RESEARCH PAPERS

Anglo-Saxon Human Sacrifice at Cuddesdon and Sutton Hoo?

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Introduction

By reference to two well-known sites where human sacrifice has been suggested, some problems of interpretation of Early Anglo-Saxon burial practices and pre-burial rites from archaeological evidence are considered.

It is twenty years since Dr Tania Dickinson published her detailed account of the high-status or 'princely' artefacts and associated burials from Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire (Dickinson 1974). The recent discovery of the two groups of unusual burials from Sutton Hoo, Suffolk (Carver 1992), and research into Early Anglo-Saxon burial customs and religion, have accentuated the need to examine afresh the more gruesome rituals of the period.

In the light of such renewed interest, particularly in human sacrifice, some reconsideration is desirable with regard to the relationship between the 'unusual' burials from the Early Anglo-Saxon burial sites at Sutton Hoo and the finds at Cuddesdon, especially as the latter site provides the most frequently cited English parallel in discussions of the possibility of human sacrifice at the former (Geake 1992; Ellis Davidson 1992; Wilson 1992; Welch 1992).

In this paper the characteristics of both sites are compared and contrasted and the evidence which has been used in their interpretation is reviewed.

Cuddesdon

Despite the circumstances and limited recording of the discoveries made at Cuddesdon in 1847, it seems beyond reasonable doubt that the two glass vessels, the 'Coptic' bucket and other artefacts represent the contents of a single grave assemblage of early-seventh-century date. Furthermore, these artefacts would appear to derive from the burial, probably a cremation, of an individual of 'princely' status. The closest parallels for the artefactual material, cited by Dickinson, come from the richest burials of the Early Anglo-Saxon period, namely Broomfield, Essex, Coombe, Kent and Sutton Hoo Mounds 1 and 2, Suffolk.

The aspect of the site that presents the greatest problem in interpretation is the group of associated burials which were described in the primary account as '...arranged in a circle, the heads outwards, lying on their faces, and with their legs crossed.' (Anon. 1847: 157). These burials, of unknown quantity but probably numbering between four and ten, were interpreted by Dickinson as the remains of slaves or captives who had been buried, probably around the edge of a barrow, after having been sacrificed on the occasion of the princely burial. It should be stated however, that Dickinson's view was one of a number of hypotheses advanced to explain the burials (Dickinson 1974: 19-24). The depth of these burials was described as being between two and three feet. Whether this implies that all were at the same level or that their depth was variable, is impossible to establish. The arrangement of the burials however, when considered with their uniform positioning, strongly suggests that they were contemporary. Alternatively, the position of each burial must have been marked in some way to enable the radial layout

to occur, with the same burial practices being employed over time. The lack of a scale plan and the ambiguity of the original report are most unfortunate. For example, it is unclear who made the original observation, and whether it was a personal communication from the workmen who unearthed the finds, or a personal observation by the communicator of the written report. That no plan was produced heightens the possibility of a distorted impression of the positioning of the burials, as the perspective of the observer will have affected the perception of their arrangement. It is possible that the burials were radial but of an irregular nature, similar to those found in some of the Yorkshire barrow cemeteries excavated by Mortimer (Mortimer 1905: Figs 745a and 846). It would also be desirable to know how many burials were found as the lower the number the less alarming the uniformity. The above factors ensure that the Cuddesdon discoveries will always remain enigmatic, although the details recorded in the primary account are sufficient to warrant its serious consideration as a candidate for a sacrificial site. No artefacts were reported with any of these burials. Although none of the burials was sexed, the results of Dr Dickinson's own small-scale excavations at the site revealed skeletal evidence of a mixed family or community group. These are believed to represent residual remains of the original discovery (Dickinson 1974: 72). For an exhaustive consideration of the nineteenth-century investigations and for details of parallels, reference should be made to Dickinson's publication.

Sutton Hoo
The royal burial site at Sutton Hoo is surely the most famous of Anglo-Saxon sites. The site is known primarily for its outstanding funerary deposit in Mound 1 (Bruce Mitford 1975; 1978;1983), but involves a wide variety of burial practices.

Present interest however, lies in the results of the excavations carried out between 1986 and 1992 by Professor Martin Carver, for which detailed interim reports are available in the series of bulletins published by the Sutton Hoo Research Committee since 1983. The most recent statement to appear provides a concise summary and, in an appendix, a clear catalogue of the new data (Carver 1992). Besides the information recovered regarding the mounds themselves, two unusual groups of flat-grave burials were found. The details quoted below are taken from Carver (1992).

The Group 1 graves were situated at the eastern periphery of the site and comprised 23 burials, ten of which showed clear signs of violence or disrespectful treatment. The body positions were varied with at least 12 supine and five prone burials occurring, as well as two unusual kneeling burials and the enigmatic burial 27 interred in a unique ploughing position. Of the Group 1 burials, three had traces of a coffin, of which one may have been accompanied by a joint of meat, and another, the 'ploughman', was buried with a wooden ard and rod. The burials were centred on a pit interpreted as the rotted root-mantle of a tree and Professor Carver's 1992 interim statement sees the group as marking a ritual area contemporary with the seventh-century mounds, where human sacrifice was carried out associated with a tree (*ibid.*: 355).

Group 2 was associated with Mound 5, which contained a primary cremation dated to the late sixth or early-seventh-century, a date broadly consistent with the primary cremations in many of the excavated mounds. The group consisted of 16 graves, some apparently arranged around the mound and some in the quarry pits of the mound. A total of nine, or possibly ten, exhibited signs of violence or disrespectful treatment. Six burials were on their sides, five were supine and three were prone. Two burials contained

additional human remains and one may have been bent over backwards. One burial had the head wrenched out of alignment and an organic collar, which may have been a noose, was observed around the neck.

The only Group 2 burial to possess any internal grave features was burial 53, a prone burial with what appeared to be a plank placed over the corpse. Six burials were shown to be stratigraphically later than partially silted quarry pits dug for the construction of Mound 5, although the time lapse between barrow construction and satellite interment for the whole group is assessed in terms of at most a few years as opposed to decades (*ibid.*: 357).

The problems of bone preservation at Sutton Hoo are well known, but where sexing of human remains has been achieved, it is probably significant that only two females have been positively identified.

^{c}14 determinations from two of the Group 1 burials provided dates of AD 540-700 and AD 680-820 (accelerator). A further unusual burial found in isolation near Mound 17 provided a ^{c}14 date of AD 670-830. None of these dates is inconsistent with a broad date range covering the first half of the seventh-century for this cemetery.

Discussion

Several common threads run through the three groups of burials described above, but these are mainly concerned with external characteristics. For example, the primary burials in whose proximity the 'unusual' burials are interred are of princely status and are dated broadly to the late-sixth to early-seventh-century at both sites. Group 2 at Sutton Hoo and, probably, the Cuddesdon burials, were directly associated with a mound. In the former case, the burials stratigraphically post-dated the construction of the mound over the primary burial and at Cuddesdon, and if a mound did exist, a similar sequence of events seems likely.

A consideration of the internal characteristics of the three groups however, shows just how different they are from each other. The regularity of orientation and body positioning at Cuddesdon provides a marked contrast with the wide variation that characterises both groups at Sutton Hoo. This, however, may reflect an exaggerated claim for uniformity in the published record of the Cuddesdon find. At Sutton Hoo, the burials are variously oriented with little obvious patterning. Even with the small number of burials which are consistently oriented there is no correlation in body positioning. The uniformly prone burial rite, with apparently tied legs, displayed at Cuddesdon, marks it out as a unique group. The Cuddesdon burials would appear to be absolutely contemporary, whereas those at Sutton Hoo need not have been.

Given the poor standard of recording of the Cuddesdon discoveries and the problems of preservation at Sutton Hoo, inferences regarding the sex of individuals should be made with some caution. This said, Dickinson's excavations at the former site revealed suggestive evidence of a family or community group as opposed to the Sutton Hoo burials, where only two probable females have been identified.

The differences between Groups 1 and 2 at Sutton Hoo are more subtle, but some significant points may be extracted from the available data. Group 1 certainly contained the most bizarre burials. In general, more effort seems to have been expended on this group, a situation which is evidenced by the traces of coffins found in certain graves and even a possible cairn over one burial. The organic grave finds, a joint of meat and the ard and rod, which accompanied two of the burials are a further indication of contrast with

Group 2, where only one prone burial showed traces of an internal feature in the form of a plank laid over the corpse. This feature, incidentally, is paralleled in a late-tenth or early-eleventh-century burial of a victim of judicial execution from Lund, Denmark (Carelli 1993: 10).

Only two females have been identified among the unusual burials. This feature is altogether surprising, particularly as the majority of proposed Early Anglo-Saxon sacrificial victims, such as those from Worthy Park, Hampshire, Sewerby, East York-shire and Yarnton, Oxfordshire, are women (Hawkes and Wells 1975; Hirst 1985; Denison 1994). Further discoveries, such as the sixth or seventh-century woman found thrown down a Roman well at Poulton Down, Mildenhall, Wiltshire (Meyrick 1949), might, perhaps, also be considered as sacrificial victims.

Although the orientation of burials in both groups is varied, there is slightly more consistency among the Group 1 burials with a W-E orientation predominating. Two of the Group 2 burials have the skulls missing (one possibly by later truncation), and two graves contained additional human remains. To summarise, the Group 1 burials at Sutton Hoo appear to have been committed to the ground with noticeably greater concern than those of Group 2.

In searching for evidence to support a sacrificial interpretation of the 'unusual' burials considered here, researchers are tempted to combine archaeological and literary evidence which is distinct in both time and space (Reynolds 1988: 718).

In a recent article, Hilda Ellis Davidson has skilfully reviewed the literary evidence for human sacrifice in the pagan period. This evidence consists mainly of Scandinavian and related sources, some of which date from the tenth-century but are frequently much later. She concluded that the Anglo-Saxons were certainly capable of carrying out human sacrifice, particularly after a heavy drinking session, but that there is a vital need for further archaeological evidence and research into folklore and earlier Anglo-Saxon laws (Ellis Davidson 1992: 340).

David Wilson, on the other hand, preferred not to use the Scandinavian evidence in support of human sacrifice in Early Anglo-Saxon England, except when discussing Sutton Hoo (Wilson 1992: 3).

The lack of contemporary literary material is a major problem. The epic poem Beowulf, perhaps composed in the eighth-century, has been trawled time and again for evidence of pagan religion with little reward (Wormald 1978: 66; Wilson 1992: 2), which warns against projecting back from much later Scandinavian sources, of which (many of which are as late as the thirteenth-century). Despite the scholarly attention devoted to the literary evidence, such studies have revealed little or nothing about the final resting place of the victims of sacrifice. This situation suggests that the burial of sacrificial victims played a peripheral role in such rituals, and may go some way to explaining our lack of evidence.

The archaeological evidence for human sacrifice is far from common and, where it occurs, difficult to interpret. Other types of evidence for religion, such as amulets, present similar problems (Meaney 1981; Ellis Davidson 1983). Ellis Davidson (1992: 333) supported Struve's (1967) opinion that signs of burning or the presence of animal bones close to an 'unusual' burial could be used to support a sacrificial interpretation. However, such finds are not uncommon in 'normal' burials (the term is applied very loosely here) of the Early Anglo-Saxon period, but in virtually all instances a sacrificial interpretation is not a serious option. Residuality is always a problem and the high

incidence of intrusive material, including charcoal and animal bones, in the graves at Winnall, Hampshire serves as a warning (Meaney and Hawkes 1970: 21). Fortunately, it was clear that much of the intrusive material at Winnall was associated with finds of post-medieval date, but if the post-medieval activity at the site had been of a different nature, certain graves (for example Grave 24) might have been seen to have fulfilled Struve's criteria.

No animal bone or evidence of burning is recorded as having been found at Cuddesdon, and at Sutton Hoo, only burial 20 from Group 1 provided such a find. Struve's criteria are hardly supported by the archaeological evidence at these sites, although in searching within or immediately around the burial place of a sacrificial victim, we may perhaps be looking in the wrong place. Too much emphasis is placed upon the burial deposit, as if it were the focus of the entire rite. In cases where live burial has been suggested, the most well-known example being Grave 41 at Sewerby, East Yorkshire (Hirst 1985), the grave itself may contain all of the available evidence, but in other cases archaeological traces of the death and burial of an individual may well have been spread over a wide area. Ritual is likely to have been conducted at the residence of the deceased, at a temple or shrine and finally at the grave. It should be recognised though that the time-span involved with graveside ritual is difficult to determine, as it may have continued intermittently (or even regularly) for some time after the initial backfilling of the grave. Although Struve is almost certainly right, the nature of such evidence is difficult to interpret and the contexts where the evidence should be expected need to be considered more thoroughly. Apart from the discovery of a pyre at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Snape, Suffolk (Carnegie and Filmer-Sankey 1993) the failure to find a site in England comparable to that at Leibenau, North Germany, with its funeral pyres and other traces of funerary rites, is probably a reflection of, until recently, a preoccupation with the end result - the grave.

Osteological evidence is of great importance (Knusel 1993: 206) and it is extremely unfortunate that neither the Cuddesdon nor the Sutton Hoo evidence can be studied in this way to any significant effect.

There can be difficulties in determining whether certain injuries were the cause of death or were inflicted post-mortem (Harman *et al.* 1981: 166), although this is less of a problem than is often thought. Decapitation is probably more easily interpreted than other types of pathological evidence, for the stress placed on both the victim and executioner is unlikely to produce a clean result; where skeletal evidence has survived from late Anglo-Saxon judicial execution sites, a somewhat untidy process involving a number of blows, often badly aimed, is frequently evident (see for example the skull from Roche Court Down, Wiltshire (Tildesley 1932)). There are also several clear examples of decapitation as the cause of death from Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, a notable example being Grave 80 from Burwell, Cambridgeshire (Lethbridge 1931). In contrast, certain of the decapitated skeletons from the Roman cemetery at Lankhills, Winchester, displayed all the signs of having been decapitated post-mortem, to the extent that the excavator felt confident enough to propose a deliberate ritual, whereby the head was severed between the third and fourth cervical vertebrae (Clarke 1979: 193).

There seems to have been no culture-specific religion amongst the earlier Anglo-Saxons (Ellis Davidson 1990: 14) and it would appear that their rites and religions were based upon cults particular to kin or family groupings. This point is important for it allows and explains both geographical and inter-site variation in burial practices.

Furthermore, one might expect some consistency in burial rite and other religious practices amongst close family or kin groups, if only we could identify such groups in the archaeological record. The royal burial site at Sutton Hoo is probably as close as we will get to a cemetery where the primary burials may represent such a well defined group; indeed, one of the most interesting results of Carver's excavations has been to show the predominance of cremations in bronze bowls as an élite burial practice in the early-seventh-century (Carver 1992: Fig. 65). The point that arises from this is that if human sacrifice played such an important role in the religion of the Sutton Hoo dynasty, then some consistency should be expected in the burial rites of their sacrificial victims (perhaps of a similar nature to that proposed at Lankhills), or, at the very least, there should be some evidence for the development of practices over time. If we accept a sacrificial interpretation, the obvious conclusion to draw is that the mode of interment of victims at Sutton Hoo was of peripheral importance to the rite during which they were killed. The burial of the 'ploughman' may not conform to this hypothesis, but its extraordinary character need not exclude it from the proposed paradigm. Moreover, the total lack of consistency displayed by the burial rites in both Groups 1 and 2 indicates that the role of the victim in any formulaic rite ceased after death and, possibly, that the corpse was returned to the family or kin group to which the victim belonged in order to be buried by them. In the latter case, the individual nature of kin or family beliefs would apply, thus accounting for the wide variation in body positioning. Additionally, if the burials are those of sacrificial victims, then we need not expect 'normal' burial rites to have been used.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the evidence for human sacrifice in Early Anglo-Saxon England based around the evidence from two frequently compared sites. At the present time the available archaeological evidence is not conclusive, although it seems likely that sacrifice played a minor role in religious ritual. The Group 1 burials at Sutton Hoo are probably best explained in these terms. As for Group 2, a judicial interpretation may be more appropriate, although we must await the results of further c14 dating along with the full publication of Professor Carver's excavations before definite conclusions can be drawn. Our impressions of the Cuddesdon burials rely upon the tantalising glimpse afforded by an unknown antiquarian and, if we accept Dickinson's suggestion, they represent the best example we have of multiple ritual sacrifice.

The 'unusual' burials from Cuddesdon and Sutton Hoo cannot be considered comparable beyond general external characteristics and although the Cuddesdon evidence is partial, it is sufficient to demonstrate that there are major differences between the two sites.

It is clear that greater consideration must be given in cemetery analyses to a wider range of contexts where materials related to death and burial rites may occur. The problem of who undertook the burial needs to be more seriously addressed, as it is that person or persons who ultimately determined the nature of the burial deposit.

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mc their latest views on the unusual burials from Sutton Hoo and Cuddesdon.

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