

Introduction

Within the period AD 400-750 in central, southern and eastern Britain dynamic cultural changes saw localised 'tribal' groups coalesce into much larger kingdoms or provinces. These changes are captured in one of the few early-medieval documents available to us, known as the *Tribal Hidage*. This eleventh-century document records seventh-century polities, expressed in terms of peoples - the *Cantwarena*, *Supsexena*, *Gyrwe* and many others, who owed tribute renders to one of the then dominant overlord kingdoms, either Mercia or more probably Northumbria. This evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and peoples (or tribes) mentioned here and in other written sources, notably the *Historia Ecclesiastica* written by Bede in the early eighth century were comparatively recent creations of the late sixth and early seventh centuries.

The names of these kingdoms also suggest they are new with the geographical prefixes of East, Middle, South and West used to differentiate kingdoms of Saxons (or Angles) seemingly added by clerics in Canterbury when writing to the newly-created seventh-century bishops of these kingdoms. Northumbria with its name's implication that its rulers had lost their ambitions to rule Lincolnshire south of the Humber is particularly late, presumably post-dating the 680s, when the Northumbrians reluctantly recognised the reality of Mercian lordship over all the lands south of the Humber (Southumbria).

We still have limited understanding as to how these kingdoms came into being. What stimulated these changes in society over such a wide geographical area? Why were some kingdoms so much more successful than others? Although these questions have been a central concern to historians of the early-medieval period, archaeological contributions to the debate have been surprisingly rare. Given the relative lack of written evidence for this proto-historical and early historical period, this imbalance is rather perplexing. Yet the archaeological record in this period for the Anglo-Saxon cultural area across much of Lowland Britain represents the richest phase of furnished burial recorded in British archaeology. It is against this background that we have developed a new research project - *Beyond the Tribal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in southern England AD 400-750* - funded fully by the Leverhulme Trust. Over the next three years we will explore the archaeological evidence for the processes that underpinned this formation of early states in one such region – England south of the Thames.

The central research question for our project is whether the formation of kingdoms in the post-Roman period should be seen as a top-down process or rather as a bottom-up process. The top-down model would emphasise the roles of centralised leadership, military dominance and royal control of inter-regional trade. The alternative bottom-up process would be characterised by patterns of exchange between pre-state societies, differential resource use and shifting models of landscape exploitation underpinning the consolidation of regional power.

The archaeological evidence for kingdoms

The identification of excavated 'royal' and 'princely' burials that first appear either side of AD600 and continue up to the middle of the seventh century clearly imply the existence of a structured and hierarchical society in southern Britain by that date. Examples are the men buried with full weapon sets, gold fittings and equipment for feasting at Sutton Hoo (Suffolk), Broomfield (Essex) and Taplow (Buckinghamshire) and more recently at Prittlewell (Essex). In addition, the sixth and seventh centuries provide a substantial number of other lesser furnished burials accompanied by a range of status indicators, such as swords, axes, ornamented dress fittings, horse harness and copper-alloy vessels, as well as more ordinary items such as spears and beads. All this evidence indicates a multi-layered society. In addition, we have matching settlement evidence, with high-status buildings first appearing around the beginning of the seventh century. Examples are the timbered halls of more than 20 metres in length at Yeavinger in Northumberland (a seventh-century *villa regia* according to Bede) and at Cowdery's Down in Hampshire. Ordinary farming communities are represented by contemporary settlements such as those excavated at Mucking in Essex and at West Stow in Suffolk and lack the large halls of these royal and aristocratic estate centres.

The kingdoms of southern England

Three kingdoms have been selected for detailed examination in this project and these reveal contrasting characteristics when they emerge into the full historical record in the seventh century, yet they are neighbours and occupy the same geographical region. Thus the kingdom of the South Saxons (Sussex) represents a standard, medium-sized political unit, which subsequently became a sub-unit (a shire or county) of much larger kingdoms during the eighth and ninth centuries. This was also the fate of Kent in the eighth to ninth centuries. The *Cantware* of Kent began as a medium-sized kingdom of similar scale to Sussex centred on the eastern half of the present county of Kent. Before the 590s Kent had expanded westwards at least as far as London. Finally, the

kingdom of the West Saxons (Wessex) emerges as a much larger political entity by the 680s, as a result of the amalgamation and conquest of several smaller political units. Before the end of the seventh century the West Saxon kingdom was also campaigning aggressively against its western British neighbours in Somerset and Devon and eventually would annexe Cornwall as well. After defeating the Mercian king in 825, the West Saxons went on to incorporate Sussex, Surrey and Kent into their expanding kingdom.

Kent was the most sophisticated of the three kingdoms, in both archaeological and historical terms. There is both archaeological and historical evidence for intermarriage with the Christian Franks in the sixth century and a wealth of artefactual evidence for cross-channel commerce and for long distance trade with the Mediterranean world via the Frankish kingdoms. Although initially of a modest size, limited to territories east of the river Medway, by the time of the Christian mission from Rome of 597, it had expanded to take in the modern county west of the Medway and also possibly much of what became Surrey as well. In the longer term, however, it became restricted to the historical county of Kent, as control of Surrey and the trading *emporium* of London was disputed between the Mercians and the West Saxons. Kent may also have controlled the East Sussex Weald at one time and appears to have lost this district (the territory of the *Haestingas*) to the South Saxons during the eighth century. It was valued at 15000 hides (taxable land units sufficient to support an extended family) in the *Tribal Hidage*.

The South Saxon kingdom was valued at a standard 7000 hides (taxable land units) in both the *Tribal Hidage* text and in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Archaeologically it is identifiable as the territory centred on the South Downs between Eastbourne and the former Roman town of Chichester. Its western boundary with the Jutish province of Hampshire is not well defined, however, and may lie a bit further east than the present county boundary between West Sussex and Hampshire.

The West Saxon kingdom that emerges at the end of the seventh century was a new super power created by the rulers of the *Gewissæ*, rounded off by its conquest of the Isle of Wight. Its expansion south and west from an original heartland in the Upper Thames basin around Oxford was its reaction to military pressure from another regional super power, that of the Mercians who unified the Midlands during the seventh century. The *Gewissan* kings abandoned the Thames region and set out to take over various small political units to the south in the process. The best documented of these

annexations was their conquest of the Jutish province of Hampshire and Wight. Our project will concentrate on defining the specific sub-regions within what had become the West Saxon kingdom c.685, extending south from Berkshire to Wight and from Hampshire west into Dorset and Somerset. Recent research by Dr Bruce Eagles has defined a sixth-century frontier zone in the Wiltshire and Dorset region between the Saxons and their British neighbours to the west. The kingdom is valued at an astonishing 100,000 hides in the *Tribal Hidage*.

Finally the county of Surrey will also be covered by our survey. This 'province' fell between the West Saxon and Kentish spheres of influence in the seventh century, but was also under Mercian control for parts of the seventh and virtually all of the eighth century as well.

The project's aims

The intention is to achieve a systematic characterisation of these three neighbouring kingdoms cited in the *Tribal Hidage* and Bede's *History*. These were the provinces of the Jutes of Kent and the Saxons of Sussex and Wessex. This will enable us to examine and compare both regional and temporal variation in identity and society accompanying the emergence of these early states. Our research will adopt, for the first time within our period and country, an explicitly comparative approach to assess the scale, form and complexity of neighbouring early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. We will develop archaeological methods for defining the physical and institutional basis of early-state economics, and assess their relationship to social dynamics in the development of kingdoms.

In order to achieve our aims we will record the archaeological evidence from the entire region in a systematic and detailed fashion. We will use a comprehensive and comparable methodology which will include excavated cemeteries and burial sites, excavated settlements, and individual artefact find-spots, in particular using those recorded by the Portable Antiquities Scheme. This last Scheme is a recent national initiative to record the many metal objects found by metal-detectorists. Our datasets will form the basis for a comparative assessment of the social and economic organisation of populations in southern England.

Secondly, we will record in detail the regional landscape context for our study area. This will include settlement distributions, local topography, land-ownership and food

production regimes over time. This will permit us to set out the landscape and productive context for our examination of state formation.

Methodologies

The project's methodology represents an expansion of that developed by Dr Stuart Brookes at UCL Institute of Archaeology for his research on the distribution and relative wealth of Anglo-Saxon cemetery communities across time phases in east Kent. His doctoral research will be published in full in 2007 and utilised the Anglo-Saxon Kent Electronic Database (ASKED) created jointly with Dr Sue Harrington. ASKED is a Microsoft Access computer database that records every cemetery in east Kent cemetery for the period 475 to 750 on a grave-by-grave basis and currently comprises records for

- 137 cemeteries, with associated topographical information
- 3500 individual burials, each with a unique identifier and personal information such as age at death, stature, sex and gender ascription where known
- 11,000 associated grave goods, identified by type and provenance and by position in relation to the body

Brookes mapped information from this dataset against a sequence of computer-generated maps, using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) methodologies. The original coastline of east Kent, much eroded and altered by long-shore drift and alluviation in the intervening 1500 years was reconstructed together with the navigable river courses. Roman roads and documented medieval droveways associated with transhumance practices were added to the maps. On this basis relationships between the settlements, normally represented by their cemeteries, could be explored by reference to communication routes, whether by road or by ship and boat. They could also be related to earlier Roman-period landscape patterns. By mapping data within time bands including the quantification of key objects, such as imports from the Frankish continent, or the quantities by weight of gold, silver, copper-alloy or iron in each grave, Brookes was able to map changes in wealth acquisition and deposition across time. Explanations for these changes were investigated and these revealed changing patterns of agricultural and trading activity in Kent over time within the early Middle Ages.

It is envisaged that the much expanded database of our project will involve some 450 excavated Anglo-Saxon burial sites representing an estimated 10,000 individuals, the majority as fully dressed inhumations. There will be in the region of 80 excavated settlement sites and at least another 1,200 individually reported find-spots.

Nevertheless this new project will explore a wider range of data sources than were gathered in ASKED, in a bid to include the full range and depth of information currently available. We will unify for the first time previously disparate research resources of archaeological evidence from excavated cemeteries and settlements, metal-detector finds and individual research electronic databases donated to the project by other archaeologists. We will also incorporate aerial photographic evidence, together with soil and topographic land coverages, as well as evidence from historical sources of estate and landscape organisation and place-name evidence.

In the last five years there have been very significant advances in the type and range of online resources available for such archaeological research in the UK. Our project will make full use of these, an example being the late Roman mapping material available through the English Heritage PastScape portal.

<http://pastscape.english-heritage.org.uk/homepage/>

Similarly digital base maps are required for spatial analyses and site mapping is now available from the Digimap Project .

<http://edina.ac.uk/digimap>

Digimap is also be able to provide maps of drift or surface geology in the UK, in addition to electronic copies of the nineteenth-century Government issued Ordnance Survey map sheet coverage. Both of these provide crucial evidence in carrying out the retrogressive landscape analyses which are central to our project. To these can be added aerial photography and satellite imagery, invaluable for the identification of landscape features of relevance to the project aims. The national archaeological agency of English Heritage holds much of this data in the National Monuments Record (NMR) at Swindon.

Research questions

Our plan is to carry out a similar set of exercises to those executed by Brookes for east Kent, but now covering the whole of southern England from Somerset in the west to Kent in the east. We anticipate being able to observe the emergence across time of core areas of wealth within this region, which have contributed to the creation of regional power bases and the formation of kingdoms. Many significant questions remain regarding the relative scale and complexity of the adjoining kingdoms; the degrees of variation in infrastructure between them; and the rates and thresholds of change within them. We will address the following five key research hypotheses and in order to illustrate these, we will consider some of the outcomes of Brookes' earlier research on east Kent.

Research hypothesis 1

The archaeological biographies or histories of specific places will exhibit clear continuity or discontinuity with late Roman landscape structures.

It is important to establish the extent to which the Roman landscape structure continued in use in the early Anglo-Saxon period. Was the settlement pattern of early kingdoms more dependent on pre-existing structures or rather on particular geographical factors? Many archaeological sites occupied in late Roman Britain end well before 400 and most others only just survive into the fifth century. Yet in east Kent, Roman burial sites on the junctions of Roman roads with trackways and coastal waterways can appear to correlate to their subsequent Anglo-Saxon successors. It is

thus very important to establish in quantifiable terms to what extent cultural succession occurs in each region.

This correlation highlights the significance of the visibility of funerary monuments, in particular along routeways, including coastal shipping routes. It is clear routeways played an important role in structuring settlement patterns in the landscape. Given the increased frequency of routeway associations in the seventh century, it seems probable that free movement through the landscape would have been increasingly controlled and manipulated by any emergent social order at this time.

In Kent we have four distinct geographical and environmental areas or *pays*:

- a coastal region of fertile easily-worked soils, with Anglo-Saxon sites showing a slight correlation to Roman sites (called the Foothills *pays*)
- a chalk upland region, of less-fertile rounded hills and more scattered settlement, with no statistical correlation between Anglo-Saxon and Roman sites (the Downland *pays*)
- a vale with fertile soils to the south of the North Downs which shows a similar pattern of settlement to the coastal region (the Vale of Holmesdale)
- the wealden district of much heavier soils, high density of woodland and scattered farms or hamlets, also with no clear statistical correlation with Roman sites (the Weald including the Chartland)

This suggests a model of settlement colonisation, moving from associations with Romano-British settlements in the core areas of the coastal region and the Holmesdale along major routeways into more marginal landscapes some distance from the coast.

Research hypothesis 2

Definable relationships existed between the creation of economic systems and state formation processes.

We want to explore changes in production, consumption, exchange and cultural identity that accompany the formation of different kingdoms as well as the speed at which these changes occurred. We will assess evidence for both environmental exploitation of the land and wealth creation through trade. This evidence will form the basis for comparative analyses of the characteristics of the economic and political organisation of the three early kingdoms. The distribution of trading places and markets is indicated by coin loss in particular and such evidence first appears relatively late in the seventh

to eighth centuries. Conspicuously wealthy communities are evidenced amongst the chronologically earlier furnished graves. Such groups may have benefited from a commercial environment, such as existed along the east coast of Kent with links to the Frankish kingdoms and beyond. The central research issue embedded within this hypothesis is whether the development of a social hierarchy was linked to landscape exploitation and methods of food production and the production of other staples, such as textiles and ironwork.

In the east of the original kingdom of Kent, there emerge clear centres of conspicuous consumption where populations have greater overall access to raw materials and foreign goods. This was a nascent economic zone of market exchange in which wealth finance in the form of foreign objects was a precursor to monetary exchange in the seventh century. These are usually in areas identified from documents of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period (seventh to ninth centuries) as possessing trading *emporium*. These areas contrast with more inland and western districts, where there is a greater coherence to agrarian multiple estates in which staple produce is mobilised as food-rent and regulated through the royal estate centres. This seems to suggest the existence of a balanced economic system underpinning the early kingdom of Kent. These markets – as Professor Richard Hodges has shown – were an important component of the Anglo-Saxon political economy, as indeed they were for the economy of the northern Frankish regions. The important corollary of this pattern is that these markets could not have existed in isolation – they depended on the organised hinterland of land-based power through a sophisticated estate structure.

Research hypothesis 3

The scale and extent of kingdoms will be discernable qualitatively or statistically from the geographical distribution of archaeological burial and settlement sites.

By examining the relative wealth from graves and from settlement assemblages within defined sub-periods, changes in practice over time can be traced. These might be measured, for example, in terms of weight by material (iron, copper, silver, gold etc) and variations in the manufactured provenance of the artefacts in furnished burials. On this basis, it should be possible to identify those districts that were disposing of a greater proportion of wealth in burial than the average at any given time and perhaps changes in social organisation will also be discernible over time within these regions.

The evidence from eastern Kent already shows us that:

- There is a clear east-west divide in material consumption during nearly all phases. Historically we may want to relate this to the division of Kent into two kingdoms positioned either side of the south-north river Medway.
- The exception here is the wealthy community near the former Roman city of Rochester, strategically placed at a bridging point on the east bank of the Medway boundary between east and west Kent and the future royal and ecclesiastical centre for the administration of west Kent.
- There were changes over time, with the period 450-525 displaying a far more variable pattern of artefact deposition than is evident later in the period. This fact runs contrary to analyses between cemeteries that suggest greater social polarity in the seventh century. We might interpret this as suggesting that during the initial phase of Anglo-Saxon burial the dynamics of stratification were negotiated on a more local level. This resulted in a wider range and number of artefacts used to signal wealth between communities.

Research hypothesis 4

Communities in key areas that had an unevenly spread resource base and unevenly distributed populations, shaped the history of entire regions by stimulating change in neighbouring communities.

What were the similarities and differences between changes in the areas of southern England under consideration? It is our expectation that we will be able to identify core areas of wealth linked to particular exploitable landscapes, but that these need not coincide with the central places indicated by documented bishoprics and monasteries (the minsters) that developed during the seventh and eighth centuries. It has already been established that the impressive wealth in Downland cemeteries in eastern Kent of the seventh century was probably the result of colonists moving onto the marginal chalk uplands along droveways and the intensive exploitation of livestock breeding on the Downs. The ability of these new communities to enlarge their flocks and herds allowed them to develop more rapidly than the long-established coastal primarily agrarian farming communities. But what were the economic relationships between these old and new communities?

In all probability, land-holding in the marginal zones was tied to Mother settlements in coastal core areas as a function of economic push and pulls. Whilst primary settlement

in the coastal and Holmesdale *pays* supports the idea that these zones contained the most important agricultural resources of the kingdom, later settlement colonisation of the Downland, together with the Chart and the Weald, conversely argues that these other landscapes were not as productive or desirable. Environmental conditions, particularly during the climatic low-point of the sixth century, meant that newly-established land-holdings in these more marginal zones are likely to have been inadequate, perhaps supporting little more than seasonal pastoralism through transhumance practices. The trend surfaces of wealth condensation and correspondence analysis of the range of interred commodities, suggests that dominant social groups and areas of primary settlement coincided.

In the case of Kent, the spatial distribution of resources indicates that different groups occupied contrasting environmental - and probably agricultural – niches. It is likely that marginal communities were in part dependent on additional subsistence support from their lowland neighbours. This must be viewed as an inter-related system, in which economic specialisation within resource niches was a more productive strategy than any other form of agricultural organisation. Further this led to increased overall production and hence to competition for control of this new resources base. It can be argued that the ostentatious Kentish Downland barrow cemeteries of the seventh century reflect just such an antagonism between the new and the old elites, as a form of resistance to the asymmetrical flow of goods back to the older settled areas.

Research hypothesis 5

The formation of kingdoms was a uniform and coherent process over time and space.

Kingdoms appear to be almost new creations when they emerge into the historical record c.590-620, so it is anticipated that uniform factors would underpin the contemporary processes across Anglo-Saxon England. We will assess at what point in time these emerging complex societies become visible archaeologically in different areas of southern England and what changes in social relations within them are discernible over time. The similarities and differences between changes in different sectors of southern England will be assessed in order to identify the key factors that might account for state formation.

International contacts

Finally, although not strictly a research hypothesis, we will address the issue of the impact of relationships with the Merovingian Frankish kingdoms. This is particularly evident in east Kent and the Isle of Wight in the sixth century. Frankish imports are found in smaller quantities within other parts of southern England and their significance needs to be assessed. We will also examine the role of contacts with the historical 'homelands' of the migrating Anglo-Saxons with Jutland, north-west Germany ('Anglia' and Lower Saxony) and Frisia. These external links will be assessed for their role in the formation of kingdoms, both through trade in high-status objects and for their ideological role in the founding of dynasties.

Expected outcomes

The creation of a synthetic database of all available source material will on its own make an important contribution to current Anglo-Saxon studies. We also anticipate that our study will provide not only new interpretations and a clearer understanding of the processes of kingdom formation, but may also bring to light previously unrecognised associations between the elements of the material culture. Indeed, we believe it will be the first such study to examine the relationship between the production of key staples and social and political change in this period on such a scale. Environmental evidence must be key to establishing a realistic view of what sustained early state structures. The underlying long-term subsistence strategies and the ability to generate surpluses within a pre-money economy appear as vital factors, together with the control and governance of these resources. In so doing we hope to correct a one-sided view that all change was directed from above and establish the processes by which economic development underpinned political and social change.

Finally, we anticipate that our research will be of broader significance and that our methods will have transferable value to those researching early state formation processes world-wide.