A GAZETTEER OF EARLY ANGLO-SAXON BURIAL SITES

BY

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DEDICATION

To Dr H. M. and Mrs Joan Taylor,
who, in their own search after
Christian Anglo-Saxon churches,
paused to give a helping hand
to one who pursued pagan Anglo-Saxon burials.

Distribution of Early English Burial Rites.
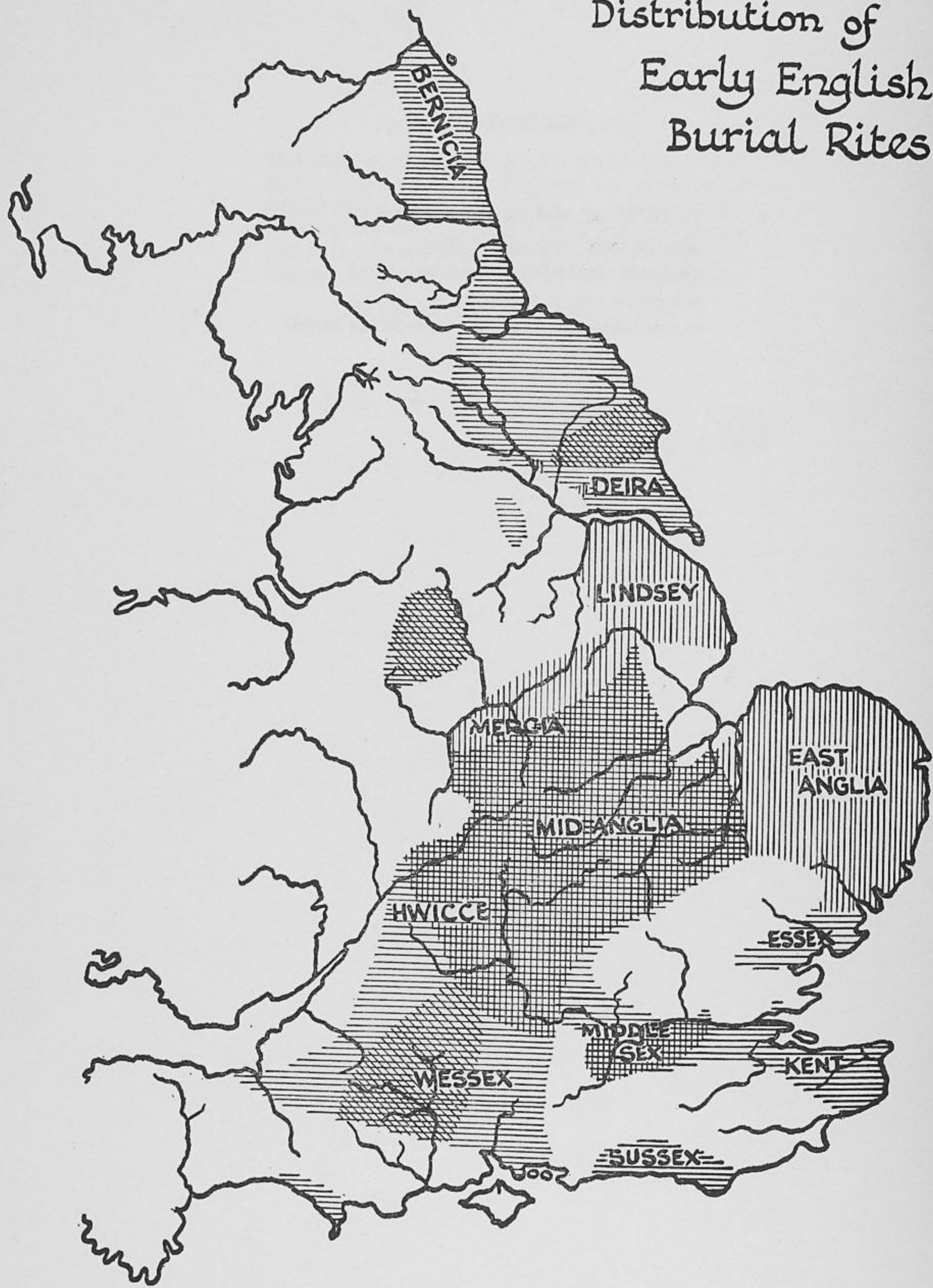
Mainly inhumation burials.

Mainly cremation burials.

Mixed burials.

Mainly secondary barrow burials.

BERNICIA

DEIRA

LINDSEY

MERCIA

EAST ANGLIA

MID ANGLIA

HWICCE

ESSEX

MIDDLE SEX

WESSEX

KENT

SUSSEX

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introduction is first, in a necessarily brief and therefore, unfortunately, a rather superficial survey, to place the burials enumerated in this *Gazetteer* in their historical context, and to relate the alphabetically listed modern counties to the early English kingdoms or 'culture areas'; and second, to give some account of the burial customs used by the heathen English with particular reference to regional variations, with the hope that this may serve to supplement the more usual studies of typological affinities based on artefacts.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The earliest inhumation burials listed here include that of the IV century raider at Richborough Castle K, and three burials with IV accoutrements found among others of unknown date on two sites at Dorchester O. The earliest cremation burials occurred probably soon after A.D. 400 near Roman towns, e.g., Cambridge, Leicester, Lincoln, Norwich, York,[1] and were probably of *foederati* and their families serving first under the Romans and later the Britons. The latest of the burials enumerated are perhaps those in the known Christian graveyards at Kintbury Bek, Hartlepool Du and Bredon Le, and some of those at Saffron Walden Ex, where X or XI objects were found in one grave. These burials are included for the sake of comparison and completeness, but burials of the later AS period are as a rule difficult to distinguish from those of post-Conquest medieval times, owing to the fact that grave-goods ceased to be supplied, and for this reason most of the burials enumerated here took place before about A.D. 700. Most of them were obviously made by heathens, but towards the end many of the burials with the richest grave-goods—the prime example being Sutton Hoo—can confidently be assigned to Christians. It can only have been subsequently that all the converted were persuaded to go unadorned to meet their maker.

THE EARLY ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS

The burials here listed, then, were mainly confined to, and covered the whole of, the heathen AS period. The first real occupation of the country by the invaders seems to have taken place towards the middle of the V, and before the century drew to its close several areas, chosen probably because of their accessibility and easily worked soils, had been occupied. Most of these became the nuclei for the historical kingdoms, although warfare or politics may have later deprived them of their importance.

The areas which show signs of V occupation[2] and the kingdoms of which they later formed parts, are

East Kent	Kent
The Sussex coast	Sussex
The valleys of the lower Thames and its southern tributaries	Middlesex (including Surrey)
Norfolk and Suffolk	East Anglia
The valleys of the Wash rivers	Middle Anglia
Upper Thames Valley	Wessex
Warwickshire Avon	Hwicce

[1] J. N. L. Myres, 'Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period', *Medieval Archaeology*, III (1959), 10–11.
[2] J. N. L. Myres, 'The *Adventus Saxonum*', *Aspects of Archaeology in Britain and Beyond*, ed. W. F. Grimes (1951), pp. 221–41; p.235.

varied greatly from one fragment to nearly 3,000, but whether there were signs that one burial was divided between two or more urns, as seems to have happened at Loveden Hill Li, we do not know. We can deduce a little more about the funeral ceremony from other excavation reports. The usual arrangements of the urns seems to have been to spread them out in rows over a considerable area, although not so regularly as the early excavators, who made no plans, represent (cf. Newark Not). At South Elkington Li, the urns were buried among flints which seemed to have been spread over the site in one operation, but otherwise in Anglian areas, cinerary urns are only found in tumuli as secondary burials. Urns were often found in pairs or groups, and may hold the remains of one person, as suggested above, or may indicate that care was taken to bury different members of the same family together. In Saxon and Jutish areas little care seems to have been taken over the deposition of the urns, which are usually found scattered among the inhumation graves, but in the 'pure cremation' cemeteries they are often found deposited on a layer of sifted gravel or a flat stone, and covered with other flat stones or a veritable cairn (cf. Thurmaston Le).

Some primary cremation burials have been found in barrows, mostly in the south, and mostly of a late date. They include those in the peculiar cemetery on Bowcombe Down IOW, and also some in Sussex and possibly also in Surrey. Of a different order, though also of VII date, are the burials at Coombe K, Brightwell-Martlesham Sf, Sutton Hoo Sf and Asthall Barrow O. In all except the last receptacles were used—at Coombe and Brightwell bronze bowls, and at Sutton Hoo a large wooden tray and a boat. At Asthall the barrow seems to cover the site of the pyre, and ashes were spread thickly above a layer of clay at the base of the mound. At Brightwell animal bones were also found, and both here and at Sutton Hoo were rough 'pans' of sand or clay into which excavators supposed libations might have been poured.

It is difficult to assess the ritual significance of cremation; on the whole, the idea behind it seems to be to release the spirit; to dismiss it from the body primarily in order that it shall no longer trouble the living. This may explain the deliberate holing of certain Anglo-Frisian urns, or the provision of windows of glass in some of the early urns of Kent, Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire. But why, so often, miniature combs, shears, tweezers and knives were made for the funeral (when it would have been so much easier to use an old, ordinary-sized knife or the like) and deposited in the urns after the bones had cooled we have no basis on which to surmise. Nor is there any obvious reason why so often playing-pieces were burnt with the corpse, while weapons are almost entirely lacking.

Finally, it should be remembered that cremation is a social rite. Miss Kirk[1] has suggested that it was a skilled business, in the hands of special families. Whether this is so or not, it is certain that the practice of cremation implies a settled community, with time to spare for social niceties. Not only were quantities of wood needed, but also a supply of urns. The making of pottery was probably a woman's task, and urns were not likely to have been part of the equipment of a campaigning warrior. Therefore cremation burials are only rarely found isolated, and when they are, it is very probable that further search would reveal whole cemeteries.

Half-Cremation

Before turning to 'pure inhumation', and the areas in which it is most frequently found, it seems appropriate to mention some peculiar burials in which fire appears to have been used as a part of the inhumation rite. These burials characterize the Mid Anglian, northern West Saxon and Hwiccean districts, but are occasionally found in Lindsey, Mercia and even Northumbria. Here, the excavators noticed that in the graves 'some of the earth appeared burnt', or 'the stones lining the grave were reddened by fire'. An isolated incident of this kind would not be remarkable; it is the frequency with which such statements occur in the excavation reports dealing with sites in the central part of England which helps to convince that the traces of fire are not merely accidental. Moreover, at times the signs are clearer. At Kempston Bd and Woodstone Hu a few skeletons were partially consumed by a fire which had been lit in the grave either before or after the body was laid in. Presumably after the fire had burnt itself out, the grave was filled in as usual.

[1] 'Anglo-Saxon Cremation and Inhumation in the Upper Thames Valley in Pagan Times', Harden (1956), pp. 123–31; pp. 126–27.

The idea behind this half-cremation is difficult to gauge. As mentioned before, it is found among people who also used true cremation and true inhumation, on the same sites, from the earliest pagan times until the latest; and this fact probably has some significance. It is noticeable that these mixed and 'half-cremation' cemeteries are not situated in open country away from the villages, as seems to have been the general rule for 'pure inhumation' sites, but close to rivers, and therefore presumably close to settlements. It may be, therefore, that this use of fire was symbolic, and served, like true cremation, to release the spirit of the dead man, so that it would no longer trouble the living. In this case, there would be no objection to siting the cemetery close to the settlement, and this would be easiest for transport. It may be for this reason, and not for some possible use of water in the cremation ritual, that the cemeteries of the Mid Anglians, northern West Saxons and the Hwicce are found near rivers.[1] In the case of the Mid Anglians, at least, it is possible that these rivers formed their route of ingress into Britain.

Found occasionally in the 'half-burnt' cemeteries, and perhaps being another outward sign of the peculiar beliefs of the people in this region, is skull burial. At Bidford Wa a woman's skull, supplied with a bronze pin, hair-ring and small crudely made pot, was found buried 3′ deep between three large slabs of limestone. It is possible that by some strange circumstance this was all that was available for burial; but its position at the far corner of the cemetery would seem to indicate that it was somehow specially regarded. At Frilford Bek a pig's head was found buried carefully beneath flat stones and supplied with pottery fragments and an oyster shell. Buxton supposed it to have been a cenotaph rather than a substitution, but so rarely are even pigs' jaws found in ordinary graves that this seems rather unlikely. At Soham Ca was an ox-skull buried muzzle down in a pit. Since the head was regarded as especially sacred in Germanic heathendom,[2] it is possible that all three of these burials were sacrificial. It is also possible that the two latter were connected with the funeral feast, for which we have no direct evidence in England, but which was so widespread among the pagan Germans that it is difficult to imagine it missing here. At times, too, animal bones which show signs of burning or cooking are found in the topsoil over a cemetery.

Inhumation

The most usual burial rite among the Anglo-Saxons, possibly because it needed least time and equipment, was inhumation. It may be for this reason that it appears to have been most popular in the south and in Northumbria—in those areas, in fact, where there are traditions of invasion by war-bands. Aelle, Cerdic and Ida cannot have had the opportunities for cremation which were available to the *foederati*, and this may well have been a contributing factor towards the difference in custom between the Saxons and the Angles, though not, of course, the sole reason for it. Anglo-Saxon inhumation burials, like those of the Romano-British and post-conquest medieval periods, are usually extended or loosely flexed. Fortunately, for those attempting to identify them, a great proportion of the heathen English graves, though by no means all, have grave-goods. Even in early cemeteries a large number of graves are unfurnished, but in the rest are found, firstly, the imperishable objects which the person buried would have had about him when alive, showing that he was buried in his own clothes. These personal items include a knife—more frequently found, in fact, than any other object—belt buckles and jewellery, mostly found with women. Items of equipment are also frequently found, in particular a warrior's weapons, which, as already remarked, are hardly ever found with cremations. Third in order of frequency are containers of some kind—rough pottery accessory vessels, elegant glass beakers, bronze-bound wooden buckets or elaborately ornamented drinking horns.[3] It is possible that these were placed in the grave filled with some kind of drink, as has been established for some funeral vessels in Scandinavia; and the possibility of this is strengthened by the occasional discovery of articulated animal bones within the graves, which must have been buried while

[1] See J. R. Kirk, 'Anglo-Saxon Cremation, etc.' Harden (1956), pp. 123–31.
[2] See B. Dickins, 'Place-Names Formed from Animal-Head Names', *The Place Names of Surrey*, ed. J. E. B. Glover *et al*, (Cambridge, 1934), pp. 403–406. S. Piggott, 'Heads and Hoofs', *Ant*, XXXVI (1962), 110–18 may also be relevant.
[3] Bronze hanging-bowls are left out of account here since opinions as to their possible use differ radically at present.

still covered with meat. The ducks' eggs found in an urn at Holywell Row St, the hazel nuts in a bronze bowl at Faversham K and the beech nuts at Hitchin Het, and the unopened oyster shells at Sarre K all show that meat was not the only food provided; and perhaps, if the English soil were more preservative, fruit such as was found in the Alemannic cemetery at Oberflacht would be discovered here.

All this might seem to indicate that the person inhumed was regarded much more as an inhabitant of the grave than the one cremated, that the spirit of the dead man was imagined as hovering close to its mortal remains and could appreciate the food and equipment provided. That such an assumption is perhaps unwarranted is shown by our own practice of placing flowers on the graves of the dead; we do it as a sign of respect, and as a consolation to ourselves that we have not forgotten a loved one, not with any idea that the spirit of the dead will be able to appreciate the flowers. There are, however, some indications that the Anglo-Saxon deposition of grave goods was more symbolic of their belief than our practice is of ours. The fact that their inhumation cemeteries are often situated in open country, well away from settlements, is one sign; and the occasional decapitation of skeletons is another. The most notable example of this was at Chadlington O, where 'ancient disturbance' was evident. Mutilation is well known in primitive societies as a means of preventing the re-animated corpse from 'walking' and harming its erstwhile loved relatives,[1] especially if the character of the dead man had been awkward, or bad-tempered, or even very forceful, in life. In another way, too, the heathen Anglo-Saxons seem to have endeavoured to protect themselves from the dead—by burning corn. This practice 'pro sanitate viventium et domus' is forbidden in Theodore's *Penitentials*[2] and is probably evidenced in two or three cemeteries. At Marston Nh a trail of burnt corn was found running across the top of the subsoil, and at Sandy Bd a quantity of charred wheat, said to be three quarters, was found in one part of the excavation.

The desire to prevent the corpse walking may have been behind those instances where the skull belonging to the skeleton is found in the grave, usually beside or between the legs. It was probably not the reason why a body is sometimes found without a skull, or why some graves contain an extra 'stray' skull—a strange phenomenon which is most noticeable in Surrey. It is possible here that the AS belief in the especial sanctity of the head[3] was responsible. It may have been felt that to acquire an enemy's head in war was to appropriate to oneself his bravery and fighting skill; and these 'stray' skulls may therefore have been legitimate trophies of war to the heathen English.

In Surrey, too, and in Kent, there is some evidence to suggest that upon occasion a woman—wife or female slave—was forced into a grave and killed. In these burials, notably at Finglesham K, Farthingdown and Mitcham Sr, the woman's skeleton is found contorted or twisted, pushed down or flung across the man's. In other parts of the country double burials of a man and woman are sometimes found, and with these, too, the woman may have killed herself, or been killed, in order to accompany the dead man, but it is impossible to tell, and an illness may easily have carried the two of them off together.

As well as women, horses and dogs are occasionally found sacrificed in the cemeteries; they, too, may have been slaughtered in order to accompany their masters, or because they were so closely associated with him they should not be enjoyed by anyone else. It is noticeable that only horse and dog skeletons are found whole in the cemeteries; although occasionally joints of meat from other animals were buried in the graves. Horse-burial may have been activated by the idea of a journey to the underworld; horses are frequently associated with the Shaman, and Othin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir is a good example of this.

Barrow Burials

Secondary burials in Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows seem to have taken place as soon as the early English reached the areas of the country where these were frequent, notably Wiltshire, the Peak District and the Yorkshire Wolds. The date of penetration to all three was probably mid VI. There is a difference, however, between the secondary burials of Northumbria and of

[1] See E. O. James, *Prehistoric Religion* (London, 1957), p. 121.
[2] E. A. Philippson, *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen* (Leipzig, 1929), p. 59.
[3] See above, p. 17.

the two more southerly areas. In Wiltshire and the Peak the burials are mostly isolated; in the Peak there are often cists formed from large stones. In Yorkshire, however, the prehistoric mounds were used as regular cemeteries by whole communities. Sometimes the graves were dug into the mounds, sometimes the bodies were simply laid on the surface and covered with earth.

It is clear, then, that even secondary barrow burial does not date from the early years after the invasion. The idea of constructing barrows of their own does not seem to have occurred to any of the Anglo-Saxons until the VII, with the possible exception of the South Saxons. In Sussex, too, the only barrow burials which can be securely dated are VII, but there are unusually large numbers of undateable barrows, in which there are either no grave-goods, or only undateable knives or weapons, and this inclines one to the view that the South Saxons were the first to build barrows. Moreover, the Sussex barrows share a peculiarity with those of Kent, the Isle of Wight and Surrey of being clustered together in groups instead of being found singly as they are in the rest of the country, for example, the Asthall Barrow O and at Taplow Bu. Except in the specified areas, primary barrow burial seems to have been something rather out of the ordinary, used exclusively by the rich, who could afford not only the expense of the labour of building the barrow, but also a rich provision of grave-goods. Occasionally two or three of these rich barrows will be close together, but tumular cemeteries such as are so frequent in Sussex and Kent are not found. It has already been remarked that in Sussex there are large numbers of unfurnished and poorly furnished barrows; and in Kent it is noticeable that there is no correspondence between the size of the barrow and the richness of the deposit. The richest burials were beneath medium-sized tumuli, not the very large or very small ones. The South Saxon records are too scanty to judge if the same holds true there.

It is impossible to deduce the way in which barrow burial spread through the country: certainly we may assume that it began in the south; but it would seem extraordinary if it were diffused from the isolated Sussex. It is possible, however, that it spread from here first into the neighbouring Kent, and from there was diffused as a result of Kentish prosperity and power at the end of the pagan period. Without a study of continental barrow burial and evidence for contact, it is impossible to go further.

It has already been suggested that in inhumation burial there was some idea that the dead man dwelt within the grave; this feeling seems to have been intensified with barrow burial. The grave goods were on the whole richer, and since there is now a visible memorial, there would be more incentive to attach the spirit of the dead to it. This idea is well developed in old Norse literature,[1] and we may assume it had some currency, albeit vague and unformed, in heathen England.

But surely the most important thing about a barrow was that it was a visible memorial. It was often sited on the false crest of a hill, from where it could be seen from the settlement below, and so act as a reminder of all the praiseworthy deeds of the man commemorated. Surely it must be for this reason that we occasionally find barrow cenotaphs. The barrows on Salisbury Race Course Wi, and Broomfield Ex, and one of those opened by Wright at Bishopsbourne K, were all without clear signs of a body; and it has been proved by elaborate scientific tests that the largest barrow at Sutton Hoo was a cenotaph. All these were, of course, late rich burials and probably all fall within the Christian period. The same reasons may be put forward for the rest as for Sutton Hoo—either that the person honoured was killed in war away from home, or that he was buried in a churchyard, but a splendid funeral in the heathen manner, and a memorial barrow, was considered desirable as well.

Ship Burials

The most remarkable barrows of the Anglo-Saxon period are those found on three sites on the coast of East Anglia, in which had been buried ships or stout boats. At Sutton Hoo and Snape the burials were aristocratic at least, and real sea-going vessels used; at Caister-on-Sea there were found only parts of the sides of boats, laid over the graves. So that it is clear that ship burials took place not only because of tradition, but because of some symbolism, probably that of a journey to the world of the dead. There is certainly some connection between these

[1] See H. R. Ellis, *The Road to Hel* (Cambridge, 1943), passim.

Suffolk ship burials and those of earlier or contemporary date in Uppland, Sweden; but it is not the place to go into it here. Already a great deal has been published on the subject and much more will follow[1].

Children

Brown remarked that children seem to have been buried in a more archaic manner than adults.[2] To judge from the records scrutinized for this *Gazetteer*, this does not seem to be entirely true. Children seem often to have been buried in a simpler manner and with fewer gravegoods than adults, but this was probably due to the fact that they had had less time than adults to acquire possessions, or to stamp their character on their surroundings. The small cup or pot found so often in children's graves was probably their own porringer, peculiar to them as a knife was to an adult, and therefore, even if ceramic was found nowhere else in the cemetery, as at Lyminge K and Winnall Ha, it is no evidence for a differing burial custom for children. Children are often found buried with adults, not only with women but also with weaponed warriors. Perhaps they belonged to the same family and were carried off together by illness or catastrophe; or perhaps children died so frequently and were considered of such little account that they were simply placed in the grave of any adult who happened to die at the same time.

Very occasionally, however, with children who were buried separately, there are features which seem to distinguish their burial from that of adults. In one or two cemeteries, noted by Brown, the orientation was different, and since the adults in these cemeteries had their feet to the east—which may be regarded as the latest orientation—that of the children may therefore be regarded as more archaic. Occasionally too, the position of the children's bodies varies from that of the adults; if these are supine, theirs have the legs crossed; if crouched, theirs are supine. It is difficult to surmise a reason for this, though it scarcely seems like an archaising. A slightly different burial ritual for children is well known among primitive peoples, and it is sometimes used with the idea of encouraging the rebirth of the child to the same parents. Perhaps the mourners wished the child's spirit to remain in the grave, ready for rebirth. Mrs Davidson would see, too, in the depositing of nuts, eggs and unopened oysters in the grave a symbol of rebirth; and the same idea may be behind the cowry shells found with several women and one man. But what the idea behind the throwing down of heavy flints on to the heads and bodies of children at Winnall Ha might have been, it is impossible to guess.

Conclusion

There is very little more that we can deduce, either from archaeology or in any other way, about the funeral ceremony or the attitude of the heathen Anglo-Saxons to their dead. We can assume that the same holds true for them as for other early or primitive peoples—

The general attitude displayed in the cult of the dead . . . is that usually adopted by primitive people in the presence of any ambivalent sacred object, namely a combination of the fear, respect and reverence shown to a being who is half-god and half-devil, or perhaps god and devil by turns.[3]

On the one hand we have the care taken to lay the dead honourably and comfortably to rest; the making of cists, the building of barrows, the provision of grave-goods, and the frequent positioning of the burials on lofty sites, from which they would be a visible memorial to the people below. At the same time there is, in general, care taken to keep the spirits of the dead away from the dwelling places of the living, either by burning the body or by siting inhumation cemeteries well away from the village—the boundary of a territory seems to have been the proper place for them, even if that boundary were a Roman road (see Churchover Wa). Even then, at times further precautions seem to have been necessary, and grain was burnt, or the inhumed body decapitated to prevent it from walking.

[1] See entry for Sutton Hoo Sf.
[2] G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England, Saxon Art and Industry in the Pagan Period* (London, 1915), III, 189.
[3] E. O. James, *Prehistoric Religion* (London, 1957), p. 122.

For those aspects of the funeral ceremony which left no trace in archaeology, our earliest record is the poem *Beowulf*, though how far we can trust it is uncertain. However, some features of Beowulf's own funeral, and that of the slain warriors in the Finn episode, seem to have been constant in Germanic heathendom; for example, the loud weeping and wailing of the mourners, led, in the case of these warriors, by a woman. After the building of the barrow, too, there was a solemn riding around the tumulus by the chief followers of the dead man, who rehearsed his virtues and called to mind his great deeds. For this alone was the real immortality of the heathen English, and their greatest desire—the praise of their followers and descendants after death.