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New light on Rendlesham:

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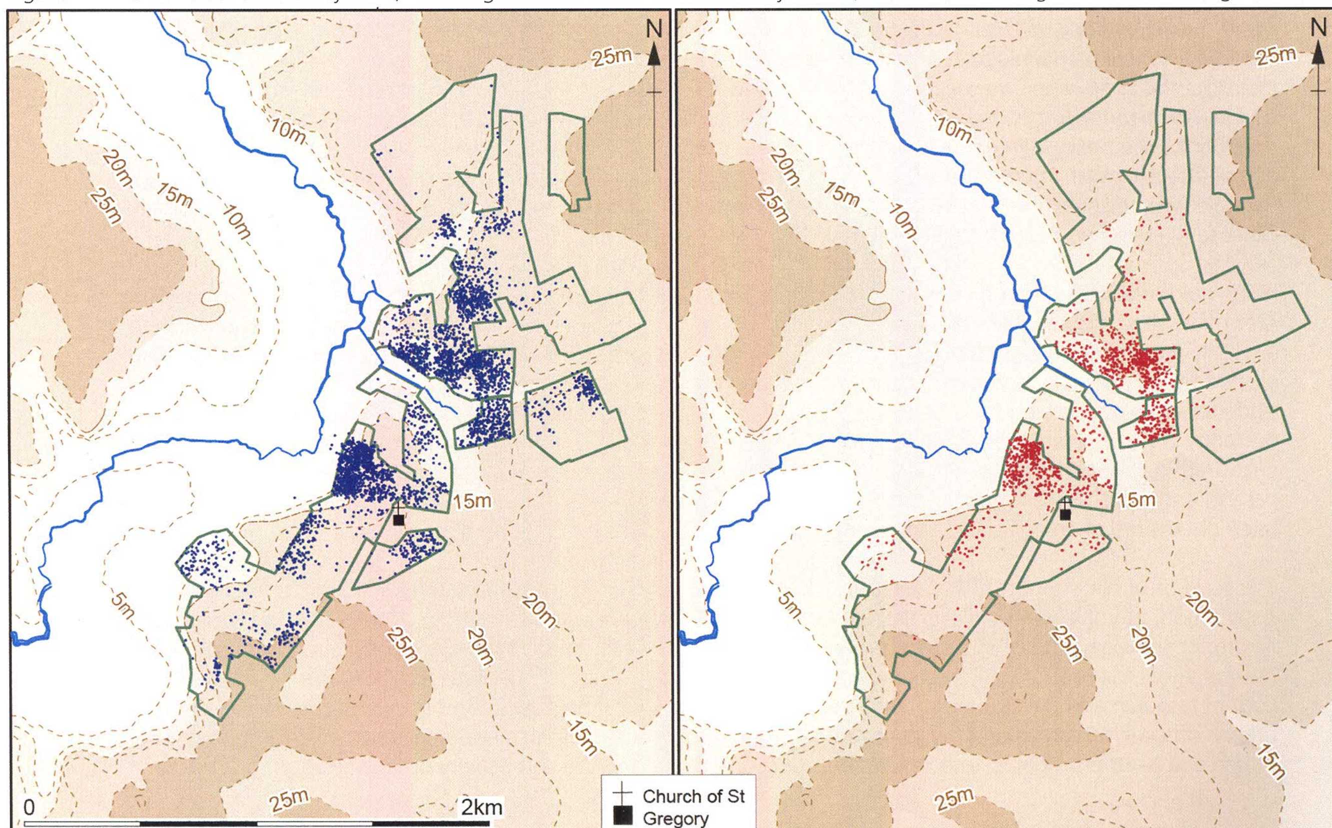
New research at a royal palace site close to Sutton Hoo poses fresh questions about the nature of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. **Christopher Scull and Tom Williamson** look at how landscape studies can change our understanding of early English royal rule.

Sutton Hoo and Rendlesham

Many people will have heard of the great Anglo-Saxon barrow cemetery at Sutton Hoo, dramatically positioned above the estuary of the river Deben in south-east Suffolk. Excavations made here on the eve of the Second World War unearthed a great ship burial, with rich gravegoods – including, the iconic helmet now displayed in the British Museum. Subsequent excavations have made more discoveries and further increased our knowledge of the site, which was in use in the later sixth and seventh centuries.[1] Those burying at Sutton Hoo evidently had access to immense wealth and enjoyed contacts which brought them treasures from across Europe. Historians have usually assumed that they were King Raedwald and other members of the Wuffingas, the royal dynasty of the East Anglian kingdom referred to in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in the pages of Bede. It has also been argued that these ostentatious burials represent the 'last gasp' of paganism before the family accepted Christianity. But much about these people remains obscure. Where did they live, how extensive was the territory over which they ruled, and what kind of power

Figure 1: The Rendlesham survey area, showing the distribution of all survey finds (left, blue) and Anglo-Saxon finds (right, red).



did they exercise over it? New archaeological research at a very different site is beginning to answer some of these important questions.

The parish of Rendlesham lies on the eastern side of the River Deben about 6 kilometres upriver from Sutton Hoo. Until the later twentieth century the village consisted of a loose scatter of houses and farms, including Naunton Hall, together with the isolated church of St Gregory the Great which lies a little to the south-east. Rendlesham has long been associated with the Wuffingas. Bede, writing in the eighth century, mentions it as the East Anglian *vicus regius* where King Swithhelm of the East Saxons was baptised, some time between AD 655 and 663, with Æthelwald, king of the East Angles, in attendance.[2] Until comparatively recently there was little archaeological evidence from Rendlesham to indicate such an elevated status. But in 2008, in response to the landowner's concerns about illegal metal-detecting, a controlled metal-detector survey was organised by the Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service, over an area of some 150 hectares. Between 2008 and 2014, 3,946 metal finds dating from before 1650 were recovered, of which 27 per-cent were from the period between the fifth and eleventh centuries, an extraordinary total. Most of the latter material, moreover, dates from the period between the fifth and eighth centuries (Figure 1).[3] All the finds were subject to expert identification, and their locations were carefully plotted using GPS.

This work was both accompanied and followed by other forms of archaeological investigation, including magnetometry and aerial surveys, and targeted excavation. Aerial photographs revealed, among other things, the cropmarks of a rectangular timber building measuring 23 metres by 9.5 metres, very probably an Anglo-Saxon hall, in the area to the south of Naunton Hall (Figure 2). This part of the parish, on a level plateau overlooking the river Deben to the west, appears to be the high-status 'core' of the settlement, and produced sophisticated dress jewellery, and weapon and harness fittings, including items of gold embellished with garnets, as well as evidence for gold- and silver-working. Two parallel ditches running north-south to the west of the 'hall' may have defined the western boundary of the settlement. Excavation revealed that these had later been backfilled with material from a substantial midden, the contents of which – also spread more widely across the site – included large amounts of animal bone. Cattle, pigs and sheep were all represented, many killed and eaten while still young and tender – a wasteful and evidently 'elite' form of consumption. But bones from horses, hawks and large, well-fed dogs were also recovered, showing that the inhabitants of the site enjoyed riding, hunting and hawking. Other major buildings almost certainly await discovery, and it is possible that the adjacent medieval parish church (with its unusual dedication to St Gregory the Great) marks the site of a much earlier foundation – perhaps that in which Swithhelm was baptised.

This area of wealth and conspicuous consumption forms only one part of a wider landscape of settlement and burial. To the north-east of Naunton Hall aerial photography, geophysics and targeted excavation has revealed a dense scatter of rubbish pits and *Grubenhäuser* – the distinctive Anglo-Saxon sunken floored buildings, used mainly for storage and as workshops. This was a lower-status area of occupation with a farming population. Fifth- and sixth-century dress accessories and decorated pottery indicate areas of burial, involving both cremations in urns and inhumations. Overall, the early- and middle-Saxon material recovered from Rendlesham extends over an area of more than 50 hectares. Not all of this vast area was necessarily occupied at the same time, and some of the material recovered may indicate periodic activity rather than permanent occupation. This is, nevertheless, the largest and

Figure 2: Magnetometry survey of the area to the south of Naunton Hall, with the cropmark plot of the possible hall (green) and the location of evaluation trenches (red) superimposed.
Note, to the left (west), the long alignments of the parallel ditches.

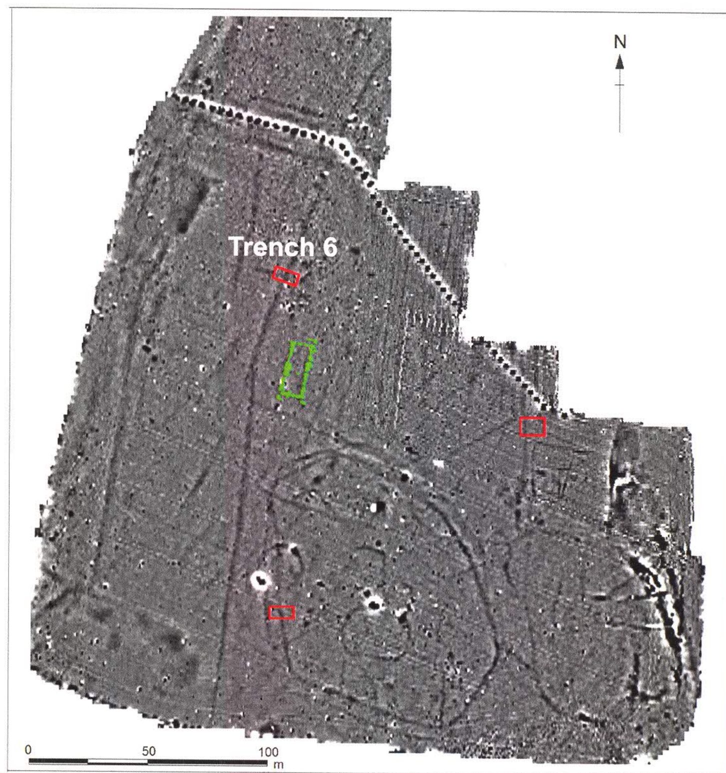


Figure 3: Evidence for metal-working recovered from Rendlesham. Top from left, unfinished copper-alloy objects (mount, buckle and pin); bottom from left, gold sheet offcut, gold droplet and fragment of gold jewellery probably broken up for recycling.
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Figure 4: Coins and coin weights from Rendlesham.
(A) Merovingian tremissis, struck at Dorestad; (B) Anglo-Saxon gold shilling; (C), silver sceat; (D), copper-alloy coin weight, inscribed 'H' (= 1 tremissis); (E), copper-alloy coin weight, inscribed 'N' (= 1 solidus).
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probably the richest rural settlement of its period yet discovered in England. It was at the peak of its importance from the early–middle sixth century until the second quarter of the eighth; it then declined, rapidly becoming no more than a small farming establishment.

The site is now the subject of a major multi-disciplinary project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and based at University College London's Institute of Archaeology, the University of East Anglia, and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.[4] The material recovered by the team of detectorists is being studied in detail. Already, however, it can tell us much about the character of the site. Its elite residents had wide contacts: there are brooches from Frankish Gaul and fragments of hanging-bowls from western or northern Britain, and of vessels from as far away as Byzantium. Items made of gold and silver were manufactured here, but also more everyday objects in plain copper-alloy, such as dress pins, buckles and bag catches (Figure 3). These were clearly aimed at more lowly members of the population, and were produced in quantities suggesting supply to a wider hinterland. Particularly striking is the coinage recovered from the site (Figure 4). This includes eight Byzantine copper coins of the late sixth and earlier seventh centuries, and quantities of Frankish gold coins, in addition to English gold shillings and silver 'sceattas' . These are all widely scattered across the site, suggesting everyday use. Even the early gold coins seem to have been used as currency and not just as bullion or raw material for metalworking, for coin weights marked with contemporary Byzantine denominations, cut coins, blanks and ingots have all been recovered. All this clearly indicates that gold coins were treated as units of value that needed to be checked for weight and fineness. This is particularly important, for most historians and archaeologists have hitherto believed that, in the later sixth and early seventh centuries, long-distance movement of expensive items was through the medium of 'gift-exchange', with objects passing from ruler to ruler as a means of obtaining prestige and reinforcing political alliances. The Rendlesham evidence implies something very different: that imports from as far away as Byzantium were also being brought by merchants, and acquired through commercial exchange.[5] All in all, the investigations so far indicate that Rendlesham was a large agricultural settlement but also a tribute centre, an elite residence, and perhaps a periodic meeting place. It was also a location for trade, both local and long-distance. The archaeological evidence, and that provided by Bede, are thus in broad agreement. Rendlesham was a place of considerable importance, and for some of its existence at least a residence of the Wuffingas, the East Anglian royal dynasty.

The investigations have also produced hints – perhaps no more – about the origins of Rendlesham's importance. The metalwork recovered includes significant amounts of late Roman material, including the latest coinage to reach Britain, and military or official belt fittings, all perhaps indicating that there was some kind of official establishment here. Conversely, there is also evidence for 'Germanic' artefacts dating from the second quarter of the fifth century, the time of the earliest English settlement. All this suggests that Rendlesham's exceptional character in the period between the sixth and eighth centuries owed something to its role rather earlier, as a centre of local or regional authority within the late Roman Empire.

Rendlesham in context

Rendlesham cannot be understood in isolation. It needs to be considered within its wider geographical contexts. The site lies within a few kilometres of a number of other significant early and middle-Saxon – sixth- and seventh-century – sites. In addition to Sutton Hoo, 6 kilometres to the south-east, a second barrow cemetery has been excavated at Snape, some 10 kilometres to the north-east. The monastery which, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, was established in 654 at *Icanhoh* by the missionary Botolph, under the patronage of the East Anglian king Sigeberht, was almost certainly at Iken, 3 kilometres to the south of the Snape cemetery. Other early monastic sites have been suggested at Burrow Hill in Butley and at Burgh by Woodbridge, seven kilometres to the south-east and ten to the west of Rendlesham respectively.[6] Slightly farther afield, some 18 kilometres to the south-west, lies the modern town of Ipswich. Excavations carried out over many decades have shown that this began life in the sixth century as a place where boats could unload on a sheltered beach at the head of the Orwell estuary, but then expanded massively, from the early

eighth century, to become a sizeable urban centre.[7]

To really understand Rendlesham and its rulers, however, we need to widen our focus, and examine a distinctive range of sites lying farther afield in East Anglia. These are so-called 'productive sites', places where metal-detectorists have recovered particularly large quantities of high-status early- and middle-Saxon metalwork. Some of these may have been trading sites like Ipswich or monasteries like Burrow Hill, but most were almost certainly kingly or aristocratic residences like Rendlesham itself. Examples include Coddenham, 11 kilometres north of Ipswich in the Gipping Valley; Caistor-by-Norwich, where concentrations of middle-Saxon material have been recovered from the fields immediately to the west of the walled Roman civitas capital of *Venta Icenorum*; Burnham Market in north Norfolk; and, on a smaller scale, Hoxne in Suffolk, which later documentary evidence also suggests was a place of royal importance. Other sites, such as Blythburgh on the Suffolk coast, have less in the way of archaeological evidence for early significance, but more in historical terms. The twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* records that the East Anglian king Anna was buried at Blythburgh, following his death in battle with Penda of Mercia in 654, and was still being venerated at the church there. As others have argued, Blythburgh seems to have formed the focus of an ancient territory, fossilised by late Saxon administrative divisions, which originated as the land of a group called the *Blythingas*.[8] Rendlesham was, in other words, one of several broadly comparable sites in East Anglia. What remains unclear is how these were related to each other. Were they, initially at least, rival sites of comparable status? Or were they alternative residence of a single dominant but peripatetic family, like the later royal castles and palaces scattered across medieval England? Careful examination of the material culture recovered from a sample of these sites, comparing it with that from Rendlesham, should give some indication of the relative importance of these various places and how this changed over time.

Kingdoms, territories and topography

All this has an important bearing on wider debates about the emergence of social complexity in Anglo-Saxon England, and the origins of the kingdoms which we encounter in the pages of Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Some historians have argued for a significant degree of political continuity between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England, with the main tribal and administrative divisions of the former – the *civitates* – developing directly into the early kingdoms of the latter. The *Trinovantes* thus 'became' the East Saxons, the *Iceni* 'became' the East Angles. Others remain wedded to the idea, first put forward in the 1980s, that there was a phase of profound dislocation in political organisation in the fifth century, leading

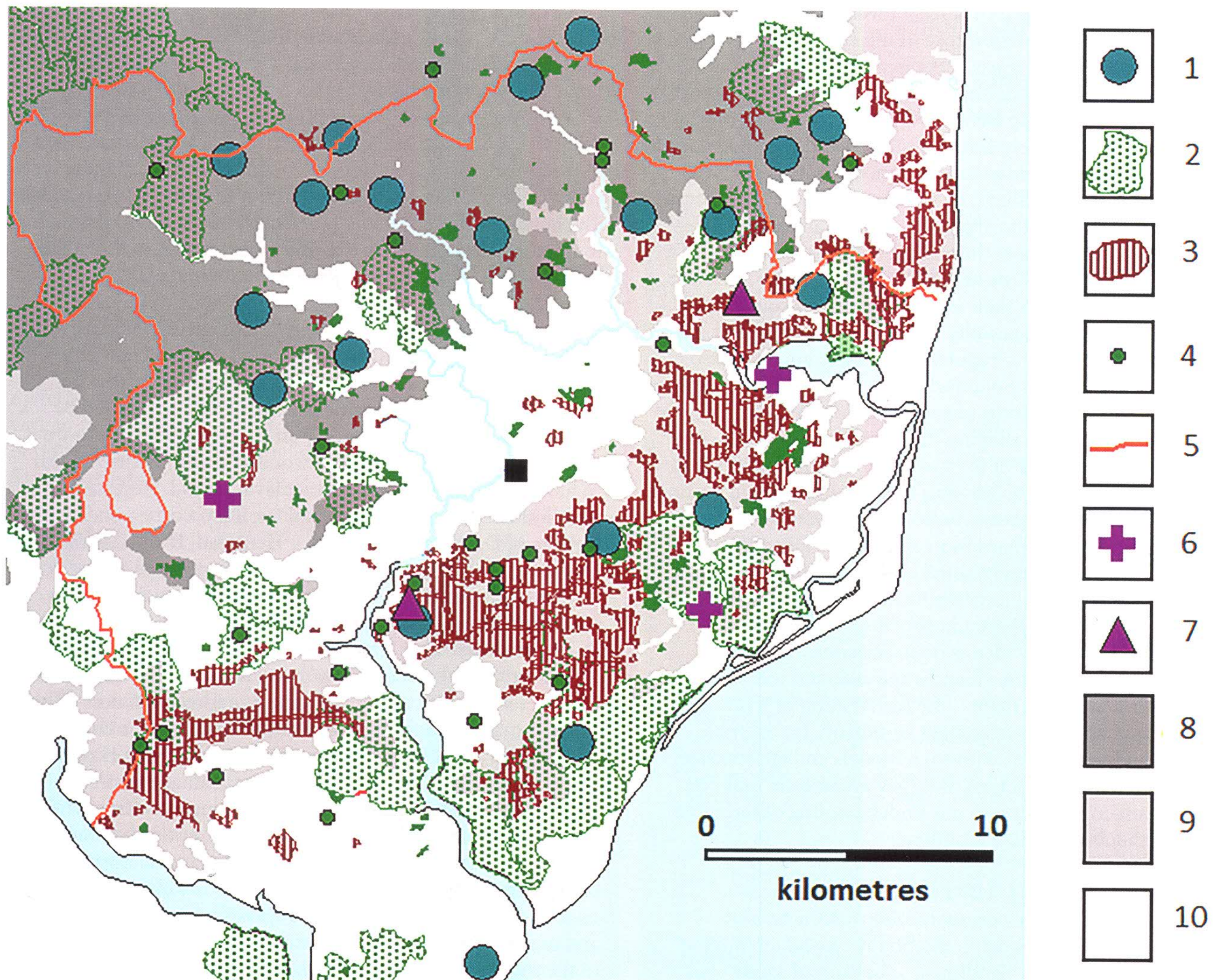

Figure 5: The wider landscape context of the Rendlesham site.
1. Early medieval deer park. 2. Parish with Old English place-name relating to woodland. 3. Area of common land or heath shown on post-medieval maps. 4. Minor name referring to woodland. 5. Boundary of the 'Wicklaw Hundreds'. 6. Suggested locations of seventh-century monasteries. 7. The barrow cemeteries at Sutton Hoo and Snape. 8. Poorly-draining clay soils. 9. Exceptionally acid sandy soils. 10. Marsh and fen. Rendlesham is shown as a black square.
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to the emergence of a number of small, autonomous or semi-autonomous tribal territories, each extending over tens or hundreds, rather than thousands, of square kilometres.[9] Only gradually did larger political units develop, as small tribes repeatedly conquered and absorbed their neighbours in what Stephen Bassett memorably described as a 'glorious knock-out competition'. Over time, this process led to the emergence of the larger Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which we encounter in Bede and other documentary sources – Northumbria, Mercia, the East Saxons and the like. This process was accompanied by the development of an increasingly complex and stratified society, and the emergence of hereditary kingship.

One of the reasons why this conceptual framework has proved so popular, especially among landscape and regional historians, is that it fits in well with other approaches commonly employed in these disciplines, and especially the so-called 'river and wold' model.[10] This supposes that, within most localities, there is a recurrent contrast between soils found on valley sides – well-drained, moderately fertile, and suitable for use as arable – and those of the intervening uplands, formed in poorly-draining clays or acid sands. Most of the significant settlements in late prehistoric, Roman and early Saxon times were located within major valleys, where rivers also provided a regular supply of water, good meadow land, and in some cases communication routes. The interfluves, in contrast, were occupied by tracts of woodland and pasture. Only gradually, as population rose in the course of the Anglo-Saxon period, did these areas become permanently settled. There was – perhaps more importantly in the present context – a recurrent relationship between topography and territorial organisation. The sparsely-settled upland 'wolds' formed cut-off points in patterns of human interaction. Communities were focused on particular valleys, or valley systems, and over time social territories tended to approximate to drainage basins. Of course, other aspects of the natural landscape also played a part in structuring patterns of social interaction. In particular, where rivers widened in their lower reaches and could not easily be crossed, and especially where they became tidal, they often served as barriers to regular intercourse and thus also developed as significant boundaries. But either way, topography strongly influenced patterns of social contact, and thus of early territorial organisation, shaping the diminutive polities which preceded the emergence of the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

In theory, it should be possible to suggest the configuration of the territories associated with important sites like Rendlesham or Coddenham by examining local landforms. But there are real dangers in simply *assuming* that patterns of settlement, land use and territory strictly followed the dictates of natural topography. These kinds of approaches need to be combined with the evidence of place-names, and with an analysis of the patterns of landscape and land use shown on the earliest available maps – the distribution of tracts of common land and areas of ancient woodland, for example. There are many problems with such models and approaches, both theoretical and practical. But they are already making an important contribution to our understanding of the early history of the East Anglian kingdom.

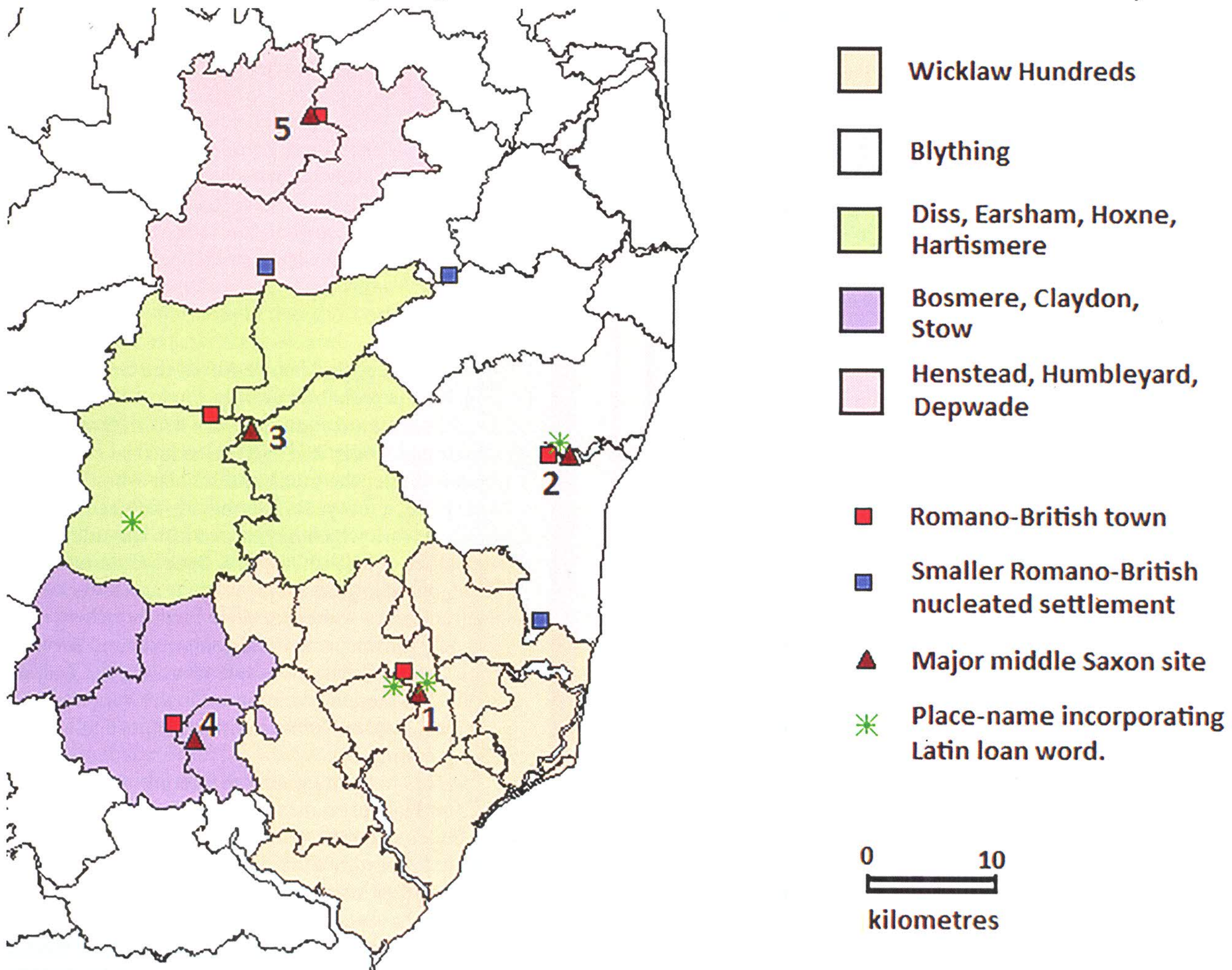
Reconstructing territories

Previous studies have, for example, often characterised Rendlesham as dominating an essentially *coastal* territory at the southern end of the 'Sandlings' – the strip of sandy soils running down the Suffolk coast. Such terrain, it is argued, was more attractive to early farmers than the heavy boulder clays lying inland, occupying the central mass of Suffolk. Yet this simple contrast between 'light' and 'heavy' soils is misleading. It is more useful to make a more subtle distinction, between comparatively light, loamy clays, moderately calcareous sands, and other light loams on the one hand; and heavy impervious clays, and acid, leached and infertile sands on the other. If we do this, then it immediately becomes clear that Rendlesham is located within an area of rather attractive soils in the valleys of the rivers Deben and the Alde , which is surrounded, and separated from the coast by, less inviting uplands. Not surprisingly, perhaps, areas of early woodland and grazing appear to have been concentrated on these poorer or more challenging soils (Figure 5). Place-names and other evidence suggest, in fact, that even the sandy uplands towards the coast, characterised by the time the earliest maps were surveyed in the seventeenth century by open heaths, were in previous centuries partly wooded.

Once these basic patterns are recognised, key aspects of early *human* geography soon fall into place. In administrative terms much of south-east Suffolk formed, by the time that Domesday Book was compiled in 1086, an area called the 'Wicklaw Hundreds' – the seven hundreds (administrative divisions) of Wilford, Carlford, Colneis, Plomesgate, Thredling, Loes and Parham, interdigitated in complex ways, which were granted to the Abbey of Ely as a jurisdictional 'Liberty' at some unknown time in the Saxon period. The outer boundary of this unit picks its way in a satisfactory manner through the wooded peripheries of Rendlesham's 'natural territory'. Similarly, we can see how the two early barrow cemeteries at Snape and Sutton Hoo, as well as the various possible monastic sites noted earlier, all lie within the wooded margins of the territory. In contrast, certain interesting things clearly lie close to its 'core'. For example, immediately to the north of Rendlesham are two adjacent parishes with very significant place-names – Campsey Ashe and Wickham Market. Both are examples of a rare type of place-name which incorporates latin elements, in these cases *campus* ('field') and *vicus* ('small urban settlement') respectively. The latter is almost certainly a reference to the Roman 'small town' at Hacheston which lies in the next parish to the north, and a mere 3.5 kilometres from Rendlesham itself.[11]

Similar patterns can be seen around some of the other major middle Saxon sites currently being investigated by the project team, although with some variations in detail. The Roman town and associated 'productive site' at Caistor-by-Norwich in Norfolk lie beside the river Tas, surrounded by tractable clay loams. Beyond lay an outer periphery of more difficult land in which tracts of woodland and pasture appear to have survived well into the medieval period. Here, as at Rendlesham, the putative 'natural territory' corresponds with a group of Domesday hundreds – Henstead, Humbleyard and Depwade – which look as if they had once formed a single unit. At Caistor, however, the 'productive site' lies much closer to a Roman urban centre than is the case at Rendlesham, while the presence within a kilometre of two large fifth-century cremation cemeteries (at Caistor and Markshall) here provides a further indication of the area's continued importance from Roman through to Saxon times. Blythburgh is another interesting case. It lies centrally within the Blything Hundred, a unit which corresponds closely to the drainage basin of the river Blyth. It also lies a mere two kilometres east of the Romano-British 'small town' at Wenhaston, with the hamlet of Bulcamp – another example of a place-name featuring the latin *campus* – lying directly in between. The close spatial relationship between these early royal or aristocratic centres, and major Roman settlements, is a recurrent feature, especially in the south-eastern parts of East Anglia (Figure 6). There are hints here – perhaps no more – that many of these centres of middle-Saxon power, and perhaps their associated territories, had earlier origins. As already noted, significant quantities of late Roman coins and metalwork have been recovered from the Rendlesham site itself. By considering these important early Anglo-Saxon sites not only in terms of their particular

Figure 6: Major middle-Saxon sites, Roman towns and the pattern of hundreds in south-eastern East Anglia.
1. Rendlesham and Hacheston. 2. Blythburgh and Wenhaston. 3. Hoxne and Scole. 4. Coddenham. 5. Caistor by Norwich.



material culture, but also within their wider landscape contexts, we can potentially reconstruct the economic and social basis of political power in East Anglia during the early- and middle-Saxon periods.

Conclusion

The discoveries at Rendlesham challenge conventional wisdom in a number of important ways. In particular, they suggest a more complex and sophisticated society, at an earlier date, than is usually accepted by archaeologists and historians. Rendlesham was, by the second half of the sixth century, already an extraordinarily large and complex site whose rulers were involved in long-distance market exchange, and possibly the control of centralised craft production. It is currently fashionable to view the 'long eighth century' as the period in which complex systems of production, exchange and social organisation returned to England, and other parts of north-west Europe, after the fall of the Roman empire.[12] But the evidence from Rendlesham suggests that this may over-simplify a more complex story. Were the rulers of Rendlesham already, in the sixth century, 'kings' of East Anglia as a whole? Or were they only one among many rulers of petty territories, some perhaps originating in the Roman period, which were yet to be consolidated into a larger East Anglian kingdom? These and other questions will only be addressed through the detailed study not only of Rendlesham itself, but also of other elite sites from the period within East Anglia, and the territories with which they were associated.

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