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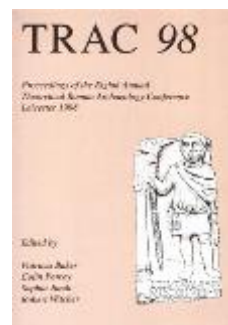
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# **Identities and Cemeteries in Roman and Early Medieval Britain**

by Howard M. R. Williams

## *Introduction*

How can we reconstruct the cultural significance of cemeteries from past societies? It is often assumed that cemeteries discovered by archaeologists in some way reflect homogeneous communities that had once lived in the locality. In turn, burial rites directly or indirectly reflect the beliefs, ideologies and social organisation of these communities (e.g. Morris 1992) and it is often stated that burial customs reflect the priorities and strategies of mourners rather than the deceased (e.g. Barrett 1994). For many periods and places in the past, these are reasonable and logical assumptions. However, it is the purpose of this paper to suggest that such a view severely restricts our understanding of the social and cultural significance of funerals and burial places in the complex, plural and heterogeneous societies found in southern and eastern Britain during the first millennium AD. Case studies from social anthropology and sociology will be used to illustrate the ways in which a variety of groups, many not related to the deceased, can become involved in the same funerals and the uses of the same burial space. At one level these studies act as 'cautionary tales', suggesting the danger of trying to understand the archaeological evidence from cemeteries in terms of the ideologies and practices of any single group. Yet, more importantly, they provide us with a new starting point for understanding the social role of burial places in past societies. By becoming foci for engagements and interactions between different groups, cemeteries can become central to the definition, reproduction and transformation of group identities including those based on class, religion and ethnicity. The use of material culture, monumentality, space and place in funerary rituals and subsequent social practices focused on burial sites might all be implicated in processes of group definition and re-evaluation. Such cases of inter-group relations during funerals and at cemeteries are probably more frequent than are often assumed. Indeed it can be argued that cases where cemeteries served homogeneous social and cultural groups without the intervention of others, are likely to be exceptions rather than the rule in many past societies.

This new perspective can be followed through to provide new preliminary interpretations of cemeteries and their context during the late Roman and early medieval periods. It is suggested that inter-group relations focused upon burial sites were fundamental in the construction and reproduction of group identities since death rituals required groups to deal with the discourses and beliefs of other groups and define their distinctive place in the world. The character and frequency of inter-group engagements during funerals and at burial sites contributed towards the emergence of new cultural identities in both the later Roman and early medieval world.

## *Anthropological and sociological studies of mortuary practices*

In the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and the use of data from these subjects by archaeologists, there is a long tradition for studies of funerary practices and cemeteries to investigate single ethnic, tribal or religious communities in isolation. Any comparisons are between distinctive cultures and any influences and interactions between groups in the mortuary context are either under-played or left unexamined (Binford 1972; Bloch & Parry 1982; Carr 1995; Huntingdon & Metcalf 1991; Irish *et al.* 1993; O'Shea 1984; Parkes, *et al.* 1997; Ucko 1969). However, there are increasing numbers of studies that address the role of funerals and burial sites in terms of inter-group relations rarely considered by archaeologists but with

striking implications for archaeological studies, interpretations of funerary rituals and cemeteries.

#### *Chinese rituals and cemeteries in Thailand*

Overseas Chinese communities represent a useful starting point for such discussions because recent anthropological work has explicitly discussed the importance of death rituals and burial places in their relations with other cultural groups. Firstly, let us discuss the importance of funerary rites and seasonal ceremonies of the Chinese ethnic minority in Thailand. Funerals are public displays central to the social life of the Chinese minority and highly visible to the Thai majority. Hill (1992) demonstrates the means, by which Chinese funerals incorporate a range of Thai religious practices, even including Thai Buddhist monks into their funerals. What appears syncretistic in fact emphasises the distinctiveness of the Thai and Chinese communities. Funerals are said to symbolise a 'Chinese' identity and links to a Chinese past (Hill 1992: 325, 328). Indeed, it appears that these interactions with the wider society through public funerals serve to sustain the Chinese community's distinctive cultural identity (Hill 1992).

This expression of identity is not only articulated through the burial of the dead, but through rituals that involve appropriating the dead of other groups. Through the *Hsui-kou-kou* festival ('festival to refine the restless ghosts' bones), the Chinese community takes responsibility of Thai 'bad deaths' through a series of elaborate and public rituals. Formoso (1996) argues that many Thai people regard these ceremonies as evidence of the successful acculturation of the Chinese into their social and political life while perceiving the Chinese community as tainted and polluted through their intimate links with bad deaths. On the other hand, Chinese groups also perceive these rituals as potentially polluting and dangerous and see their treatment of Thai bad deaths as a worthy act, a symbol of the socio-economic, moral superiority and distinctive identity (Formoso 1996).

This case study provides a fascinating example of inter-group relations and co-operation through funerals and burial sites by which each group perceives the rituals in different ways. It appears that these public and formalised mortuary interactions help define and reproduce ethnic identities and socio-economic status of Chinese communities within Thai society (ibid. 1996).

#### *Chinese cemeteries in Singapore*

An important lesson for archaeologists is the way that burial space can be incorporated into relations between the Chinese communities, other groups and political authorities. The example of Chinese burial grounds in Singapore suggests ways in which multiple discourses, sometimes in conflict, can surround the burial places and mortuary practices of one ethnic group. Cemeteries are the focus for ancestor worship, yet the Chinese communities have had to adapt and negotiate with the authorities of Singapore who hold very different attitudes towards Chinese cemeteries. State discourses focus upon the large amount of valuable space taken up by Chinese graves, public health and hygiene concerns, and an awareness that the kinship-based focus of ancestor worship is dangerous to nationalist ideologies (Yeoh & Hui 1995). Consequently, political tensions surround the use and maintenance of these burial sites, supporting the view that:

Far from being the product of a monolithic culture, burial space as a social product is often construed in a plurality of ways and invested with diverse if not antithetical meanings by different individuals and social groups

(Yeoh & Hui 1995:184)

Yeoh & Hui (1995) demonstrate the nature of Chinese discourses, focusing upon *fen shui* and ancestor worship that incorporate funerary rituals and burial space in the negotiation of their power relations and ethnic identities in a plural society (see also Barley 1995:114–5). Therefore, archaeologically identifiable aspects of funerary practices and burial spaces are central to these processes of identity construction and reproduction.

*Bali – religious affiliation and village solidarity*

Similar themes are applicable to Bali where funerals are often interpreted in terms of élite power and ritual display (e.g. Geertz 1980). However, political and cultural identities can often be played out in terms of conflict and co-operation in almost every stage of mortuary practices, even the manner of mourning a death and the expression of emotion. Linda Connor (1995) discusses differences in mourning patterns between Balinese Hindus and Muslims during the pre-cremation ceremony surrounding the washing of a corpse. The ceremony is an important part of funerary procedures; while Balinese Hindus display a stoic reaction to the ceremony, Muslim relatives attending the same ritual express their sadness and shed tears. Connor suggests that these differences in mourning practices and the expression of grief are observed by mourners and embody wider political and cultural tensions in Bali. These concern religious differences between Islam and Hinduism and the nature of a separate Hindu-Balinese identity in a largely Muslim state. She describes how one ceremony following the death of an elderly male caused consternation among relatives who were married to Muslims: 'The corpse-washing brought into high relief the conflicting allegiances of the deceased's two daughters' (Connor 1995:552), demonstrating that in Bali: '...experiences of death and bereavement may be constituted through multiple and contested discourses in shifting contexts of sociality' (Connor 1995:538).

Funerals and access to burial sites can define village solidarities and relations between élite groups and village communities. Carol Warren's (1993) discussion of disrupted death ceremonies illustrates the ways by which inter-group tensions become manifest during funerary rites. Village identity can be expressed through their burial sites and by excluding individuals and sections of society from burial at these locations; sometimes funerals of unpopular individuals are disrupted and occasionally their coffin broken open and the corpse mutilated. Therefore, the treatment of the body and the location of the grave become heavily contested events in which different groups attempt to assert their rights and identities in relation to others. While the funerals of powerful individuals have been discussed in terms of élite power, competition and elaborate displays and cosmologies (Geertz 1980), there is the potential for their disruption as an expression of popular protests and alternative readings of the events. Once again, funerals and burial places cannot be fully understood in terms of the ideas and practices of one group.

*Java – the role of funerary specialists*

The above examples illustrate the ways in which participation in rituals, access to, and use of, burial space as well as the treatment of the corpse together with many other aspects of death and burial can be central to the ways that groups interact and define their identities. On Java, Clifford Geertz describes another example of co-operation and inter-dependence over death rituals between cultural groups in a plural society. Geertz describes the dependence of a rural non-Muslim community upon Muslim ritual specialists and secular authorities for the organisation and proper transformation of the deceased and mourners through the rites of passage. This co-operation breaks down at a time of political unrest and Government agents advise Muslim authorities not to participate in non-Muslim rural funerals. Rather than diffusing tensions, this appears to create and enhance inter-group animosity. When a boy died in a non-Muslim village community and there was no one to preside over the funeral and deal with the pollution and danger of the corpse, the scenario threatened the fabric of inter-group relations. Clearly, mutual co-operation and funerals can maintain social stability, inequalities and relations between groups, but when these relations break down the friction caused might increase awareness of group distinctions based upon political affiliation, religious practices and beliefs (Geertz 1973).

In addition to the relatives of the deceased, a variety of funeral specialists including coffin makers, priests, musicians, hired mourners, corpse handlers and gravediggers aid in the organisation of funerals. On many occasions such as the Java example, these specialists come

from outside the local community and sometimes they may derive from completely distinctive religious, ethnic or cultural groups. For example, Jonathan Parry's study of the ritual specialists associated with the holy city of Benaras in northern India seems to demonstrate the role of ritual specialists in controlling and interpreting funerary rites (Parry 1994:75–148, see also Watson 1982:157). Funerary specialists can be an important medium for co-operation between groups, the negotiation of group identities. There is the potential for such interactions to go one step further, leading to the dependence of groups upon funerary specialists and eventually their acceptance of these specialists' attitudes and practices towards death and burial. Group interactions surrounding death can define and emphasise differences, but on other occasions they might lead to the active transformation of group identities and relations between groups.

*Ethnicity, class and cemetery space: Britain, Ireland & America*

Let us now focus more on the ways that burial space can incorporate multiple discourses or the use of numerous groups. Local authority cemeteries in Britain and Northern Ireland during the last two centuries provide a further example of group interaction and conflicting values surrounding funerals and burial sites. The very origin of these cemeteries can be traced to a variety of motivations and ideologies; from middle class concerns over public health to dissenting Christian denominations wishing to be buried in consecrated ground outside the control of the Anglican church (Rugg 1997). Once in use, the spatial organisation of the cemetery and monumentality of graves emphasised the ideologies and class divisions of the rapidly transforming and industrialising society. In particular, the ordering of graves, the patterns of movement through the cemetery and the symbolism of elaborate funerary monuments created a distinctive environment for different groups to experience elite discourses on death and dying. Concerning the Undercliffe cemetery at Bradford it has been stated that:

In the urban cemetery of the new industrial town, even more precisely than in the new industrial town itself, the class state which was developing could be neatly demonstrated by the lines on a map or plan

(Rawnsley & Reynolds 1977:220)

In addition to class divisions, spatial distinctions and grave monuments in nineteenth and twentieth century cemeteries can embody distinctions in cultural and religious identities, as discussed by Lindsay Prior for Belfast cemeteries.

...the cemetery inscribes in spatial terms the social cleavages which afflict the living and the distinctions which order the latter are very often evident in the intimate details of the gravestone inscriptions.

(Prior 1989:117)

Similar practices seem to take place in some American cemeteries. In a review of the evidence, Davies (1997) illustrates the close relationships between public funeral rites, patterns of remembrances and the reproduction of ethnic identities in the United States. A variety of ethnic groups from Italians to Ukrainians and Gypsies maintained separate cemeteries or burial plots, acting as anchors for their distinctive identities and cultural origins. Conversely, he observes the ideological functions of large communal cemeteries in linking members of a culturally diverse population into a symbolic unity in death (Davies 1997:98). In a variety of ways, funerals and cemeteries clearly hold an active part in the reproduction and transformation of ethnic identities. We should not underestimate the overtly political nature of many funerals for ethnic groups in a plural society, establishing links with a homeland, symbolising group unity, articulating political demands and evoking injustices done to them by others. For example, this is evident in the funerals of Chilean exiles in parts of Europe (Eastwood 1989) and the funerals of Black communities in America before and after emancipation from slavery (Perry 1993).

As a last case study, Judith Okely's work on the Traveller Gypsies provides an important example of the mechanisms by which death rituals and cemeteries reproduce ethnic group

distinctions. British Gypsies use local authority cemeteries and churchyards for burial. In doing so they associate their dead with non-Gypsies. In a situation with close parallels with the Chinese communities of Thailand, by giving up their dead to local authorities and the Church, Gypsies associate death pollution and the ghosts of the dead with the wider British population. Okely argues that death is regarded as analogous to assimilation into the rest of British society and that the dead are associated with similar qualities to non-Gypsy people: sedentary in their graves and dangerous to Gypsies (Okely 1983:220, 228). Therefore, the apparent assimilation of Gypsy groups into the rest of society upon death masks a central way by which Gypsies mark and reproduce a cultural distinctiveness. The separation of the living and the dead acting as a metaphor for ethnic divisions even though Gypsies and non-Gypsies are not divided in death (Okely 1983:217–30). This example is not alone among cases where a group or tribe may take on the practices of other groups at funerals and the treatment of the dead that appears to help maintain rather than diffuse distinctions between groups (Barley 1995; Parker Pearson 1982).

*Summary – inter-group relations in death rituals*

We cannot expect these examples to encapsulate all of the possible ways that groups interact during funerals, although they incorporate some common themes that are very important for our understanding of archaeological data.

- Funerals and burial sites in ‘complex’ and ‘plural’ societies can involve a variety of different groups who bring with them their own ideologies, expectations and practices.
- Even if a single group exclusively uses a burial site, other groups may become involved in funerary rites in a variety of roles from ritual specialists to merely onlookers. Even when other groups are absent or deliberately excluded their ideologies can still permeate and influence funerals and the use of burial space.
- Therefore, funerals and cemeteries can become the focus of multiple and conflicting attitudes and beliefs surrounding death and burial.
- Inter-group relations during rituals and the use of burial sites can perpetuate and emphasise the differences between groups. Alternatively, interactions during funerals and at burial sites, can lead to the transformation of existing identities and social arrangements into novel collective identities involving disparate cultural groups through the shared experiences of ritual practices and relations with ancestors.
- These interactions are likely to take place between groups of unequal standing, wealth and authority, facilitating the control of rituals and funerals by one group over numerous peoples with different religious or ethnic affiliations.
- Only some of the complex inter-group mortuary relations will be archaeologically visible and many may be obscured or hidden by the very nature of the inter-relations. Despite this the treatment of the corpse, use of cemetery space, material culture and monuments, in other words all those aspects that are archaeologically visible, can hold central importance in relations between groups and the expression and negotiation of their identities.

*Some implications for the interpretation of late Roman cemeteries*

We can now attempt to demonstrate the significance of these themes in addressing the archaeological evidence for late Roman and sub-Roman cemeteries in southern and eastern Britain between the third and sixth centuries AD. For the late Roman period, the anthropology and sociology generate a background from which to explore relations between groups of different ethnic, religious, social and political backgrounds attending funerals and using burial sites. In particular, they suggest a re-consideration of the socio-political significance of the standardization, relative homogeneity and ‘managed’ character of late Roman extra-mural cemeteries (Esmonde Cleary 1992; Philpott 1991:226; Thomas 1981).

Firstly let us consider the significance of cemeteries and the population they served. Cemeteries were an important part of the topography of the late Roman town and its hinterland. Burial places would have been the final destination for funerary processions but also contexts

for graveside rituals. A wide variety of social activities could have taken place at cemeteries in addition to burial rites and they may leave archaeological traces (e.g. Flower 1996:98; Toynbee 1971:49–54; Watts 1991; Whytehead 1986:65–7). The ordering of graves into rows and lines with individual plots, often respected, would have encouraged the use of graves and cemeteries as a whole as important and enduring places for relatives to visit and contact the dead. Furthermore, under the influence of Christian ideas and practices, certain cemeteries became foci for public worship at chapels, baptisteries and churches. In Britain there is some tentative evidence for such practices including the possible cemetery church from Butt Road, Colchester (Crummy *et al.* 1993:187, 189) and the chapel and baptistery at Icklingham, Suffolk (Biddle & Kjolbye-Biddle 1996; Harries 1992:56, 59; Thomas 1981:170; Watts 1991:63; West 1976). Cemeteries were not only used for burial of the dead and ancestor rites but also could have incorporated religious worship, public and civic rituals during the fourth and fifth century AD. Placed alongside major roads leading out of towns, cemeteries would be constantly encountered by local people and travellers during daily life as well as ritual occasions. Therefore rituals and processions en route to the cemetery or taking place at cemeteries would have been highly visible, public affairs within clear sight of all manner of groups and individuals living in the environs.

Against this background we must consider the highly stratified nature of late Roman society as well as the cultural and religious diversity of the population of lowland Britain. At the late Roman cemetery of Poundbury outside Dorchester in Dorset, there seems to be evidence that the cemetery served a population drawn from Dorchester's rural hinterland as well as the town itself. Once again this appears to emphasise the substantial region that extra-mural cemeteries served, and the variety of groups drawn to these sites. At Lankhills and Poundbury there are subtle hints from grave goods, ritual practices and lead isotope evidence of groups from other parts of the Empire being buried in the cemetery and/or influencing burial rites (Clark 1979:383–5; Molleson 1992:46). The burial populations of extra-mural cemeteries are likely to have been drawn from a multitude of religious groups with discrete or varying beliefs but with similar practices surrounding death. Not only did this include distinctions between 'élite' and 'popular' religious traditions and the myriad of pagan cults that existed in Roman Britain, but also possible divisions amongst Christian groups known to have existed in the late Roman West. Of course, late Roman Britain was a highly stratified society and burial space around towns is likely to have incorporated plots and cemeteries for groups of different status. Occasionally the status of families or households demarcated by the use of mausolea, stone and lead coffins (Clark 1979:190–1; Farwell & Molleson 1993:237; Philpott 1991:53). Certain plots would have been owned by families as suggested at Poundbury and Butt Road, Colchester (Crummy *et al.* 1993:158; Molleson 1992:44) or burial clubs for poorer people as suggested by the excavator for Trentholme Drive (Wenham 1968:46).

Clearly, extra-mural cemeteries served a multitude of social, cultural and religious groups even when they did not employ distinctive burial rites that archaeologist's can confidently identify. This leads us to the question; why cannot we clearly see this diversity in the funerary record? Perhaps we should not expect to identify all these groups clearly and unambiguously in the archaeological record since burial rites are influenced by élite groups, civic authorities and funerary specialists as well as the wishes of the deceased and his/her immediate kin and friends (Naumann-Steckner 1997:146–7; Toynbee 1971). The relative regularity and uniformity of funerary rites may also be related to their public nature. With so many different groups involved in funerals or acting as audience for the rituals, the practices and symbolism of burial rites might have had to be regularised and simplistic in order to achieve meaning and significance to as many groups as possible. The symbolism of the rites may have been directed by those authorities able to influence the public presentation of the funeral and the manner of burial.

Consequently the extra-mural zone of cemeteries around Roman towns in the fourth and early fifth centuries represented important arenas for social interaction. Engagements between

groups and individuals at funerals and burial sites and the roles performed by representatives of groups held important implications for the way different groups perceived others and legitimated, naturalised and objectified their identities. Access to cemeteries, and the organisation of burial rites may have been carefully restricted by those controlling cemetery space through kinship structures, burial clubs, social, religious or cultural identities or networks of patronage (Patterson 1992). Control and uses of cemeteries may have helped legitimate élite ideologies and culture onto the wider population in death. For example, in areas where Christianity pervaded élite culture, managed cemeteries may have embodied an idealised vision of the dead in terms of spiritual kinship (Harries 1992:60). These processes might lead to burial sites incorporating a range of different groups and encouraging a 'collective' and 'idealised' community of the dead that provided a contrastive commentary upon the pluralistic and stratified society of the living. Extra-mural cemeteries reflect a new emphasis upon the organisation and orchestration of funerals by authorities and funerary specialists and consequently promoting their ideologies and political strategies. For burial sites such as Queenford Farm, Dorchester-upon-Thames, their 'managed' nature reflects the 'administrative machinery' of towns, the strategies of élites and ritual specialists rather than the religious beliefs of the buried population (Chambers 1987:66; Thomas 1981:232).

While the degree of control over late Roman burial sites may have suppressed and rendered invisible the distinctive beliefs and practices of many groups, we should not overstate the influence of authorities over death rituals. Burial sites are difficult to control and may have become foci for conflicting discourses surrounding death and burial. For example, in Rome during the fourth century, martyr's tombs became the focus for meetings by heretic groups in addition to their place in the 'orthodox' cult of saints sanctioned by the Church (Maidier 1995). In late Roman Britain where Christianity had a much weaker hold, we might expect tensions and conflict between groups to be embodied in burial space and funerary ritual. One practice that may represent some of these tensions is decapitation: possibly a response to the perceived danger and pollution of the dead (Harman *et al.* 1981; Philpott 1991). Such practices are found in both rural and urban contexts and perhaps they flourished in areas and times, when civic authorities and priests could not preside over funerals and burial rites. This appears supported by sites such as Ashton where decapitation took place among the backyard burials and was absent from the formal, organised cemetery (Watts 1991:64). Poundbury cemetery 1 stands in contrast to the cemeteries 2 and 3 but also with other cemeteries around Dorchester such as Allington Avenue. Where cemetery 1 appears more formalised with a large number of 'Christian' burial traits, the others sites display more 'pagan' practices including decapitation rites (Farwell & Molleson 1993:236-9). Other examples of pronounced distinctions in funerary rites between adjacent cemeteries include burial plots at Shepton Mallet, Somerset (Leach 1990). Watts has argued, this may represent distinctions between the burial sites of pagan and Christian communities (Watts 1991:64-5), yet this could represent the varying degrees of control and organisation over burial space by ritual specialists and élite authorities. At some sites there was more flexibility for alternative social statements and religious practices expressed by mourners at the graveside.

The socio-political significance of extra-mural cemeteries in late Roman Britain did not lie solely in their identification as 'pagan' or 'Christian' (pace Watts 1991). Some fourth century cemeteries might be regarded as Christian and others as pagan, yet the evidence suggests that many incorporated a range of different religious and social groups living and dying in close proximity. This approach is in sharp contrast to those that try to objectively identify religious and ethnic affiliation from the burial evidence without considering the social and landscape context of cemeteries around Romano-British towns. Such approaches are not naïve because they assume that ethnicity and religion are important in death rituals, but because they fail to address the ways in which the interaction of diverse groups might affect the organisation of funerals and burial places. If we can assume that groups existed in hermetically sealed units



both in life and in death, without interaction or dependence on others, we might expect their religious, social and ethnic identities to be clearly expressed in the archaeological record of cemeteries. Otherwise, we must accept that the archaeological manifestations of death and burial embody a complex network of exchanges and influences of different ideas and practices from frequent inter-group relations. Perhaps we might consider the significance of cemeteries to reside in the very diversity of groups drawn together in public funerals and the numerous discourses that these groups brought to such gatherings. It may have been the ability of cemeteries to incorporate this diversity of ideologies and practices into a relatively uniform and controlled framework of burial practice that is at the basis of their importance for understanding later Roman death, society and the reproduction of identities at numerous levels. From this perspective it is possible for us to appreciate the value of the anthropological and sociological case studies presented above; since they re-configure our basic assumptions and premises concerning the archaeology of cemeteries in Roman Britain.

*Some implications for cemeteries of the fifth and sixth centuries AD*

In many ways, 'Anglo-Saxon' communal cemeteries of the late fifth and sixth centuries AD appear to be very different from those found in the same regions in the fourth century AD. Despite attempts to identify continuities with late Roman graves, artefact styles and burial practices show an overwhelming debt to Continental Germanic rites. Both inhumation and cremation rites are practised; inhumation graves being accompanied by jewellery and weapons, cremated remains usually placed in ceramic containers (Welch 1992). Cemeteries vary greatly in size but larger inhumation cemeteries such as Dover Buckland (Evison 1987) and mixed rite cemeteries such as Abingdon Saxon Road (Leeds & Harden 1936) can contain several hundred graves, while cremation cemeteries such as Spong Hill in Norfolk contained several thousand burials (McKinley 1994). Many burial sites were placed in prominent locations, reusing prehistoric and Roman monuments and close to contemporary settlements. In some cases they were probably serving numerous households and communities spread over a substantial territory (see McKinley 1994:66–71). Many authors have suggested that 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries may have incorporated both native groups and the descendants of immigrants from northern Germany and southern Scandinavia (e.g. Härke 1990).

Therefore, some of the broad theoretical themes concerning inter-group relations at funerals and burial sites derived from anthropology and sociology may have significance for our understanding of these sites as well. It seems reasonable to assume that immigrant Germanic and native British groups would have come into direct and frequent contact throughout this period in many regions of southern and eastern England. As times and places for communal gatherings of substantial numbers of people, mortuary practices and burial sites might have been one of the contexts in which groups of different origin, custom and language came into frequent contact (Williams 1998). Consequently, we can consider 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries in the light of relations between heterogeneous immigrant and indigenous social groupings rather than solely in terms of the traditional debates concerning population replacement or insular culture change (see Arnold 1997:19–32; Higham 1992:168–88; Welch 1992:97–107). By analogy with some of the anthropological and sociological case studies presented above, it might be possible to argue that such structured interactions in the funerary context may have provided a catalyst for the construction and transformation of group identities and social relations between groups. Germanic groups that held sway over funerary space and the rituals conducted there could have made a disproportionate contribution to the organisation of mortuary practices. In turn, such control could have actively influenced social arrangements, attitudes towards the dead and concepts of ancestry and identity.

It seems surprising that traditional Anglo-Saxon scholarship has discussed only some of the possible interactions between 'British' and immigrant 'Germanic' groups through mortuary practices and cemeteries. These might have included:

- The burial of Germanic individuals and their kin in communal cemeteries as an expression of their distinctive cultural identity and to symbolise boundaries with native groups.
- The burial of native individuals and groups living alongside or integral to Germanic households and communities in 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries. This might include slaves, servants, friends, guests, spiritual kin, marriage partners and their families. These groups would be subsumed into Germanic identities in death and their graves may appear 'Anglo-Saxon'.
- Either through coercion or reciprocal relations, culturally independent native groups in Anglo-Saxon territories may give up their dead to Germanic groups for burial in 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries.
- Germanic groups might secure the participation of native individuals and groups in Germanic funerals and burial rites in other capacities:
  - a) Observing/attending Germanic mortuary practices and observing/attending other communal gatherings at burial sites.
  - b) Providing labour and performing non-specialist roles in funerals.
  - c) Giving gifts, contributing animals (e.g. for sacrifice) and materials (i.e. pyre wood, grave goods) at the funeral.
  - d) Providing funerary specialist services: priests, other rituals specialists, grave diggers, musicians, mourners etc.
- The emulation of Germanic mortuary practices by native groups following frequent and long-term exposure and influence from immigrant groups.
- The exclusion of native groups from Germanic mortuary practices or rejection of Germanic mortuary practices by native groups. Native groups in these instances may have followed 'sub-Roman' mortuary practices (i.e. west-east burial without grave goods, a visibly different rite from those in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. For sub-Roman sites, see Petts 1997).

Perhaps 'British' groups initially maintained their cultural identities in some areas because their interactions at funerals emphasised their distinctiveness and separateness from Germanic groups. There continues to be limited archaeological evidence for British survival, and this might reflect the inability of indigenous British groups to control and communicate identities in death rituals rather than the absence of such groups. By participating in Germanic mortuary rituals and burying their dead in 'Anglo-Saxon' cemeteries (perhaps effectively giving up their dead to a different set of traditions and cultural values), funerals and the use of cemeteries may have been a central process in the gradual acculturation of British communities into Germanic social arrangements. Rituals were therefore inculcating British groups with the 'mytho-symbolic' ideals of Germanic communities (see Smith 1986:52–3; Härke 1997, Williams 1998). Inter-group relations during death rituals could have been an important agent for social change and identity negotiation in this period.

### Conclusions

We have seen a preliminary attempt to address the potential complexities in social relations behind the cemeteries of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries AD. These themes are often left undiscussed by archaeologists, yet are central to the kinds of interpretation we wish to make from the archaeological evidence for death and burial in the first millennium AD – burial sites not only concern those being buried and their kin, but funerary specialists, political authorities and a multiplicity of other groups influencing and participating in funerary rituals.

For late Roman cemeteries this allows us to appreciate that the social significance of burial sites may have resided in their *inclusive* nature, drawing together a range of disparate religious and cultural groups for communal rituals and links with ancestors and the supernatural. These

practices could have emphasised distinctions between groups, but perhaps also served to bring about a construction of common identities in death beyond the identities of kin groups.

For early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries this perspective helps us to explain the relative invisibility of distinctively indigenous mortuary practices in many parts of southern and eastern England. British communities may have initially retained their identities and culture yet were rendered archaeologically invisible by practising unaccompanied west-east burial rites even in the 'Germanic regions' of southern and eastern England. Others still may be rendered archaeologically invisible by the complexity of their interactions with Germanic groups. Over the long term, mortuary practices could have been one of the ways which British people living within Anglo-Saxon territories were incorporated into Germanic social organisations and ideologies.

It might be considered that these themes are somehow irrelevant for archaeological studies of burial sites given the fact that many of the processes of inter-group interaction and competing discourses might be regarded as archaeologically invisible. Yet, I would argue that it is only by understanding the complexities of group interactions can we begin to adequately appreciate and interpret the formation of the archaeological record of cemeteries; the treatment of the body, the use of material culture and monuments, and the landscape setting of cemeteries. In both the Roman and post-Roman studies, these perspectives force us to reappraise the traditional approaches to cemeteries and mortuary practices and their social significance. From these perspectives, it might be legitimate to regard southern and eastern England during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries as contested landscapes in which mortuary practices and cemeteries provided important symbolic resources for groups to structure and transform their identities and social relations.

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