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Quoit Brooches and the Roman-Medieval Transition

by Geoff Harrison

Introduction

Research has shown that there are marked material differences in the archaeology of 'Roman Britain' and 'Anglo-Saxon England'. Explanations for the transition between these two periods in the fifth century regularly refer to the movements and interactions of defined ethnic groups, such as 'Angles', 'Saxons' and the 'native' population. The aim of this paper is to highlight why these ideas have become explanations for archaeological change in the fifth century and why such approaches might be due for reconsideration. Additionally, alternative explanations for material culture change, which do not rely on assumptions about material culture and its relationship to ethnic groups and their movements, will be proposed.

These issues will be addressed through a case study using an annular brooch type known as the 'quoit brooch'. These brooches will be examined for two reasons. Firstly, they are usually dated to the mid-fifth century, the time at which, according to interpretations of documentary sources, changes caused by the migration of ethnic groups from the continent to eastern England occurred. Secondly, they have been interpreted as both native 'British' brooches, and also 'Germanic' artefacts occurring in England due to the migration of people(s) from the continent. This conflict of interpretation raises issues related to how archaeologists understand material culture and the Roman-Medieval transition in general.

Quoit brooches and their interpretation

Quoit brooches are decorated annular brooches found as grave goods in cemeteries in southern and eastern England (Figure 1). Functionally, they are assumed to have been for holding together garments at the shoulder (Owen-Crocker 1986:28). The brooch classification used here was devised by Barry Ager (1985), who in turn based his work on that of E.T. Leeds (1945:46–8). The debates refer mainly to annular Types B, C (Figure 2, 3) and D1 (Figure 4) along with the penannular Type A (Figure 5). Types D2–4 are not discussed as Ager (1990:154) claims they have 'no demonstrable connection with the Quoit Brooch Style', nor are Type E brooches which have been labelled 'Broad-banded Annulars' as opposed to quoit brooches (Ager 1985). These types are mainly differentiated by size and the arrangement of the pin-stop (see Ager 1985; 1990 for full discussion of forms). Only one Type A brooch and nineteen Types B–D1 are known (or eighteen and a half, one Type B brooch is fragmentary).

A majority of the known brooches were found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In their reports, excavators recorded the brooches using a variety of terms, such as 'circular bronze brooch' (Read 1895:372) or 'bronze annular' (Griffith & Salzman 1914:22). Furthermore, the reports of these initial discoveries made no direct inferences about the ethnic identity of those who were buried with the brooches, other than that they were found in cemeteries broadly referred to as 'Saxon' (Read 1895) or 'Anglo-Saxon' (Griffith & Salzman 1914).

E.T. Leeds (1936) was the first person to discuss the brooches as a defined and significant type, and to apply the term quoit brooch. In *Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology* he also stated his concern with native survival (Leeds 1936:1). Leeds believed that up to that time, archaeologists had paid too much attention to the role of the Germanic migrants into England, no doubt influenced by the historical account of Gildas; a late fifth or sixth century monk who told of the death, destruction and complete population replacement caused by the Germanic invasions. This had led to minimal consideration by archaeologists of the fate of native Britons after the Germanic influx. With this in mind, Leeds sought to identify indigenous people through the

archaeological evidence, and hence achieve a better understanding of how the two groups of people interacted (Leeds 1936:1–2). His concern for the ‘native’ population may have been influenced by the political climate in late 1930s Europe and what has been called the ‘anti-German backlash’ within archaeology (Lucy 1998:14).

An important aspect of this research was Leeds’ (1945:44) belief that the penannular brooch was a relic of ‘the older native culture’, one which would demonstrate the presence of indigenous people and population continuity. He believed penannular brooches could be traced back to types known from the pre-Roman Iron Age which continued in use through the Roman period (Leeds 1936:3; 1945:44). Thus, for Leeds, the Type A brooch provided a crucial link in his argument about the relationship between quoit brooches and indigenous populations. Its native origins were confirmed by the penannular form, while its decorative styles and the penannular inner ring of the Type B brooch (Figure 3) linked it to the other annular quoit brooches (Types B-D: Leeds 1945:46). Furthermore, all known Type A-D brooches were found in ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cemeteries, that is to say, in the same cemeteries as a range of distinctively ‘Germanic’ artefacts and burial rites. Hence, Leeds believed quoit brooches demonstrated the presence of ‘native’ people in ‘Germanic’ cemeteries. They could therefore be used to infer a degree of native survival despite the influx of Germanic people(s) which archaeologists had often previously asserted all but wiped out the indigenous population. Leeds concluded:

There is every reason to believe that they [quoit brooches] are objects antedating the invasion, and if it is desired to know what the native women were wearing before or at the time of Hengest’s landing, this group supplies the information.

(Leeds 1936:7)

Egil Bakka (1958) and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (1961) refuted this view. They believed the brooches were entirely Germanic (as they had animal motifs (Bakka 1958:13)) and were the predecessors of later metalwork styles. For example, Hawkes called the ornamentation on Type A-C brooches (as well as other artefacts) the ‘Jutish Style A’. She concluded that:

The origins of this [quoit brooch] animal style appear to have been in southern Scandinavia in the fifth century...It is also the earliest expression of Anglo-Saxon zoomorphic ornament and the precursor of mature Style I in England.

(Hawkes 1961:71)

Roman stylistic influences, such as ‘fur’ on animal bodies (Leeds 1936:4; Hawkes 1961:53–4), were attributed to trade between northern Gaul and southern Scandinavia (Hawkes 1961:61). The brooches were dated to c. AD 450 (Bakka 1958:13), broadly when archaeologists believe the historical sources describe the beginning of Germanic incursions into eastern England. Further contributions to the debate were made by Evison (1965), Haseloff (1974), and Ager (1985; 1990), who refined the existing chronologies and cultural affiliations of the brooches, so as to better understand their place in fifth-century history.

This outline of research on quoit brooches shows that, to a certain extent, concern for the brooches was instigated by Leeds’ research interests in 1936. Yet, throughout the subsequent contributions, the central theme has remained the same; did the brooches represent ‘native’ people surviving in the post-migration context, or did they have continental, ‘Germanic’ antecedents and thus support the migration hypothesis?

Reassessments

Having identified this as the main theme of the debates involving quoit brooches, it is worth making a more detailed and critical examination of the theory that underlies the discussion. The aim is to make explicit the assumptions and conceptual frameworks that have been used by archaeologists in interpreting both quoit brooches and the Roman-Medieval transition itself.

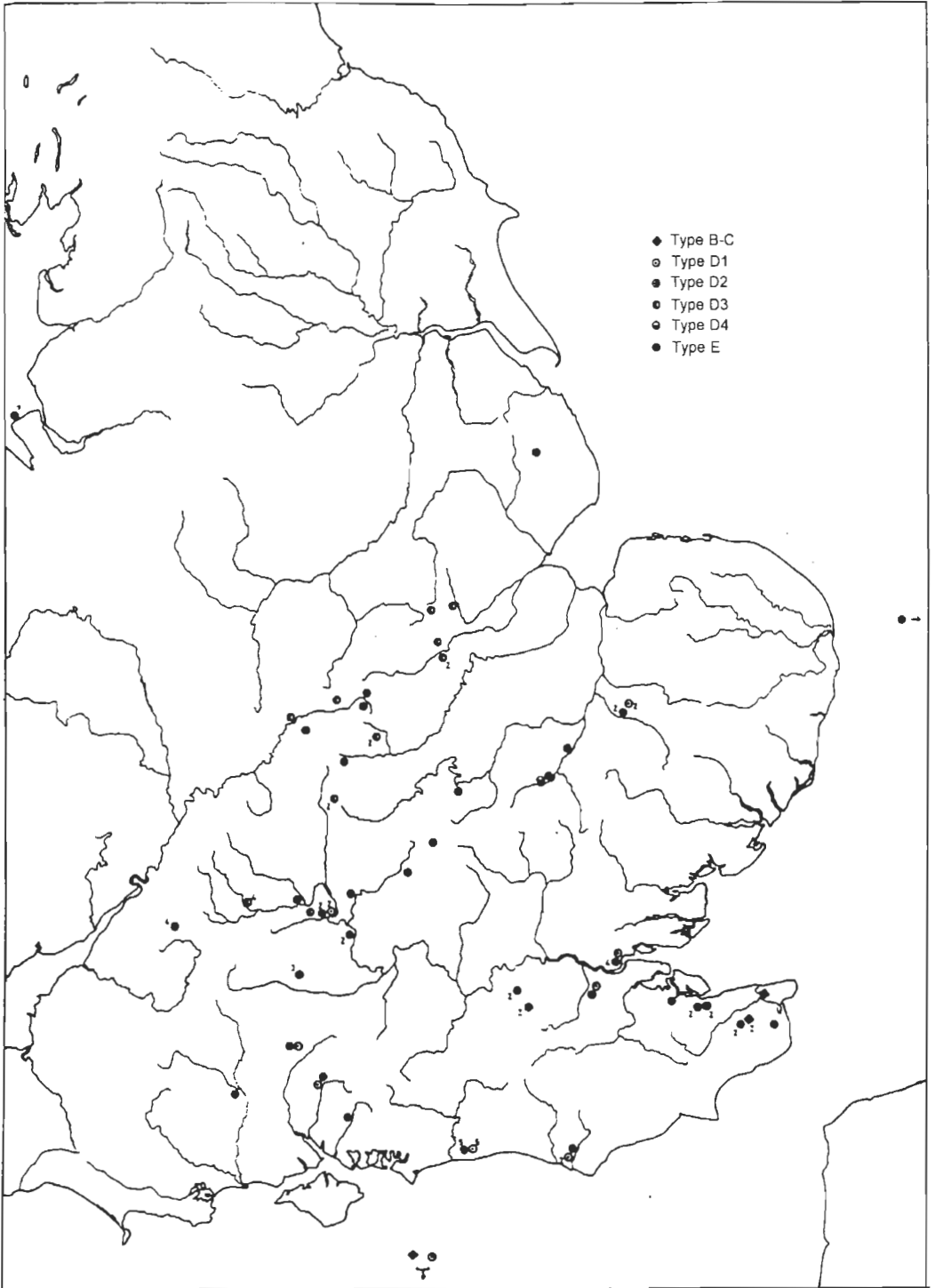


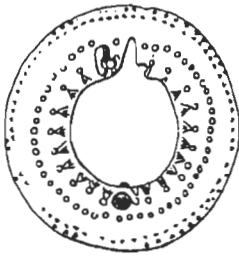
Figure 1. Distribution map of quoit brooches (Types B-D) and Broad-banded Annular brooches (Type E) (After Ager 1985:33. Reproduced with permission).



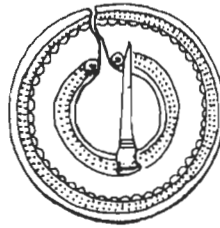
Figure 2. Type B quoit brooch (British Museum).



Figure 3. Type C quoit brooch (British Museum)



Andover (Portway), Hants.



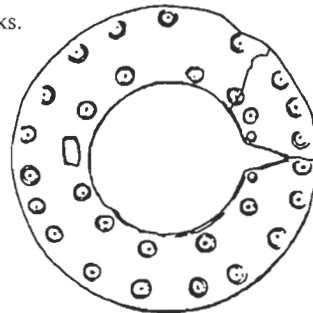
Alfriston, Sussex



Abingdon, Berks.



High Down, Sussex



Little Eriswell, Suffolk.

Figure 4. Type D1 quoit brooches (After Ager 1985. Reproduced with permission).

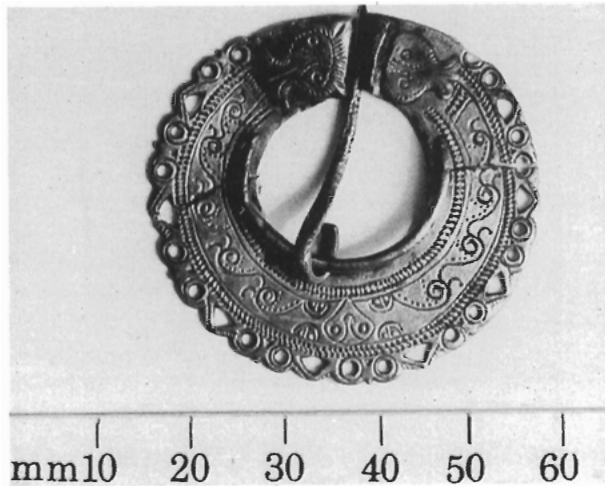


Figure 5. Type A penannular quoit brooch (Sussex Archaeological Society, Lewes Museum).

As noted above, the main emphasis of this debate has been the use of quoit brooches to identify the presence of certain ethnic groups in a particular cemetery, be they 'Germanic' people or 'natives'. Furthermore, because the brooches were linked so closely to these social/ethnic groups it was assumed that in the case of Germanic brooches/motifs, when they are found in a previously non-Germanic area (i.e. south-eastern England) people must also have moved or migrated into that region. Historical sources undoubtedly influenced this model for explaining the distribution of quoit brooches, and their role will be discussed further below.

These assumptions have, of course, not been exclusive to the interpretation of quoit brooches. From the beginnings of 'Anglo-Saxon' archaeology certain types of material culture, such as pottery and brooches, were used to infer the migrations of ethnic groups from north-western Europe and southern Scandinavia to eastern England (e.g. Kemble 1855). The debate has not been static. Initially, complete population replacement by a mass migration/invasion was generally envisaged (e.g. Freeman 1903), whereas now many scholars acknowledge the potential complexity of the transition and prefer the idea of small scale migrations, perhaps by a Germanic elite whose distinctive material culture became widely acculturated (e.g. Härke 1990; Higham 1994). Despite these developments, the idea that ethnic change (be that of a whole population or only the elite) was a fundamental catalyst for the formation of 'Anglo-Saxon England' has remained part of the academic debate. As Jones has stated:

The question of the scale and significance of the Anglo-Saxon immigrations forms the marrow in the historical bone of contention regarding the nature of the transition between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England.

(Jones 1996:39)

Quoit brooches have been part of the debate surrounding the transition. However, it should be asked why they have been the subjects of so many detailed studies when there are only twenty such brooches. Their significance may be attributed to the fact that there are relatively few diagnostic types of material dated specifically to the mid-fifth century (e.g. Equal-armed brooches, Cruciform brooches (Böhme 1986) and certain pottery types (Myres 1969)). Thus, they have become significant for understanding changes at a time when the documents might lead us to believe ethnic groups were migrating. Being relatively rare yet significant items, their definition is contentious and becomes polarised between 'native' or 'Germanic' explanations.

It is these polarised interpretations which make quoit brooches a revealing medium through which to re-examine the Roman-Medieval transition. However, this contradictory position is not inherent in the brooches; the objects themselves have not changed. Rather, the debate emphasises the subjectivity of artefactual categorisation and demonstrates that it must be the assumptions, interpretations and conceptual frameworks used by scholars that are at issue.

As stated above, an important aspect of the quoit brooch debate has been the assumption that artefacts reflect certain ethnic identities. The aim of the next section is to highlight why archaeologists have assumed that this relationship exists and to show how this has influenced transition period archaeology.

Material culture and ethnic identities

The perceived correlation between material culture and ethnic identities has been fundamental to Anglo-Saxon archaeology since its inception in the nineteenth century (e.g. Kemble 1855. For a full discussion of the appearance of this methodology and how it differed from previous discussions of material and identities see Hannaford 1996; Hides 1996). However, researchers have noted that the 'culture = people equation' (Shennan 1991:31) also had its origins in the specific academic and socio-political milieu which existed in Europe at this time (e.g. Jones 1997; Shennan 1989).

An important element of this context was the emergence of racial theory as a means of discussing human social groupings, both in academic and popular literature. Ethnicity appears to have long been integral to human social interaction (although the extent to which it may be considered an essential part of human behaviour is a moot point (Bentley 1987), as is the relationship between ethnicity and other types of grouping, such as by religion or politics (Hannaford 1996:58)). However, the specifically racial view of ethnicity (whereby ethnicity is a sub-division of race (Hannaford 1996:3)) arose from developments in the natural sciences and the application of Darwin's theories on biological evolution to human societies and the social sciences (Hannaford 1996:275; Hides 1996:40). In this way, aspects of human existence, such as language and culture (including material culture), became integral to the biological/blood relations that were said to unite members of what thus became a bounded racial or ethnic group.

Additionally, the study of biological evolution was concerned with the origins and development of 'Man' [*sic.*] (Hides 1996:37). Thus, in the human/social sciences, the historical development of cultural and linguistic racial features was also investigated (Hides 1996:37). This historical component in the definition of racial/ethnic groups was particularly important for another significant motivating force in nineteenth-century thought - that of nationalism. Indeed, racialism helped define national identities and was itself promoted by the emergence of nation states (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996:5-6). It was in this context of national/ethnic histories that identifying the past by archaeological means became a powerful tool. Archaeological evidence by its very nature can be interpreted in a number of ways. Also, it may have great antiquity and is not restricted to documentary sources (Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996:19-21). Furthermore, with the application of theories linking culture and identity, archaeological evidence provided a means of demonstrating the origins, continuity and movements of 'nations' through time and space. The emerging nations were thus given a sense of timelessness and legitimisation through their antiquity (Austin 1990:15).

Although overt racialism and nationalism is generally no longer present in early medieval archaeology, the quoit brooch debates demonstrate the perpetuation of theories linking material culture directly to ethnic groups. In highlighting the development of thinking on quoit brooches it is clear that they became significant at a certain time and in response to particular questions being asked by archaeologists about the nature of the transition and the relationship between 'native' and 'Germanic' people(s). Furthermore, concepts used to interpret the brooches, involving bounded, immutable ethnic groups and archaeological cultures, derive from the specific context of nineteenth-century racial theory and nationalism.

Despite the fact that links between culture and racially-influenced views of social identity were first made in the nineteenth century (Hides 1996:41), the identities ascribed by scholars to the users of quoit brooches were derived from much earlier historical sources, such as Gildas, Bede, Procopius and the Gallic Chronicle of 452. These sources have been interpreted by the same scholars as referring to bounded ethnic groups and thus support the approaches to the transition period used in archaeology from the nineteenth century onwards. Indeed the longevity of the traditional model may be attributed to the seemingly close relationship found between archaeological and historical evidence. For example, the pottery types found in both north-western Germany and East Anglia may be seen to echo Bede's narrative about the movements of the Angles and Saxons (*HE*. 1:15). However, some historians have taken a more critical approach to these documents. They have demonstrated the problems of using the texts as sources of objective historical record, as the authors composed them for specific reasons. It has been said that Gildas wrote a 'sermon' (Yorke 1993:45), while Bede composed a religious history dedicated to King Ceolwulf (Hanning 1966:75; Bede *HE*. preface). Furthermore, the references to ethnic identities need not be taken at face value.

Using continental sources as a starting point, a number of historians have demonstrated that early medieval ethnicity was not an immutable, bounded social categorisation for a specific group of people. Rather, it has been shown that ethnic labels were subjective and fluid (e.g. Geary 1983; Pohl 1991; 1997). They were assigned to, or used by groups and individuals on the basis of, for example, origins, customs, laws and language (Geary 1983:19). Ethnicity has also been called a 'situational construct' (Geary 1983:16), drawing attention to the fact that it is:

a subjective process by which individuals and groups identified themselves or others within specific situations and for specific reasons.

(Geary 1983:16)

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that we only really know about ethnicity in elite and literate contexts; hence, the identities created and maintained by a majority of the population are unknown (Amory 1994:4; Pohl 1991:41; 1997:9).

These conclusions have important implications for how archaeologists categorise material culture and the people(s) to whom it may be linked. To call a quoit brooch either Germanic or native (or indeed Angle or Saxon) may well be limiting our understanding of the early medieval usage of ethnic identities. The notion of fixed and bounded ethnic groups contradicts the view of ethnicity as a fluid and situational social practice (see also Bentley 1987; Jones 1997 for more detailed considerations) in which a number of identities may be held by an individual, being expressed to greater or lesser extents depending on the context of interaction. These approaches to ethnicity have led some to doubt the existence of defined, bounded, perhaps territorial ethnic groups as 'real' entities (Shennan 1989:11), although they may become powerful and influential ideas to groups or individuals in specific contexts (cf. Jenkins 1997:168). We might instead think of overlapping social networks of varying scales (Shennan 1989:11).

Additionally, archaeological research has produced results which may again lead us to question the general applicability of broad, perhaps regional, ethnic groupings, as derived from historical sources such as Bede. Research by Pader (1982) and Lucy (1998) has identified localised patterning in mortuary practice. We cannot ignore broader patterns (e.g. brooch distributions or the occurrence of cremations and inhumations), but we might ask if these have diverted archaeological research from investigating local identities and the contexts in which quoit brooches were found. Being found in graves means the brooches must primarily be interpreted as a constituent of a burial costume, placed with the deceased by mourners. Thus, a direct relationship between the 'dress' and identities ascribed to the deceased in death and the clothes worn or identities used by an individual in life can not be assumed (Thomas 1991:104). Furthermore, there are identities other than ethnicity with which the mourners could have been con-

cerned, such as age or gender, and if ethnicity was a factor, did they actually recognise the 'native'/'Germanic' dichotomy, or were more local identities important to them? Unfortunately, detailed evidence about the graves in which a majority of quoit brooches, especially types A-C, were found does not survive, so a detailed contextual comparison is not possible. However, where the evidence does exist, the brooches were associated with material, (such as finger rings and four or more beads) usually found in (biologically sexed) 'female' graves (Brush 1993).

The problems associated with linking material culture directly to ethnicity are further highlighted by ethnographic studies made in Africa. These studies (e.g. Hodder 1982; De Corse 1989) show that this relationship cannot be taken for granted. De Corse found that out of all material culture in his study area in Sierra Leone, only shrines were implicated in the negotiation of ethnicity and these were highly variable in style and not present at every site (1989:138). Thus, for archaeologists who cannot talk to the users of the artefacts, it is even more difficult to discern which material may or may not be used specifically to negotiate ethnicity. Were quoit brooches used to represent a particular ethnic identity, or was this done through material and/or practices that do not survive archaeologically? De Corse concluded that his research:

...demonstrated the difficulty in using material culture to ascribe ethnicity or even to define broader cultural groups

(De Corse 1989:138)

This is equally true in archaeology.

Migrations

Quoit brooches have not only been used as evidence for certain ethnic groups, but as noted above, owing to perceived close associations between material culture and ethnic groups, they have also been used to infer migrations of people (Bakka 1958; Hawkes 1961). The strength of the migration hypothesis throughout the course of 'Anglo-Saxon' archaeology may be attributed to the seemingly complementary nature of historical and archaeological evidence. However, a number of historians have asked why the early medieval sources refer to migrations in the first place.

Firstly, it is important to note that none of the authors who refer to the movements of peoples in the fifth century around the North Sea were eyewitnesses. Both Bede and Gildas, the two most influential insular sources for archaeologists, saw the events of the mid-fifth century as significant episodes in the past. Additionally, it is notable that both these authors were writing as Christians. Hanning has asserted the importance of Christianity in shaping the 'historical imagination' (1966:2) of the authors; the Bible influenced how they conceptualised, explained and expressed the past. Gildas was explicit about this influence:

And I could see that in our time too, just as Jeremiah had lamented, 'the city' (that is, the church) 'sat solitary, bereaved'...I gazed on these things and many others in the Old Testament as though on a mirror reflecting our own life

(DEB. 1.5-7)

In the Bible (especially the Old Testament), narrated events are commonly explained as Divine interventions in the human world (Howe 1989:45). The prosperity of God's people(s) was assured while His laws were obeyed, and disasters seen as a sign of His displeasure with the nation's immorality (Hanning 1966:46). Disasters, which served to alter the established order, were regularly brought about by external groups of people who caused death and destruction and thus became God's agents on earth (Howe 1989:59; e.g. Jeremiah, Lamentations, Isaiah 9 and 10). For Gildas, this was an influential model. He used the Old Testament as 'a storehouse of historical *exempla*' (Hanning 1966:58), such that:

The aim of the historical chapters of *De Excidio* can be said to be the establishment of the British past firmly within the context of the history of salvation, i.e. of the guidance of history by divine providence

(Hanning 1966:57)

Hence, the English origin myth was also strongly influenced by a Biblically inspired rhetorical and narrative device:

The coming of the Saxons is less significant as an event in itself than as the climax to a series of punishments meted out by God to the British

(Howe 1989:41)

The work of Gildas was fundamental in the creation of the English origin myth, and it certainly influenced Bede (Hanning 1966:73). However, the aims of the *Historia Ecclesiastica* were somewhat different to Gildas' work (see above). There was also a shift in emphasis between the two accounts. Gildas presented the Britons as a 'latter-day Israel' (*DEB.* 26.1) being tested by God, while Bede presented the English as the 'new Israel' (Hanning 1966:70) inheriting England from the sinful Britons. Despite these differences, the model was flexible enough to allow both authors to write specifically Christian accounts, in terms of eschatology and salvation history referring to groups of peoples, (rarely individuals) in the same narrative context:

For Bede, as for Gildas, history [in Britain] is a drama played out on an island stage by those who cross the sea

(Howe 1989:51)

Thus, descriptions of invasions/migrations by external peoples may be seen as rhetorical, narrative devices, appropriated from Judeo-Christian texts whose writers also used migrations as a key explanatory framework. To a late antique/early medieval devout Christian writer, the Old Testament may have been both the origin and justification for expressing the past in this way, creating a powerful and influential origin myth. The narratives were 'credible in their claims to ancient origins, which does not mean that they are factual accounts of actual origins' (Pohl 1997:9). Similar ideas may be applied to continental sources of this period (e.g. the Gallic Chronicle of AD 452, Muhlberger 1990). These narrative methods were adopted by archaeologists through their use of sources such as Bede and Gildas, yet it must be accepted that the sources do not necessarily record the actual occurrence of migrations. Thus, a direct relationship between these texts and archaeological evidence from the fifth century (such as quoit brooches) cannot be assumed.

The above observations about ethnicity, migrations and historical sources have important implications for the study of quoit brooches and as a result of these critiques we might question the general applicability of the prevailing discourse within which these interpretations have taken place. It may also be asked if these are the only means to interpret quoit brooches?

Alternative approaches

If previous approaches to the interpretation of quoit brooches, referring to ethnic change and migrations, can be challenged, it is necessary to seek alternative understandings. Firstly, however, it is important to stress that, despite the critical approaches outlined above an entirely negative view of the evidence need not be adopted.

Highlighting why the narratives may have taken the form that they did, forces us to question the applicability of the historical model to the archaeological evidence of the mid-fifth century. Yet we cannot simply dismiss the idea that there may have been migrations of people which were recorded by later authors (albeit for specific reasons and narrated through certain rhetorical conventions); this was clearly a strong tradition in early medieval literate circles. We also cannot dismiss migrations as a potential explanation for material culture patterning, even if the historical and archaeological basis on which they have been 'proven' is questionable. However, if

migrations are considered as a stimulus for change, Anthony (1990) has suggested that they should not be discussed as simple, uni-directional movements of entire populations. Rather, more complex, sometimes two-way movements by sections of a population for specific purposes might be envisaged. Finally, despite the observation that material culture is not a reliable means of inferring ethnic identities, we cannot simply dismiss or explain away recognised material culture patterns, such as the similarity of artefact types found across north-western Europe and around the North Sea littoral.

The aim therefore is to interpret material culture patterns and changes without relying on potentially problematic assumptions. To turn to the possible alternative explanations, the occurrence of exchange/trade networks has been discussed in the quoit brooch debate. Hawkes (1961:61) and Evison (1965:77) refer to a flourishing trade between northern Gaul and Scandinavia during the late Roman period, which accounted for the perceived 'Roman' influences on 'Germanic' quoit brooches. Additionally, it is interesting to note that decorative influences for quoit brooches have been found from around the North Sea periphery; from Jutland (Hawkes 1961), northern Gaul/Frankia (Evison 1965) and even from the late Roman Mildenhall Treasure in East Anglia (Evison 1965). It might therefore be hypothesised that the North Sea was a unifying geographical feature around which people and material culture could circulate, rather than a divide across which migrations or invasions must take place. Carver (1990:117) has suggested the existence of a North Sea 'zone of interaction'. He does, however, believe it to be only a post-migration phenomenon of the seventh and eighth centuries as the settlement of eastern England by Germanic immigrants in the fifth century is 'well documented' (Carver 1990:117). If the migration model is based on the aggregation of questionable assumptions, it might be asked if such a 'zone of interaction' was also operating in the fifth century?

Building on this idea, it is too simplistic to say that because quoit brooches (or their decorative motifs) were known and available around the North Sea littoral, they would automatically have been used by those who came into contact with them through some form of passive acculturation. 'Post-Processual' studies have described material culture as 'active' and integral to the social practices of groups/institutions and the individuals of which they are constituted. Material can be used to structure, express and maintain certain practices and identities (e.g. Barrett 1991:6). As such, when seeking to explain material culture change, it is important to consider the possibility that material is not used arbitrarily. Rather, it may be (consciously or sub-consciously) appropriated into social practice (cf. Niles 1997) by groups or individuals to mark a range of identities and affiliations in certain contexts; be they identities used in life or ascribed in death. Material need not only be imposed from an external source, as when migrations are seen as the primary catalyst in archaeological transitions, or even imposed and acculturated more widely, as with the idea of an elite migration (Härke 1990; Higham 1994).

This can be briefly illustrated with a modern analogy. In 1997 the most rapidly expanding market for the quintessentially 'English' Barbour wax-cotton jacket was Asia. This was not as a result of English people moving to that region. Rather, it implies that a type of material culture, which people know to have a very defined set of social connotations, was being appropriated into a different context to that in which it was originally conceived. Hence, it is not simply the jackets themselves which are desirable, but the associated identity (i.e. rural 'Englishness') which goes along with them. Yet because the material is not used in its original context, the meaning and the identities it helps create will be subtly different. It is an identity of association that is being appropriated through Barbour jackets in places like Japan, not one of actual membership of a particular identity group. Therefore, the same material types cannot be assumed to represent the same identities wherever they are found and understanding contexts of use is a vital part of interpreting the role of material culture in social practice.

To summarise, the traditional assumptions implicating migrations in fifth-century material change have been highly influential. However, it is argued here that a variety of factors may

have produced the known fifth-century artefact distributions around the North Sea (Shennan 1989:12) and it is important to explore these other means by which material becomes dispersed, and how and why it was appropriated.

It may in fact be questionable to use quoit brooches as evidence for migration. The continental parallels used to demonstrate this are purely decorative (e.g. Hawkes 1961). The 'Quoit Brooch Style' of ornamentation is only found in combination with the quoit form of brooch in England (apart from the single Type B brooch from Bénouville, France). Yet despite this, it may be significant that scholars have perceived in these brooches both 'native/Roman', as well as 'Germanic' decorative elements. Quoit brooches may represent not physical processes of population movement, but the emerging influence of new decorative styles from around the North Sea periphery on pre-existing metalworking techniques and decoration. They may have been appropriated by groups and individuals to signify new social practices or identities (or at least new material conditions through which these were conducted), perhaps associated with the specifically 'Germanic' identity recorded in later historical and poetic texts. Alternatively, these records may be later constructions with 'Germanic' metalwork styles available in the North Sea region being appropriated more as an alternative to the established and understood symbols of 'Romanitas' in the context of declining Imperial influence, or undermining, what might be called, 'Romanized' practices in eastern Britain. More specifically this process may have overlapped with the construction of some form of 'female' identity in the burial context (see above).

Conclusions

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that Leeds initiated the debates surrounding quoit brooches, possibly as a means of pursuing his specific research interest in 1936. Similarly, the theoretical framework within which the brooches have been interpreted (involving defined ethnic groups and the Biblically and historically derived notion of migrations) have shown to be rooted in assumptions produced by nineteenth-century racial theory and nationalism.

To avoid using these assumptions in explaining the distribution of quoit brooches and their related decorative styles, alternatives have been outlined. It was concluded that, although migrations (in some form) cannot be ruled out, it is also important to consider the potential role of exchange and especially the idea that material can be appropriated into social practices by groups and individuals for a variety of reasons. Thus, quoit brooches may be interpreted as evidence for changing social practice and material culture usage in the context of late Roman/early medieval burial rites.

While this is only one hypothesis and one artefact type, this study has important implications for the Roman-Medieval transition. If it is accepted that the notion of ethnic group migrations is, to some extent a construct, then for archaeologists to continue to consider these issues (however complex the interaction between groups is seen to be or on whatever scale the migrations) is in effect maintaining the development of 'paradigms to explain that which they themselves have created' (Bond & Gilliam 1994:13).

The alternative interpretation of quoit brooches presented above, which stresses the importance of social practice and the possibility of material appropriations, leads to a very different view of the transitions; one in which the process is not simple, clear-cut or reliant on migrations as the only catalyst. Furthermore, social practice is context-specific. In the case of quoit brooches being found in cemeteries, it is the mortuary context and its associated practices that are important. Indeed, notwithstanding studies of settlements and economics, fifth-century archaeology is still dominated by cemetery evidence, which is also commonly used to demonstrate ethnic change and the effect of migrations. Yet this was only one context of social practice and it must be asked if changes here, which are believed to mark the transition, were reflected equally in other areas of social practice which constituted people's lives. This approach should draw attention to the complex dynamics of social change, recognising the importance of both individuals and their wider context, showing that migrations and the movements of ethnic

groups are not the only means by which to understand the material culture changes through which archaeologists study the transition from Roman Britain to early medieval England.

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