, often appearing to merge and transform into each other. This imagery has often been linked to the psychopompic and shape-shifting attributes of shamans and the Norse god Odin in particular (e.g. Hedeager 1999). Indeed, the role of abstract decoration in adorning surfaces, thresholds and liminal zones is widely found in many late Antique and early medieval artefacts, art and architecture (Hawkes, 1997).

This argument has some specific implications for the significance afforded to the decoration of cinerary urns in the mortuary arena, for just as the pot physically contains the

ashes, so the decoration creates a symbolic boundary, 'framing' the cremated remains of humans and animals. Indeed, this may have mirrored the 'framing' of the cadaver as it was dressed and placed on the pyre surrounded by sacrificed animals. In this regard, the very act of selecting a decorated cinerary urn – even if the precise meaning of the decorative motifs may elude us – enhanced the commemoration and reconstitution of the cremated dead. Each pot cites its own life-history of use to contain and store things, as well as simultaneously invoking memories of previous funerals in which pots were also interred as cinerary urns (see Jones 2001). Therefore, pot and artefacts did not serve to symbolise a static social identity held by the deceased and constructed by survivors, but create mnemonic citations linking the deceased with pot-use as part of the *habitus* of early Anglo-Saxon settlements and the recollection of past funerals. Moreover, these artefacts were not only about citations to past events and practices, they were also prospective, creating a new identity for the grave and/or the afterlife. In this regard, pots can be considered to be catalytic convertors of memory, articulating the regeneration of corporeality following fiery destruction (Williams 2013). Elsewhere (Nugent and Williams 2012) I argue that the cinerary urns were afforded a further significance due to the ocular qualities of their decoration. The cremated dead were believed to be remade as sensing beings, inhabiting their graves, indicated by the 'ocular' character of many cinerary urns.

The life-histories of the cinerary urns may have also been important to their commemorative significance as vessels for the cremated dead. Urns could have been either made for, or selected for, the funeral to fulfill the practical role of housing the cremains, both for an unknown duration following the collection of the cremains from the funeral pyre and for burial. Between collection and burial, cinerary urns may have been displayed, transported and handled above ground for days, weeks, months or even years. For other cemeteries, such as Mucking

(Essex), the settlement, cremation and inhumation pottery was compared and found to be similar, although the larger urns and 'finer' fabrics were selected for the cinerary urns (Hirst and Clark 2009: 603; 610). This evidence suggests that vessels were not purpose-made but instead the 'best' available vessels were preferentially selected as cinerary containers for their size and perhaps for their shape and decorative schemes in relation to the social identity of the deceased. We can only speculate as to whether urns with a particular biography were considered pre-destined to operate as cinerary urns during their use lives. These may have been possessions of the deceased, intimately connected to the person and hence polluted and requiring disposal, or else gifts brought by mourners to the funeral containing food or drink.

For the Lincolnshire cremation cemeteries of Cleatham and Elsham, on-going doctoral research on internal and external use-alteration by Gareth Perry is providing evidence which suggests that decorated cinerary urns had previous use-lives which involved making and/ or storing beer and dairy products. In contrast, undecorated pots are more commonly sooted and were therefore more likely to have been involved in cooking and heating activities (Perry 2012 a & b).

Therefore, decorated pots preferentially selected as cinerary urns were associated with food production and storage, the prelude to cooking, eating and drinking. Indeed, this association with food and drink production and storage, rather than any links to fiery technologies of pot-making and use, may have been the sought-after metaphors by which the cremated dead were conceptualised and commemorated. In the post-cremation stages, urns served to 'store' (or indeed 'ferment') the cremains.

What is clear is that the cremated dead had already been transformed by fire, and the pots selected as cinerary urns were also products of a parallel fiery transformation. Yet it may have

been their significance as vessels linked to storage and production that could have rendered

cinerary urns significant in terms of how the dead were mourned and remembered. Moreover, the

process of beer or butter-making, the former requiring the use of heat to malt the grain and both

involving a heat-producing fermentation process, might have been seen by early Anglo-Saxon

people as having closer parallels to the multi-stage cremation process involving the burning and

subsequent inurnment of the cremains than pot-making, metalworking or food preparation

(contra Williams 2005a; this point is also made by Perry 2012 a). This affords us with an

alternative view on the cremated dead in early Anglo-Saxon England, one by which the cinerary

urn was not a final destination, but a place where the dead were regenerated and lived on in, or

travelled onwards from, their graves.[1] More specifically, burying cremains in an urn created a

future-memory of the deceased as planted, nourished, growing, not simply stored, within the

cemetery.

Yet ceramic vessels clearly were also employed in earlier stages of the cremation

ceremonies. From 91 cremation graves at Spong Hill, re-burnt Saxon pot sherds were recovered

(McKinley 1994: 91; see also Hirst & Clark 2009: 620). Cereal grains and nutshells from a small

number of urns might represent the traces of food offerings placed on the pyre (McKinley 1994:

91-92). Moreover, wooden vessels and boxes, iron-bound buckets and glass vessels were also

added to pyres (Evison in Hills et al 1994: 23-30; Morris in Hills et al 1994: 30-35). Together

with the zoo-archaeological evidence that horse, cattle and dog, and more rarely foxes and

raptors, were likely placed as whole animals, other animal species are likely to reflect food

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[1] I am indebted to Åsa Larsson for her superbly insightful observations on this issue and to

discussions with Gareth Perry about his work on pottery from early Anglo-Saxon contexts.

remains placed on pyres. These include the frequent occurrence of sheep/goat and pig augmented

by the possibility that some of the cattle and horse remains reflect feasting. Rarer occurring

species that may have formed part of funerary feasting shared between mourners and the dead

include deer, domestic fowl and fish (Bond 1994 in McKinley 1994; 1996). Pyres may have been

stacked with food and drink together with the bodies of people and animals, indicative that food

and drink was integral to performance and significance, particularly those connected with

consumption and destruction, in the early stagesof the cremation ceremonies of early Anglo-

Saxon England. In other words, the early Anglo-Saxon cremated dead were being nourished and

hydrated during the cremation ceremonies from pyre to burial. Alcoholic drinks may have been

shared by mourners and placed on the pyre, but also used to accelerate ignition, as might butter.

Likewise, beer might have been used to dowse the smouldering pyre. We also do not know

whether the cremains were submerged in food and liquids poured into the urn for burial.

Indeed, at a number of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites where both inhumation and

cremation were praticed, there is now increasing evidence that feasting activities took place

around graves; indicated at Cossington by two grave-shaped pits contained burnt stone (Filmer-

Sankey and Pestell 2001: 259-261; Thomas 2008: 58: 63-65).

The implications of this evidence are fourfold. First, pottery drew its presence and

significance from the importance of eating and drinking during the cremation ceremony itself,

including cooking and consumption taking place at the burial site and perhaps also accelerating

and fuelling ('feeding') the fire with food and drink. Second, the cinerary urns were the last of a

succession of vessels and their contents involved in caring and catering for the dead through

multiple stages of the funeral, perhaps connected to the widespread idea that the ghost of the

deceased required nourishment and refreshment on its journey to the next world (Hertz 1907).

Third, vessels selected as cinerary urns were those decorated vessels used to make and store food and drink despite the presence of alternatives. Finally, these decorated urns lent to the post-cremation inurnment of the dead the metaphor of storing, fermenting and nourishing, facilitating the future-memory of an on-going animate presence of the dead within the grave.

Pots from Inhumation Graves at Spong Hill

In early Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves we find a wide range of vessels – wooden bowls, glass drinking cups, drinking horns and metal-bound buckets as well as ceramic vessels. Pots are usually seen as simply low-status because they were readily available (Lee 2007: 76). Certainly, they are widespread grave-goods in early Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves, found with both genders and all age-groups (Stoodley 1999: 33; see also Lee 2007: 75; Penn and Brugmann 2007: 40-41). These vessels tend to be smaller and fewer are decorated when compared with those used as cinerary urns. Among the inhumation graves from Spong Hill and two other inhumation cemeteries from Norfolk – Morning Thorpe and Bergh Apton – three quarters were undecorated (Penn and Brugmann 2007: 40). Hirst and Clark make a similar observation for the mixed-rite Cemetery II from Mucking, Essex (Hirst and Clark 2009: 603). Therefore, while some were likely used to make and store food and drink (see Perry in press a & b), a larger proportion were cooking and drinking vessels.

Despite these differences in likely function and significance, the larger urns resemble cinerary urns and those that are decorated bear comparable designs to those found among cinerary urns. This suggests the vessels deployed in both cremation pits and inhumation graves were part of the same pot-making tradition regularly brought into the mortuary milieu. I contend that rather than being simply readily-available containers of low-status, they held a related, but different role in commemorating the dead, perhaps comparable to the smaller vessels that may

have accompanied the cremated dead on their pyres, containing food and drink for the deceased. Here again, pots relate to care for, and sustenance for, the dead. To explore this argument, we need to look at how the pots were placed within the inhumation graves at Spong Hill and put this into context by exploring other East Anglian and Essex inhumation graves.

Spong Hill is unique in the high frequency of pot-deposition in its small group of inhumations: 44 pots found in 37 of the 58 graves (64%) including graves with both male and female-gendered artefact assemblages (Fig. 6.2). This compares with 167 graves of a total of 365 (45%) with pottery from the Morning Thorpe inhumation cemetery, which is the closest parallel I have identified to Spong Hill in terms of the urn-frequency. Perhaps more typically, at Bergh

Apton (Norfolk), 18/63 (29%) inhumation graves contained pottery (Green and Rogerson 1978) while at Westgarth Gardens (Suffolk) 14/69 (20%) contained pots.
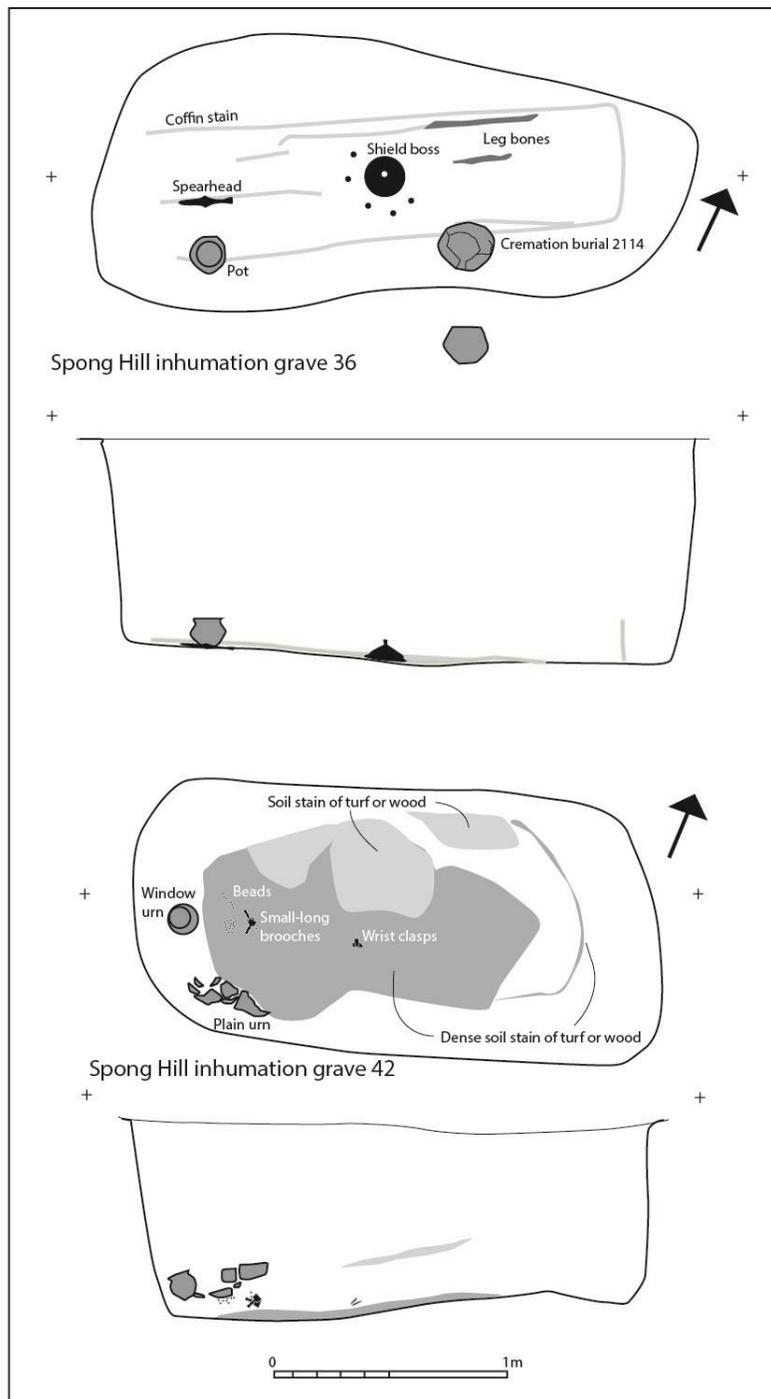

Figure 5.2.   Spong Hill inhumation graves 36 and 42, artifacts and grave plan.

(Redrawn by the author after Hills et al. 1984: 87, 96).

Catherine Hills observed the importance of pots in the inhumation practice at Spong Hill and also observed that those graves without urns contained alternatives, including a bronze bowl and bronze-bound bucket (Hills et al 1984: 7). Christina Lee (2007: 73) also noted that this frequency may have been influenced in some way by proximity with so many cinerary urns. Following Christina Lee, I suggest this provision reveals acts of care for the dead, symbolically 'feeding' the deceased after death (2007: 85). Moreover, as a practice shared between cremation and inhumation ceremonies, I suggest that the significance of pots in both disposal methods foregrounds their relational character as technologies for commemorating personhood and sustaining bonds with the deceased in which vessels held a particular significance (for catalogue, see Hills et al 1984).

Even within the small sample, there appears to have been choreography to pot-deposition, which Lee (2007: 84) observes is negotiated individually at each burial site she studied. At Spong Hill, most pots were placed beside or above the skull, hinting at a close relationship with feeding the dead, and perhaps between pot, head and the senses (see also Lee 2007: 84).

This pattern is found elsewhere in East Anglia and Essex. As noted above, the largest sample of inhumation graves from Norfolk comes from the inhumation cemetery of Morning Thorpe. Despite its size, the lack of skeletal remains makes it difficult to precisely associate pots to body-position. However, if we take instances with skeletal fragments, weapons and dress accessories strongly imply the way the body was likely to have lain, hence we can estimate the likely position of the pot in relation to the body. In the vast majority of cases it appears that pots were placed beside the head, as in female-gendered grave 208 (Green and Rogerson 1987: 89). Likewise, seven out of the ten pots (70%) recorded on grave-plans from Bergh Apton (Norfolk)

are in this location. Similarly, at Westgarth Gardens (Suffolk), all the pots are right next to the skull of cadaver with one exception, a weapon grave where the pot is at the feet and beside the head is a glass cone beaker, its rim placed adjacent to the skull (West 1988: 33). At Springfield Lyons (Essex), urns are all at the west (head) end of the graves 4701,4758, 4861, 4882, 4909, 4966, 6280 (Tyler and Major 2005:54, 56-8, 62).

The same pattern can be identified at Mucking's Cemetery II for graves 260, 347, 351, 493, 534, 566, 585, 596, 691, 784, 851, 854, 860, 878, 915, 967, 970, 975, 989 (Hirst and Clark 2009: 559). In two cases where urns are further away from the head, there is a clear logic to this. In grave 588, two pots were by the left arm and adjacent to each other, while a copper-alloy bound wooden stave bucket was placed beside the cadaver's head (Hirst and Clark 2009: 75-6). Another exception is an infant's grave containing a small Romano-British vessel placed upon the lower body (Hirst and Clark 2009: 87). Indeed, buckets and glass vessels share the choreography of pots and are placed beside the head (e.g. grave 843, Hirst and Clark 2009: 145).

Returning to Spong Hill, on most cases the pot was on the floor of the grave, but in other instances, as with inhumation grave 8, pots were added during the grave's back-filling as 'closing' deposits. In two graves, inhumations 4 and 14, the pottery was situated on ledges far above the grave itself. This suggests that many more pots may have been placed in graves at shallow depths at the time of the funeral or afterwards during commemorative ceremonies and were subsequently destroyed by ploughing or erosion prior to the excavation. If so, these pot-depositions would mirror the shallow burial of cinerary urns at Spong Hill, suggesting a strong similarity between the act of situating some vessels in inhumation graves and the burial of the cremated dead.

As with cinerary urns, breaking pots could be a ritual act in the inhumation graves, perhaps comparable to placing or breaking pots on the pyre prior to conflagration. However, rather than the 'holing' of cinerary urns (if indeed this had anything to do with rituals of fragmentation, see above), pots in inhumation graves were in some cases subject to severe fragmentation. Indeed, only 15 pots were complete or near-complete and 14 only present by sherds or parts of bases. Similar practices have been found at other early Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves from East Anglia (e.g. Penn 1998). In grave 38, one pot was near-complete but the adjacent pot was incomplete, suggesting that this fragmentation is not evidence of grave-disturbance In grave 57, the pot at the head was intact, while in the middle of the grave we find half a pot placed with the dead. The same pattern is found in grave 42 where a broken undecorated pot was placed at the head-end of the female-gendered grave. Adjacent to it was an intact and decorated 'window' urn – the hole had pierced its base and was filled with a sherd of vessel glass (Fig. 6.2). In this instance, a drinking glass fragment was afforded a new life within a pottery vessel, perhaps an heirloom even in a fragmented state. Conversely, Hills et al (1984: 7) suggest that some pots may have been deliberately smashed in the burial ritual, whether this was to destroy the vessel to articulate loss or to release the contents, this was likely a dramaturgical grave-side act (Fig. 6.2).

The inclusion in the grave-fill of individual pot-sherds is a further factor in the mortuary practice at Spong Hill, also observed at other early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, notably at Snape (see also Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 244-46). This is a more specific act than simply indirect evidence of funerary feasting at the cemetery (see above) or simply gift-giving (cf. King 2004). Lee (2007:79) observes that sherds might symbolically stand for whole pots, but that the act of breaking at the grave-side or during the back-filling of the grave may have not simply

articulated mourning and loss. As Larsson (2009: 348) notes for past funerals, breaking an object creates new bonds and relationships. Pot-sherds and vessel-parts – when both placed with the dead or in the grave-fill – might allow material bonds between the living and the dead to be created as the pot is part-buried and part-retained among the living. A comparable practice has been identified in some cremation graves where snapped fragments of unburned antler combs were placed in graves and presumably the other halves were kept by mourners as mementos of the deceased (see Crummy in Gibson 2007: 261-66; Williams 2003).

Cremation and inhumation graves overlap in the northern sector of the cemetery at Spong Hill. In some cases, cremation burials in ceramic urns were themselves added to the fills of inhumation graves in this area. In some examples, as with inhumation graves 22 and 23, this appears to be a deliberate practice, in the former case the cinerary urn was situated directly above the position of an accessory vessel placed below it on the base of the grave. Similar patterns were found at Snape (Suffolk) where a pair of cinerary urns were placed on a ledge at the west-end of the grave of an adult male interred with a spear and knife (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell 2001: 52-54). This example is instructive, since the commemoration of the fiery transformation seems to have been marked by placing burned oak logs on either side of the inhumation, the two lines of burned oaks mirroring the pairing of urns close by. Therefore, pots that contained food and drink, and pots that contained ashes, were equally potent commemorative material culture in inhumation graves at Spong Hill.

The Broader Context: Pots, People and Place

In early Anglo-Saxon England, pots were clearly integral to the *habitus* of daily life – including the storage, production, preparation and consumption of food and drink. Moreover,

rituals involving the consumption of food and drink were likely important in pagan season festivals and gatherings, making them central to the construction of social and political relationships and identities. The giving and receiving of food, but also the handling and exchange of vessels were likely to be integral to such acts (see Scull 2011). An illustration of the importance of the material culture used to prepare, store and serve food and drink is the rich feasting gear in the early seventh-century grave beneath Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo (Scull 2011; Williams 2011a), yet it is unquestionable that this elite funeral draws upon a broader repertoire of ideas about life and death shared in more humbler graves from earlier centuries. Indeed, the association of vessels more generally with ritual practices of eating and drinking is revealed in the rare twelve miniature bucket pendants that may have formed part of a cloth-lined bag placed in an adult female inhumation grave with other distinctively amuletic artefacts from a cemetery at Bidford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire (Dickinson 1993). The dispensing and consumption of drink might have held cultic import for 'cunning women' in early Anglo-Saxon England.

Therefore, pots in both cremation and inhumation practices can be seen as concerned with material exchanges and multisensory experiences in mortuary memory-making rituals. Yet the extent of the specific significance of pottery in both inhumation and cremation seems particularly pronounced at Spong Hill, where we see both disposal strategies closely linking ceramics with the cadaver in the grave. Pottery was placed upon the pyre – presumably containing food and drink – and subsequently was used to contain, transport and inter the cremains. Likewise, we have identified the breaking and placing of pots in inhumation graves, often beside the head, as well as the placing of pots, pot-sherds and cinerary urns during the closing of graves.

I do not consider the different uses of pottery is explicable in terms of a simple division between 'possessions' and 'gifts' (contra King 2004): pots clearly contributed to successive stages of early Anglo-Saxon funerals involving both disposal methods. However, I would follow King (2004) and Lee (2007) in seeing these as evidence of the relationship between the living and the dead negotiated through gift-giving and feasting. Yet we seem to be seeing a closer connection between the cadaver and ceramics than has hitherto been recognised.

A simple parallel between the making, life-histories and deposition of pottery and the birth, life and death of people as found in some cultures may only be part of the picture (e.g. David et al 1988). What can be said with more confidence is that the breaking and re-making of the identities of the dead was mediated by pottery in both inhumation and cremation practices. Pots were *not* used to make bodies in inhumation graves, but they hydrated and nourished them and serving to articulate the breaking and making of relationships between the living and the dead during the burial rituals. The distinction with cremation was that selected pots, rather than paralleling the fiery destruction of the body, while sometimes subject to deliberate breakage, *became* bodies or skins when used to contain the cremains.

Therefore, we have two disposal methods that involve linked but distinctive uses of pottery in relation to cadavers – pots to feed the dead operated in both strategies, but only in cremation did pots serve in body-building - re-fleshing the cadaver. This particular emphasis might have been on creating a sensing, even animate, identity for the dead within their graves. Indeed, the provision of decorated pottery as cinerary urns is combined with clear evidence for the regular placing of whole animals on the pyre with the dead and the inclusion of toilet implements and combs in post-cremation practices. All these correspond with an efficient cremation process and evidence that attention was often paid to separating and retrieving a

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substantial portion of the cremains from the pyre as revealed by bone-weight. These practices seem connected to a distinctive necrogeography, since they are associated with the large cremation cemeteries of 'Anglian' eastern England. In southern and central England we also find cremations placed in cinerary urns. Yet here by contrast less attention seems to be afforded to collecting and burying cremains. There is less evidence for pyre and grave-goods, a higher proportion of undecorated urns, lower bone-weights, a larger number of un-urned cremation deposits and less evidence for animal sacrifice (McKinley in Birkbeck 2005: 21-23; Powers in Ennis 2009:48). Conversely, in some inhumation graves, pots are rarely found (e.g. Kinsley 1989).

We are dealing with a spectrum of mortuary practices, not a hard-and-fast distinction between 'Anglian' and 'Saxon' cremation practices. Still, there is clearly a constellation of ritual emphases associated with the larger cremation cemeteries of 'Anglian' eastern England. Therefore, the emphasis on post-cremation rituals corresponded to places of social aggregation for ritual purposes in the early Anglo-Saxon landscape in which mourning and disposing of the dead, and sharing food and drink, may have been integrated practices.

Elsewhere, I have contended that large cremation cemeteries were more than burial facilities, but may have served as locales for ritual and political power – localised cult and ceremonial sites (Williams 2002b; 2004b). While evidence for these other features is inconclusive, it is possible that ritual specialists, or control of these sites by incipient elites, mobilised cremation as a means of creating a distinctive, but readily recognised strategy of distinction and inclusion, drawing on remembered traditions from Continental homelands and invented/contrived identities rooted in an imagined mythological past for fluid and ethnically diverse social groups. It may have also been a form of burial organisation that took on power

because these more opportunistic circumstances of social fragmentation rendered mortuary arenas spheres for asserting a hyper-conservative identity in death. A question of scale meant that this form of burial worked appropriately for localised groups with limited power networks. Certainly they were a burying community that overlapped and interleaved with contemporary communities primarily using inhumation and these cemeteries do not appear to have exclusively served a coherent 'tribal' territory. What is clear however, is a regionally-focused constellation of ritual practices that may have constituted an 'ideology of transformation' (see Williams 2001), creating and promoting a way of treating and perceiving the cadaver in death that may have linked to a coherent eschatology and cosmology of transformation and regeneration of the dead as animated and corporeal within the landscape in their pots. This was not exclusive of inhumation, as we have seen, and indeed, inhumation was a minority rite at many of these sites that display a comparable connection between pottery and nourishing and hydrating the dead. Yet, if cremation was deployed in a climate of ethnogenesis at the local level, then mortuary practices might have been one arena where identities were linked to land, resources and myths and memories of descent.

This in turn might provide a new perspective on these sites' abandonment. Rather than Christianity, it was the rise of larger regional powers during the sixth century that rendered obsolete the power and significance of these cult sites where public ritual had been orchestrated through place, ritual technology and acts of care and emotive engagement with the dead on a relatively small scale. The shift from cremation to inhumation, and the fragmentation of these early, large cremation cemeteries, may been seen in the context that the increasing scale and extent of socio-political networks by elites rendered these traditional 'tribal' places of power and memory, where mortuary and cultic practices took place, increasingly irrelevant.

Conclusion

Cremation and inhumation were both multi-staged processes in early Anglo-Saxon England that facilitated unfolding commemorative engagements with the dead through corporeal transformations, staged closures and body-building material cultures (Williams 2006a). At Spong Hill, we find a burial site dominated by cremation, with perhaps one household or segment of society adopting inhumation to define themselves apart in the later part of the site's use. Yet the treatment of pots traversed both disposal methods found at the cemetery. The intimate commemorative association of pottery and cadavers is apparent through many generations of the dead who were interred in cinerary urns. Equally, the regular placing of pots – whole or in part – within and above inhumation graves meant they had a distinct but perhaps related significance in negotiating relationships between the living and the dead. This significance has been overlooked hitherto because studies of inhumation have not considered the contemporary cremation rite and have instead afforded attention to weaponry and dress accessories (e.g. Penn et al 2007).

In later, Christian, sources, it was only revenants (corporeal ghosts that followed bad deaths) that were animate and threatened to destroy the living (Blair 2009). In the pagan period, are we dealing with an understanding of death and the dead as both potentially harmful and beneficial to the living, inhabiting their graves even following the cremation process? Elsewhere, I have argued that 'deviant burials' might be extreme responses with a spectrum of commemorative technologies creating dialogues with the dead to constitute their mnemonic transformation into ancestors. Whether due to the personality of the deceased, the manner of their death or as a punishment, these individuals were still interred within communal cemeteries

as part of the community of the dead (Williams 2007b; see also Reynolds 2009; see also Nugent 2011b).

At Spong Hill, the grave was perhaps only a staging post for afterlife destinations in which ceramic vessels – what they contained, what was spilled and what was retained whole and what was broken, may have mediated and punctuated ritual practices and the staging of social remembering and forgetting. As Ing-Marie Back Danielsson puts it with regard to late Iron Age Scandinavian graves, graves can be considered 'engines of transformation' that required 'feeding' (Back Danielsson 2007: 257-63). It seems that cemeteries were not mere repositories for cadavers. Instead, the pots suggest that the burial place was where the hungry and sensing ancestors were reincorporated into a community of the dead through the burial of cadavers and ashes. The attention afforded to the 'corporeal' integrity of ashes within the urn may not have come from an equation of cremains with food and drink (cf. Back Danielsson 2007; Oestigaard 2000), but may well relate to a conceptualisation of the dead as still-living, still-sensing within their graves; in particular they appear to have required haptic and gustatory care and provision as well as distinctive topology provided by the urn (cf. Nugent 2011b; Williams 2011b; Nugent and Williams 2012). Bodies and pots were here not simply connected metaphorically, but linked together in chains of operations from death to burial. Emotive acts of care within the funerary rituals, including those involving ceramics, were likely intended to feed and sustain the unburned cadaver in the grave or when placed on the pyre; hence the shift towards inhumation did not lead to an abandonment, but an adaption, of existing concerns with furnishing and 'feeding' the dead. In cremation practices, the significance of pottery had been taken one stage further; serving to re-flesh cremains within highly decorated urns. In these contrasting and changing ways, both the

inhumed and cremation early Anglo-Saxon dead were repeatedly made memorable by affording them a well-urned rest.

Acknowledgements

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