

# **The Early to Middle Anglo-Saxon Period, 500–800**

In this year Cynewulf and Offa fought around Bensington [Benson] and Offa captured the town

ASC D(E) 779 (777)

## INTRODUCTION

The early part of the Anglo-Saxon period can only be understood in terms of what came before, namely the removal of the Roman administration and collapse of Roman economic structures in the fifth century. That process involved a profound change from a militarised tax state, a high population, and some large-scale farming systems, to a more fragmented settlement landscape in which an apparently much smaller population was engaged principally in subsistence agriculture. Here we enter deeply contested territory, with many difficult and, as yet, unresolved questions. For instance, what was the nature of Roman government at the end of fourth and the beginning of fifth century, and how did leading kindred groups who wielded local authority emerge by the end of the fifth century? What was the scale of immigration by people from elsewhere in Britain and from the Continent, and how did these people fit into existing forms of political and social organisation? What happened to the Romano-British population, given that Roman-style buildings, pottery, and coinage disappear and by 500 almost all surviving material culture and cultural practices appear to be, in archaeological terms, ‘Anglo-Saxon’.<sup>1</sup>

The first part of this chapter attempts, as far as possible, to understand life in south Oxfordshire in the obscure period around 500. We then move on to trace the emergence of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the late sixth and seventh centuries, and to assess the local impact of kingly contests of the kind mentioned in the extract from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle at the head of the chapter, which seem to give Benson a prominent role as a royal base. The larger part of the chapter focuses on the economic structures and daily interactions which did so much to shape inhabitants’ experiences and perceptions. In these early centuries much about the organisation of local life is uncertain, and the findings necessarily contain an element of speculation. Yet significant and useful data do survive, including archaeology in

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<sup>1</sup> For some general discussion of these issues: Esmonde-Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain*; White, *Britannia Prima*; Smith et al., *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain*; Gerrard, *The Ruin of Roman Britain*; Blair, *A-S Oxon*. chapter 1; Higham and Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, chapters 1 and 2.

and just beyond the hundred's bounds and place-names recorded in mainly later documents, including charter boundary clauses.

Three main arguments are advanced about early to middle Anglo-Saxon people's perception of the landscape (defining the middle Anglo-Saxon period as c.650–800). Firstly, it is argued that social organisation strongly structured access to resources, and that changes in access were articulated through basic social units such as household and kindred. Although elites made an increasingly visible impact on the land and on landscape memorialisation, the localised expression of social relationships amongst ordinary inhabitants remained the strongest driver of daily experiences and perceptions. Developing local relationships are visible in excavated mortuary sites and settlements — which included family farms from which dues were rendered and directly administered estate land farmed probably by the unfree — as well as in place-names deriving from particular individuals and groups. Secondly, it is argued that because of the primitive nature of the farming economy household welfare was finely balanced, and problems such as poor weather could have a severely detrimental impact. As a result, a real threat of starvation affected the way the landscape was experienced. A third theme is the adoption of Christianity and attendant impacts on people's perception of the past and attitudes to the environment.

## STRUCTURES AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE

### *Power and Identity*

The first point to make about the Anglo-Saxon transition in south Oxfordshire is that it took place against a background of significant late Roman activity.<sup>2</sup> That was not the case everywhere, and it would have had implications for the way social change took hold. Here a key nodal point appears to have been the Roman 'small town' of Dorchester, immediately to the west of Ewelme hundred. The Old English name 'Dorchester' (*Dorciccaestræ*, c.731), means 'Roman town called \**Dorcic*', and it preserves as its first element \**Dorcic*, which (with the river names Thames and Thame) is one of the few surviving pre-English names in the region.<sup>3</sup> The survival of the British element in the name probably reflects Dorchester's status as a significant and widely known feature in the landscape. Use of the Old English loan

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<sup>2</sup> *TTT*, 75–7.

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of \**Dorcic* is obscure, but the British \**Duro-c-*, a diminutive of \**duro*, 'a fort', or the root \**derk-/dorc-*, as in Breton *derch*, Welsh *drych*, 'mirror, aspect, appearance', are possible elements, and Coates suggested that the name may be a Brittonic form of Romano-British \**Durocuccium*, meaning 'boat fort'. Watts, *Dictionary*, 191, 606; *PN Oxon*. I, 152; Carroll, 'The Place-Name Wallingford', 57; Coates, 'The Pre-English Name of Dorchester-on-Thames', 53–60.

word *cæster* ‘city, walled town, fortification’<sup>4</sup> as a compound suggests that it was recognisable as a Roman settlement to the area’s English-speaking inhabitants. That recognisability was due to the fact that Dorchester had survived as a central place in the late Roman period, when some other settlements were in decline. In the later third century, or slightly later, its defences were strengthened by the insertion of a stone wall in front of the earlier earthen ramparts, and the cutting of a new enclosing ditch;<sup>5</sup> Dorchester was evidently regarded as a place worth defending. Indeed, within the defences, excavations have revealed activity through the fourth century, with at least one well-appointed building with a tessellated floor constructed possibly after c.370, and another simpler building perhaps around 400.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, at Dorchester as at several other locations in the region, the evidence for late Roman settlement overlaps chronologically with the earliest Anglo-Saxon material of early to mid fifth-century date.<sup>7</sup> What is more, certain burial finds suggest a Germanic presence before the Roman collapse, which may in some way be related to the Anglo-Saxon arrival. In 1874, amongst a number of unfurnished burials, a male burial containing late Roman military-style belt equipment was found in the Dyke Hills Iron-Age earthwork immediately to the south of Dorchester. A nearby female burial included a mixture of Roman and Germanic items. In 2009–10 the disturbed remains of a further late Roman burial were found in Dyke Hills, and the metalwork recovered included a fine military-type belt. Additional late Roman metalwork, including buckles, has also recently been found in the southern part of the town itself. Such material might suggest the presence of a powerful military group at Dorchester in the early fifth century.<sup>8</sup>

The belt equipment in particular has been the focus of significant debate, especially since an important article by Sonia Hawkes and Gerald Dunning noted its parallels with contemporary furnished weapon graves in Gaul, and interpreted it as official kit for ‘federate’ soldiers serving in the late Roman army.<sup>9</sup> Hawkes and Dunning argued that the presence of such equipment with an individual buried alongside a woman with a late Roman buckle and

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<sup>4</sup> Parsons and Styles, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names. Brace–Cæster*, 158–62.

<sup>5</sup> Hogg and Stevens, ‘The Defences of Roman Dorchester’, 43; Frere, ‘Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1962’, 130; Frere, ‘Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1963’, 124–7; *TTT*, 71, 74–5.

<sup>6</sup> Frere, ‘Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1962’, 123; Frere, ‘Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1963’, 109–18; *TTT*, 72, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *TTT*, 73, 75, 164–8, 90, 91, 380; Booth, ‘A Late Roman Military Burial from the Dyke Hills’; Hamerow et al., ‘The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project’, 59–60.

<sup>9</sup> Hawkes and Dunning, ‘Soldiers and Settlers’, building on Kirk and Leeds, ‘Three Early Saxon Graves from Dorchester’.

brooches of ‘North Germanic’ origin suggested that this was the grave of a German soldier who had received lands in Britain for service in the Roman army.<sup>10</sup> Such an assessment of the Dorchester metalwork might support the identification of Dorchester as a centre of the kind which some have proposed as emerging in Britain in the aftermath of the Roman military withdrawal in the early fifth century, when regional power possibly devolved to Roman elites in control of individual provinces and city territories.<sup>11</sup> Possibly if some Germanic federate troops remained at Dorchester serving British leaders during and after the Roman withdrawal, they may have played a part in encouraging Saxon settlers?<sup>12</sup> If so, that might strengthen a traditional interpretation of the fifth- and early sixth-century ‘migration’ period, based ultimately on Gildas (c.540), and Bede (d. 735), in which British ‘tyrants’, eager to secure their territories in unstable times, invited large, well-organised groups of ethnic Saxons to settle their lands.<sup>13</sup>

However, there are serious problems with such an interpretation. To start with, the identity and precise chronology of the belt-wearers remain uncertain.<sup>14</sup> Analysis of tooth enamel indicates that the remains found in 2009–10 were those of a man of indeterminate European, rather than British, origin.<sup>15</sup> However, even if the belt-wearers were late-Roman Germanic troops, as is entirely possible, to link them with planned, large-scale Saxon immigration is highly problematic given what we know about post-Roman Britain and about early medieval Germanic society. In other words, it is unlikely that fifth-century British leaders were able to retain extensive territorial power, still less that the immigrants were part of a strongly hierarchical society capable of exercising it.<sup>16</sup> What is more, although migrants clearly were arriving and bringing with them their own material culture, much of which has been found in and around Dorchester, the spread of that material cannot be directly equated with immigration, the scale of which remains open to question.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Hawkes and Dunning, ‘Soldiers and Settlers’, 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Welch, ‘The Archaeological Evidence for Federate Settlement in Britain’; Dumville, ‘The Idea of Government in Sub-Roman Britain’, 180–3; Halsall, *Worlds of Arthur*, 216–20; Green, *Britons and Anglo-Saxons*, 65–9, 82–3.

<sup>12</sup> Hawkes, ‘The Early Anglo-Saxon Period’, 64–77.

<sup>13</sup> Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (‘On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain’), chapters 20–26; *HE*, XI–XXII; discussed by Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 1–8.

<sup>14</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 5–6.

<sup>15</sup> Booth, ‘A Late Roman Military Burial from the Dyke Hills’, 259–60.

<sup>16</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 6.

<sup>17</sup> Hamerow et al., ‘The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project’, 61; Tyrrell, ‘*Corpus Saxonum*’, 153–4; Shennan, ‘Some Current Issues in the Archaeological Identification of Past Peoples’, 31; Lucy, ‘Ethnic and Cultural Identities’, 92–4; Curta, ‘Some Remarks on Ethnicity in Medieval Archaeology’, 177.

How, then, to explain what was going on in south Oxfordshire in the fifth and early sixth century? On present evidence, it seems almost certain that the local Romano-British population survived beyond the early fifth century, even though the withdrawal of Roman authority at that time is very likely to have brought significant demographic decline.<sup>18</sup> There seems little doubt that the Thames valley, rather than the Icknield Way or some other route, was the main communication route for fifth-century and later immigrants, not least because the material culture of the upper Thames has strong links with that of the Kentish-Frankish world and in particular with Surrey, Essex, Kent and Sussex.<sup>19</sup> In parts of the main valley of the upper Thames, native and immigrant populations may well have lived cheek by jowl, probably with some conflict but not apparently an overwhelming amount, at least as far as the archaeology has revealed to date.<sup>20</sup>

In other parts of the region immigrants may have had less of an early impact. It has been suggested, for instance, that a lack of material evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity in the Chilterns, itself a place with an ancient, pre-British name (\**ciltā*, ‘high’ + the common Celtic place-making suffix *-erno-*), has been used to support the idea of a late-surviving British enclave there composed either of small groups or, according to one interpretation, an independent polity surviving in the late sixth century.<sup>21</sup> Place-names may occasionally supply tantalising glimpses of later Anglo-Saxon perceptions of such a British presence in the area, most notably in the names Wallingford (*Welengaford*, c.895), if the name is to be interpreted as ‘the ford of the *Wealingas* (Britons)’, and Britwell (*Brutewell(e)*, c.1320); Britwell, in the Chiltern scarp zone), possibly meaning ‘spring of the Britons’.<sup>22</sup>

Scientific analysis of skeletons from local cemeteries gives us some concrete data about inhabitants’ origins. Analysis of the oxygen and strontium isotope ratios of the tooth enamel of some of the mid fifth- to earlier sixth-century burials in a cemetery at Berinsfield, just north of Dorchester, suggests that most of the population at that time would have been born in the locality. Nineteen individual burials were tested by this method, their probable date being determined by the character of the grave goods (which accompanied sixteen of the burials) and radiocarbon dates. Of these individuals, only one appears to have come from the continent (or just possibly two), and two others may have grown up in western or northern

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<sup>18</sup> *TTT*, 378.

<sup>19</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 8, 14; Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 83–4, 87.

<sup>20</sup> *TTT*, 380.

<sup>21</sup> Rutherford Davis, *Britons and Saxons: The Chiltern Region 400–700*; Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 14 and n. 45; Hepple and Doggett, *The Chilterns*, 52–6; Watts, *Dictionary*, 134; Baker, *Cultural Transition in the Chilterns and Essex Region*, 138–86.

<sup>22</sup> Watts, *Dictionary*, 88, 646; Carroll, ‘The Place-Name Wallingford’.

England. On the basis of this limited test, possibly about 20 per cent of the cemetery population was of non-local origin, but perhaps only 5 per cent came from the continent. Interestingly, the one strong candidate for continental origin was buried with a fragment of Roman belt fitting (as well as a knife and shield boss).<sup>23</sup>

These findings, in other words, provide evidence for some small-scale migration, but suggest that a large proportion of this population grew up locally. A significant caveat is that isotopic analysis can only identify first generation migrants, so the presence of second or third generation migrants is much more difficult to assess. Those looking for an entirely new population arriving in the fifth century might grasp at the fact that there were differences in diet and stature between the people interred at Berinsfield and those buried at the late Roman cemetery 600 metres to the south at Queenford Farm, which apparently went out of use before (or shortly after) burials at Berinsfield began in the early fifth century.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is unclear whether these differences really were a result of immigration. Some of the dietary and physical differences between the populations might be suggested to result from differences in the social structure of their underlying communities in successive periods.<sup>25</sup> What is more, the basic burial rite at both cemeteries was inhumation, and the burials without grave goods at Berinsfield are very similar to those at Queenford Farm.

How then did the incomers, or at any rate their material culture and language, come to dominate, and apparently quite quickly? The mechanics of interaction and cultural assimilation are essentially a matter of speculation, but it is at least possible that they are illuminated by the later traditions of the West Saxon royal house, which was descended from a group called the 'Gewisse', whose name perhaps means 'sure' or 'reliable', and may have been self-conferred. Information about the Gewisse comes chiefly from Bede, writing in the early eighth century, and the deeply problematic ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and West Saxon Regnal List. From the first two sources it appears that the Gewisse had become very successful in the upper Thames area around Dorchester by the late sixth century. Ceawlin, king of the Gewisse, is named by Bede as one of the great overlords of the southern English, who in the 570s, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, here not drawing on Bede and very late, successfully captured seven 'towns' from the British, including Aylesbury, Cirencester, Bath, and Benson.<sup>26</sup> The Gewissan focus on the south Oxfordshire area is

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<sup>23</sup> Hughes et al., 'Anglo-Saxon Origins Investigated by Isotopic Analysis'.

<sup>24</sup> Hills and O'Connell, 'New Light on the Anglo-Saxon Succession'.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication from Paul Booth.

<sup>26</sup> *HE*, II.5; ASC A, under 571 and 577.

reinforced by the claim that in 635 King Cynegils was converted to Christianity at Dorchester and made it the centre of an episcopal see.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, the ninth-century Regnal List claimed the West Saxons' descent from a British ancestor, or at any rate a king with a British name: Cerdic (reigned c.538–54?).

Taken together these scraps may indicate something of how the Gewisse rose to prominence in and around Dorchester. Barbara Yorke has suggested the descent claimed in the Regnal List may reflect a willingness 'to acknowledge the British contribution to West Saxon identity'.<sup>28</sup> It may well also have reflected an earlier political necessity. Whilst outwardly sixth-century West Saxon rulers claimed Saxon ethnicity, presumably necessary for the purposes of interactions with other rulers, their local powerbase may have relied on people whose ancestry was still understood to be Romano-British and who continued to maintain some form of status and territorial presence. A two-way relationship would have helped in the incorporation of Britons into Anglo-Saxon kinship networks.<sup>29</sup>

That a probably modest number of immigrants had such a profound effect in the late fifth and sixth centuries may be partly explained by military prowess, but it also related to the small size of the population. So much is suggested by cemeteries such as Queenford Farm and Berinsfield. We do have to remember that there are almost certainly many burials and perhaps whole cemeteries either destroyed without record or as yet undiscovered, but it is safe to say that the fifth- and early sixth-century population was smaller than that of the third or fourth century, when agriculture was far more intensive. That said, the population cannot have been miniscule or the landscape would have reverted to scrub and then woodland, which, as we shall see, it did not.

The best archaeological indication of the size of a local population in the early Anglo-Saxon period comes from excavations at Berinsfield. Around a half to two-thirds of the cemetery there was recovered, revealing a total of 114 individuals from 100 graves as well as four cremations, all apparently dating from the fifth to early seventh centuries (based on grave goods and radiocarbon dates). The entire cemetery is likely to have constituted around 150–200 individuals mainly buried in a period of about 150 years, implying a living population of roughly 30–40 people,<sup>30</sup> or about 6–10 households. The catchment area is unknown, but the low numbers support the idea that this and other cemeteries were probably

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<sup>27</sup> *HE*, III.7; ASC E 635.

<sup>28</sup> Yorke, 'Anglo-Saxon Origin Legends', 23.

<sup>29</sup> Hamerow et al., 'The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project', 59.

<sup>30</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, xvi, 112, 116, noting probable lost cremations as well as inhumations; Hills and O'Connell, 'New Light on the Anglo-Saxon Succession', 1101–1105.

used by single or small number of nearby settlements, so the distribution of burial sites in all likelihood broadly reflects that of contemporary living communities, with probable gaps because of undiscovered cemeteries.

In all, five certain or highly likely burial sites of the fifth to eighth centuries have been identified within the hundred, with many more known from surrounding areas (Figure 3.1).<sup>31</sup> Together, they form the eastern limits of a cluster of Anglo-Saxon burial sites centred between Abingdon and Dorchester. In terms of size, each of those burial sites was comparable with, or even smaller than, the community buried at Berinsfield.

### Figure 3.1

It was in this world of small groups that the continental migrants and their culture had such an impact. We can speculate that fifth- and early sixth-century strong men exerted some kind of limited territorial control, even though it is unlikely that there were any large, or tightly controlled territories. Dorchester was probably the focal point of the surrounding area, with the Dyke Hills valley fort or the nearby hillfort on Castle Hill in the Sinodun Hills perhaps used as a defensible base. In the fifth century the locality was probably dominated by leaders of native stock, but the immigrants, or at any rate those adopting their ways, soon came to be more successful. If Dorchester was at the heart of one small territory of leading kindred, that of the Gewisse, others may possibly be reflected in the string of 'ingas' place-names along the Thames, including that of the 'Garingas' around Goring.<sup>32</sup> By the later sixth century such local groups may have come under wider regional lordship of the Gewisse.

Looking forward to the middle Anglo-Saxon period, by the early seventh century, larger political units were emerging. By that time the Gewisse were operating alongside other rising powers, notably the Anglian and other groups in the Midlands who became known as the Mercians. In fact, Gewissan power in the upper Thames valley was coming under increasing Mercian pressure.<sup>33</sup> The foundation of Winchester as the centre of a new southern

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<sup>31</sup> The cemeteries within the hundred are: the fifth to seventh-century cemetery at Painter's/Rumbold's Pit, Ewelme (Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site'); the middle Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Benson St Mary's Avenue (*SMidLA*, 47 (2017), 69); and the cemetery at Gould's Grove, Benson (Ashmolean Museum, Ewelme topographical folder, letter from Thomas Powell, 1917). Findspots of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork likely to represent burials are from: Chalgrove (BERK-2A13A9), in the far north-west of the parish, north of Newbury Hill; and Cuxham (BERK-6E8DEA), on high ground just north of the village. Other early and poorly documented finds suggest further burial sites in Benson: HER, PRNs 2105, 9460.

<sup>32</sup> Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, 40–2; Eagles, *Roman Civitas to Anglo-Saxon Shire*, 157–84; Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 35

<sup>33</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 42–5; Yorke, 'Competition for the Solent and 7th Century Politics', 36–8.

bishopric in 641 appears to have exerted for the Gewisse a gravitational pull away from the Thames valley, and by the 680s the royal dynasty had established itself over a people — henceforth known as the West Saxons<sup>34</sup> — inhabiting core-lands centred on southern Wiltshire and Hampshire.

For the remainder of the seventh and eighth centuries and into the ninth century, south Oxfordshire formed part of a highly unstable frontier province between the rival Mercian and West Saxon kingdoms. Although recorded battles were infrequent, land grants by the rulers of the two rival kingdoms during this period document attempts by both to establish claims in the area, particularly through patronage of border minsters such as Bath, Malmesbury, Abingdon, and Cookham.<sup>35</sup> For periods under Æthelbald (716–57) and Offa (757–96), Mercian rulers appear in the ascendancy. Æthelbald occupied Somerton (Som.) in 733, and Offa defeated the West Saxon Cynewulf at Benson in 779, between which dates Mercian rulers are found in possession of lands as far south as Wootton Bassett (S 256, S 96) and Purton (S 149), both near Swindon (Wilts.). But there were periods too when West Saxon control seems likely. The West Saxon Cuthred may well have recaptured the upper Thames valley in 752, and the West Saxons were still in control of it until Cynewulf's defeat.<sup>36</sup> By that time south Oxfordshire had become more peripheral to foci of political, religious and economic activities in Mercia, Wessex, and the London area.

This brief narrative of events shows the transitory nature of political power across south Oxfordshire as late as the ninth century, and it also illustrates a process, recognised elsewhere, by which many of the polities of early medieval England underwent a series of scale-changes in socio-political organisation. Particularly during the middle Anglo-Saxon period, the most important kings, such as those of the West Saxons or Mercians, began to claim more extensive territorial powers, wherever possible extending their rule over the petty kings of neighbouring small-scale polities. However, greater extensive lordship was not necessarily felt as more intensive rule by the lower levels of society.

It would seem that early in the period kings maintained a direct personal link with their kingdoms; tribute and allegiance were made directly to the king, and the king's rule was formalised through a range of public rituals.<sup>37</sup> One of these rituals — encapsulated by the

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<sup>34</sup> Walker, 'Bede and the Gewissae'; Yorke, 'The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the Origins of Wessex', 93–4.

<sup>35</sup> Yorke, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, 62–4; Kelly (ed.), *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey*, 12–14; Eagles, *Roman Civitas to Anglo-Saxon Shire*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms', 72–8; Scull, 'Social Archaeology and Anglo-Saxon Origins', 19–23; see also Wickham, *Framing*, 519–35.

concept of ‘hall culture’ — was the public consumption of food renders (*feorm*) by itinerant kings at important locations; another was political assemblies, where nobles and freemen (or representatives thereof) participated in procedures legitimating the ruler’s power.<sup>38</sup> Several divisions existed in early medieval society, especially between the free and the unfree, and between the noble and non-noble.<sup>39</sup> In one sense these divisions were relational — nobility depended on proximity to one’s lord rather than a clear social distinction, and lords themselves varied in their proximity to the king — but with these ranks also came certain rights and obligations.<sup>40</sup> Nobles had a responsibility to support kings in war, and to serve them in other administrative capacities, and it was this power that distinguished them from others.

The emergence of ‘high kings’ at the head of paramount dynasties wielding supra-regional power, such as would seem to be the case of the rulers of the West Saxons or Mercians, was primarily the result of competition between these kings, in which the direct control over territorial heartlands became combined with other powers extending over a wider geographical area. This power depended, on the one hand, on the physical display of force, enabled by a retinue of aristocratic warriors, and on the other, on their ability to gain recognition from those sub-kings who exercised control over local areas. In this regard, battles described in the earliest sources may be understood as, in some ways, aristocratic affairs, in which strategic and symbolic ambitions of kings and their followers were acted out, but in which various exceptions, conventions and rituals, constrained the worst effects of warfare on society.<sup>41</sup> The recorded battles of the upper Thames valley can probably be understood in this way. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that having a rival army in the area was not good news for local people. Some ceorls were obliged to bear arms,<sup>42</sup> and inhabitants generally were doubtless obliged to supply food and other necessities, and may have risked being taken as slaves.

It is likely that the powerbase of local chiefs remained largely unaltered as part of this process. Both nobles and other freemen would seem to have been part of internally ranked descent groups — essentially extended families — for whom the basic socio-economic unit was the ancestral farm or holding, rights to which were embodied in a central family but

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<sup>38</sup> On the functions of great halls: Blair, *The Church*, 275–9; McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 59–78. For public assembly: Reuter, ‘Assembly Politics’; Roach, *Kingship and Consent*; Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England*, 156–9.

<sup>39</sup> Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*, 31–3.

<sup>40</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 277–80, 488–9.

<sup>41</sup> Halsall, ‘Anthropology and the Study of Pre-Conquest Warfare’.

<sup>42</sup> Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 63.

which was worked by a household which might include extended family, more distant kin, and a range of unfree dependents.<sup>43</sup> Although the status of heads of these local extended families may have become devolved as part of larger territorial unification, these individuals continued to draw on the representational role they played for the small political communities who granted them legitimacy.<sup>44</sup> Whilst the power of high kings rested on maintaining their authority over sub-kings and other nobles, and was accordingly highly volatile, at the scale of local territories we might expect much greater stability in community structures.

Our main written evidence for these social structures comes from law codes, and although concerned with Wessex, the laws of King Ine (688–725) give some indication of who in this period might be conceived of as a peasant — someone outside the power elite — in early to middle Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire, and of the different groups that existed within the peasantry around 690. Surviving in an appendix to Alfred's laws, Ine's law code includes a number of pronouncements on the relationships and wergelds of English and 'Welsh', and on the responsibilities of nobles.<sup>45</sup> Wergelds were the basic compensation payments made to kin for the murder or disablement of a person, and were calculated on the basis of rank. The laws valued the wergeld of nobles (*gesiths* in Ine's code, equivalent to *thegns* by the tenth century) at twelve hundred shillings, six times that of ordinary freemen (*ceorlas*). Welshmen, by contrast, were divided into five different classes of wergild assessments ranging from 600 to 60 shillings.<sup>46</sup>

Because the relationship between peasants and kings was mediated through tribute, local organisation remained relatively stable. From quite an early date the countryside was recognised as divided up for the purposes of taking tribute and for maintaining law and order. In Ine's law code at least one kind of tribute (*foster*), is very precisely described down to the number of chickens, cheeses and 'ambers' of ale due, and calculated on the basis of ten 'hides'.<sup>47</sup> The origins of such hidage assessments — effectively land and the families which it supported — are unknown: they may have descended from Roman taxation or continental Germanic practice, but were certainly widely known by the seventh century.<sup>48</sup> While kings

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<sup>43</sup> Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms', 72–3; Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 56–88; Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 70–2; Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*.

<sup>44</sup> Escalona et al., 'Politics, Neighbourhoods and Things In-Between', 19.

<sup>45</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 103–4.

<sup>46</sup> Rushbrook Williams, 'The Status of the Welsh in the Laws of Ine', 274.

<sup>47</sup> Ine, 70.1, discussed by, amongst others, Lavelle, 'Ine 70.1 and Royal Provision in Anglo-Saxon Wessex'; Wickham, *Framing*, 321.

<sup>48</sup> Goffart, 'The Technique of Barbarian Settlement in the Fifth Century', 69–70; Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, 119–86; Charles-Edwards, 'Kinship, Status and the Origins of the Hide', 4–5.

could and did use these assessments to calculate the tax liable from individuals, it was more common in earliest examples for them to negotiate with and take tribute from groups of people. The best example of this practice is the preserved in the so-called ‘Tribal Hidage’, a short document surviving in three versions, the earliest of which dates from the first half of the eleventh century,<sup>49</sup> but which appears to describe the political situation of the seventh or eighth centuries.<sup>50</sup> The Tribal Hidage lists thirty-five different groups of people each associated with a hidage. To judge from the range of assessments and names given to them, not all these groups were equivalent. Some may have represented relatively large political agglomerations (kingdoms), some constituted groups associated with well-defined geographical units,<sup>51</sup> and others — whether self-identifying or not — may simply have been corporate bodies of substantially autonomous free peasants grouped together for fiscal purposes.

So much for shifts in power and identity, and the emergence of kings, which provide a basis for understanding developments during the early and middle Anglo-Saxon society. What can we actually say about the inhabitants of the area, the people who lived and were buried in south Oxfordshire during the fifth to eighth centuries?

### *The Inhabitants*

There is much that we do not know about the people living in sixth-century south Oxfordshire, but we can be confident that for much of the time their life was hard. People depended greatly on the main August cereal harvest and on the health of their cattle and other livestock. The threat of starvation was very real.<sup>52</sup> Excavated contemporary settlements in the region — such as that of Sutton Courtenay, just 10 km west of Ewelme hundred — supply no evidence for significant storage facilities such as granaries or silos in which foodstuffs could be stockpiled,<sup>53</sup> even if disasters could have been predicted. Whatever regular food storage took place, did so on a small scale. Possibly the situation was made harder by cooler and

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<sup>49</sup> Dumville, ‘The Tribal Hidage’; Davies and Vierck, ‘The Contexts of Tribal Hidage’, 288–92.

<sup>50</sup> Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 9–13; Keynes, ‘England, 700–900’, 23.

<sup>51</sup> For example, *Wihthara*, ‘Isle of Wight dwellers’; *Pecsætna*, ‘Peak dwellers’; *Elmedsætna*, ‘Elmet dwellers’; and *Cilternsætna*, ‘Chiltern dwellers’, discussed further [below, p. ....](#)

<sup>52</sup> Amongst the seventeen individuals recovered from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Didcot Power Station, osteological analysis identified two (skeletons 2 and 14) with evidence for childhood malnutrition: Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 234.

<sup>53</sup> Leeds, ‘A Saxon Village near Sutton Courtenay, Berkshire’, first to third reports; Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 50–1, 61–2. Modern excavations by Oxford Archaeology in 2016 at Sutton Courtenay Bridge Farm, east of the village (in Appleford parish), have identified a further settlement, with twenty-one *Grubenhäuser*. Here the absence of other feature types of early Anglo-Saxon date can be regarded as definitive: Paul Booth, personal communication.

wetter summers brought on by the so-called ‘Late Antique Little Ice Age’ of c.536–660, although its effects in the English lowlands are debateable.<sup>54</sup> In Oxfordshire as elsewhere in England, malnourishment may also have been exacerbated by the effects of plagues, one of which is described by Bede for the year 664, and which are beginning to be identified in skeletons excavated in England.<sup>55</sup>

Datable burials from the region suggest that longevity was considerably lower than in the late Roman or later Anglo-Saxon period, with probably less than half the population reaching thirty years of age, and only about 13 per cent of adult men surviving beyond forty-five.<sup>56</sup> Overall, local population growth may well have been checked or even fallen into decline during the later sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>57</sup> Amongst what, as we shall see, were typically small groups, the survival of child-bearing women may have been key to the continuity of a particular community. As a result of these stressful conditions, group membership and rights to land and food tributes are likely to have been highly charged matters, readily capable of generating social conflict. The success or otherwise of individual groups may well be reflected in quite widely varying levels of disease found in analysis of skeletal remains, with poor nutrition apparently more prevalent at nearby Didcot than at Butler’s Field, Lechlade (Glos.), for example.<sup>58</sup>

It seems likely that there was great variety amongst the kin groups exploiting their farms. As we have seen, the background of some, early on many, was certain to have gone back into the Roman period, but others arrived from places further afield. Significantly, while there was evidently almost certainly some mix of incomers and ‘locals’ within these communities, a large number of people chose to express social differences and rank through their burial with objects of portable wealth, particularly metalwork (Figure 3.2).

### Figure 3.2

Somewhat paradoxically, and in contrast to the Roman period, burials of the fifth to the late seventh century are notable for the particularly rich assemblages of objects which accompanied some individuals in death, as dress accessories, personal effects, and other

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<sup>54</sup> Rippon, ‘Continuity and Change’, 16–18.

<sup>55</sup> *HE*, III, 30; McCormick, ‘Toward a Molecular History of the Justinian Pandemic’, 308; Keller et al., ‘Ancient *Yersinia Pestis* Genomes’.

<sup>56</sup> *TTT*, 174–5. At Berinsfield, four of the thirty aged and sexed adult males (13 per cent) were aged over 45: Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 108, 112–16.

<sup>57</sup> *TTT*, 172.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 175–6.

grave goods.<sup>59</sup> At cemetery sites in the hundred, just as across much of England, objects in iron, copper-alloy, and occasionally in precious metals of gold and silver, were consumed in the burial rite, removing them from the daily life of people, who — to judge from the other archaeological traces they left behind — were not in other ways materially wealthy.<sup>60</sup> The reasons for such elaborate mortuary practices were doubtlessly multifarious but from the variations in what was buried with whom it seems clear that the act of burial was used to emphasise age and gender roles, social rank, ancestry, and other aspects of identity.<sup>61</sup> Dying could be very expensive, and that may have been because, for the living, burial provided a way of creating idealised communities and bringing some certainty to unpredictable times, the implication being that social variability and difference between people were a commonplace.

Berinsfield, like other contemporary cemeteries, appears to be physically structured, with numbers of burials grouped together in small clusters, suggestive of family groups.<sup>62</sup> Within such small groups the apparent ranking of individuals, on the basis of their grave goods, is best regarded within the general framework of an extended kinship structure. During the later fifth and sixth centuries many of the objects seem to reflect a preoccupation with kin and identity. Assemblages are heavily gendered: weapons, such as swords, spears, and shields are associated with masculine identity, whilst combinations of brooches and personal effects are linked to femininity.<sup>63</sup> Particularly amongst women, certain objects would seem to symbolize aspects of an individual's life-course, with new ways of dressing associated with new social permissions.<sup>64</sup> At around five years of age, girls begin to be buried with feminine items such as jewellery, but at around twelve years of age there are marked changes in costume with rings and pins becoming common. The late teens appear to mark another threshold, with new brooch types, long necklaces and keys and latchlifters appearing amongst the burial assemblage – symbols, perhaps, of domestic roles as co-heads of

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<sup>59</sup> Welch, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 62–4; Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 4–5.

<sup>60</sup> For local cemeteries, below, pp. .... For the national distribution of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, with its eastern and southern weighting: Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, fig. 1.1 (p. 2); Higham and Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World*, fig. 2.7 (p. 80).

<sup>61</sup> Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear*; Williams, *Death and Memory*, 36–78.

<sup>62</sup> This tendency in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries has been discussed by Evison, *Dover: The Buckland Anglo-Saxon Cemetery*, 134–6, 142–6; Sayer, 'Death and the Family'; Sayer and Wienhold, 'A GIS-Investigation of Four Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries'.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Pader, *Symbolism, Social Relations and the Interpretation of Mortuary Remains*; Härke, "'Warrior Graves'?"; Brush, 'Adorning the Dead'; Lucy, 'Housewives, Warriors and Slaves?'; Lucy, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of East Yorkshire*.

<sup>64</sup> Lucy, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of East Yorkshire*, 45; Stoodley *The Spindle and the Spear*, 108–16; Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*; Gowland, 'Ageing the Past', 147–53.

households.<sup>65</sup> Then around the age of forty some of these objects are no longer buried with women.<sup>66</sup> For men, similar age thresholds are less easy to identify, but weapon burials are maximal between twenty and twenty-five years old, while axes and seaxes (long, one-sided knives) tend mostly to be found amongst the older age group of thirty-five to thirty-nine-year-olds, and are generally much less common than other weapon types.<sup>67</sup>

Certain interred objects appear to have symbolised roles that women particularly served within their groups. Women are often interred with iron keys, and tools of textile production and ceramics, which might indicate a domestic role. Keys played a significant part in the construction of the image of the ‘lady of the house’ in the Germanic world and later written sources attest to wedding ceremonies wherein sets of keys denote a woman attaining responsibility for valuables, perhaps held in a locked container or room.<sup>68</sup> Other objects may have indicated more specialist roles. Copper alloy girdle-hangers which imitate iron keys in form but not function may have been worn by women with medical knowledge, probably including midwives.<sup>69</sup> The richest burial (grave 12) from the nearby cemetery of Didcot included a work/relic-box filled with threads, textiles and plant remains, which might suggest her status as a healer.<sup>70</sup> Other objects, such as spindle whorls — such as were found in Berinsfield graves 54 and 125 — might symbolise a role in household-based spinning and textile production. The inclusion of weapon sets with male burials would suggest a martial status, though this may have had as much to do with symbolism as actual fighting ability. Only four out of twenty-five accompanied male adults at Berinsfield had no weapons, which suggests that weapon-bearing was a sign of masculinity (and adulthood), and not necessarily an indication of social role, although it is also noteworthy that there was a tendency for old men (over the age of fifty) to be buried without weapons.<sup>71</sup>

These kinds of overt signalling are thrown into sharp relief when we consider the fragility of the period’s small rural populations. Groups consisting of only three or four extended families would have been particularly sensitive to threats of disease, food shortages, and other crises. The survival of such groups often depended on women who could give birth to and raise the next generation; if a group had too few such women, growth slowed and the

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<sup>65</sup> Steuer, ‘Schlüsselpaare in frühgeschichtlichen Gräbern’, 204; Hirst, *An Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Cemetery at Sewerby*, 38–43; Hines, *A New Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Great Square-Headed Brooches*, 263.

<sup>66</sup> Stoodley, *Spindle*, 108.

<sup>67</sup> Gowland, ‘Ageing the Past’, 151–2.

<sup>68</sup> Fell, ‘*A friwif locbore* Revisited’, 160–2.

<sup>69</sup> Felder, ‘Networks of Meaning and the Social Dynamics of Identity’, 14.

<sup>70</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 223; Blair and Hills, ‘An Anglo-Saxon Relic Box’.

<sup>71</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 130–1; Gowland, ‘Ageing the Past’, 151–2.

survival of existing infants was endangered. Men and post-menopausal women, by contrast, were more expendable to group-fitness. This simple observation may in part explain the relative wealth in grave-goods of many adult women buried at this time, who are much more likely to be buried with precious items in gold, silver, and garnet. If these objects are in some ways a measure of gender relations, such women would seem to have been regarded as important members of their households, who were honoured in death by their kin. Though we cannot be certain, some of the objects interred with women — the jewellery, clothing and household utensils — may have originated as dowries, and therefore symbolised kinship relations. But women were also more vulnerable, biologically to dangers of childbirth, and socially to the death of a spouse or patron. Finally, it may be significant that a large proportion of graves, around a half at Berinsfield, had few if any items buried with them, and those they did were ones not typically associated with particular genders.<sup>72</sup> Were these people simply too poor to have such things, or socially dependent on others in the community?

In attempting to answer this question, we can turn again to Ine's law code and the different social groups it describes. Ceorls were land-holders, heads of households, and commonly slave-owners, but there seems also to have been great variation amongst them.<sup>73</sup> Some certainly owed military service, but this may only have been the weapon-bearing elite of their class.<sup>74</sup> By the later Anglo-Saxon period, at least, warrior representatives were calculated from five-hide units of land, which meant that for each freeman peasant serving in the king's army, there were several more who ordinarily did not.<sup>75</sup> Ine's law code also refers to *gafolgeldas* 'rent/tribute-payers', which may suggest the existence of free-born, but rent-paying tenants.<sup>76</sup> By the eleventh century these were known as *geburas*, holding only a quarter-hide of land.<sup>77</sup> The lower levels of peasantry also included *coliberti*, 'freed men' but still dependent, as well as slaves — *thralls* in Ine's law code — both of which were also in a sense worker-tenants.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 127–36.

<sup>73</sup> Ine 51; Attenborough (ed.), *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 52–3. See also Stenton, 'The Thriving of the Anglo-Saxon Ceorl'.

<sup>74</sup> Hollister, *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*, 65, 73.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

<sup>76</sup> Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 261–2, n. 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 474–6. The eleventh-century *Rectitudines singularum personarum* notes the existence of a further class of peasant — *kotsetla*, or 'cottagers' — intermediate to free-holders and *geburas*: Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 193, 198–9.

<sup>78</sup> Pelteret, *Slavery*; Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 59–70.

As in Roman Britain, slavery was endemic in early England.<sup>79</sup> Even as late as the Domesday survey there are significant numbers of *servi* recorded, in what is probably an under-enumeration.<sup>80</sup> By the eleventh century few people are likely to have become slaves as a result of warfare, but their ancestors may well have been; others may simply have lost status as a result of economic hardships or misbehaviour.<sup>81</sup> It is worth noting that warfare was a commonplace in south Oxfordshire at many times in the first millennium AD — during the early and middle Anglo-Saxon periods, as well as later — so the conditions for slave-taking were often met, even if captives were ultimately sold abroad. In Ine's law code slaves were valued at 60 shillings, less than half the wergild of a ceorl, and only slightly more than a coat of mail and a sword.<sup>82</sup> The main services they provided were labour, particularly as craft specialist, stock workers and undertaking other specialist tasks.<sup>83</sup>

Ceorls could also be socially mobile, thereby increasing the variation between them. By the early eleventh century, the Promotion Law (*Gepyncðo*), specified the ways in which a prosperous ceorl might elevate their rank to that of thegn by possessing 'fully five hides of his own land (*agen land*), church and kitchen, bell-house (*bellhus*) and a burh-gate (*burhgeat*), seat and special office in the king's hall'.<sup>84</sup> The military overtones of the Promotion Law suggest that one of the ways in which a ceorl might prosper was through military service, but the qualification of five hides of land suggests that acquisition or increased profitability in land, or entrepreneurship in trading, might make them sufficiently wealthy as well. Of course, by the same token they might also fall on hard times and have to become a dependent peasant to keep going.

While Stenton saw this social mobility as a feature mainly of the later Anglo-Saxon period, there seems little reason to think — given the huge variability in early Anglo-Saxon burial assemblages — that the same was not true also from an earlier period.<sup>85</sup> Slaves, as in Roman times, may always have been able to pay for their freedom with labour.<sup>86</sup> An additional complicating factor in this regard is the distinction made in Ine's law code between English and Welsh. Wergelds of Welsh noblemen were half that of their English equivalents, those of ceorls, three-fifths.<sup>87</sup> Ine's Welshmen were probably those in south-west Britain, but

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<sup>79</sup> Pelteret, *Slavery*; Pelteret, 'Slave Raiding and Slave Trading'; Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 86.

<sup>80</sup> Clarke, 'Domesday Slavery'; Moore, 'Domesday Slavery'.

<sup>81</sup> Pelteret, 'Slave Raiding and Slave Trading'; Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 61.

<sup>82</sup> Ine 3.2; 54.1.

<sup>83</sup> Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 64–5.

<sup>84</sup> Stenton, 'The Thriving of the Anglo-Saxon Ceorl', 389.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*; John, *Reassessing Anglo-Saxon England*, viii–ix.

<sup>86</sup> Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 64.

<sup>87</sup> Rushbrook Williams, 'The Status of the Welsh in the Laws of Ine', 273.

this distinction may also have been relevant in the upper Thames of the fifth and sixth centuries if — as seems likely — Britons survived in any number. Should there have been any movement in the affiliation of individuals and their families, commending themselves in some way to an Anglo-Saxon, a change in the social status could be the reward.<sup>88</sup>

Differences in the character and numbers of accompanying artefacts indicate degrees of social differentiation between individuals, with perhaps an apex group visible through the inclusion of certain valuable and prestige items.<sup>89</sup> What is most interesting is that from the point where furnished inhumation becomes common in the third quarter of the fifth century through to the seventh century, these social differences appear to widen. One example of emerging elites is provided by the burials excavated at Cuddesdon (just north of the hundred) during nineteenth-century improvements to the Bishop's Palace.<sup>90</sup> Though many of the details of the discovery are unknown, it is clear from the objects recovered, including two swords, two glass bowls, a bronze bucket of disputed origin, and a fragment of gilt bronze set with garnets, that this represents a grave assemblage of a late sixth or early seventh-century high-status burial (perhaps that of a member of the Gewissan ruling family), an interpretation all the more likely given the presence also of prone radial burials — possibly human sacrifices — around the grave.<sup>91</sup>

It would seem that by the time of the princely burials at Cuddesdon and nearby Taplow (Bucks.) this was a stratified society in which certain individuals and lineages had established themselves as a separate high-status group with different access to prestige goods.<sup>92</sup> Objects of equestrian equipment and bronze vessels — such as the three sixth- to seventh-century harness mounts and a unique miniature bronze bowl from Rumbold's Pit, Ewelme — are characteristic of the richest male graves and can be used to identify leading members in the community.<sup>93</sup> The concentration of these types of burials in the area of Long Wittenham and Dorchester has been argued to indicate the presence of a number of important families in the area, to which ought to be counted also the finds from Ewelme. The choice of

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<sup>88</sup> Woolf, 'Apartheid and Economics in Anglo-Saxon England', 127–8 argues that this in itself may have helped to preserve segregation.

<sup>89</sup> Arnold, 'Wealth and Social Structure', 108; Hirst, *An Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Cemetery at Sewerby*, 97–104; Brookes, *Economics and Social Change in Anglo-Saxon Kent*, 125–38.

<sup>90</sup> Dickinson, *Cuddesdon and Dorchester-on-Thames*.

<sup>91</sup> *Oxon. Atlas*, 18; Reynolds, 'Anglo-Saxon Human Sacrifice at Cuddesdon and Sutton Hoo?'. .

<sup>92</sup> Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms'; Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 201–10.

<sup>93</sup> Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site', 8, 10; Scull, 'Archaeology, Early Anglo-Saxon Society and the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms', 72–3; Härke, *Angelsächsische Waffengräber Des 5. Bis 7. Jahrhunderts*, 93–4; Fern, 'The Archaeological Evidence for Equestrianism', 67.

Dorchester for Birinus' short-lived bishop's seat at the centre of this cluster of elite families would thus seem to be a natural corollary of the continuous processes of hierarchisation and the accumulation of power across the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>94</sup>

In summary, burial evidence from the fifth to early eighth centuries indicates the presence of small settlements based around family groups. Men and women had separate social roles, and these would have influenced their patterns of work and movement within the landscape. The presence of long-established people and recent incomers, as well as a trickle of long-distance trade, probably resulted in a cultural mix, but affiliations remained very localised. Mixing may have encouraged social conflict, and kingly struggles introduced at certain times an element of danger and unpredictability without making kings a strong and regular local presence, at least until the establishment of a royal centre at Benson in the decades around 700 (about which more later). Almost certainly, primitive farming technology put pressure on subsistence. It is in this light that we may understand funerary rituals which appear to emphasise family structures and to legitimise ancestral claims to landed resources.<sup>95</sup> The crucial question is, then, what exactly were these resources? That is to say, what kinds of terrain were most sought after?

### *Settlement and Economy*

The distribution of archaeological finds provides important evidence about where early and middle Anglo-Saxon populations were concentrated. In the upper Thames region datable material finds have been restricted mainly to the gravel terraces in the principal river valleys.<sup>96</sup> In fact, the terraces between Abingdon/Milton, Sutton Courtenay/Drayton (all formerly Berks.) and Dorchester/Berinsfield, just west of the study area, have yielded the greatest concentration of fifth- to eighth-century finds in the whole of the Thames valley.<sup>97</sup> Within the study area itself, most finds have come from on or near the gravels in the west of the hundred, including from Benson, some 5 km south-east of Dorchester, where part of a

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<sup>94</sup> *HE*, II, 7; Yorke, 'The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the Origins of Wessex', 94; Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', 448–9; McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 295–6.

<sup>95</sup> This idea was discussed by Saxe, 'Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices in a Mesolithic Population from Wadi Halfa, Sudan', 51; subsequent discussions include Shephard, 'The Social Identity of the Individual in Isolated Barrows'; Bradley, 'Time Regained'; Williams, *Death and Memory*, 55–65, 158–62; Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric*, 45–51.

<sup>96</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*, 28 (fig. 2.1).

<sup>97</sup> Including significant settlement evidence from Drayton/Sutton Courtenay, Appleford, Long Wittenham, Bishops Court, and Mount Farm: Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 1–17; *TTT*, 91–100; Hamerow et al., 'Anglo-Saxon and Earlier Settlement near Drayton Road, Sutton Courtenay'; Hamerow et al., 'The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project', 51 and fig. 2.

settlement with probably (at least) mid sixth- to mid eighth-century occupation has been excavated (Figure 3.3), and there have been numerous stray finds of pottery sherds and weapons.<sup>98</sup> At Warborough, immediately to the north, *Grubenhäuser* (or sunken-featured buildings) have been tentatively identified in the large Romano-British cemetery at Church Piece, close to Queenford Farm.<sup>99</sup> The cemetery's substantial buildings appear to have been robbed for materials at some point after the fifth century, and a handmade Anglo-Saxon biconical urn was found nearby.<sup>100</sup>

### Figure 3.3

There are dangers, of course, in accepting the distribution of finds as straightforward evidence of early medieval activity.<sup>101</sup> The concentration of archaeological evidence on the gravels is partly an artefact of modern investigation. Gravel soils produce the best crop marks to identify archaeological sites from the air and they have also attracted large-scale mineral extraction and therefore archaeological investigation.<sup>102</sup> This means that sites of all periods are more likely to be found there than elsewhere.<sup>103</sup> Other evidence, such as that of place-names, brings its own problems. Most obviously, place-names were subject to change and may not reflect the earliest phases of Anglo-Saxon settlement.<sup>104</sup> Such a case is Benson, documented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (which was produced in the 890s) as *Bænesing tun*, 'the estate called after Benesa', a name not easily relatable to Benson's earlier Anglo-Saxon significance or its royal ownership.<sup>105</sup>

Yet, for a variety of reasons, it seems highly likely there really was more settlement on the gravels than elsewhere, especially in the early Anglo-Saxon period. This is the

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<sup>98</sup> Pine and Ford, 'St. Helen's Avenue, Benson', esp. figs. 1–2, 8–9, favouring the earlier part of this date range; McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, suggesting continuation into the eighth century, with the establishment of a great hall in the late seventh century or afterwards. See also Smith, 'Appendix A. Below Ground Archaeology'; Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 26–7.

<sup>99</sup> *VCH Oxon*, 18, 398; HER, PRN 10597.

<sup>100</sup> *VCH Oxon*, XVIII, 398; Harman et al., 'Roman Burials around Dorchester-on-Thames'; Henig and Booth, *Roman Oxfordshire*, 62.

<sup>101</sup> Retrieval biases are discussed by Scull et al., 'Excavation and Survey at Watchfield, Oxfordshire', 264–8.

<sup>102</sup> Benson and Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley*; Bradley, 'The Gravels and British Prehistory'; M.A. Robinson and R. Wilson, 'A Survey of Environmental Archaeology in the South Midlands', in H.C.M. Keeley (ed.) *Environmental Archaeology: A Regional Review*, 2 (1987), 21.

<sup>103</sup> In fact, the area between the confluences of the Thames and its tributaries the Thame and Ock, contains one of the densest sequences of known prehistoric monuments in Britain, and has yielded a wealth of Iron-Age and Roman features, including buildings, enclosures, and trackways: *Oxon Atlas*, 10–17.

<sup>104</sup> Cole, *The Place-Name Evidence*, chapter 1; Hall, 'The Instability of Place-Names'; Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*, 43.

<sup>105</sup> Watts, *Dictionary*, 50; *PN Oxon*, I, 116.

conclusion of research in many comparable regions,<sup>106</sup> and in south Oxfordshire, as elsewhere, it is supported by the results of archaeology carried out on other terrain, as well as by an assessment of what different types of soil offered early farmers. In south Oxfordshire the first gravel terrace, which was liable to flooding, and the clay vales, which had heavy and often waterlogged soils, have yielded Iron-Age and Roman sites but almost no Anglo-Saxon ones. Iron-Age and Roman settlements in these areas were generally small and, presumably, in some way satellite to the bigger and more numerous centres on the gravels. This pattern supports the idea of expansion onto less favourable terrain as population grew and withdrawal when it shrank in the late and post-Roman periods.<sup>107</sup> In particular, intensive Roman farming was associated with exploitation of the floodplain terrace on a scale which would not be replicated until much later times.

The pre-Anglo-Saxon sites have been discovered from cropmarks and from the pipeline surveys which cross the geologies of the study area. Early medieval settlements are unlikely to show up as cropmarks because buildings were insubstantial and there were no surrounding enclosures. But they can appear in pipe sections, for example as pits. What is more, just outside the hundred, in North Stoke, a further technique has been employed which is capable of locating early medieval sites, namely extensive fieldwalking.<sup>108</sup> That fieldwalking indicates from pottery finds that the biggest concentration of prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon activity was on the valley gravels. Prehistoric and especially Roman pottery scatters, however, were also found on Chalk slopes and plateaux, Anglo-Saxon ones were not. This is likely to be because the larger, more organised Roman population used more land more intensively than the smaller, less hierarchical post-Roman one. It cannot simply be about the survival of pottery: Roman pottery survives best, but prehistoric organic-tempered pottery is no more durable than its Anglo-Saxon equivalent, which was produced between the fifth and seventh centuries.

It is also telling that where early medieval settlements or associated burial grounds have been found beyond the main river terraces in the study area, they are on patches of gravel or other well-drained sandy or coarse loamy soils (especially those of the Frilford

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<sup>106</sup> For example: Davies, and Vierck, 'The Contexts of the Tribal Hidage'; Hooke 'Anglo-Saxon Estates in the Vale of the White Horse', 135–7; Hamerow, 'Settlement on the Gravels', 40–1; Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, 103–4; Gardiner, 'Economy and Landscape Change in Post-Roman and Early Medieval Sussex', 152; Brookes, *Economics and Social Change in Anglo-Saxon Kent*; Harrington and Welch, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 90–1. Doubts about the reliability of this pattern have been expressed by Scull et al., 'Excavation and Survey at Watchfield', 264–8.

<sup>107</sup> Brookes, 'Population Ecology', 74–8.

<sup>108</sup> Ford and Hazell, 'Prehistoric, Roman and Anglo-Saxon Settlement Patterns at North Stoke'.

Association). A settlement site uncovered by pipeline archaeology is near Rycote (SP 6609 0495, in Great Haseley parish). Here two *Grubenhäuser* and other features were found in association with late-prehistoric gullies on Greensand and gravel. Occupation probably began in the later fifth or earlier sixth century.<sup>109</sup> A mid fifth- to seventh-century cemetery close to the Chiltern scarp in Ewelme was probably associated with a settlement in the valley of the Ewelme brook where the Chalk is overlain by Northmoor Sand and gravel.<sup>110</sup> A further cemetery located on the south side of the same valley at Gould's Grove (Benson parish) was uncovered by gravel extraction in the early twentieth century.<sup>111</sup> Finally, at Chalgrove, a few sherds of organic-tempered pottery have been found south of the village close to the church on the second gravel terrace, and an early brooch to the north-west.<sup>112</sup>

It seems then that some people lived in side valleys and on slightly less favoured soils, but probably not many. Another place to look for them would be the so-called Icknield Loam Belt, a narrow band of loamy soils at the foot of the scarp developed on the outcrops of the Upper Greensand and Lower Chalk where numerous springs provided a ready source of water. A small late sixth- or seventh-century cemetery just east of the study area at Adwell Cop, Postcombe, another cemetery at The Knapp in Lewknor, and finds from Chinnor further north-east indicate that this zone was early settled.<sup>113</sup> Some of the villages in the study area which are on the same terrain have names which could go back to the early to middle Anglo-Saxon period in that they contain OE elements likely to have been used more commonly before AD 731 than afterwards.<sup>114</sup> These include Cuxham, *Cuces hamm*, c.1000 (*hamm*, 'hemmed in land, meadow'), where one metal find suggests a ?sixth-century burial or burials, and Easington, *Esidone*, 1086 (*dūn*, 'hill').<sup>115</sup>

So, it seems that the gravels were almost as important as they look, and the reasons for this are mainly environmental. The gravels provided freely draining, easily worked soils, with rich grassland on the floodplain fringes and dry land for settlement on the slightly higher second terrace.<sup>116</sup> In Benson, Warborough and Berrick Salome gravels were associated with

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<sup>109</sup> Ford et al., *The Archaeology of the Aylesbury–Chalgrove Gas Pipeline*, 25–30.

<sup>110</sup> Mileson, 'The South Oxfordshire Project', *SMidIA*, 42; Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site'.

<sup>111</sup> Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site', 27.

<sup>112</sup> Page et al., *Barentin's Manor*, 8; Figure 3.1.

<sup>113</sup> Hinton, 'Anglo-Saxon Burials at Postcombe, Lewknor'; Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 91 (Lewknor, The Knapp); Meaney, *A Gazetteer*, 206: Chinnor I and II.

<sup>114</sup> Cox, 'Place-Names of the Earliest English Records'.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.; *PN Oxon*. I, 116; 125; 155; PAS, BERK-6E8DEA; **above, Figure 3.1.**

<sup>116</sup> Hamerow, 'Settlement on the Gravels'; Robinson, 'Environment, Archaeology and Alluvium', 59–60; Hey, *Yarnton*, 38–44. Williamson, *Environment, Society and Landscape*, 55–6.

gently sloping areas of fertile and loamy Brown Earths.<sup>117</sup> By contrast, the heavier Stagnogley soils were more difficult to cultivate, particularly in the wetter conditions that prevailed in the period 580–900.<sup>118</sup> Whilst clay vale soils were likely to have posed significant problems for early farmers, this is not to say that they were unproductive. The tendency for impeded drainage meant they were best suited for grass, and here-and-there were also pockets of fertile soils suitable for agriculture, such as in Warborough and Benson parishes, where level or gently sloping land over river terrace gravel provides for good drainage and the soils are lighter loamy Brown Earths.<sup>119</sup> The Britwells and Berrick Salome also lie on a pocket of this fertile soil, and it is likely that the long, thin shape of these parishes reflects the early subdivision of this resource patch.

Fine soils overlying gravel were just what people engaged in small-scale mixed farming with limited manpower and animal traction would have wanted. Before the adoption of the heavy plough, there was a strong preference for lighter soils, which could be turned by ard.<sup>120</sup> Cemeteries suggest very small local populations and therefore little pressure on resources, in which circumstances people could occupy mainly the best territory. The retreat from waterlogged land makes best sense in a situation where constraints on activity were more environmental than political or ethnic. Inhabitants were engaged in small-scale subsistence farming in which the basic unit of production was the household.<sup>121</sup> In contrast to the Roman villa system, trade and surplus production were minimal, and even when these started to increase from the later sixth century they remained at relatively low levels. This meant that people had to provide essentials for themselves and there was a corresponding shift away from intensive cereal production to mixed farming with an emphasis on pastoralism. Whatever additional produce was required probably came mainly through social networks, often perhaps in the form of reciprocal gift-exchange. The archaeobotanical evidence, however, shows that the landscape in the vale remained largely open, as it had been in the Roman period, presumably because cultivation and animal grazing occurred on a sufficient scale to prevent extensive woodland regeneration.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Soilscales SS ID 7; Unit 0571v Sutton.

<sup>118</sup> Lamb, 'Climate from 1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D.'; Hass, 'Northern Europe Climate Variations'; Dark, *The Environment of Britain*; Büntgen et al., 'Cooling and Societal Change'.

<sup>119</sup> Soilscales SS ID 7; Unit 0571v Sutton.

<sup>120</sup> See Fowler *Farming in the First Millennium*, 182–204 on the uses of the ard in early medieval Britain.

<sup>121</sup> Wickham, *Framing*, 536–47.

<sup>122</sup> Archaeobotanical data from Pelling, 'Overview of Archaeobotanical Remains'; Parker, 'Late Quaternary Environmental Change in the Upper Thames Basin'; Day, 'Post-Glacial Vegetational History of the Oxford Region'; Day, 'Woodland Origin'; Hey, *Yarnton*, 369–79; Dodd (ed.) *Oxford Before the University*, 373–4.

Tree pollen was of the type associated with secondary and managed woodland, with hazel best represented at Barton Court Farm.<sup>123</sup> There was limited growth of woodland in certain areas, for example on wet land in Berrick Salome,<sup>124</sup> but elsewhere some of the least fertile soils remained open, including Mount Farm, Berinsfield and Spartum Fen in Great Haseley.<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, woodland continued to feature in charter boundaries of later date, although by this time they appear to have been distinctive enough to serve as appropriate landmarks. For someone moving through the vale in the seventh century the landscape would have appeared as a patchwork of wood pasture, roughly grazed pastures and meadows, arable fields under cultivation and left fallow, as well as scrub.

A sharp reduction in alluviation shows that cereals were not produced in the quantities which characterised the Roman period.<sup>126</sup> The most significant crop change was in terms of the wheat types cultivated, with pronounced and sometimes rapid (but not total) shift away from hulled to free-threshing wheats, the latter being easier to process into flour.<sup>127</sup> In addition, a more diverse, and therefore lower risk, arable regime seems to have emerged. In contrast with the Roman focus on wheat and barley, by the seventh century, if not before, rye, oats, beans and peas began to play an increased role, probably for human as well as animal consumption.<sup>128</sup> Given the small population, arable farming need not have been very intensive: the presence of perennial weed seeds could result from the expansion of arable by ploughing up of grassland, but it seems more likely a result of an extensive arable regime which incorporated long fallow phases between ploughings. Vale farmers were well served by local grazing resources, including an extensive floodplain close by the river terrace settlements. Unsurprisingly, grassland taxa are well represented archaeologically, for example at Berinsfield, next to Warborough.<sup>129</sup> In the absence of intensive Roman-style hay production on the floodplain, extensive grassland would have been required to provide animals with winter feed.<sup>130</sup>

Accompanying these shifts in cultivation was an increased reliance on animal husbandry. Animal bone finds from the area around Dorchester reflect the national picture,

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<sup>123</sup> Miles (ed.), *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm*, 21–3, and pollen report by J.R.A. Greig.

<sup>124</sup> Wilson and Booth, *A Narrow View across the Upper Thames Valley*.

<sup>125</sup> Parker, 'Late Quaternary Environmental Change in the Upper Thames Basin', 101–46; Lambrick, *Neolithic to Saxon Social and Environmental Change*, 91.

<sup>126</sup> *TTT*, 80; Hey, *Yarnton*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*, 48, 363; Pelling, 'Overview of Archaeobotanical Remains'.

<sup>128</sup> Pelling, 'Overview of Archaeobotanical Remains'; Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*, chapter 2; Hey, *Yarnton*, 48–9, 363.

<sup>129</sup> Parker, 'Late Quaternary Environmental Change in the Upper Thames Basin', 58–60.

<sup>130</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*, 367; Stevens, 'Iron Age and Roman Agriculture in the Upper Thames Valley', 29.

and suggest a reduction in cattle consumption and an increase in sheep, goats and pigs.<sup>131</sup> Even so, it seems likely that beef was the major form of animal flesh consumed, as even on sites where sheep are dominant, the greater size of cattle meant that they would have provided much larger quantities of meat.<sup>132</sup> The increase in pig is most interesting, as these are ‘famine’ stock that can be raised and fattened quickly without dedicating land specifically to that purpose, the meat easily preserved by smoking and salting.<sup>133</sup> The sex and age profiles of the sheep bones closely resembles that of home consumption, with communities more self-contained and far less evidence for the input from a wider economy.<sup>134</sup> There is no archaeological evidence for stabling, so it is likely that only some stock were kept over winter following the annual autumn slaughter. Limited evidence attests to fishing, though this was very variable from one site to another, with local fish types such as eel and pike always the most common. Bone assemblages suggest hunting, trapping, and wildfowling were not practiced to any significant degree.

Mixed farming required the management of livestock. Crops were probably enclosed by fences to keep out animals, and possibly (as at Yarnton, north-west of Oxford) Roman boundaries may still have been used in the early part of the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>135</sup> Ditches — such as those excavated in Rycote running parallel to the Thames — helped to separate areas of hay-making from those used for pasture further from river.<sup>136</sup> After the harvest, grazing animals would have helped manure the main fields, but in spring and early summer those living in the vale may well have found it useful to graze their animals in the Chilterns in order to keep them away from crops near their homesteads, especially where, as often appears to have been the case, fences took the form of lightweight hurdles and shallow ditches. The Chiltern wood-pastures were apparently accessed by numerous droveways, not far distant. Two such routes running up the spines of small spurs leading into the upland of the Chilterns are named in the boundary clauses of the charters of Brightwell Baldwin (S217, dated 887), Cuxham (S1379, dated 995), and Benson (S887, dated 996) as *fildena* ways. *Fildena* is most likely an adjective *filden* derived from either OE *feld* ‘open country’ or OE *fileðe* ‘hay’, implying a meaning related either to ‘openness’ (either of the road or a destination) or to a grassy (i.e. turf-covered) surface (or perhaps, by popular etymology, combining both of these

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<sup>131</sup> Poole, ‘Animals and Identities in South Oxfordshire’.

<sup>132</sup> Sykes, ‘From *Cu* and *Sceap* to *Beffe* and *Motton*’, 57; Poole, ‘Animals and Identities’.

<sup>133</sup> Watson, ‘The Role of the Pig’; Hionidu, ‘What Do Starving People Eat?’, 117, 119.

<sup>134</sup> Miles (ed.), *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm*, report on faunal remains by B. Wilson.

<sup>135</sup> Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*, 67.

<sup>136</sup> Ford et al., *The Archaeology of the Aylesbury–Chalgrove Gas Pipeline*, 26–8; also Hey, *Yarnton*, 45.

aspects).<sup>137</sup> Thus *fildena weg* was perhaps used to describe a wide, turf-covered droveway; that in S887 was explicitly linked to the (presumably, detached upland) *wudu* ‘wood’ as its destination (Figure 3.4). The droveways are likely to have been established in prehistoric times, and the antiquity of local droveways is suggested by their tendency to form estate, parish and hundred boundaries, particularly around the Chilterns where parishes formed long strips rising up into the hills.<sup>138</sup> The strong possibility that the Brightwell Baldwin *fildena weg*, for example, was already established by the early Anglo-Saxon period is suggested by the location of the sixth-century cemetery at Rumbold’s Pit (since cemeteries were usually associated with pre-existing routeways).<sup>139</sup> In this regard it is interesting that the probably authentic tenth-century Newnham Murren charter (S738) refers to one such droveway running along Grim’s Ditch up to Nuffield as the *ealdan wege* (‘old way’).

### Figure 3.4

In contrast to settlement in the vale, the available evidence suggests that the southern part of the Chiltern Hills was an area of low intensity land use and limited settlement, a pattern which may have been established already in the Roman period (and earlier). A few villas have been identified in the hills, including in Harpsden and Bix,<sup>140</sup> just south of Ewelme hundred, but there does not seem to have been as much Roman settlement in the Oxfordshire part of the Chilterns as there was further north in Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire,<sup>141</sup> and certainly less than in the vale to the north-west. Some of the villa sites were in use late in the Roman period, but there is no reason to believe what had long been a lightly settled area saw any expansion of population thereafter. In fact, a fall in population is much more likely, as elsewhere. Reduced activity after 410 is indicated by the growth of woodland over the Roman sites in Harpsden.<sup>142</sup> That this regrowth happened at an early stage is supported by findings from comparable upland areas. At Snelsmore on the Berkshire Downs, for example, there was significant woodland regeneration in the late Roman or early medieval periods.<sup>143</sup> There is at least some early medieval activity in the hills: part of a late

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<sup>137</sup> Kitson, ‘Quantifying Qualifiers’, 61–9. The Benson charter (S887) refers to *fildena wudu weg* ‘*filden* wood way’, correcting Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 27.

<sup>138</sup> See also Thorn, ‘Hundreds and Wapentakes [Bucks.]’, 39.

<sup>139</sup> Mileson and Brookes, ‘A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site’, 25.

<sup>140</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 201, 235.

<sup>141</sup> Hepple and Doggett, *The Chilterns*, 45, fig. 35.

<sup>142</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 4, 235.

<sup>143</sup> Watson, ‘Man’s Impact on the Chalklands’, 79, 83.

fifth- or early sixth-century pot was found in former clay workings just north of Nettlebed, at one of the highest points in the Chilterns,<sup>144</sup> and a sherd of probably sixth-century pottery was found during excavation of a medieval churchyard overlying a probable Roman site in Bix.<sup>145</sup> These connections may have spread either over the scarp from the north-west or up the dip slope from the south from settlements close to the Thames beyond the Goring Gap such as Lower Shiplake, from where late fifth-/sixth-century cemetery is known.<sup>146</sup>

A reduction of settlement in the Chilterns might be anticipated on environmental grounds in a period of low population and limited elite extraction. The area had some moderately fertile soils but steep slopes and a poor water supply.<sup>147</sup> Probably in the early Middle Ages as later areas with the least amenable soils were covered by woodland or wood-pasture, such as Cookley (*Cokelea* c.1183; OE *Cuca's lēah*) in Swyncombe, and — just outside the hundred — *stanora lege* 'stoney hill-slope [Stonor] *lēah*' in the tenth-century Pyrton bounds (S104), both of which lie on Clay-with-flints soil associations of the Batcombe type.<sup>148</sup> Della Hooke has suggested that the Old English word *lēah* may usually have described relatively open woodland (wood-pasture) used for grazing.<sup>149</sup> The word is documented before 730 but it appears to have become more common thereafter, at a time when greater pressure on resources may have required different wooded areas to be demarcated, defined, and named.<sup>150</sup>

### *Late Seventh and Eighth Century Developments*

The rise of Gewissan power in the upper Thames in the late sixth century was accompanied by the establishment of a new kind of settlement, the 'great hall' complex, which consisted of large timber buildings and outbuildings arranged in a regular spatial plan of the type found at Yeavinger (Northumb.).<sup>151</sup> Several local great hall sites of the late sixth or early seventh century have been more or less firmly identified: Dorchester Bishop's Court, Sutton Courtenay, and Long Wittenham.<sup>152</sup> At Dorchester, a growth in settlement activity included

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<sup>144</sup> Found by Des Dix, and examined in 2011 by Helena Hamerow and Paul Booth.

<sup>145</sup> Mileson and Nicholls, 'The "Lost" Church of Bix Gibwyn', 29–30 (pottery analysis by M. Mellor).

<sup>146</sup> Meaney, *A Gazetteer*, p. 212.

<sup>147</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 2, 8; XVIII, 1, 12; Marshall, *The Land of Britain*, 204, fig. 3.

<sup>148</sup> *PN Oxon.* I, 84, 137; Cranfield University, *The Soils Guide*, Soil Association 0592a.

<sup>149</sup> Hooke, 'The Woodland Landscape of Early Medieval England', 150.

<sup>150</sup> Cox, 'The Place-Names of the Earliest English Records', 66; Gelling, 'Towards a Chronology for English Place-Names', 69–70; Blair, *A-S Oxon.* 25.

<sup>151</sup> Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*.

<sup>152</sup> McBride, 'An Early Anglo-Saxon Great Hall at Benson?'; Hamerow et al. 'The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project', 62–4; Brennan and Hamerow, 'An Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complex at Sutton Courtenay/Drayton'.

the erection of a great hall at Bishop's Court, c.600 metres west of the town, of a post-in-trench building in the Allotments, 200 metres south-west of the Abbey, and of another at the Abbey itself, all of which are probably datable to the seventh or eighth centuries.<sup>153</sup> Adam McBride interprets these structures as elements of a single multi-focal settlement landscape of royal and ecclesiastical activity which over the course of the eighth and early ninth centuries became concentrated in the area of Dorchester Abbey, at a time when new continental ideas of power and kingship were gaining purchase.<sup>154</sup> Recent reinterpretation of an excavated structure at Benson by McBride shows convincing similarities in its form and construction with other previously identified great hall sites, raising the strong possibility that there was a hall there too, in this case established perhaps in the late seventh or eighth century (Figure 3.3, Feature 1006).<sup>155</sup> The presence of a great hall at Benson would seem likely given the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's repeated identification of Benson as a royal base, and given Benson's extensive late Anglo-Saxon jurisdiction (outlined below).

Interestingly, the dating of high-status structures in Dorchester and Benson coincide with the period of great political uncertainty in the upper Thames valley, as already noted, so questions remain about the identities of the architects of these building projects. Dorchester briefly became a Mercian bishopric in the 660s, and again in the late ninth century, and Benson too would seem to have been variously under Gewissan and Mercian control during the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>156</sup> It is likely, therefore, that the incumbents of these elite complexes changed too. The distribution of great hall complexes was closely linked to nodal locations, near routeways and with access to a variety of different resource patches.<sup>157</sup> Aerial photographs, metalwork finds, and limited excavations suggest that the sites at Sutton Courtenay, Long Wittenham and Dorchester were connected by an early Roman trackway visible as cropmarks in aerial photography.<sup>158</sup> Part of Dorchester's continuing success was due to its location on the intersection of several main roads and riverine connections.<sup>159</sup> Benson too had river connections and was close to long-distance Roman and prehistoric

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<sup>153</sup> Frere, 'Excavations at Dorchester on Thames, 1962', 125–7; May, 'Romano-British and Saxon Sites near Dorchester-on-Thames', 57–9; Keevill, 'Archaeological Investigations in 2001', 326, 355. The archaeological evidence is summarised and re-evaluated in McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 265–71.

<sup>154</sup> McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 268–71.

<sup>155</sup> McBride, 'An Early Anglo-Saxon Great Hall at Benson?'; McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*.

<sup>156</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 44, 58–9; Yorke, 'Competition for the Solent and 7th Century Politics', 38.

<sup>157</sup> Brookes, 'Population Ecology'; Blair, *Building*, 111–12; Scull et al., *Lordship and Landscape in East Anglia AD 400–800*, in press.

<sup>158</sup> Hamerow et al., 'The Origins of Wessex Pilot Project', 67.

<sup>159</sup> *Oxon. Atlas*, 16–17.

roads (Figure 2.8).<sup>160</sup> Indeed, judging by later manorial links, its mid to later Anglo-Saxon territory may have extended along the Roman road between Dorchester and Henley-on-Thames as far as the foot of the Chiltern dip slope.<sup>161</sup>

Such physical connectivity was important because early medieval kings were peripatetic, spending weeks, maybe a few months, at different centres in order to support themselves and their courts, and to make their power felt.<sup>162</sup> Government over localities was accordingly intermittent: king's justice was most effective when he attended to it in person, while the stability of his entourage depended on bringing it to within riding distance of the fields that produced the grain and meat. Periodically descending on estate centres and, later, minsters, the royal court could drain a locality of its resources. Perhaps indicative of this trend, the proportions of cattle in the Beech House Hotel site, Dorchester bone assemblage are exceptional in comparison to all but two other sites nationally; the high cattle proportions indicating that the site was occupied by persons of elevated status.<sup>163</sup>

Royal visits may have been rare occurrences, but the settlements visited had the most direct access to their king, and the wider connections this entailed. These were also the communities that formed the basic components of wider political organization, and their lands the core zones of larger territories of exploitation. Ros Faith has contrasted these two types of landscape as 'intensive' and 'extensive' lordships, where the former represented areas of direct exploitation, the latter more extensive dependencies that offered goods and services to the core.<sup>164</sup> Probably by the eighth century Benson's closest link were with Ewelme, the western part of which closest to Benson emerged as a meeting place and trading centre, Berrick (OE *berewic*, barley farm), apparently a satellite supplying grain, and Warborough ('watch hill'), then or later a look-out point (Figure 3.5).<sup>165</sup> Benson, Berrick and Ewelme later shared a field system, and much of Benson's demesne land was concentrated in Warborough.

Then or later Benson also had strong links with Holcombe, Huntercombe, Nettlebed, and beyond the hundred with Wyfold and Henley-on-Thames, all of which remained part of

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. 22–5; Cole, *The Place-Name Evidence*, 276, fig. 9.6.

<sup>161</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 4, 15–16; XVIII, 8.

<sup>162</sup> E. Lönnroth, 'Government in Medieval Scandinavia', 455; Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, 87–91 (which maps several itineraries); Brookes, 'Walking with Anglo-Saxons', 150; Blair, *Building*, 104–11.

<sup>163</sup> Poole, 'Animals and Identities'; Rowley and Brown, 'Excavations at Beech House Hotel', 50–5.

<sup>164</sup> Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 1–14. For the slaves at Benson who presumably farmed the directly exploited land there: below, ....

<sup>165</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVIII, 36; *PN Oxon.* I, 120, 138; Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site'. See discussion, p. ...., below.

the estate in 1086.<sup>166</sup> At Holcombe there was a *Kyngesbur* (1270; king's *burh*), perhaps a royal base of some kind.<sup>167</sup> Possibly Nettlebed (*Nettlebed*, 1246, 'the nettle bed'), in the Chiltern Hills on the Roman road to Henley, was valued as a stopping point for travellers, if Ann Cole is correct that the place-name reflects gatherings of people and animals around ponds on the small patch of impermeable London Clay at Nettlebed Common.<sup>168</sup> Wyfold, also in the hills, may well have been a grazing ground.<sup>169</sup> Henley itself, where there was almost certainly an early river crossing, was a nodal point in the regional communication network, connecting places to the west and north with the lower Thames valley.<sup>170</sup> Finally, it is conceivable that Draycott (OE *dræġ* + *cot*), north-west of Rycote (Fig. 2.3), which long remained a detached part of Ewelme hundred, had a role as a trans-shipment point on the upper River Thames.<sup>171</sup>

### Figure 3.5

This emergence of more regularised kingly control and of nascent estate structures coincided with significant economic developments. By the mid seventh century Kentish-Frankish connections began to wane. A brooch from East Hanney, datable to around 630, may count amongst the last of the 'Kentish' style intrusions.<sup>172</sup> Thereafter the vector of influences shifted decisively north-east to south-west along the River Thames and especially the Icknield Way, a route which linked south Oxfordshire with an increasingly dominant Mercia.<sup>173</sup> There are various indications that people were becoming more connected and commercially orientated in their behaviours. Handmade early Anglo-Saxon pottery from Rycote appears to have been locally produced, probably mainly for consumption within the household or settlement.<sup>174</sup> On the other hand, an increase in trade was reflected in a more widespread adoption from the later seventh century of silver coinage. Silver pennies (commonly referred to as 'sceattas') were small, weighing around 1.3 grams, and are found in such large numbers nationally as to suggest they were used regularly in routine monetary

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<sup>166</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVIII, 36.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.* 308; Blair, *Building*, 226.

<sup>168</sup> Cole, 'The Use of *Netel* in Place-Names', 54.

<sup>169</sup> Below, .....

<sup>170</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVI, 4–6.

<sup>171</sup> Personal communication from Simon Draper.

<sup>172</sup> Personal communication from Helena Hamerow.

<sup>173</sup> *TTT*, 359–62; Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 81–3, fig. 53.

<sup>174</sup> Thin section analysis of Rycote pottery carried out by Gareth Perry for the South Oxfordshire Project, superseding Vince, 'Pottery from Rycote'.

exchanges, even presumably by wealthier peasants.<sup>175</sup> In Ewelme hundred a trading site appears to have developed west of Ewelme village at a site below the cemetery at Rumbold's Pit, where a dozen eighth-century coins have been found as well as fragments of imported quernstones made of Niedermendig lava (reflecting trade and also quite advanced crop processing techniques). Most of the coins recovered from here and the few from elsewhere in the hundred show affinities with currency circulation north and east of Oxfordshire in the East Midlands, and Lincolnshire in particular.<sup>176</sup> Around half belong to series E, an imported coinage from Frisia that is found across Mercia in great quantities. There are also examples of series G, which are found mainly in Northumbria and Lindsey, but are believed to be from Quentovic in Francia,<sup>177</sup> and series J, which was produced in either York or Lindsey.<sup>178</sup> This broad axis of connection makes sense given the Ewelme site's location on a branch route leading off the Icknield Way at one of main descents into the Oxfordshire vale (Figures 2.8 and 2.10): it was well placed to serve as a gathering point for those travelling to or from the north-east.

Trade presumably reflected some intensification of farming. Environmental data from Yarnton suggests some expansion of cereal farming in the eighth century, perhaps to support a growing population.<sup>179</sup> From that period cereal remains become more abundant in archaeological features and the changing composition of weed seeds suggest the ploughing of heavier clay soils, something which would have been made possible, presumably, by the use of heavier ploughs. The oxen required for such ploughing would have been fed by the cultivation of hay, a practice which had ceased in the early Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>180</sup> Local evidence for farming is very limited, although quantities of cereal remains recovered from sites in the region seem to have remained small.<sup>181</sup>

The seventh and eighth centuries also saw shifts in settlement, some of which may have related to environmental, economic, and political changes. In Ewelme hundred as elsewhere, early settlements possibly moved around a locale, with individual timber houses rebuilt on nearby sites as they decayed. The process of constant renewal meant settlements changed in focus, layout, intensity of activity, and use of space over time, and, in some cases,

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<sup>175</sup> Williams, *Early Anglo-Saxon Coins*, 28–9.

<sup>176</sup> Op den Velde and Metcalf, 'Series E Reconsidered', 104; Metcalf, 'English Money, Foreign Money', 44–5.

<sup>177</sup> Abramson, *Sceattas*, 15–16; Gannon, *Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles*: 63, 113.

<sup>178</sup> Abramson, *Sceattas*, 17. John Naylor proposes that the mint site of Series J was in Lindsey, not Northumbria: 'Mercian Hegemony and the Origins of Series J Sceattas'.

<sup>179</sup> Hey, *Yarnton*, 47–8.

<sup>180</sup> *TTT*, 172, 333–6.

<sup>181</sup> Pelling, 'Overview of Archaeobotanical Remains', summarising evidence from sites including Benson, Berinsfield, Dorchester, Radley, Abingdon, St Aldate's (Oxford), Yarnton, and Eynsham.

there was a more substantial shift in settlement location.<sup>182</sup> A minority of settlements were probably abandoned after a few generations. Scattered settlement remains at Mount Farm, contemporary with Berinsfield just one kilometre to the south, probably represent one of the communities using the cemetery, yet both the cemetery and the occupation sequence at Mount Farm end as soon as the early seventh century,<sup>183</sup> possibly due to localised soil exhaustion.

Where soils remained reasonably amendable, settlements were less likely to undergo complete abandonment or substantial drift. The settlement near Rycote, for example, appears to have been occupied from the late fifth or sixth century until the mid eighth century.<sup>184</sup> Most strikingly, the excavated features and burials from Benson suggest some form of occupation in the area of the village for around 1,500 years (Figures 3.2, 3.3, and 4.2).<sup>185</sup> Great hall complexes were usually amongst the most transient, with few surviving far into the eighth century. Sutton Courtenay, for example, one of the paramount elite centres in the region, may have been abandoned in the later eighth century, perhaps being replaced by a new settlement c.1.5 km to the north-east under the present village.<sup>186</sup> Benson was unusual in that the settlement which replaced the putative hall was so close by. Perhaps, unlike many other centres of Gewissan power in the region, Benson continued as a Mercian royal base, and John Blair has suggested that with the abandonment of the hall the settlement may have been laid out on a grid plan using the short perch unit apparently typically used outside of Wessex.<sup>187</sup>

At Ewelme there is also evidence of a shift of focus within a relatively small area, in that case perhaps a result of its apparent role as an eighth-century trading centre. The Rumbold's Pit cemetery most likely served a population based in the sheltered and well-watered valley where the springs and present-day village are located. By the middle Anglo-Saxon period people perhaps moved west along the valley to near the trading/meeting site, which is c.400 metres north of the village (Figure 3.6). Geophysics in the southern part of the metalwork field indicates a possible Anglo-Saxon *Grubenhau*s, and in the late thirteenth century a lost *burh* (of unknown kind) was commemorated in a nearby field-name (Figure

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<sup>182</sup> Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 65–71.

<sup>183</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 142; Lambrick, *Neolithic to Saxon Social and Environmental Change*, 87.

<sup>184</sup> Ford et al., *The Archaeology of the Aylesbury–Chalgrove Gas Pipeline*, 25–30.

<sup>185</sup> Pine and Ford, 'St. Helen's Avenue, Benson'; below, ....

<sup>186</sup> Hamerow et al., 'Anglo-Saxon and Earlier Settlement near Drayton Road, Sutton Courtenay'; Brennan and Hamerow, 'An Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complex'; McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 248–51.

<sup>187</sup> Blair, Rippon, and Smart, *Planning in the Early Medieval Landscape*, 297–8.

5.16: *Buristede*).<sup>188</sup> It is possible that the material assemblage is in part the residue of gatherings outside the main settlement area. Yet the pottery recovered from garden test pits and other evidence indicates that twelfth-century and later Ewelme was a very elongated settlement, making a gradual and early spread of settlement seem likely.<sup>189</sup> In other words, the village retained elements of Anglo-Saxon dispersal despite a later tendency to nucleation, perhaps because of its post-eleventh-century fragmentation amongst several manors with their own widely spaced manorial sites.

### Figure 3.6

What happened in the Chilterns during the later seventh and eight centuries? A significant intensification of farming seems highly unlikely, since the area remained very sparsely settled in 1086.<sup>190</sup> Probably there were a few small and scattered settlements carrying out mixed farming with a strong emphasis on grazing. Place-names in the Chilterns indicate some of the open areas probably ideal for grazing, notably the *feld* place-names, many of which may be early since they are part of the early stratum of names well-represented before 730.<sup>191</sup> Places such as Nuffield (*Tocfeld*, c.1200) might have been better suited to grazing than arable farming, especially if the first element is OE *tōh* ('tough') (Figure 3.7).<sup>192</sup> The names Swyncombe (*Suincumbe*, 1086, OE *swin* + *cumb*, 'pig valley') and Huntercombe (*Huntercumba*, c.1183, OE \**huntera* + *cumb*, 'huntsmen's valley') suggest pastoralism and hunting.<sup>193</sup>

### Figure 3.7

Part of the grazing activity was probably carried out by vale dwellers, and indeed those living on the Chiltern dip slope, and transhumance may have become more significant as lowland farming intensified. Yet there was still plenty of grazing available in the vale, and it was becoming better managed. Vale dwellers may have fattened their pigs in Swyncombe in the autumn, but it seems unlikely that they went hunting at Huntercombe very often since

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<sup>188</sup> In this regard it is noteworthy that the word *burh* may in some cases have been used to denote 'trading area', Blake and Sargent, "For the Protection of All the People", 141–5.

<sup>189</sup> Mileson and Brookes, 'A Multi-Phase Anglo-Saxon Site', 3–9, 26 and fig. 3; below, pp. ....

<sup>190</sup> Roden, 'Enclosure in the Chiltern Hills', 115; Faith, 'Hides and Hyde Farms', 35, 37–8; below, pp. ....

<sup>191</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*, 25; Cox, 'The Place-Names of the Earliest English Records'.

<sup>192</sup> Watts, *Dictionary*, 445 discusses the etymology.

<sup>193</sup> *PN Oxon*. I, 135, 136–7.

wild animal bones are almost entirely absent from early Anglo-Saxon sites in the lowlands. By contrast, Chiltern dwellers had more need to supplement their meagre farming by hunting. For them an extra source of meat would have been particularly valuable since it would have been difficult to keep cattle in particular in an area with such a poor water supply.

Overall, it is unlikely that the dominance exerted by elites in their vale settlements over their Chiltern neighbours was terribly strong during most of the early Middle Ages, indeed the connections that existed may well have been relatively weak. Probably, therefore, the emerging lordships that existed over Chiltern communities were correspondingly 'extensive', drawing on services and renders that spanned these ecological zones, but probably only collected at places convenient for the elites.<sup>194</sup> Chiltern inhabitants contacts, partly indicated by sparse coin and pottery finds, may have been as much with others in the hills to the north-east and with the lower dip-slope settlements such as Whitchurch and Shiplake which looked towards the middle and lower Thames.<sup>195</sup>

## PERCEPTIONS

Much of early inhabitants' sense of place is necessarily lost, yet there is still much we can say, or reasonably suppose, about their experiences and perceptions. The people living in early and middle Anglo-Saxon south Oxfordshire were mainly subsistence agriculturalists, and that above all would have shaped their lives and outlooks. The seasonal round of activity can be summarised fairly briefly.<sup>196</sup> After the harvest in August/September land intended for winter crops was ploughed and harrowed to produce a seed bed. Wheat and rye would then be sown in September/October, with spring crops such as barley, oats and beans sown from late February to April. Ploughing would be carried out by oxen in teams or, in small fields, using hand tools such as spades. Seed was scattered by hand and covered by a further round of harrowing. Much effort was required at every stage of the process, including in keeping the growing crops free from choking weeds. A relative lull in the summer was filled, in the later part of the period, by hay-making, which took place usually in June and July, an operation which had to be carefully timed and carried out quickly so that the cut grass could dry out and be safely stored. This element of the farming economy was especially important in the vale, where meadows were extensive, and indeed their presence there would have

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<sup>194</sup> On this point see also Faith, *The English Peasantry*, 1–14.

<sup>195</sup> Personal communication from Maureen Mellor.

<sup>196</sup> For clear accounts of pre-modern English farming: Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*, part I; Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England*, chapter 2, especially 11–18.

encouraged the development of clustered settlements in which labour could be rapidly mobilised.<sup>197</sup> Cereals were harvested with hand tools in August and September, the winter-sown ones first. Grain then had to be taken to a homestead to be threshed and winnowed. In the spring and summer animals fed on pastures, in the winter they were given hay. Animals had to be looked after throughout the year, and sheep and cows required daily milking, with women working to turn milk into cheese. Pigs, chickens and bees were also kept.

In Ewelme hundred there is little evidence of what fields were farmed and how, but in early to middle Anglo-Saxon England fields normally lay beside the farmstead or settlement exploiting them. Systematic fieldwalking has tended to show low intensity spreads of Anglo-Saxon pottery, probably deriving from contemporary manuring, concentrated close to settlements, which makes it likely that a continuously cultivated infield was complemented by a periodically cultivated outfield.<sup>198</sup> The implication of that was that people would have spent much of their time close to their homesteads, the men in the fields, the women working in and around the house, often squatting (as revealed by their bones)<sup>199</sup> to prepare food and to collect water from the springs after which several of the hundred's settlements were named. Charcoal found in excavations suggests that fuel wood was taken from scrub or open woodland,<sup>200</sup> a job perhaps for children. The land around the farm was crucial to survival and must have absorbed much of inhabitants' day-to-day mental focus. In terms of perceptions, then, it seems almost certain that the scale of life had shrunk compared to the kind of world suggested by late prehistoric land management which entailed large-scale boundaries marking long-distance movement of considerable numbers of livestock.<sup>201</sup> It was quite different to that of the Romanised countryside too, in which there was a network of intensively farmed estates and commercial connections.

Of course, early Anglo-Saxon inhabitants moved around the wider landscape, and it mattered to them too. Animals would be taken to pasture on the outfield further from the farm as well as to grassland and fallow nearby. Cattle were often kept on heavier land close to ponds and streams which supplied their water. Sheep, which required less water and also tended to suffer from foot-rot where soils are prone to seasonal waterlogging, were kept on

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<sup>197</sup> Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes*, 174.

<sup>198</sup> Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*, 269; Hey, *Yarnton*, 38–41. A systematic parish survey was carried by the Bensington Society, coordinated by Gordon Miles, during the 1970s and 1980s. Their fieldwalking only revealed Anglo-Saxon activity very close to the probable Anglo-Saxon settlement core at Benson: Oxfordshire Museums Resource Centre, Standlake, 1988.145.A.

<sup>199</sup> Boule, 'Evolution of Two Human Skeletal Markers from Squatting Position', 52–3.

<sup>200</sup> Pine and Ford, 'St. Helen's Avenue, Benson', 170 (charcoal report by M. Robinson).

<sup>201</sup> A point well made in Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*, 297.

light, well-drained soils, including arable fallows and probably the hilly scarp zone. Moving animals brought people into contact with those living in surrounding settlements, and that required people to describe where they lived to outsiders, entailing perhaps more descriptive names than simple references to ‘the stream’ or ‘the meadow’ which may have sufficed within a family or hamlet.

The area’s place-names, for all that they are first documented after 800, offer clues about local people’s perceptions. That is especially the case since many are of a kind documented elsewhere before 730, notably the names relating to natural features.<sup>202</sup> As has been long recognised, Anglo-Saxon place-names distinguishing landscape features like hills, valleys and streams reveal people who moved about with an eye for terrain, and who would have been far better able to recognise advantages or limitations of potential settlement sites than we are today.<sup>203</sup> In the south Oxfordshire vale are a series of *dūn* names identifying low, flat-topped hills suitable for settlement, including Easington (*Esidone*, 1086, ‘Ēsa’s hill’). At Warborough was the barrow-shaped ‘watch hill’, or *weard beorg* (*Wardeberg*, 1200).<sup>204</sup> The difference between the two is shown in **Figure 3.8**. In the claylands were *brōc* names, probably indicating muddy streams such as the one at Brookhampton;<sup>205</sup> such streams needed fords or crossing points, which were found at Latchford and Rofford. Fords were especially valuable for those living at places hemmed in by streams such as Cuxham (*Cuces hamm*, 995, ‘Cuc’s hemmed-in land’). At the scarp foot useful spring sites were identified by *welle* names, notably Ewelme (*Auuilma/e*, 1086, OE *ǣw(i)elm*, ‘spring, source of a river’, ‘powerful spring’) and Brightwell Baldwin (*Berhtanwellan/Byrhtan wellan*, 887, ‘bright spring’).<sup>206</sup>

### **Figure 3.8**

As we have seen, the Chiltern Hills were almost certainly used by vale dwellers from the earliest period, although before 800 the hill country was probably not an essential component of the vale economy because there was so little pressure on grazing land. Use of the hills, even at a low level, would have had implications for perceptions. Cyclical

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<sup>202</sup> Gelling, ‘Place-Names and Archaeology’, 994–5; Cox, ‘The Place-Names of the Earliest English Records’.

<sup>203</sup> For example, Blair, *A-S. Oxon.* xxi–xxii.

<sup>204</sup> See further discussion, below **p. ....**

<sup>205</sup> There is also a possibility that the distinction between *brōc/burna* was dialectal and/or chronological, and not just a reflection of underlying geology.

<sup>206</sup> Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape*, 40–57; *Oxon. Atlas*, 22–5; *VCH Oxon.* XVIII, 397.

migrations for seasonal agricultural work such as cutting timber or grazing animals in the hills meant that some individuals moved away from settlements for well-defined intervals in the agricultural cycle, a factor that may have sometimes affected the stability of communities. Nonetheless, on the whole the Chilterns would have been rather separate from the vale to the north-west, with its own few inhabitants and perhaps also a distinctive, and rather archaic, way of life which may have incorporated a greater element of hunting and gathering.<sup>207</sup>

In vale and hills alike, the pragmatics of survival would have been crucial to people's outlook. Locating and controlling the cleanest spring or best patch of well-drained soil might well be a matter of life or death. On the other hand, the material culture of the period tells us that belief evidently came into things too. We have little direct information with which to understand religious beliefs before the Conversion, but at least some of the broad contours of the pagan worldview can be grasped by analogy with other pre-Christian Germanic belief systems.<sup>208</sup> As John Blair has noted, 'in a primitive, rural culture, nature-spirits and folk-magic would have been prominent'.<sup>209</sup> Places such as mounds, groves, and streams could be invested with significant power as part of their ritual uses, or simply by virtue of their prominence or aesthetic qualities. *Egsaford*, recorded in the bounds of Brightwell Baldwin and Cuxham, may be one such place. Gelling suggests that the place-name probably contains the personal-name Egisa, but the first element may instead be the noun *eg(e)sa* 'fear, horror, dread',<sup>210</sup> which would suggest a local aversion, perhaps in relation to some superstitious association. *Brydabeorh* — possibly the 'brides' barrow' — in the bounds of Benson (S887), might be similarly explained as a place with folkloric associations.

Watery places, and in particular the River Thames, are likely to have held a particular significance. Early medieval weapons recovered from the Thames, such as the two sixth- to seventh-century spearheads from Benson Lock and two contemporary seaxes from Day's Lock at Dorchester/Little Wittenham, are examples of persistent practices of watery deposition that continue into the Viking age throughout northern Europe.<sup>211</sup> The most likely explanation of such objects is that they were deposited as part of 'votive' practices

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<sup>207</sup> Above, p. ...

<sup>208</sup> The lack of contemporary literary material for reconstructing early Anglo-Saxon pagan practices is discussed amongst others by Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 2–3; Wormald, 'Bede, "Beowulf" and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', 66. Archaeological approaches addressing this issue have been outlined by Blair, 'Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes'; Carver, 'Agency, Intellect and the Archaeological Agenda'.

<sup>209</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 18. See also Semple, 'Sacred Spaces and Places'.

<sup>210</sup> *PN Oxon*. I, 122; Langscape.org.uk, L217.0.00 (accessed Sept. 2014).

<sup>211</sup> Swanton, *A Corpus of Pagan Anglo-Saxon Spearheads*, 33; Christie et al., *Transforming Townscapes*, 431–5; Naylor, 'The Deposition and Hoarding of Non-Precious Metals'.

undertaken at key locations, perhaps as part of ‘closing’ rituals or the laying down of arms.<sup>212</sup> In light of that, it is possible that by naming springs such as those at Ewelme and Brightwell Baldwin people were investing them with a spiritual significance.

Woods and trees were also commonly associated with pre-Christian cults. Amongst those places more convincingly associated with pagan worship was an earthwork enclosure at Wyfold Grange (*Wifaldam*, 1152–3), the first element of which seems to derive from the OE *wēoh*, ‘an idol, heathen shrine’,<sup>213</sup> and the second from OE *fald* ‘fold’, referring perhaps to its use in ritualised seasonal activities in the livestock cycle.<sup>214</sup> Another is ‘Ingham’ in the Brightwell Baldwin boundary clause. In Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, Ingham places appear to represent ancient royal estates, possibly cult-centres devoted to the god Ing.<sup>215</sup> Indeed, this connection between pagan sites and kings may also be visible at Wyfold, which is located directly on the transhumance route linking the royal estate of Benson and its Chiltern appurtenances. Both places may also emphasise the cyclical nature of cult practices as part of seasonal routines and movements through the landscape. The otherness of lonely wooded hills and valleys seems to be reflected in names such as Elvendon (‘elves’ valley’) in nearby Goring.<sup>216</sup>

Any discussion of pagan religion is necessarily speculative, but our thinking about beliefs and perceptions can be grounded a little more firmly by considering the character of contemporary houses.<sup>217</sup> The layout of houses does not suggest the creation of highly differentiated social space in the early Anglo-Saxon period. Most settlements comprised irregular groups of widely spaced timber buildings housing probably just a handful of family groups (Figure 3.9). Excavated settlements in eastern England of the fifth and sixth centuries show little differentiation in building size and organisation within particular sites, and no evidence of a hierarchy between them — even where associated burials demonstrate that communities had access to portable wealth and clearly differentiated identity and rank.<sup>218</sup> Limited local data, including the well-excavated settlement of Sutton Courtenay Bridge Farm, suggests the same, and this tendency is true also of middle Anglo-Saxon buildings at Beech House, Dorchester that are built in a slightly different timber-framed style.<sup>219</sup> What

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<sup>212</sup> Stocker and Everson, ‘The Straight and Narrow Way’; *TTT*, 231–4; Lund, ‘At the Water’s Edge’, 50.

<sup>213</sup> OE *wīg* ‘fight’ is also suggested in *PN Oxon*. I, lii.

<sup>214</sup> *VCH Oxon*. draft text on Checkendon; Gelling, *PN Oxon*. I, 46 interprets the first element as *wīl*, ‘mechanical contrivance’, but this finds no obvious explanation in the location.

<sup>215</sup> Sandred ‘Ingham in East Anglia’; Watts, *Dictionary*, 331.

<sup>216</sup> *PN Oxon*. I, 52; Hall, ‘Are There Any Elves in Anglo-Saxon Place-Names?’.

<sup>217</sup> As shown by Blair, *Building*, 86–94.

<sup>218</sup> Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 70–2.

<sup>219</sup> Rowley and Brown, ‘Excavations at Beech House Hotel’, 12–13.

early settlements do suggest is a separation between home and landscape, between the small, dark and fairly uniform interiors of timber buildings, used for sleeping, cooking and eating and the intimacies of family life, and the world beyond.

### Figure 3.9

Experimental reconstructions of early Anglo-Saxon buildings at the West Stow Country Park — comparable with those from Sutton Courtenay Bridge Farm and Rycote — suggest their one or two-roomed interiors had a distinctive atmosphere. The main source of natural light was through the open doors on the broad sides; during hours of darkness, naked flames produced characteristic odours, shadows, and sounds. These buildings lacked chimneys so smoke from the hearth and torches percolated through thatch roofs and other openings, making the interiors both dark and acrid. Such conditions structured people's domestic lives and are likely to have coloured their encounters between home, material culture, and body. It is in these settings that the reception of Anglo-Saxon art should probably be assessed. In the dark smoky settings of house interiors high-status metalwork — such as the intricately faceted great square-headed brooches from Berinsfield graves 102 and 107 (Figure 3.10) — was designed to catch the light, whilst the interplay of torches and shadows set off the cryptic motifs of interlaced and disarticulated animal ornamentation.<sup>220</sup> Similarly, the traditions of storytelling reflected in later writings and illustrations would have found in these darkened spaces a captive audience, where listeners could be frightened by tales of monsters in the marshes and woods.

### Figure 3.10

Importantly, Anglo-Saxon houses were in an ongoing state of change, rather than being finished constructions. Ground-sunk principal timbers were highly susceptible to rot and dampness. Likewise, other materials of construction, such as thatch, loam and mud, meant that repair was a constant concern. External raking timbers, such as were identified around the Benson hall, might have served a primary structural purpose, but might equally have been used to consolidate older dwellings that were beginning to collapse.<sup>221</sup> To most

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<sup>220</sup> Hedeager, 'Split Bodies', 114–116.

<sup>221</sup> Personal communication from Mark Gardiner.

inhabitants, repair, renewal, and destruction of housing was the norm, and houses in turn could be invested with their own life-cycle.<sup>222</sup>

In other words, the house was a distinctive element within the environment. Prominent landmarks might also be ‘humanised’, as can be seen in an early eleventh-century charter (S914) that describes nearby Princes Risborough (*Hrisebyrgan*), which lies at the foot of the scarp, as being *be Cilternes efese* ‘by Chiltern eaves’. Of course, for ordinary early Anglo-Saxon inhabitants the main priority in terms of marking the land was probably to claim an area for themselves and their family or kin group. It is in this light that we should presumably understand the location of cemeteries such as Ewelme at points offering long views, rather than a preoccupation with landscape aesthetics. Seen from the vale, the cemetery at Rumbold’s Pit in Ewelme occupied a distinctive eminence, rising as a low dome above Ewelme village and the flatter landscape to the north, and forming a near horizon in front of the Chiltern scarp in the distance (Figure 3.11). Whilst this is not a dominating, nor particularly striking, location, it has a local impact on the skyline of the vale, directing the gaze to the rising ground and upland landscape beyond and also to the sunset over the Sinodun Hills. Just over the Thames, the cemetery of Long Wittenham I was located at the base of the dramatic eminence of Round Hill, an association which is unlikely to be coincidental.<sup>223</sup>

### Figure 3.11

Burial archaeology suggests the importance of social memory and inheritance to contemporary communities. It seems that burial clusters were added to over several generations, implying that later burials represent individuals who through physical association claimed some form of descent from earlier burials.<sup>224</sup> The effort and performative nature of funerary ritual was an important way of emphasising community relations more widely. The act of burying — and in some cases cremating, and then burying — the dead, was a process by which the bodies of living members of the community were transformed into venerated ancestors. The great effort expended in this process betrays anxieties caused both by the severing of a person’s social obligations, but also about their ability to transcend

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<sup>222</sup> Sofield, ‘Living with the Dead’, 379–83. Reflecting on this idea, Marianne Hem Eriksen has discussed how buildings in Viking Scandinavia were associated with human-like qualities: they could live, die, and be celebrated just as people could: ‘Commemorating Dwelling’.

<sup>223</sup> Dickinson, ‘The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames’, site 98.

<sup>224</sup> Williams, *Death and Memory*, 158–62; Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 124–6.

their corporeal form through the communal gathering of mourners. These were momentous events for the living communities, and this underlies the memorialisation of the dead in landscape.

Cemeteries appear to have been almost always deliberately marked and identified by above-ground structures and monuments. Excavations at Berinsfield showed it to have developed within the remnants of a Roman field system that was apparently still visible at the time of burial, and work at Didcot Power Station has shown that at least one burial lay under a raised earthen mound.<sup>225</sup> Of course, still visible Roman field systems were common, but in the upper Thames as a whole by the seventh century there was a strong tendency to locate cemeteries next to earlier monuments, such as Bronze-Age barrows, perhaps as a way of associating the dead with supposed ancient ancestors.<sup>226</sup> Interpretations of these patterns have emphasised the structuring role of ritual in landscape; these were landscapes purposefully augmented through cultural behaviour to enable, channel and control encounters, views, and understanding. Besides demarcating the position of a cemetery, such features would have helped to direct celebrants to the site for the purposes of interment and remembrance (Figure 3.12). After death, these monuments retained a powerful mnemonic force emphasising ancestry, kinship and place.

### Figure 3.12

From the late sixth and early seventh century social status started to play a greater role in lived experience, and probably also therefore in perceptions of place. Settlement layouts became a little more structured,<sup>227</sup> perhaps allowing for more formalized codes of behaviour, especially where there was a significant degree of hierarchy, as at royal sites. Slaves in particular may have had their own quarters, and certainly their own work routines. The formalised layout and appearance of seventh-century great hall complexes makes clear that they were designed to act as semi-ritualised settings for gatherings that enhanced the status of leaders.<sup>228</sup> So too were they venues in which the consumption of elite symbols was at its greatest: literally in the case of cattle, but also figuratively in the use of art. Elaborate metalwork of the period is commonly decorated in Style II, an art style which, outwardly

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<sup>225</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 7–9, 239–40.

<sup>226</sup> Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 142–3; Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric*, 48.

<sup>227</sup> Reynolds, 'Boundaries and Settlements', 130.

<sup>228</sup> McBride, *Great Hall Complexes*, 139–44; Blair, *Building*, 114–25.

cryptic, nevertheless uses regular conventions of animal shapes placed to form symmetrical motifs in harmonious rhythm. This art, along with the inclusion of parts of wild animals in graves (claws, teeth and antler rings),<sup>229</sup> and the pattern of butchery marks on animal bones at high-status sites,<sup>230</sup> has been argued by various authors to suggest the existence of animistic or shamanistic practices bound up with group leaders.<sup>231</sup>

Elites started to make a lasting mark in the wider landscape too. At nearby Taplow (Bucks.) and Cuddesdon, for example, earthen barrows were used to demarcate the burials of high-status seventh-century individuals.<sup>232</sup> ‘Taplow’ (*Thapeslau*, 1086) is a compound of the personal name ‘Tæppa’ and *hlāw*, the OE word for ‘barrow/mound’.<sup>233</sup> Cuddesdon (*cupenes dune* in a charter of 956 (S587)) is named from ‘Cūþwine or \*Cūþin (OE *cūþ* + *-īn*), a short form of name is *Cūþ-*, and ‘hill’.<sup>234</sup> Interestingly in both cases their place-names preserve highly localised insights into inhabitants’ perceptions, in which personal names became affixed to features in the landscape. The association of personal names and places has been seen as in some way marking possession, and it became common by the late Anglo-Saxon period, as seen in a number of place-names within Ewelme hundred.<sup>235</sup> Similar compounds occur as landmarks in the charter boundaries of Cuxham (S1379) which names *cludan hlæpe* ‘Cuda’s tumulus’,<sup>236</sup> and Brightwell Baldwin (S217) at *cadandune* ‘Cada’s hill’.

The association of personal names and barrows has been much discussed, and raises important questions about forms of collective memory.<sup>237</sup> In his treatment of memory Edward Casey outlines a number of subtly different ways in which places can be linked to memory. Features can be remembered simpliciter: as single things in isolation from other things and events, or as whole circumstances of interactions, a state of affairs. But they can also serve to ‘remember-to’; as mnemonics for reminding. In this way they serve as a way of associating places not only with past object or events, but more importantly induce the remindee ‘to do or

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<sup>229</sup> Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones*.

<sup>230</sup> Sykes, ‘Deer, Land, Knives and Halls’, 177–83.

<sup>231</sup> Glosecki, *Shamanism and Old English Poetry*; Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*; Hawkes, ‘Symbolic Lives’; Bond, ‘Burnt Offerings’; Williams, ‘Animals, Ashes and Ancestors’; Bond and Worley, ‘Companions in Death’.

<sup>232</sup> Dickinson *Cuddesdon*.

<sup>233</sup> Watts, *Dictionary*, 600.

<sup>234</sup> *PN Oxon*. I, 167–8.

<sup>235</sup> Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*, 43–4; above, p. ...; below, pp. ....

<sup>236</sup> *PN Oxon*. I, 126.

<sup>237</sup> For example, Addy, ‘Tideswell and Tideslow’; Anderson, *The English Hundred-Names*, 214; Ekwall, *English Place-Names*, 135; Cameron, *Place-Names*, 122–3; Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 154–8; Gelling, *The Place-Names of Shropshire, Part V*, xiii–xiv; Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric*, 161–2; Baker, ‘Meeting in the Shadow of Heroes?’, 37–63.

think something that he or she might otherwise forget to do or think'.<sup>238</sup> Most place-name scholars have assumed that barrows with attached personal names represent examples of the first two forms of remembering. Typically, it is suggested that they record the names of the men buried there.<sup>239</sup> In cases such as Taplow and *cudan hlaewe* these monuments may even have commemorated an historical state of affairs, such as seventh-century Gewissan overlordship of the region.<sup>240</sup>

Some archaeologists have elaborated on what the functional purposes of such visible acts of commemoration may have been. As with funerary mounds more generally, named barrows could be seen to reflect changes in social and economic organisation, as ideological statements of political domination and resistance, or as a way of promoting social identification.<sup>241</sup> However, in most cases these discussions have focussed on barrows as commemorative acts of creation, not on the ways in which these personal names continued to have a presence in contemporary perception, in other words what, potentially, they reminded people to do.<sup>242</sup>

In the most recent discussion of such occurrences John Baker has come closest to considering the way in which continuous place-memory could influence future actions. In his discussion of certain personal names in monuments associated with open-air assembly places he draws attention to the possible role these monuments played in public perception: they could encapsulate past and present allegiances; they could induce the remindee to act appropriately in the sight of ancestral figures; and they could convey historical legitimacy on future proceedings.<sup>243</sup> This raises difficult questions about who 'created' these names. It seems unlikely to have been a political act by members of the elite since this makes the unlikely assumption that they had the power and will to force inhabitants to use certain names. That would go against what appears to have been usually a spontaneous, popular origin for the names of landscape features (as argued below for later-medieval field-names).<sup>244</sup> More likely, if there was a political dimension, it was that the acts, and therefore

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<sup>238</sup> Casey, *Remembering*.

<sup>239</sup> Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 157–8 discusses this possibility with regards to the mounds at Taplow (Bucks.) 'Tæppa hlāw' and Offlow (Staffs.) 'Offa hlāw'.

<sup>240</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 39; Gelling, *Signposts to the Past* suggests this may also be the case with Offlow.

<sup>241</sup> See discussions in, for example, Shephard, 'The Social Identity of the Individual in Isolated Barrows'; Brookes, 'Walking with Anglo-Saxons'; Carver, 'Reflections on the Meanings of Monumental Barrows in Anglo-Saxon England'.

<sup>242</sup> Casey, *Remembering*, 93.

<sup>243</sup> Baker, 'Meeting in the Shadow of Heroes?'

<sup>244</sup> Below, pp. ....

the names, of certain powerful people were memorable and were passed down the generations, becoming eventually mythologised and quite possibly garbled.

Usually it is impossible to identify the people whose names became attached to places, but, in some cases, suggestions can be made, as with two further individuals mentioned in the bounds of Brightwell Baldwin (S217): Ecgfrith and Ceolwulf. The relevant part of the boundary clause runs as follows:

At Brightwell from Ceolwulf's tree along long hill to open-country way thence to hollow dean (valley) up to Cada's down, to Æthelheah's boundary, thence to Ecgferth's boundary, then always by Ecgferth's boundary to Cux(ham) people's boundary, thence to ing(ham) people's boundary, thence so along ing(ham) people's boundary south through east 'leah'/wood, thence to hostage's ridge, until back to Ceolwulf's tree, and the mowing land (by) between terror's ford, and street ford, to the north of (the) brook and the wood thereto which is called shelf ridge  
S217 (c.887)

Ecgfrith (*ecgfriðes gemære*) is a common personal name given to seventeen individuals known from written sources, so would seem to have been a local landowner.<sup>245</sup> Although Ceolwulf was also a relatively common personal name by the ninth century, there are grounds for believing that the person identified here (at *ceolpulfes treopwe*), could be one of the so-named kings of Mercia or Wessex.<sup>246</sup> For one thing, the name is associated with a boundary tree rather than property — that is to say affixed to a landmark *sui generis* rather than as a function of landholding: there is no particular reason for supposing the tree signified the existence of a neighbouring local landlord.<sup>247</sup> For another, is the close proximity of a 'royal' landmark and the feature named adjacent to it in the Brightwell boundary clause cited at the beginning of this chapter, namely *gisles bæce* 'hostage's ridge' (S217).<sup>248</sup>

'Ceolwulf's tree' and 'hostage's ridge' appear to have been located at ends of a low ridge marking the southern boundary of Brightwell Baldwin parish, the former near the early

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<sup>245</sup> PASE.

<sup>246</sup> Ceolwulf I (821–3) and Ceolwulf II (874–9) of Mercia, and Ceolwulf of Wessex (597–611). The last was son of Cuða of Wessex, so this place-name may have been an extension of West Saxon folklore in the south Oxfordshire landscape. The differences in place-making qualities of 'Ceolwulf's tree' and *cudan hlaewe* might instead be regarded as a very deliberate statement associated with regime change.

<sup>247</sup> On this point see also Kitson, 'Quantifying Qualifiers', 60–1.

<sup>248</sup> The possibility of that *gisles* derives from the personal name \*Gīsl (well recorded as a first element in dithematic personal names) is discussed in *PN Oxon.* I, 122.

Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Rumbold's Pit, and the latter further east along Grove Lane (Figure 3.4, above). Not closely identifiable, but certainly within a few kilometres of this location, is *sigor dene* 'victory dene' in the Pyrton bounds (S104). It is possible that all three locations were closely associated in terms of landscape commemoration. All lie in close proximity to the Ridgeway and the Chilterns beyond, and all similarly occupied elevated positions in the transitional zone of rising upland, close to the *fildena weg* recorded in S217 and S1379 and S887 (Benson). Should *gisles bæce* indeed refer to a 'hostage' this would make it an almost unique occurrence in OE toponymy, with further potential significance regarding the ethnicity and political constitution of the region. Ryan Lavelle has postulated that hostages were used in early medieval England as a tool for inter-ethnic relations; particularly conveying status between political adversaries.<sup>249</sup> The close proximity of a possible royal personal name enshrined in the landmark might appear to strengthen the political overtones of a place associated with overlordship, historical legitimacy, and royal status.

It seems at least possible that in 'Ceolwulf's tree', 'hostage's ridge' and 'victory dene' a *mise en scène* of monumental landscape was being evoked. Taken together, the kaleidoscopic imagery of king(s), battle, and the exchange of hostages could conceivably be read as a scene of some half-remembered event, the naming and encoding of which served to enhance its local memorability.<sup>250</sup> The purposes of this placed-remembering can only be guessed at, but their location on the threshold between vale and upland is noteworthy, as is their proximity to the junction of the Ridgeway and *fildena weg*. Viewsheds calculated from their locations suggest that they were most visible from the Chiltern approaches; they had only a limited monumental presence in the vale itself (Figure 3.13). To those descending into the vale, passing directly below 'hostage's ridge' and 'Ceolwulf's tree', these landmarks may well have acted as monuments to the past.

### Figure 3.13

A related association may explain the naming of the Iron-Age Grim's Ditch linear earthwork. Other monuments of this kind dating to the eighth century, notably Offa's Dyke and Wansdyke, were named with the figures of Offa (the probably sixth-century eponymous

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<sup>249</sup> Lavelle 'The Use and Abuse of Hostages'; Lavelle 'Perceiving and Personifying Status and Submission in Pre-Viking England'.

<sup>250</sup> Lavelle, 'Oxfordshire, Wessex, and Mercia in the Age of Alfred the Great' makes a strong case that Ceolwulf's tree may refer to Ceolwulf II of Mercia, and *gisles bæce* to the hostages the ASC states he gave to the Vikings in 874.

ancestor) and Woden both cast as ancestors in the Mercian and West Saxon royal genealogies.<sup>251</sup> The naming Grim's Ditch (*Grimesdich*, c.1216) would be in keeping with this practice. Like Wansdyke, OE *Grīm* in this name probably refers to Woden, so we may possibly be witnessing an awareness of quasi-sacred royal genealogy in the minds of local populations and, in some way, in their understanding of the landscape.<sup>252</sup>

If such royal associations existed, it is unclear exactly what they might have meant to inhabitants. What local people certainly did have to respond to was Christianisation, which became inescapable. The construction of the great hall at Dorchester Bishop's Court and the development of the bishop's seat at the site of present-day Abbey probably reflect the changing orientation of elite power in the mid to late seventh century. By the end of the century all of the ruling elite of Anglo-Saxon England had converted to Christianity, and the rest of the population gradually adapted to the new religion. The conversion to Christianity represented a reorientation in worldview.<sup>253</sup> This applies to profound assumptions about the shaping of the physical environment, routines and practices. The precise effects of the conversion on local communities is difficult to gauge. It is likely that during the period of religious transformation there was great variability between people in the ways that they understood and accepted the new religion. Its reception is also likely to have been coloured by the different rites and religions practiced by different kin groups and their cults.<sup>254</sup> To some inhabitants of south Oxfordshire, aspects of Christian ritual may not have been unfamiliar, while others may have regarded them more suspiciously.

There was certainly a transformation in funerary practices: many of the burial sites of the fifth and sixth centuries were abandoned, notably in our region the large mixed rite cemeteries of Berinsfield and Long Wittenham. At Berinsfield amongst the latest burials are graves 22, 28, 52 and 110 that, on the basis of their accompanying grave goods, are likely to date no later than the first quarter of the seventh century.<sup>255</sup> A similar date range would apply to the latest burials — graves 38, 71 and 123 — from Long Wittenham I.<sup>256</sup> The abandonment of these cemeteries would, however, seem to predate the supposed

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<sup>251</sup> Yorke, 'The Origins of Mercia', 16–17; Reynolds and Langlands, 'Social Identities on the Macro Scale', 34; Brookes and Reynolds, 'Territoriality and Social Stratification', 282–3.

<sup>252</sup> *Grīm* could alternatively be used in a more negative sense, as a place fit to be occupied by a devil: Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 233.

<sup>253</sup> Petts, *Pagan and Christian*, 17–29; Carver, 'Introduction', in Carver (ed.) *The Cross Goes North*; Urbańczyk, 'The Politics of Conversion in North Central Europe', in Carver (ed.) *The Cross Goes North*, 15–27; Lund, 'Fragments of a Conversion'.

<sup>254</sup> Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 14.

<sup>255</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, 126–7.

<sup>256</sup> Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 98.

establishment of Bishop Birinus at Dorchester in 635, indicating that other — social, economic, political — factors rather than religion were also at play.<sup>257</sup>

Across eastern England the seventh century witnessed a decline in the furnished burial rite. A few high-ranking families, such as those represented by the early seventh-century burials at Berinsfield (graves 22, 28, 52), and the lavishly accompanied mid seventh-century burial at Cuddesdon are striking in their continued display of wealth.<sup>258</sup> By contrast, from ten burials at Bishop's Court, Dorchester, only one grave contained a knife and seax.<sup>259</sup> The items found with burials suggest that gender and age distinctions in burial were breaking down in the seventh century: the grave goods that lasted for any length of time were ones that were not gender specific, such as knives and buckles. The objects that continued — infrequently — to be used and which had gender associations, were ones linked with femininity, but were now found with all age groups rather than being restricted to certain ages as was the case in the sixth century. Gender distinctions almost certainly remained crucial (albeit now signalled in different ways), but these changes might suggest the promotion of identities based on status and class, a process which might have been accelerated by population increases.

The twin effects of social and religious change meant that many of the older community cemeteries were abandoned in the seventh century in favour of others nearby. Burial activity at Sutton Courtenay,<sup>260</sup> Long Wittenham I,<sup>261</sup> Blewburton Hill,<sup>262</sup> and Berinsfield<sup>263</sup> had ceased by c.625, but in each case was succeeded by new seventh- to eighth-century cemeteries nearby at Appleford,<sup>264</sup> Long Wittenham II,<sup>265</sup> Blewbury II,<sup>266</sup> and Dorchester,<sup>267</sup> respectively. In the latter case, the position of the new burial sites so close to the seat of the West Saxon bishopric would support the idea that these represent newly converted people who required new 'semi-Christian' burial sites that were distinct from the preceding 'pagan' ones.<sup>268</sup> The same may be true of Benson. Eight graves of seventh- to eighth-century date have been excavated to the south of the present-day village in St Helen's

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid. p. 459; Scull, 'Before Sutton Hoo', 3–23.

<sup>258</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*; Dickinson *Cuddesdon*.

<sup>259</sup> Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 53.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid. sites 140 and 141.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid. site 98.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid. site 22.

<sup>263</sup> Boyle, *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*.

<sup>264</sup> Hinchliffe and Thomas, 'Archaeological Investigations at Appleford', 66–8.

<sup>265</sup> Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 99

<sup>266</sup> Network Archaeology report no. 333, unpublished grey literature report.

<sup>267</sup> Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 'Dorchester, unprovenanced'

<sup>268</sup> Meaney and Hawkes, *Two Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries at Winnall*, 53–4.

Avenue, a location that would seem to be separate from both early burials of the fifth and sixth centuries (not precisely located but likely to be in the vicinity of Benson airfield)<sup>269</sup> and the churchyard of St Helen's, 100 metres to the north. As is typical of graves of this period, they contained few grave goods: just a single iron knife was recovered.<sup>270</sup> But in fact, while the locations of these burials certainly indicate a change from earlier forms of burial, there is nothing that allows us to definitely attribute it to Christian allegiance.

Nonetheless, the shift from 'pagan' field cemeteries to burial sites in close proximity to early churches at the centre of settlements meant that the dead were encountered more regularly as part of routine activities. Benson may provide an example of an early church, possibly one established by the eighth century. Comparison with the evidence from Dorchester raises the possibility that the parish church of St Helen, Benson is on the site of an early medieval predecessor. The dedication may provide an indication of an early date,<sup>271</sup> and the church's location — in close proximity to and on the same orientation as the putative seventh- to eighth-century great hall complex — would be consistent with an early predecessor or predecessors on the site of the present church.<sup>272</sup> Over time, the adoption of Christianity meant a decoupling of military-political leadership from religious leadership. Great hall complexes gave way to new monastic sites — Sutton Courtenay to Abingdon, Long Wittenham to Dorchester — and, with it, religious leadership was ceded to specialist, often female-led, ecclesiastical institutions.<sup>273</sup>

There were practical adaptations to the new religion as sacred sites in the landscape and their supernatural residents were gradually abandoned in favour of new places of Christian worship. Periodic cult centres — used in cycles of seasonal transhumance or the discharge of renders — were replaced by more permanent religious centres that were fixed in time and space. Although we have no direct evidence for early churches it is likely that both Dorchester and perhaps Benson had minsters from the seventh or eighth centuries, even if the bishopric at Dorchester was transferred relatively swiftly to Winchester.<sup>274</sup> This shift in the sacred geography of the landscape from 'natural' to 'built' places must have reflected a significant reorientation in people's perceptions, albeit some outlying crosses (such as the one mentioned in the Newnham Murren charter S738) may have perpetuated earlier religious

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<sup>269</sup> Dickinson, 'The Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites of the Upper Thames', site 17.

<sup>270</sup> *SMidIA*, 47 (2017), 69.

<sup>271</sup> Jones, 'Holy Wells and the Cult of St Helen', 67 notes a particular cluster of St Helen's dedications in the Middle Thames associated with putative seventh and eighth century church foundations.

<sup>272</sup> *VCH Oxon.* XVIII, 60 and references cited there.

<sup>273</sup> Cf. Yorke, 'The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity', 255–7.

<sup>274</sup> Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 136

sites.<sup>275</sup> So too, was the attendant shift from naturally acquired, popular cults to the didactic instructions of specialist clergy, albeit intensive educational efforts are highly unlikely since they were not taking place even in the twelfth century. Initially, these churches served a large parish, and probably priests travelled from minsters to rural settlements to administer sacraments.<sup>276</sup>

### *Belonging*

Some tentative suggestions can be made about inhabitants' sense of territorial attachment between 500 and 800. We have seen that the household basis of society would have made the family group the prime focus of attachment for most people, set within the community and the claim to patches of territory apparently justified and understood by reference to ancestors. And we have also seen that wider cultural allegiances existed, as evidenced by material culture. During the unstable days of the fifth and early sixth century identifying as British or Saxon may well have mattered a good deal, although we can be less clear about whether, later on, West Saxon or Mercian allegiance really signified much to local farmers.<sup>277</sup> In the intervening period, by the sixth century, an intermediate and territorial scale of identity may have come to the fore, that of the tribal group.

The folk-groups absorbed under Gewissan rule in the upper Thames region in the late sixth and seventh century have a shadowy historical existence. Probably they included a group called the *Garingas*, based around Goring, just south-west of Ewelme hundred.<sup>278</sup> Apparently more numerous were a people known as the *Cilternsæte* (*Ciltern sætna*, genitive plural, 'Chiltern dwellers'), one of the groups listed in the Tribal Hidage who were assessed at the large figure of 4,000 hides, and would appear to have occupied land in south Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, and northern Hertfordshire.<sup>279</sup> There has been much debate about the significance of the name and its antiquity,<sup>280</sup> but it seems likely that part of the Chiltern dwellers' group identity derived from their pastoral economy, and claims to use

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<sup>275</sup> Blair, *The Church*, 478–81.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid. 161–2. For the establishment of parishes: below, pp. ....

<sup>277</sup> The point about later identities made in *TTT*, 195.

<sup>278</sup> Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 35. Another possible group name (but the etymology is less convincing) is Shillingford (*Sillingeforda*, 1156), on the Thames by Warborough and near Dorchester, which could take its name from a group called the *Sciellingas*, or alternatively from a quality of the river (*Scielling*, 'the noisy one'): *PN Oxon*. I, 139; Watts, *Dictionary*, 544.

<sup>279</sup> Bailey, 'The Middle Saxons'; Blair, *A-S Oxon*. 35; Watts, *Dictionary*, 134.

<sup>280</sup> Most recently, Baker, 'Old English *Sæte*'.

the uplands.<sup>281</sup> If so, we have a good example of a very early sense of the Chilterns as a separate landscape zone.

By the end of the eighth century it was very local attachment which was again emphasised. Charters from the ninth century record the existence of local groups, many of which may have been formed earlier. The *cuces-hæma gemære* ‘boundary of the inhabitants of Cuxham’ and *incg -hæme gemære* ‘boundary of the inhabitants of Ingham’ mentioned in the Brightwell Baldwin bounds (S217) are examples of such identities.<sup>282</sup>

Some such groups may have been formed from small folk groups, or formerly more extensive groups whose territorial control had shrunk. These smaller groups, which we shall return to in the next chapter, probably equated with local communities which constituted relatively well-defined territorial units – the partial equivalent perhaps of later village or parish communities. Importantly, they occupied very clearly bounded and defined territories, in a way which earlier groups had not.

## CONCLUSION

In the early medieval period every region had its own trajectory, which unfolded in its own way. But all of them passed through a similar sequence of stages as Roman authority gave way to new forms of social organisation and inter-dependence. In the first stage kinship associations came to the fore, influencing patterns of landholding, social identities, and even forms of burial. Who one was, to whom one was related and descended from became important areas of political negotiation by which certain families established themselves in local spheres. Unlike the preceding Roman period, people’s perceptions were mostly orientated inwardly towards those occupying the same resource territory, with domestic and social interactions conducted within arenas ordered in these terms.<sup>283</sup>

The small size of communities meant that those inhabiting settlements were closely connected by bonds of obligation to one another, either as members of a household living together under the same — small — roof, by virtue of close kinship, or simply necessity. Analysis of the contemporary cemeteries suggest that connections were also made between those who claimed descent from a common ancestor; that belonged, in other words, to a

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<sup>281</sup> Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*, 21.

<sup>282</sup> The first element of *incghæma* (Ingham) might be an obscure personal name or some unidentified element, but it could conceivably have been a group name: *PN Oxon*. I, 96. For the dangers of readily identifying *-ing* and *-ington* names with the genitive of a folk-name (the *-inga*-type name): Gelling, ‘Place-Names and Archaeology’, 999. The supernatural associations have already been mentioned, p. ....

<sup>283</sup> On this point cf. also R. Faith 2009, ‘Forces and relations of production in early medieval England’, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 9.1, 23–41; Williamson, *Environment, Society and Landscape*, 55–6.

‘good’ family. Graves of certain women in these cemeteries also hint at kinships created by marriage, which was a particularly important way of linking small communities together.

Farming and settlement forms were intimately related to the nature of the environment. Groups of families held pockets of land on the river gravel terraces, and shared the agricultural, domestic and other productive tasks amongst themselves. Crafts were organised at a domestic level, and exchange between groups, on the basis of surviving material objects, seems to have been relatively small-scale. Yet these were far from egalitarian groups. If social identities in death are anything to go by, each member had a distinct but complementary role to play, organised by gender, age, and place in the family.

These notions of kinship extended into the landscape. The perceptions of the settlements, fields and burial sites where people lived and worked were encoded with the personal names of ancestors, from local landowners to ancient kings, versions of which existed in local toponymy at much later dates. Some of these names — such as the monumentalised landscape of Ceolwulf’s tree and hostage ridge — may be late additions to the landscape in places that were encountered only intermittently, but others, such as the eponymous *Cūþ*- had a very regular and local presence in the day-to-day lives of many inhabitants of the vale.

Behind these family structures and internal rivalries probably lay feelings of social anxiety and insecurity that existed in all times of environmental precarity, and these emotions were possibly especially intense in the generations either side of 600. In these decades social relations changed from ones clearly orientated on family structures of age, gender and relationships to ones increasingly determined by rank and position. One significant effect this change had on landscape was that older family burial sites were gradually abandoned, in some cases to be forgotten entirely, and in other cases to be only half-remembered and mythologised in the names of places. A second effect was that people identified themselves increasingly as the ‘followers of’ particular individuals and not simply as members of a kin-group, whether or not they were directly descended from the named person. Whoever *Cūþ*-, *Ēsa*, or *Benesa* were, people increasingly understood their group affiliation and perhaps social standing in relation to people invested with higher status and importance.

From the late sixth century onwards — the second stage — came a hardening of social distinctions to include groups that did not work the land themselves but assumed some level of control over the mobilisation of goods. An example of this dominion was the pattern of hall complexes that appeared in the seventh century between Abingdon and Benson. From the mid seventh century new renders may also have been required for maintaining

ecclesiastical communities at minsters. From these places local leaders were able to fashion an elite culture comprising amongst other things the display of prestige objects, food consumption and public rituals around the discharge of obligations, alongside new ostentatious forms of burial, first in isolated barrows and then in churches. Most accounts ascribe the emergence of these groups as the culmination of the competition between families with certain factions able to establish local and regional hegemony. Whatever the driver, leaders remained in a personal — or at least personalised — relations with the wider population, including those in the back settlements of the Chilterns. Production remained predominantly domestic in basis, and exchange was essentially embedded in social relationships.

Some of these tributary relationships and notions of social ranking may have a deeper ancestry. The importance and longevity of Dorchester, so close to south Oxfordshire, owed something to its character in the late Roman period, an observation that raises questions about the status of Benson and the structure of power in the region. On the basis of the archaeological and written sources it is certainly possible that there was a degree of territorial lordship that was being expressed already from an early date.

The changing structure of social relations resulted in different types of local encounter between people and landscape, from ones fixed almost entirely on routines undertaken within the locale, to ones that acknowledged broader economic interdependence. At least for those, presumably men, undertaking the tasks of seasonal transhumance and the episodic rendering of dues at the great hall complexes of Benson or Dorchester, there was a wider conception of landscape and the people that inhabited it. So too was there an appreciation of the spatial relationships that existed between neighbours, from the limits of their territories, often marked by routeways, to the locations of their appurtenant resources. From a perception of landscape and inhabitation that was almost entirely group-centred, a more structured space-centred conception gradually emerged.

The third stage, here broadly after 700, saw changes in production, exchange and social relations. This period saw the development of a partly monetised economy, and related to that new forms of commercial exchange and systems of taxation. New markets were an incentive for the intensification of agricultural production and economic specialisation, and extensive lordships gradually gave way to a system of proto-manorial estates. While these developments are recognised as a general trend more widely across England from the eighth century, the full effects are not clearly visible in south Oxfordshire until following centuries. It is to these that we now turn.