

Public Archaeology

Arts of Engagement

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Access Archaeology





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Dialogues with Early Medieval ‘Warriors’

Howard Williams and Rachel Alexander

How are early medieval graves interpreted by community archaeology projects? This chapter considers how the well-known and innovative Operational Nightingale project has distinctively deployed the excavation and analysis of early Anglo-Saxon (later 5th and 6th-century AD) furnished graves, including those containing weaponry, in its practice and public engagement. In light of recent discussions regarding the ideological, social, educational and emotional significances of the archaeological dead, we consider Operation Nightingale’s well-received practical and interpretative dialogues with the dead during the investigation of an early medieval cemetery at Barrow Clump, Figheldean, on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire. Our focus is upon the project’s assertions of parity and affinity between early Anglo-Saxon weapon burials and the experiences of modern military personnel: dialogues with early medieval ‘warriors’.

Introduction: interpreting early Anglo-Saxon weapon burials

The early medieval dead, particularly furnished inhumation graves of the 5th to 7th centuries AD, have been investigated since the 18th century (Content and Williams 2010). They have long been prominent in wider popular culture as evidence of the earliest pagan Germanic settlers: the purported founders of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The most lavish of them are early 7th-century chamber graves, notably the ‘treasure’ from Sutton Hoo’s Mound 1, now displayed at the British Museum and reconstructed at the National Trust Visitor Centre near Woodbridge (Walsh and Williams 2019). Yet there have been many more dug and displayed for generations of visitors to museums, such as the 6th-century rich adult female’s grave from Lechlade (Gloucestershire) in the Corinium Museum, Cirencester, or the 7th-century weapon burial from Ford, Laverstock (Wiltshire) displayed in Salisbury Museum (Williams 2009). Therefore, since the 19th century, furnished early Anglo-Saxon inhumation graves, and weapon graves specifically, have been perceived as powerful visual and material evidence for the martial character of barbarian invaders who occupied southern and eastern Britain following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (Content and Williams 2010; Lucy 1998; Williams 2008).

Yet over the last half-century, sustained academic debates have questioned the chronology, scale, veracity and simplicity of an equation between furnished inhumation graves and a culture-historic narrative of Germanic settlement, including a face-value interpretation of their martial character (e.g. Hills 2003; 2007; Halsall 2013: 221–52; Lucy 1998). Weapons in these graves tend to be found with bodies determined to be those of adult males on osteological grounds, but need not have been those used in life exclusively by those individuals interred and need not be their personal possessions. Hence the equation of weapon graves with the identity of the deceased as active ‘warrior’ at the time of death has long been considered simplistic and misleading.

Problematizing the warrior-status of the occupants of weapon graves was counter to the shift to quantitative social and symbolic analyses that characterised early medieval burial archaeology from the 1970s onwards, which shifted the focus away from the identities of those interred, to exploring patterns over space and time in the differential treatment of the dead (see Williams 2006 for a summary). The specific critique of weapon burials as ‘warriors’, however, was most famously articulated through the critique of the concept of ‘warrior graves’ by Heinrich Härke (1989; 1990; 1992; 1997; see also Dickinson and Härke 1992; Stoodley 1999). Härke conducted a detailed chronological and social analysis of weapon burials from across southern and eastern England. The frequency of weapon-deposition shows no correlation with historically recorded battles which, for Härke, queried the direct association

between weapon burial and frequencies of large-scale military activity. The character and chronology of weapon burial was shown not to be static, and its frequency varies between cemeteries and between regions, perhaps linked to variations in socio-economic structures, different strategies of articulating community identities in death, and differing intensities of socio-political competition focusing on funerals (see also Lucy 1998; 2002; Stoodley 1999). Moreover, the choices regarding which weapons, and which combination of weapons, hint at incomplete weapon set could be interred, hinting that the 'image' of a warrior in death was not always the aim. Instead, weapon deposition may have instead articulated the multivariate social and political identity of the dead person in relation to circumstances of death and their social network, including the decisions of mourners to articulate their status and strategies of inheritance and memory-making using the mortuary arena (see also Williams 2006).

Likewise, Härke argued (albeit not on convincing evidence in all cases) that weapons were sometimes interred with individuals too young or infirm to wield them at the time of their deaths, and other adult individuals' graves lacked weapons who seemed perfectly able to have used them in life (Härke 1990). A slight difference in stature between those males with and without weapons, led Härke to regard a symbolically articulated Germanic ethnicity as well as social status, rather than warriorhood, as the determining factors informing weapon burial. Indeed, weapons had cultural biographies, meaning they were circulated through multiple owners before interment, and perhaps some circulated within and between households and down the generations before being consigned to a grave (Härke 2000; 2014).

While different strands of Härke's argument have stood the test of time to varying degrees, this work remains the foundation of subsequent evaluations of early Anglo-Saxon weapon burial. Consequently, the presence of weapons need not reflect directly the identity of the graves' occupants but may instead form part of a careful selection of items by survivors to choreograph a narrative about the deceased in relation to the living community (see Brunning 2017; Sayer *et al.* 2019; Williams 2005). While interpretations vary between commentators, their deployment remains seen less as a simple signal of Germanic martial identity, and more as a fluid and multi-vocal element of complex ritualised displays of power and inheritance at a time of socio-economic and political dislocation (see Halsall 2013: 229; see also Härke 2014). Archaeologists' nuanced readings of weapon graves as social, symbolic or mnemonic statements by mourners fluctuating in character over time and space is now well established (e.g. Lucy 2002; Pader 1982; Richards 1987; Stoodley 1999; Williams 2006).

Yet despite the apparent acceptance of this position within archaeological discourse, the equation of weapon burials with a triumvirate of associations – 'Germanic', 'pagan' and 'warrior' – has persisted in some popular accounts and heritage environments. Many key museum displays do eschew a 'warrior' inference for weapon graves (such as Bede's World (now Jarrow Hall), observed 2005, and the West Stow Anglo-Saxon village, observed 2010). Yet others persist in equating weapon burials with 'warriors'. A caption introducing a display of weapons from early Anglo-Saxon grave-finds from Derbyshire in the Weston Park Museum in Sheffield, for example, states: 'Warriors – Anglo-Saxon men enjoyed hunting and fighting. Most men owned spears rather than swords. They also used shields to protect themselves from attack' (observed, 23 October 2018).

This persistent disjuncture between archaeological discourse and the popular perceptions of early medieval graves has been only provisionally appraised. Notably, an effective and important critique by Lucy and Herring (1999) showed how outmoded culture-historic and migrationist narratives about the Anglo-Saxons persist in museum environments (see also Williams 2009). For fieldwork contexts, to date the only significant discussion is a very recent one: Sayer and Sayer (2016) have cogently and critically considered the complex public engagements with the excavation of an early Anglo-Saxon furnished inhumation cemetery at Oakington (Cambridgeshire) in terms of English origins but also local identities, revealing diverse responses and perceptions to the excavation of the graves. They

advocate the potential for open public engagement through these funerary contexts, both regarding contemporary cultural identities and themes relating to disease, dying and death.

Harland (2017) has also noted how popular perceptions and media reporting of the early Anglo-Saxon period have lagged far behind archaeological research (see also Harland 2019; Williams 2007; cf Shipley 2015). Crucially, he helps to afford a context for the persistence of this narrative. The affinity of Germanic origins and the early Anglo-Saxon past has cross-Atlantic manifestations which are currently ripe for appropriation by the Alt-Right, White Supremacists and neo-Nazi groups, but which also resonate with a broader English/Anglo-Saxon nationalist rhetoric. In the UK specifically, after a century of ambivalence fostered in no small part by two World Wars, and the supremacy of 'Britishness', it is now becoming again popular to celebrate Englishness and English origins, including 'English' martial traditions. This has been fostered in no small part by the emboldened nationalist and anti-immigration discourses, deploying variegated appropriations of the Roman and early medieval pasts, in the political identities and debates fostered during both the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and Brexit referendum of 2016 (Bonacchi *et al.* 2018; Gardner 2017). The challenge of engaging the public with the early Anglo-Saxon past has therefore never been more important and sensitive, and the persistent popular equation of weapons with warriors relates directly to present-day perceptions of England's martial and 'racial' heritage rooted in 19th-century concepts and ideas.

This chapter aims to build on the important, but relatively sparse, literature on the public mortuary archaeology of weapon graves, by considering one high profile and widely lauded UK community archaeology project that has prominently focused on public engagement through early medieval cemeteries. We consider Operation Nightingale (OpN) and the striking emotive and martial narratives created by the project about the early medieval dead. We do this by drawing evidence about the project from relevant online resources, newspaper and magazine articles, video documentaries, as well as the project's grey literature and published reports.

In our evaluation, we focus OpN's martial heritage narratives which have sought to connect the archaeological evidence of 'warriors' of the early Anglo-Saxon period excavated at Barrow Clump, Figcheldean, Wiltshire, and the military identities of the participants in the project. We situate this in relation to broader discussions surrounding how, and why, the public engage with the dead through archaeology in today's world (Giles and Williams 2016). This is a topic largely eschewed by discussions of public archaeology and community archaeology in the UK: yet it is important that we critically explore how and to what extent the ancient dead should be part of the drive towards 'archaeology for all' (Nevell and Redhead 2015; see Baldry *et al.* 2012 for a rare exception).

In our endeavour, we acknowledge that OpN's archaeologists have not yet been able to critically evaluate the project themselves at the time of our writing, although a monograph is forthcoming (Richard Osgood pers. comm.). Limitations of the project and the challenges of working with those suffering from physical and psychological conditions have, however, received discussions in print (Osgood 2013: 116; see also Finnegan 2016). Still, for the purposes of this chapter, OpN has not yet received detailed evaluation concerning the ethics and politics of mortuary archaeology in contemporary society (e.g. Brown 2016; Giles and Williams 2016; Sayer 2010) specifically in relation to its conflict-related and martial themes.

Background: Introducing Operation Nightingale

OpN was established in 2011 as a pioneering and well-publicised example of an innovative community archaeology project. Engaging specifically with injured military personnel and deploying archaeology as a strategy of physical and psychological therapy. The project was initiated through a liaison between

the British Army and archaeologists by Richard Osgood (Senior Historic Advisor with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation), Sergeant Diarmaid Walshe (1st Battalion, The Rifles) and Corporal Steve Winterton (1st Battalion, The Rifles), and implemented through the Defence Archaeology Group (DAG) (DAG 2017; Osgood 2013; Walshe *et al.* 2012). Funded by charities and the Ministry of Defence, OpN aimed to help with the recovery of those personnel with physical and psychological injuries in Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequently on medical leave: applying archaeology as a means of rehabilitation (Walshe *et al.* 2012). For some of its Wiltshire-based projects, it was augmented and extended by Wessex Archaeology's Project Florence (WA 2017b).

The rationale for deploying archaeology for rehabilitation has been the primary focus of the published discussions of OpN (Army 2017; Cooper 2016; Finnegan 2016; Osgood 2014; Walshe 2012; Walshe *et al.* 2012; Watts-Plumkin 2013; WA 2017a). Many of the military personnel involved faced the challenges of physical injuries and mental illnesses resulting from their military service and adaptation to civilian life, exacerbated by isolation and inactivity. Archaeology was deployed to help restore a routine, fitness, confidence, self-esteem, social bonding and offering both archaeological and broader transferable technical skills (Finnegan 2016; Walshe 2012; Walshe *et al.* 2012; Watts-Plumkin 2013). Archaeological practice, as much as archaeological results, were key to the envisioned success of OpN, offering tangible engagement with ancient sites and material culture, and the process of discovery and recording through survey and excavation. Meanwhile, the diversity of activities involved in archaeology meant it could serve a range of abilities and interests. Various excavations of a wide range of sites allowed the soldiers to gain valuable knowledge of the history of their country whilst utilising skills in mapping, planning, geophysics and excavating.

The social 'bonding' experience and fun of OpN has also been emphasised (Finnegan 2016; WA 2012). This relates to the appeal of archaeology in itself, allowing participants to experience the past first-hand and in a tangible and enjoyable fashion (e.g. Holtorf 2007: 60). More specifically, it links to broader arguments that digging and handling artefacts is physically and mentally beneficial and facilitates social inclusion (e.g. Kiddey 2017; Neal 2015; Sayer 2015). For some of the military personnel, the prospect of archaeology as a career was a tangible aspiration (Winterton 2014).

These various restorative dimensions are enshrined in the historical allusions to the Crimea of OpN's naming. The work of pioneering Victorian-era nurse, Florence Nightingale, evoked the long tradition of endeavours to heal British military casualties. Likewise, the project's insignia – a trowel with a serpent wrapped around it – adapts the Greek symbol for medicine – the Rod of Asclepius – to an archaeological theme, and thus equating digging and healing.

The project's identity and successes, however, are not simply framed by its benefits for some, or all, of the military personnel. Project Florence worked alongside OpN at Barrow Clump and provided the main way to include local communities in south Wiltshire in the archaeological investigations. This included various activities such as site activity days with site tours, exhibitions, lectures, making a movie about OpN, the Big Draw and volunteering, thus show-casing the rich heritage of South Wiltshire (WA 2017a). Involving the community early in the project allowed them to help make decisions, setting goals and planning days as a way of presenting and understanding the past in a reflective manner suitable to the rest of the community (cf. Kähler 2015: 75). The partial relinquishing of control of the project to local communities reveals that OpN was not exclusively a military project (WA 2017b).

A moral and patriotic dimension to OpN cannot be denied. Reviewing the project, Cooper (2016) describes OpN as a 'moral compulsion' to save monuments or sites which were liable to damage. Walshe put this into a martial context: 'the army is designed to protect our identity and our sovereignty, and also to protect our heritage. This is one of our roles' (Walshe 2012: 11). Therefore, the heritage

conservation dimensions of the project are tied into the martial facets of both the practitioners and the archaeological subjects investigated.

OpN also needs to be commended for a very rapid and high-profile series of popular and scholarly publications, providing a firm grounding for both the therapeutic strategies and the archaeological results. These include magazine articles (e.g. Osgood 2014; Walshe *et al.* 2012) but also open-access grey literature reports (Andrews and Mephram 2014; Andrews 2016; BGH 2017; Forshaw and Andrews 2013; Osgood 2017) as well as an academic outputs (Finnigen 2016; Osgood 2013). Therefore, unlike many community archaeology projects, the results have been rapidly disseminated affording clear academic benefits alongside the results achieved for veterans and the public.

Summing up this brief review of OpN to date, it can be regarded as a multi-staged, multi-site, distinctive and pioneering strategy of community engagement, providing the model for potential future community archaeology projects in offering bespoke and tailored engagements with specific groups who might otherwise not experience archaeology. Specifically, it is one of a series of projects which have attempted to target specific needs within the groups: those subjected to social exclusion and/or suffering from particular mental and physical conditions (Finnegan 2016; see also Kiddey 2017; Lack 2014; McMillan 2013; Neal 2015). Rather than community archaeology defined by locality and place, and tending to have an appeal gravitating to relatively affluent individuals (see Neal 2015), OpN instead explores a richly qualitative, rather than quantitative, criteria of non-specialist engagement. This mode of transferable and sustainable community engagement has allowed OpN to operate beyond a single locality, incorporating it into projects involving students, professional archaeologists and other community archaeology dimensions. Hence, OpN's different endeavours have engaged with military personnel but also with the public more broadly via a range of strategies, from open days and community volunteers through to television and the media.

The Archaeological Practice of OpN

While the focus has been on *why* OpN was performed, *how* and *what* was investigated is far from incidental. First, as noted above, OpN did not focus on, or rely upon, a single archaeological site, locality, region or indeed even a country-specific project. Instead, the operation could encapsulate, and be transferable between, a range of sites and locales. A second aspect of OpN as a community project was its use of a wide range of techniques and sites, from condition inspections, desktop research and post-excavation recording alongside survey and excavation (Osgood 2013: 116). Those sites targeted for more intense field work were find-rich and complex, allowing volunteers to experience tangible traces with some guarantee of success, as well as to operate in historical military landscapes. Third, OpN targeted sites under threat: many were Heritage at Risk sites on MoD land: these were not research excavations targeting sites otherwise unknown, or monuments secure from threat.

The Progress of OpN 2011–2018

First, the late prehistoric East Chisenbury midden was investigated to mitigate the damage of badgers (Walshe *et al.* 2012; Winterton 2014: 246). Subsequently, the University of Leicester worked with the Defence Archaeology Group and OpN to investigate the site of Whitewall Brake, on Ministry of Defence land north of Caerwent Roman city where a high-status Roman complex was revealed (Hilts 2012; Watts-Plumpkin 2013; DAG 2017). As well as a 20th-century military landscape, the walled defences of Caerwent afforded a proximal military dimension to the Roman archaeological remains too. The principal subsequent site subjected to investigation over the next three years (2012–2014) was Barrow Clump (Grinsell's Figheldean 25, Wiltshire): a scheduled ancient monument on Historic England's heritage at risk (HAR) list on MoD land on Salisbury Plain (Andrews and Mephram 2014; DAG 2017; Forshaw and

Andrews 2013; Pitts 2012; WA 2012). The heroic martial allusions are replicated in the code name for the project: Exercise Beowulf (Osgood and Andrews 2015; Pitts 2012; Walshe 2012).

Barrow Clump was originally an early Neolithic settlement and then Early Bronze Age burial mound. Later, it was reused as a burial site in the 6th century AD afforded the discovery of weapon burials, allowing martial aspects in the past to mirror the contemporary military landscape and practitioners (WA 2017c; see also Andrews and Mephram 2014; Forshaw and Andrews 2013; WA 2017a–b). The explicit aim was to extend previous excavations by English Heritage and focus specifically on the investigation of these early Anglo-Saxon graves.

Yet it was plane-crash sites at Ludgershall (West Sussex), Lyneham (Wiltshire) and at Upavon (Wiltshire) in 2013 that married OpN to the investigation of modern conflict archaeology (Osgood 2014). For Upavon, Osgood (2014) notes how the plane crash-site ‘provided a tangible link to the Battle of Britain and a period in our history heavily featured in the school curriculum. Those with a military ethos found the project cathartic and rewarding.’ (Osgood 2014, 35). Therefore, OpN involved the military, but also the subject of investigation was martial in character (Osgood 2014). The 2015 excavation of a Spitfire crash-site at Holme Lode Farm, Holme, Lincolnshire followed on from the Upavon project, and this was indeed the crash site even though the human remains had long been removed (Shute 2015). Likewise, OpN excavations took place at the Marne Barracks, Catterick, revealing funerary dimensions of a Bronze Age burial mound and early Anglo-Saxon graves as well as Roman buildings (DAG 2017; ON 2015). The 2016 excavations at Perham Down (Wiltshire) saw another relationship between OpN and past military practices: the excavation of First World War practice trenches (Andrews 2016; DAG 2017). Facilitating by the newly founded Breaking Ground Heritage (BGH), 2016 saw fieldwork at Barry Buddon (Angus) also investigating First World War training trenches (MoD 2017; Saunders 2017; Sotheran 2017). In 2017 and 2018, BGH returned with OpN to Barrow Clump and investigated further early Anglo-Saxon furnished inhumation graves (BGH 2017). In all instances, the conservation and research outputs, as well as the benefits for OpN volunteers can be recognised as integrated, rather than separated, results of the fieldwork.

Excavations abroad are another feature of OpN. For example, in 2016 OpN joined up with University of Leicester students in Akrotiri, Cyprus (DAG 2017; ULAS 2016). Entitled Exercise ARTEMIS 16, the excavations took place on an operational Royal Air Force base as there was known archaeological features that were in danger of destruction and erosion. Again, like OpN in the UK, the injured soldiers involved either had an interest in the past or many of the people are believed to have previous archaeological training. The same applies to Exercise Joan of Arc, at Bullecourt 2017 which saw the investigation of a First World War battlefield location (Osgood 2017).

To summarise some of the principal aspects of the work of OpN to date, the operation has proved to be versatile and applicable to a range of site-types and landscapes in Britain and abroad, thus creating a model combination professional archaeologists and military personnel and funded by a range of charities and the MoD. It has proven transferable and sustainable, operating at different scales and durations and involving varied degrees of other community engagement dimensions such as Project Florence (WA 2017b). In short, OpN has promoted itself, and received widespread acclaim, in effectively deploying archaeological practice as a therapeutic mechanism by focusing on *martial* subjects of the recent past, as well as early medieval furnished burial sites.

Warriors Past and Present in Barrow Clump’s Media Archaeology

The creation of close bonds with the dead was a specific feature of the Upavon Spitfire crash in 2013. This was not a mortuary site: the pilot survived although he perished soon after in the Battle of Britain (Osgood 2014). Yet, the pilot’s daughter, who never knew her father, participated in the project, and the

OpN volunteers were acutely aware of the close connection between the crash-site and the pilot's death in the Second World War. The 2015 crash-site at Holme Lodge Farm Spitfire had been the site of the pilot's death. The excavations at Bullecourt encountered the remains of two German soldiers (Osgood 2017). In all these examples, OpN operates as a form of memory work, connecting death and memory in the past to restorative and commemorative practices in the present (Osgood 2013: 125; see also Brown 2016).

However, the deployment of the early medieval dead faced different connotations and challenges in this regard. The engagement with early Anglo-Saxon graves (later fifth and sixth-century AD) at Barrow Clumps and Catterick provided the most important and sustained relationship between those injured in conflict and the unnamed ancient archaeological dead among OpN's investigations to date. Indeed, the particular combination of Early Bronze Age and early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices in both these landscapes, create common connections between Britain's early past and present-day landscapes of conflict. Mirroring the striking material and corporeal power of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries to evoke links between past and present (Sayer and Sayer 2016), we explore how the sixth-century early medieval burial ground reusing the mound's southern side and ditches at Barrow Clump constructed a sustained link between conflict past and present focusing on the personhood of the 'warrior'.

Warrior graves in print

Archaeologists, military personnel as well as local volunteers participated at the 2012–14 and 2017–18 Barrow Clump excavations (Osgood and Andrews 2015). As noted above, significantly, this deliberate research strategy meant that furnished male graves including those with weapons, as well as female-gendered and child graves, would be targeted. Together, these allowed a martial discourse to pervade the excavation. The Anglo-Saxon heroic and martial allusions can be identified the project's name: Exercise Beowulf, otherwise described as 'Operation Beowulf' in *Current Archaeology* magazine volume 306 (Osborn and Andrews 2015: 32). This is mirrored in the barrow being situated in the Salisbury Plain Training Area, and the participation of military personnel and funding. Soldiers were described as encountering their martial 'ancestors', with the *Current Archaeology* article's subheading being 'soldier archaeologists and warrior graves' (Osgood and Andrews 2015). This was manifest not simply with the recovery of martial gear – spears and shield bosses – but their funerary context: interred in the graves of adult males (WA 2017). Indeed, the interim report describes how among the graves '...were warriors buried alongside their spears and shields...' (Osgood and Andrew 2015: 29).

Although the interim report and public literature make clear that it was an 'Anglo-Saxon community' that was recovered, including high-status female graves, not just adult male burials (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 30–31; 33–34), the spectacle of weapon burial is emphasised (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 32). The discussion aimed at a wide non-specialist audience emphasised the graves represented a community 'that valued military prowess' (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 31). A burial of a mature male with a sword, spear and shield was also discussed in relation to his physical attributes: his 'strong muscle attachments indicating a very robust frame' so that 'he cut a commanding figure'. His age suggested he might be a 'once-mighty warrior, now a community elder' (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 306).

Other items recovered were co-opted into a martial and masculine discussion. For example, the well-preserved yew-wood bucket uncovered in one weapon burial was described as a 'manly drinking vessel' by Wessex Archaeology's video reflecting on the first season of excavations (WA 2012). Another grave was referred to in the video as 'a warrior' defined by a shield boss, two spears and a knife (WA 2012). The diggers themselves connected to this narrative on the video: Rowan Kendrick, formerly of 5th Battalion, The Rifles, dug the grave of a weapon burial and inferred it was the grave of a 'young male buried with a well-preserved drinking vessel and spear, marking him out as a young warrior who liked to drink.

Not too dissimilar to the modern soldiers on the excavation' (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 32). Thus, the bonds of 'warrior' status linked contemporary military personnel with the early medieval past. The military personnel working on the project seemed to interpret weapon burial as a 'sign of respect' (Osgood 2013; WA 2012). The poem *Beowulf* is also cited to support the martial inferences (Osgood and Andrews 2015: 32).

Rather than any negative responses to digging skeletons, OpN revealed yet another example of the diverse and engaging ways in which archaeological engagements with the dead can positively engage contemporary communities and individuals (Giles and Williams 2016). Richard Osgood explained the palpable link experienced by the modern military personnel who felt a 'bond of kinship' with the dead 'warrior', whom they regarded as 'one of their own'. This appraisal was underpinned by Rifleman Mike Kelly who regarded weapon burial as a symbol of 'great respect' and that he understood what both they went through and their families went through. The soldier also regarded archaeological excavation itself as means of honouring a fallen warrior: it was a 'great respect for a former warrior to be dug up by another warrior' (Osgood 2013; WA 2012; see also Brown 2016; Williams and Williams 2007). Hence, the equation of warriors past and present was key to the Barrow Clump investigations by OpN.

In the magazine articles, the visual power of the weapon burial served to convey the 'warrior' identity of the dead (for context, see Bolchini 2019). This is also true of the latest report in *Current Archaeology* magazine about the latest excavations at Barrow Clump in which a new 'sword burial' was uncovered and a vivid photograph of the grave bearing spear and sword with the caption stating: 'this man cradles a sword in the crook of his arm' (Osgood 2018). Notably and positively, the language is far more cautious in this latest article, with the lede being the only place to use the term 'warrior grave' and keeping it within scare-quotes, but the 'warrior' status is projected through the choice of image, intimately connecting the body with the artefact placed with it.

Warrior graves on film

The martial dimensions were extended to a wide television audience when the first season was featured on a Channel Four *Time Team* programme produced during the first season of the Barrow Clump excavations (Time Team 2013). Here again we find soldiers expressing their enjoyment, social bonding, but also the therapeutic dimensions of the excavation process. Also, attention was afforded to the family nature of the burial ground, and the warrior status of the male occupants. Here, the narrative is taken out of the hands of OpN and seems to have been crafted by the programme but also in liaison with professional archaeologists and academics involved. Time Team presenter Tony Robinson describes Barrow Clump as where 'warriors and their families were laid to rest with all their riches'. As 'warrior-farmers' and the weapon graves are described as 'warrior graves', with Dr Helen Geake explaining that grave-goods being about 'painting a picture of their role in society'. The burial investigated by archaeologist Cassie Newland is described as 'distinctly warrior-like'. In this context, it is unsurprising that archaeologists cultivated explicitly a martial dialogue between past and present, with one soldier stating: 'it isn't wasted on any of us that we are digging up warriors of the past' (Time Team 2013). In other words, the significance of weapon burial is identified in both the original burial deposition and the act of excavation by a soldier who could afford it all due respect (Osgood 2013: 116–19). Re-enactors brought the warriors to life, while the lives of warriors past were resurrected and respected through excavation. This chimes closely with Martin Brown's appraisal of the bonds of respect and affinity created between military personnel and the remains of fallen soldiers on the Western Front (Brown 2016).

Admittedly, the *Time Team* programme does qualify its association of weapon graves with 'warriors' by discussing how the excavated shield might be for display as much as a defence-giving feature. The lack

of wear suggests that 'battle action' in life was not evidenced, but instead the programme suggested a qualification of their earlier assertion in the same episode: in death the early Anglo-Saxon community had wanted their males to dress as mighty warriors. However, these points are missing from the other interim reports and there is no evidence this qualified narrative was discussed or perpetuated on site among the military personnel, for whom the dead were 'warriors'. The summary of the *Time Team* programme emphasised the importance of this relationship between ancient graves and living soldiers: 'whether staying in the forces or moving on, archaeology has rebuilt their lives'.

By cultivating a martial personhood for the early medieval dead, rehabilitating these ancient 'warrior farmers' through excavation, the injured soldiers were performing a reconstitution of their own identities. Archaeological practice is thus a means of negotiating martial identities in both past and present: digging operating as a dialogue with the dead (Brown 2016; McLelland and Cerezo-Román 2016; Williams and Williams 2007).

This narrative of 'warrior graves' has persisted. *Digging for Britain*, Season 7, Episode 2 (2018), follows the return of the team to Barrow Clump led by Richard Osgood. Presenter, Alice Roberts, refers to weapons very cautiously as 'often associated with male burials' and 'Anglo-Saxon men were often buried with shields laid over them'. Uncovering the burial of an adult male with a knife, spear and sword, one of 27 graves. Osgood explains regarding the sword, that 'if you are digging with a military team, they all want to find weaponry...' and cautiously that the individual with a sword was 'perceived as a warrior' (the perception presumably being by 6th-century people). Roberts states that we cannot 'assume' he was a warrior, but then turns to the body of the man for confirmation, asserting that his 'long bones' and 'jaw' was 'robust' and 'masculine', presumably suggesting that stature and robusticity underlines a warrior status in a fashion akin to Victorian antiquarian commentators on weapon burials (Williams 2008).

Discussion

Archaeologists' relationships with the military are complex and long-lasting (Osgood 2013: 114; Stone 2015: 178). This discussion has not sought to explore in detail the issues of whether archaeology can be demonstrably therapeutic and restorative of military personnel or other groups. Equally, we do not query what criteria we adopt to judge the success or failure of archaeological projects seeking to do this (see Sayer 2015). Indeed, we anticipate that any single archaeological project will enrich and inform different individuals in contrasting regards (see Sayer and Sayer 2016). Moreover, we have not explored the broader ethical and political challenges of archaeologists working with the military in war zones and training areas (e.g. Hamilakis 2009). Instead, our focus is on the 'public mortuary archaeology' of OpN (see Giles and Williams 2016): how the dead are deployed in the present and made to 'live again' through archaeological practice and interpretations, as well as via media dissemination. In this regard, the therapeutic, ethical and political dimensions of OpN are seemingly enmeshed. As Osgood (2013) notes, the power of conflict archaeological sites and material cultures is that their familiarity and importance to troops renders them suitable for training military personnel. We propose that OpN has developed a distinctive martial and mortuary dialogue between past and present. For recent conflict archaeology, this can be powerful and personal (see also Brown 2016). Yet, for early medieval graves, this may have more challenging connotations (Sayer and Sayer 2016). OpN's innovative mode of public mortuary archaeology through its fieldwork and media engagements fosters bonds of fictive kinship between soldiers present and those of the Early Middle Ages by asserting parities and affinities between early English martial activity and modern soldiery.

This phenomenon is epitomised in *Time Team*'s characterisation of the Barrow Clump families as groups of 'warrior-farmers' and exposition of a model of English migration long challenged in academic discourses. In doing so, OpN has fostered a popular narrative on grave-goods and burial practice in early

Anglo-Saxon England in which martial immigrant ‘warrior’ status is foregrounded. This holds particular resonances with 19th-century celebrations of the martial identities and Teutonic migratory origins of the earliest English (see Williams 2008). Furthermore, it takes little account of the aforementioned academic critique of weapon burial as ‘warrior graves’. Instead, most recent studies have regarded weapon burial as multi-vocal, but also shifting in significance over time and space (e.g. Härke 1989; 1990; 1992; 1997; Halsall 2003; Williams 2011). Indeed, this is a broader challenge for the public engagement with mortuary archaeology, where identities are often uncritically read from grave-goods without considering the multiple actors and processes by which grave-goods might be selected upon and placed with the dead (see Williams 2009).

Yet OpN’s popular narratives and martial inferences from furnished sixth-century graves do not exist in a vacuum and should not be regarded as a singular challenge for this community archaeology project exclusively. Regarding weapon burials as ‘warrior graves’ and furnished graves as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ have persisted and are valorised in popular texts and in artistic displays of the period (see Lucy and Herring 1999; Williams 2007; 2009). For many, they constitute the earliest direct ancestors of modern British people in England, in contrast the pre-Roman and Roman populations are often cast as ‘other’. This is, for example, the case at major heritage destinations such as the National Trust’s Sutton Hoo (Walsh and Williams forthcoming), English Heritage’s Lindisfarne and Jarrow Hall (formerly Bede’s World), all of which characterise in their heritage displays the origins of England in terms of Bede’s origin myth. The same applies to many local and regional museums, including Leeds City Museum, which perpetuate a simple migrationist narrative for English origins. It is this popular manifestation of the early English, seemingly materialised and embodied in the furnished weapon grave, that OpN has deployed as a point of departure for their therapeutic practice and its media coverage has emphasised.

At one level, this is a fair and appropriate strategy for engaging modern soldiers in the first instance: to find familiarity and empathy in the past. Yet by the same token this approach holds the potential to valorise and misrepresent conflict and warfare in the Early Middle Ages, where the ‘professional warrior’ was a very different and evolving phenomenon to the life of a soldier in the late 20th or early 21st centuries. More concerning still, there are all manner of potential uses and misuses of this narrative in the second decade of the 21st century. The celebration and rehabilitation of early Anglo-Saxon warrior identities through excavation at Barrow Clump finds a parity in the commemoration of the ‘military hero’ in modern British culture and in a specifically English landscape of military training, where antiquity is mobilised to valorise martial endeavours and the war wounded for both worthy charitable, but also political, ends. This also finds particular resonance with the rise of a culture of military commemoration since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a revitalisation of war memorialisation since the new millennium, coming to the fore as part of the centennial celebrations of the Great War epitomised by the National Memorial Arboretum (e.g. Williams 2014). More recently, we have seen other popular celebrations of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture through heritage sites and the media, including the exhibitions and media associated with the Staffordshire Hoard and the celebrations of the ‘warrior queen’ Aethelflaed of Mercia. So the OpN work finds a broader context fascinated in English origins and ‘early English’ martial prowess. We must also recognise that concepts of the Anglo-Saxon ‘warrior’ encounters a new international context with the rise of early medieval martial images and material culture now widely appropriated by the far-right across the Western world, encapsulating both the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings (e.g. Elliot 2017).

In summary, academic and popular narratives regarding English origins have hinged on discoveries of furnished graves since the mid-19th century, when the first generation of archaeologists systematically and repeatedly dug up ‘warrior graves’ and regard them as the graves of the earliest English (Williams 2006; 2007; 2008). Today, they continue to be a focus of political discourse and debate as well as popular dissemination. In the public climate that has emerged since OpN was initiated, they might be considered

a mechanism for valorising military endeavours past and present, as well as being potentially ripe for misappropriation by extreme political viewpoints. So if the early Anglo-Saxon dead are being deployed as emotive and martial therapeutic tools for injured military personnel, they simultaneously feed popular narratives of English martial origins comparable to those portrayed in popular fiction and rooted in racial models of English origins from the 19th century (see Williams 2008).

Is this the fault of OpN? Perhaps not, since archaeologists cannot ever 'control' or 'future-proof' their findings in relation to public debate and political misappropriations. Still, the archaeologists working on OpN have carefully crafted their public engagements, and they therefore retain a responsibility to ensure that their narratives are informed by contemporary scholarship, and are robust, balanced and evidence-based. By way of analogy, a recent popular discussion by Duncan Sayer (2017) explores this very issue, based on new DNA analysis of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. Likewise, the debates about how we interpret 'warrior graves' is well established in the academic literature, so why cannot OpN extend these debates into their public engagements? As part of the ethical responsibilities of public mortuary archaeology, should we all develop more rigorous roles in debating not only archaeological interpretations, but how these results are disseminated to multiple, global, publics (see Williams 2019a)?

A parallel situation can be identified to the challenges facing OpN in the 2017 publication of a peer-reviewed journal article which identified a female sex to the occupant of a tenth-century chamber grave (Bj581) from the proto-town of Birka, Sweden. The individual was long presumed a man, and a high-status warrior, since the skeleton discovered in the late 19th century excavations had been found buried with a wide and rich range of items including weapons and gaming pieces as well as a pair of sacrificed horses. Yet the DNA evidence demonstrated the individual could be sexed as female (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017). Significantly, the study asserted the traditional equation of weapons with warrior status in the Viking Age, and thus argued that the genomics meant that the grave was most suitably interpreted as that of a 'female Viking warrior'. In doing so, the interdisciplinary team of authors produced a prominent example of digital public mortuary archaeology: choosing a high-venue academic publication venue that was widely disseminated world-wide via media and social media, assisted by the powerful visuals and chiming with the ever-popular gender-identity debate for contemporary audiences (reviewed by Williams 2017a-e; Williams 2019b). The possibility and character of female warriors in the Viking Age is the focus of ongoing research (e.g. Gardeta 2013; 2018), yet female warrior identity was widely popular among both academics and the public since it serves to reveal inherent male-bias within the discipline as well as to counter traditional male-dominated modes of perceiving Norse society in the Viking period. Yet, whether the interpretation is convincing or not, this narrative simultaneously perpetuates a celebration of the era's martial stereotypes via the medium of archaeological data. We might take from this the lesson that, if we cannot control the media story, we can at least consider our fieldwork and publications as not only dialogues with traces of the ancient dead, but also dialogues with contemporary society and politics. Whoever 'she' was, the occupant of Birka 581 is celebrated as a warrior in a society that continues to evoke its 'Viking' martial heritage. Instead of accepting such a narrative, why not debate key points of argumentation beyond our formal academic publications, and entertain alternative readings of the evidence? As with the authors of the Birka grave publication, OpN might consider engaging their participants and publics with different scenarios for interpreting weapon graves, and the wider burial population at the Barrow Clump cemetery.

There is a second key point to be gained from the example of the Birka 'female warrior grave' of relevance to OpN. It is not only significant regarding how we write, but also how we envision the early medieval furnished graves in public engagements (Williams 2017b). The use of excavation plans, photographs, but perhaps art, can project our interpretations far beyond traditional audiences, but they can also reify specific narratives to the exclusion of others (see also Williams 2009). The publication of Bj581 and its media dissemination used both Hjalmar Stolpe's original grave-plan but also an artist's reconstruction

of the chamber grave. Likewise, OpN have used images effectively and vividly in popular magazines, social media and television, to promote their work, including in *Current Archaeology* magazine and via television and social media. More than words, these images conjure a simplistic equation of weapons with the deceased's body, and therefore an equation with a warrior 'occupation' in life. Yet might we deploy such images differently, to reveal the complex multi-staged funerals that comprised these graves? Should we consider further how we use images of multiple graves to communicate our stories about past communities, not just dead individuals? Different approaches might facilitate us opening, rather than shutting out, ongoing academic debates regarding the interpretation of weapon graves from early medieval Europe, including the equation of weapons with warrior status? Perhaps alternative envisionings of graves and their occupants are required, restricted and inspired by, but not dictated by, the archaeological evidence (e.g. see Giles 2016; Gardęta 2019; Watson and Williams 2019). Both through a more careful use of text and image, we can enhance, rather than restrict, archaeological interpretations, with input and engagement with stakeholders and the wider public.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, at the end of 2018, the latest excavations at Barrow Clump by OpN and BGH has been reported in *The Guardian* under the heading 'Soldiers find Saxon warrior on Salisbury Plain' (Kennedy 2018). The media are thus keen to regard the sixth-century weapon grave as a 'warrior' buried with 'his spear' and 'his sword'. Once again, the martial identity of the diggers is matched by that ascribed to the grave's occupant: 'the soldiers were very moved by the discovery of a man they felt would have shared some of their experiences.' OpN's Facebook page referred to the grave as a 'warrior burial' with scare-quotes round 'warrior' (OpN 2018). As noted above, the latest *Current Archaeology* piece focuses on the intimate connection of a weapon grave between the sword and the adult male skeleton which appears 'as though he were cradling it with reverence' but refraining from expounding the 'warrior grave' term outside of scare quotes (Osgood 2018). Despite this nuance, it is clear that the martial narrative remains alive and well and an integral part of OpN's public engagement.

The aim of this paper has not been to denigrate the innovative and effective community archaeology projects of OpN. Such bespoke projects connecting specific groups with the human past hold considerable promise and an established place in archaeological research. Yet, the challenge for OpN in the future is to participate in the rehabilitation of soldiers, as well as to engage other publics, whilst simultaneously shedding critical and detailed light on the stories narrated about the martial identities and conflict narratives involving the archaeological dead, their human remains and material cultures. If the archaeological dead are tools for rehabilitation, fostering fictive kinships and emotional engagements with the early medieval dead (see Brown 2016), we must also remember that martial discourses can be mobilised in other, unwanted, and unintended fashions too, particularly relating to furnished graves from the Early Middle Ages.

While the early 'English' martial connotations and material traces deployed in community engagement may well afford empathy and affinity for military personnel today – soldiers digging soldiers – we have drawn attention to the complexities of narratives of Anglo-Saxon migration and warrior identities. Returning to Harland's (2017) recent warning: 'it is a dangerous time to be peddling oversimplifications of the Anglo-Saxon past.' These dangers are certainly not specific to OpN: we all face these difficulties in our attempts to conduct community and public archaeology in the early 21st century, especially when negotiating the stories surrounding early medieval graves. Such challenges might be faced by advancing more complex and nuanced interpretations of early medieval weapon graves for participants, communities and the media.

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