Placing the dead: investigating the location of wealthy barrow burials in seventh century England

Howard M. R. Williams, *University of Chester*
Grave Matters

Eight studies of First Millennium AD burials in Crimea, England and southern Scandinavia

Papers from a session held at the European Association of Archaeologists Fourth Annual Meeting in Göteborg 1998

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Introduction

When we think of data obtained from archaeological excavations of barrow sites, we envisage the information derived from artefactual remains. While these remain the traditional focus of archaeological study and interpretation, a great deal of information can be derived from studying the architectural organisation of burial sites. This paper presents the case study in this research by identifying principles behind the location of high status barrow sites in early Anglo-Saxon England and the late satch and seventh centuries AD. The paper also considers the complexity of graves and their importance to the social and symbolic nature of barrows and burial sites. It is the research that has been carried out in seven sites AD that can begin to discern the emergence of historically distinct elements and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon elite to Christianity. An understanding of the type of location chosen for the final resting places of selected members of these elite groups reveals much about their social status and ideologies and their relations with the wider populations of southern and eastern England. The paper focuses upon one early Medieval burial site at Stonehenge in Oxfordshire, southern England, and proceeds to compare this site with other high status barrow sites from Wessex and the Upper Thames region. First, let us discuss the social and cultural nature of the society and the community of ancestors.

Mortuary landscapes

The landscape context of barrow sites of the first millennium AD has received relatively little and interminable treatment by scholars until very recently (e.g. Barrow 1966, 1976; Reynolds 1997, Williams 1978, 1979, 1984; Williams 1997b). For example, studies of burial location in this period tend to be descriptive rather than interpretative. Where studies of burial location take place, they usually focus upon single sites or small areas such as relationships with ancient monuments or boundaries rather than all the full range of elements that influence the placing of the dead (e.g. Barrow 1966, 1976, Goodier 1984, Williams 1997b). In order to consider the placing of high status barrow sites of the seventh century, we can take the lead from the work of Christopher Tilley (1964, 1966), John Barrett (1994) and Richard Bradley (1997). These scholars and others have applied social theory and phenomenological approaches to space and place in investigating the contexts of ritual sites and monuments. Studies have incorporated a variety of approaches by investigating the relationships of archaeological sites with the natural topography, proximity and associations with inherited monuments, patterns of intervvisibility with other sites and axes of movement through the landscape. These perspectives emphasize the material and symbolic qualities invested in sacred places and the wider landscape. Also, there has been interest in the ways in which the perceived social and economic and monument location can structure the movement of experience and memory. The spatial ordering of practices and rituals at these sites is thought to influence the construction and reproduction of social identity at this time. The past (Barrow 1994; Tilley 1994, 1996; Bradley 1997).

These studies encourage us to envisage new approaches to the study and interpretation of Early Medieval cemeteries. Graves and cemeteries during the first millennium AD were never regarded as dots on maps or as sites planned in the way that archaeologists consistently portray them. Burial sites had to be viewed as networks of meaningful social and economic networks. The significance of the ways in which they were engaged with and experienced during rituals but also during less formalised encounters within daily life (Williams in press c). Graves and cemeteries are important events in traditional societies. The process of rituals and rituals conducted at the grave-side could have been important in the ritual and social contexts during which social and political networks and relations were played out (Barrow 1994). Subsequent to the ritual, graves could become enduring features of the cultural landscape and potentially the focus of further burial, ancestor rites and other forms of formal mourning. Graves can have a continuing role in the social life of a community, they might be viewed as places of ritual and the dead as well as being the dwelling places of spirits and/or the community of ancestors.

Funerary rituals and the use of barrow sites involve the physical and symbolic transformation of the corpse, soul and the ancestors into new social categories and identities (Hatt 1956, Huntington & Morcom 1994). Sometimes these transformations manifest themselves in the spatial distribution of the placing of burial sites (e.g. Arden 1959, Kam 1999). This is supported by the knowledge that symbolic and ideological factors make an equal and equal contribution to practical considerations in choosing the place of burial and in the community of ancestors. The use of an element of barrow and the repeated association of the grave with particular localities can create the contribution of an idealised social order that structures identities of kinship and group solidarity (Blok 1974, Black & Park 1982, Meyer 1993, Warren 1993, Williams in press). The spatial elements of performances, features and actions during funerary rituals can be seen as
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"technologies of the self"; they are means by which individuals and groups understand their place in the world and sense of identity (Bloch 1982, Foucault 1988). The dead might not only embody the ideals and beliefs of the living, but may also have actually influenced these very concepts through their use as societal and cultural symbols. Celebrating and experiencing burial practices would have contributed to the changing symbolic and social value of graves for past populations. Hence we might consider the use of place and space during mortuary practices as reciprocally related to ideologies and relationships between the dead and the living in past societies.

High status burial sites in England during the late sixth and seventh centuries AD

Aimed with these theoretical themes we are in a position to construct methodologies to investigate patterns in the placing of "high status" graves in England during the late sixth and seventh centuries AD. These burial sites are well known in the archaeological literature due to the splendid number of grave goods found at sites such as Sutton Hoo, Bournemouth, Benty Grange and Taplow. Their interpretation has a central place in our understanding of the changing nature of Anglo-Saxon society during the period (Welch 1995, 1998). They represent distinctive, if heterogeneous, groups of wealthy graves, and this wealth has overshadowed investigations of their landscape context (e.g. Arnold 1986).

These graves include both male and female individuals, usually they are found singly and spatially segregated from domestic contexts (Boddington 1999; exceptions exist in the southeast where larger "barrow cemeteries" are known, Shephard 1979, Eagles & Smirn in press). Graves often contain large quantities of high quality artifacts including rich weapon assemblages, gold and silver jewellery and a range of vessels. Sometimes graves have elaborate structures including ship burials, chambers and beds (Speake 1985, Carver 1993). They are placed beneath sizeable barrows or inscribed into ancient monuments (Carver 1998, Van de Noort 1993, Williams 1998). During the seventh century, cremation rites disappear from the grave repertoire. Furthermore, there areacrement burials (Boddington 1990, Geske 1992). The occasional use of cremation to dispose of the dead among high status graves reflects a further distinctive element of these burial sites. Further, the use of cremation was a symbol of mystical status and linked with a past in which certain cremation rites were more common (Williams 1997a, 1999). Despite the difficulties inherent in interpreting status from cremation rite grave mounds (Jonsrud 1989), we might usefully attempt to interpret these burials as representing a variety of high status "royal" and "noble" groups. They indicate members of leading household holding power over the rapidly evolving socio-political structures and tribal confederations that existed across England during the seventh century (Arnold 1988:115, Basset 1989, York 1990, Davell 1997, Carver 1994).

A methodology for investigating the location of Early Medieval burial sites

Wealthy burial sites were selected and their surrounding landscapes traversed over by bicycling and by bird and by boat, as a starting point in the interpretation of their landscape context. This was combined with a thorough study of maps and modern historical evidence for the location of each burial site. It might be that observations made in these sites today are hopefully subjective and intuitive, biased by modern architecture and landscape (e.g. Johnson 1998). These difficulties can be counteracted by implementing a systematic methodology. There are four main strands to such a methodology for Early Medieval burial sites; firstly, we attempt to observe our observances with reference to ethnographic and anthropological evidence for the significance of grave location in many societies (see Arnold 1986). Secondly, we can compare and contrast the quality of other "status" site with the location of other Early Medieval burial sites. In this way it is possible to identify the selectivity in grave location by mumers and how these changes are reflected from other "lower status" burial sites. Prehistoric round barrows were frequently reused as Early Medieval burial sites and therefore represent the most important "control" against which to describe the location of high status graves (Williams 1986). In this way we can begin to understand why certain locations were reused, while other prehistoric barrows sites available in the landscape were not selected.

Thirdly, we can combine environmental, historical and place name evidence as a control for observations. These sources can reveal a variety of vegetation, land use and the social-economic context of these burial sites. For example, they help in securing the validity of interpretations revealed by field observations. Often, we cannot "prove" the exact vegetation cover for a site, and hence understand its meaning. Equally, even the denuded state of many barrows and the presence of woodland, we cannot fully identify from which parts of the landscape the barrow would be visible. However, we may be able to assume that if a visual interrelationship was important, it would have been preserved by vegetation clearance.

Lastly, place name and literary evidence can inform us concerning the way people perceived the landscape in the Medieval period (Osborn & Overton 1994, Sample 1998). For example, there is some independent corroboration for the significance of barrows for the solemnisation of the hero's funeral in the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf. Composed in the later, Christian Anglo-Saxon period, the poem derives from existing oral traditions. It might incorporate elements of specific expectations for the placing of a high status barrow burial originally derived from the perspectives of the Anglo-Saxon elite of the late sixth and seventh centuries. Beowulf dies fighting to defend his kingdom. The monument is described as residing in an ancient tomb situated on a high, flat rock, and connected to a small boat and sited on the sea (Alexander 1973:121, lines 2251-2), the tomb was constructed by an ancient people and contained a hoard of treasure (Alexander 1973:121, lines 2251-7, 131, lines 2566-7). The cremation of Beowulf and the raising of the barrow took place on the headland, perhaps nearby this ancient monument (Alexander 1973:150-1, lines 2371-49, 3156-68). Beowulf’s funeral and barrow seem to be associated with the physical and territorial boundary of the Geatish kingdoms formed by high ground and the sea. The tomb was placed in a "liminal" location, by the coast. Movement of men as movement seem important in the location of the grave. It is explicitly stated that the barrow became an important turn-off point because of its location. The barrow was located to be seen from afar and perhaps also to view wayfarers. These clear references to the landscape context of Beowulf’s barrow and mythical and imaginary landscape may have important implications for the function of these barrows, indicating a location of real Anglo-Saxon high status barrows. It may tell us about the ways burial placing was expected to be interpreted during the funeral and afterwards.

While these approaches cannot become an "objective" and unambiguous interpretation of the placement of the dead, it helps us to situate field observations within an interpretive framework. The use of GIS (Geographical Information System) was not selected for this preliminary study, although a range of computer-based studies of Early Medieval barrows hold great potential for future research. Yet even if computer studies were utilised, they are likely to be of less concern for making an interpretation in the field when subtle features of the landscape cannot be recognised more clearly than through computer analysis. Indeed, this study provides a clear example of the limitations of GIS for archaeological study (see above). At Lowbury Hill, a GIS program was employed to identify the tracts of land visible from the barrow with GIS (Fulford & Rippon 1994). This program did not identify the subject’s viewpoint. Closing your eyes and gaining an experiential view of the landscape from the barrow (see below).

Because evidence from visiting high status burial sites that four factors contribute towards a description of their landscape context:

1. Inhabited monuments of prehistoric and Roman date
2. Topography & view-sheds
3. Routes - both roads and water courses
4. Boundaries and settlement patterns

Derived from field observation, these criteria provide the best starting point to discussing wealthy grave locations of the seventh century.

Lowbury Hill

Let us now pursue a single case study for this approach by investigating the location of the Saxon barrow on Lowbury Hill in southern England (NIR SRU 541832). The barrow lies close to the modern county boundary between Oxfordshire and Berkshire. It has been excavated twice in this century by teams from Reading University, in 1914 and 1992 (Aikman 1916, Fulford & Rippon 1994, fig. 3). A description of the barrow’s location in the 1994 excavation report provided a valuable starting point for this study (Fulford & Rippon 1994).

Heinrich Hürke’s discussion of this site remains the first clear attempt to interpret, rather than simply describe, a high status barrow burial in terms of its landscape context.

The barrow contained the skeleton of a male of about 45 years of age (Fulford & Rippon 1994). The skeleton lay supine, accompanied with the head to the north, the body was covered by a primary barrow which is now in a very denuded state from ploughing damage and erosion. Accompanying the skeleton were a sword, spear, knife, a sandal, a shield, a belt, a comb, a buckle, and a bronze hanging bowl with enameled mounts (Aikman 1916:19-23, Fulford & Rippon 1994). The assemblage seems to date broadly to the later seventh century AD (Arnold 1988, Hawkes 1966:94).

Monument reuse

Anglo-Saxon burial sites frequently reuse ancient and abandoned monuments of both prehistoric and Roman date. Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are often closely located to the visible ruins of a probable Romano-Celtic temple (Aikman 1916; fig. 32, 33). The temple continued in use during the fourth century AD (Fulford & Rippon 1994:201). By the seventh century it is likely that the temple was abandoned and ruined but remained an enduring feature in the landscape. Monument reuse for burial use seems to have extended beyond the spatial proximity to the remains of the temple or the Roman structure. Hürke has suggested that soil and Roman artifacts were deliberately taken from within the Roman structures for the construction as a means of emphasising links with the past (Fulford & Rippon 1994:202, Hürke 1984:204). The barrow was placed on the eastern side of the temple (Fulford & Rippon 1994: fig. 17). By placing the barrow close to the entrance into the rectangular temenos enclosure, it would have been possible to control the entrance to the temple still visible in the seventh century. The location of the barrow would have fundamentally altered the temple and entered the Roman structure. The reuse of the site is further emphasised by an Early Medieval female grave found during archaeological excavation situated into the temenos ditch at the southeastern corner of the enclosure (Aikman 1916). Lastly, the systematic destruction and robbing of the temple could have taken place in the seventh century and may be evidenced by a later activity on the site (Fulford & Rippon 1994:202). The enduring relationship is recognised between the Roman and Saxon monuments in the Anglo-Saxon name for the hill: “Lowbury” is formed from the Old English words hlacwum meaning barrow, and hibba meaning enclosure or camp (Gelling 1974:512).

We cannot know if local traditions retained aspects of the temple’s use and associations between its abandonment in the fourth/fifth century and its reuse in the late seventh century. Such associations may be certain whether the site continued to be inhabited and whether it retained a cult focus in the sixth century or whether it took on a different function. Either way, the siting of the Saxon grave directly infringed upon the experience and use of the temple complex. The funerary ritual and the
building of the Saxon barrow may have involved a reinterpretation of the ruins, giving them fresh meanings as a focus of elite mortuary rites.

Monument reuse is commonplace in southern and eastern England between the late fifth and seventh centuries in England. Early Medieval burial sites in the upper Thames region frequently reused prehistoric monuments including henges, linear earthworks, hillforts, round and long barrows (Williams 1997b). This practice continued into the late Anglo-Saxon period when the prehistoric barrow at Blachsham Hill on Cuckshamsley Hill was reused as the meeting place for the shire-court of Berkshire. The place name Cuckshamsley is thought to derive from “Mound of Cwichæm” which suggests that the prehistoric monument became associated with the West Saxon kings (Peake 1957, Menzey 1964:45-6, Gelling 1974:481-2, Hawkes 1986, fig. 54). A similar royal association with an ancient monument (possibly a Neolithic grave described in a 13th century source) has been suggested for the place name “Cuttslowe” north of Oxford (Dickinson 1974, Hawkes 1985:85). The use of Roman structures as Early Medieval burial sites is also well attested in the region. There are well known cases of early and middle Saxon burial sites inserted into or adjoining Roman villas, burial sites, temples and other structures (Williams 1997b). Therefore, the reuse of an ancient monument at Lowbury reflects a continuation and elaboration of existing and widespread practices in Early Medieval burial location rather than a novel association made by high status graves (Williams 1996).

We can gain some possible insights into the motivations and meanings behind this relationship. Ancient and abandoned remains could have held associations with ancient peoples and were places of contact between past and present, the living and the dead. In this context, the placing of the grave may have been a symbol of elite control of supernatural knowledge, power and meanings bound within the ancient monument. Once the barrow had been situated on the site, the kin of the Saxon individual buried at Lowbury could claim exclusive access to the Roman structure and its significance through the graves of the dead. Whether the ancient remains were seen as the
works of gods, ancestors, "Roman" or "British" groups, the barrow may have been situated to portray the high status group as the legitimate heirs to the power and authority of the past. This ritual association with a distant past may have helped to legitimate claims over land, people and resources (Bradley 1987, Halske 1994, Halske & Williams 1997, Williams 1997, 1998, see below).

Topography and view-sheds

The placing of the grave can also be described by considering topography and views from the site. Lowbury Hill is one of the highest points on the Berkshire Downs and the Saxon barrow is situated on the summit of the hill at 186 metres O.D. (Addison 1916, Fulford & Rippon 1994, Halske 1994:263, fig. 32 & 34). The selected location affords commanding long distance views in most directions. This can be demonstrated in a panorma based upon photographs taken from the hilltop (fig. 35) and the estimated greatest distances visible from the hill in every direction (fig. 37). Northwards one looks into the Upper Thames valley towards the Sinodun Hills over Dorchester-upon-Thames, Bear's Hill west of Oxford and the hills east of Oxford around Goring and Cuddesdon. The scarp of the Berkshire Downs towards Cuckhamley Hill (fig. 34 & 35). There are a few barrows with long distant and broad panoramas comparable with Lowbury. These include the barrow on the northern side of the Berkshire Downs towards Cuckhamley Hill and Gore Hill, West Itchley (fig. 41). Despite the impressive views from these mounds, they only afford prosperous views over the Thame valley. For example, vistas southwards from Clun Knob are blocked by the summit of Clun Knob. Therefore the experience of views from these sites is very different from the Local barrow site.

Of all the sampled prehistoric round barrows in the vicinity, only two in the locality offer similar topographical locations and views to the Lowbury barrow (fig. 42). At Town Copse (southeast of Lowbury Hill), the hilltop was placed on a hilltop but away from the highest point of the hill. This location afforded distant views south, north and east, but was not in the direction of views to the summit of the hill. Consequently this barrow does not fully achieve the "all-round" views of Lowbury. Southcombe Knob on Cuckhamley Hill (west of Lowbury) is located on a hilltop summit with long distant views in most directions. In particular, it overlooks Knob 1 has views southwards towards the Downland which is comparable with Lowbury. Yet there remain subtle differences from the Lowbury barrow. The Downland south of the Downland are visible to the south and the view to the south of the Downland is obscured by high ground close by both the south and west. Therefore, in addition to the association with the Romano-Celtic temple, the topography and views from the Lowbury barrow provided a unique setting for the funeral and subsequent encounters with the Saxon grave. These qualities are shared by few other sites in the region.

**Fig. 34. Lowbury Hill and its environs. 1 = Lowbury; 2 = Southcombe Knob; 3 = Churn Knob; 4 = Gore Hill, West Itchley; 5 = Hagbourne Hill; 6 = Blevinton Hillfort; 7 = Lingby Knob; 8 = Aston Upham; 9 = Cross Barrow, East Itchley; 11 = Lower Change Farm; 12 = Churn Farm; 13 = Fox Barrow.**

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The dry valley immediately west of Lowbury Hill describes an important north-south route. The Berkshire Downs pass Compton where a minster church was founded in 944 by the Bishop of Berkshire. The site was named "Fair Mile" by the Normans. This may represent the approach to the downs. Such routes may be clear in modern day, but the routes of these paths are often obscured by modern day development. The Berkshire Downs towards Cuckhamley Hill provide a unique setting for the funeral and subsequent encounters with the Saxon grave. These qualities are shared by few other sites in the region.
Fig. 35. Panorama from Lowbury Hill, showing the long distant and balanced nature of the view. Drawn from photographs by the author.

Fig. 36. A GIS study showing land visible from Lowbury Hill (after Fulford & Rippon 1994).
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Lowbury Hill

For example, by comparing the length of the Ridgeway, often invisible from Lowbury with that of prehistoric barrows, a clear contrast can be observed (fig. 33).

From other routes in the Thames valley (fig. 34), Lowbury Hill would have been visible for many kilometres. Although we cannot tell whether the barrow itself could be seen from such distances given its denuded state, the small buildings on Lowbury Hill can be clearly discerned for up to ten kilometres within the Thames valley. Presumably a sizeable barrow with a modest mortuary structure or timber post would have been highly visible from the north when newly built. For example, had there been an Early Medieval east-west route connecting the ford of the Thames at Wallingford with the Icknield Way around Harwell, Lowbury Hill would have been clearly visible (if not prominent) for many kilometres on the southern skyline.

However, the hill and barrow would have been invisible from long sections of other routes passing closer to Lowbury. This is the case for the important routes described by the river Thames and the Roman road from Dorchester upon-Thames to Silchester passing through Streatley (for the route of road see Margary 1969: 150-152, Melpas 1987). The Saxon barrow was close to the Icknield Way that passed along the base of the downs to the north of Lowbury (Adkinson 1976, Grigson 1978, 1979; Melpas 1987). However, Lowbury Hill would have been obscured from view for travellers moving along the Icknield Way by the foothills of the downs. It seems as if the barrow's location was selected to be extremely visible from routes passing through the Berkshire Downs at the expense of others traversing the Thames valley.

This investigation of routes of movement highlights a further aspect of the relationship between Lowbury and ancient monuments. As we have seen, Lowbury Hill is surrounded by prehistoric barrows (fig. 34). While approaching Lowbury from any direction, travellers would have passed by these structures en route to the summit. It is tempting to suggest that these encounters with ancient monuments and distant views of the Saxon barrow sky-lined on the hill-top may have combined to encourage relationships and distinctions between the Saxon monument and the vestiges of the ancient past.

Fig. 37. The extent of views (in kilometres) from Lowbury Hill.

Fig. 38. The extent of views (km) from (a) Blewburton Hill Anglo-Saxon cemetery and (b) the barrows and Early Medieval burials of Cross Barrows, East Ilsley.

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Blewburton Hillfort Rampart Anglo-Saxon Cemetery

East Ilsley barrows and Anglo-Saxon burial
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Lower Chance Farm

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Aston Uphurpe Desc Barrow

Fig. 39. The extent of views (km) from barrows located on valley bottoms; (a) Lower Chance Farm and (b) Churn Farm.

Fig. 40. The extent of views (km) from barrows located on (a) hillside (Aston Uphurpe) and (b) spurs (Fox barrow).
**Fig. 40 (contd.)**. The extent of views (km) from barrows located (a) on spurs (Haglebourne Hill).

Gore Hill, West Ilsley

**Fig. 41 (contd.)**. The extent of views (km) from barrows located (b) on breaks of slope (Churn Knob) and (c) on ridges (Lingley Knoll).

Gore Hill, West Ilsley

Lingley Knoll
Fig. 42. The extent of views (km) from barrows located on hillslopes (a) off-summit (Town Copse) and (b) on-summit (Scoulhammer Knob).

Fig. 43. The lengths of intervisibility (km) between barrows and the Ridgeway demonstrating the dominant location of Lowbury in relation to the route.
The main axes of movement through the landscape would have been important for the builders of the Lowbury barrow, since they structured the ways in which the barrow would be seen, experienced and interpreted. Perhaps such routes were incorporated into the funeral procession in some way. Travellers passing along the Ridge Way would find it difficult to avoid referencing or acknowledging the presence of the barrow, either as a marker on the journey or as a known grave of a powerful individual. The situation of the grave suggests a desire for the identity, status and authority of those who placed the grave on Lowbury Hill to be recognised and respected by all those moving through the landscape.

**Territory and settlement**

Finally, we need to consider the Saxon barrow on Lowbury Hill in terms of its relationship to territorial units and settlement patterns. By the late Saxon period, Lowbury Hill lay at the southern extent of E Dorset. Hundreds and the charter bounds have been reconvened by Margaret Gelling (Gelling 1978, 1979). Other than Lowbury, no prominent hilltops are incorporated into the route of the boundary and only two other barrows (Fox barrel and Lower Chance Farm) are as close to, and intervisible with, the Lowbury estate boundary. Neither barrow is situated in a prominent position (table 1).

There are well known difficulties of interpreting relationships between burial sites and later boundaries and a number of different perspectives are possible (Barrowley 1966, 1976; Gelling 1984; Hook 1985:112). For example, territories may have changed between the seventh and tenth centuries and the boundary may have only incorporated the hilltop once the barrow was centuries old. However, there is circumstantial evidence that might support the validity and social significance of the association of the barrow and boundary. Many scholars believe that late Saxon estates were not created de novo. Della Hooke has suggested that some of the estates on the northern escarpment of the Berkshire Downs could have been created as part of a gradual process during the middle Saxon period, while others see them having much greater antiquity (Hook 1988:127,141, see also Richards 1978:25, Tingle 1991:70). The distribution of burial sites provides some supporting evidence for such assertions. Eylesbury barrow is named and attributed, upon, an Iron Age hillfort (Gelling 1978, Stemple 1988:116) re-used during the late fifth and sixth centuries for a mixed-over Anglo-Saxon cemetery (Collins & Dolan 1959, Williams 1997, 1998). A concentration of early Anglo-Saxon burial sites is known from around Eylesbury. The hillfort may have been a focus for settlement and communal gatherings as well as burial. If so, it seems possible that the Lowbury barrow burial lay in a peripheral and ‘liminal’ location in relation to this settlement and burial activity. This may have been the case already in the seventh century. In this regard it is interesting to note the association with the Iron Age earthwork of Grim’s Down along the line of the Berkshire Downs and the possible similarity of the barrow to the Downavon. This similarity in form is incorporated into the boundary of the Eylesbury estate near Fox barrow (Gelling 1978). Therefore we have strong hints that the Lowbury barrow may have been close to the contemporary boundary of an ‘archaic hundred’ or ‘multiple estate’ centred on Eylesbury hillfort (for other examples, see Hook 1995).

There are hints that boundaries in middle and late Anglo-Saxon charters were defined as much by ritual procession as by the written documents in which they are recorded (Kelly 1990:44, 46). The peripheral location of the Lowbury barrow can be related to this evidence. The funeral procession, ritual burials, barrow building and other rituals could have held an important role in defining boundaries in order to legitimise control of land and other resources (Charles-Edwards 1976, Shephard 1979, Carver 1988).

On a regional level the barrow also serves peripheral (fig. 32 & 34). Our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon settlement patterns in the Upper Thames region is strongly biased towards the grave terraces (Scail 1992:264-268) but it seems clear that the focus of settlement was upon the terraces along the Thames and its major tributaries (Dickinson 1976, Hawkes 1984, Hammersley 1992, Blair 1994). During the seventh century, Dorchester and Wroxham became the first episcopal see of the West Saxon kingdom and later received Mercian patronage (Dickinson 1974, Hawkes 1986:88, Blair 1994). Close by there appears to be a number of early royal or high status sites such as Benson, Aigburth subterranean halls have been recognised on aerial photography (Bailey & Miles 1976:1-40, Hawkes 1984:88-99, Hawkes 1988:125-128, Blair 1998, 1994). Aigburth was another possible early settlement (Hooke 1996:102-26). By Downside, the upper Thames region focused upon Aigburth and Salford was one of the most densely populated regions in England (Hooke 1987:124-26, Blair 1994).

In contrast, there is limited evidence of Anglo-Saxon settlement on the Berkshire Downs (Richards 1978:51-55). It is not to say that the landscape around Lowbury was unattractive or sparsely settled, since Anglo-Saxon pottery occurred in low densities may still represent land-use and settlement (Gaffney & Tingle 1980:143-145, Tingle 1991:71, page 156 1994-203). However, it does appear that the barrow marked an area that was relatively peripheral in the Early Medieval period, away from concentrations of settlement and political authority. It may be significant that the hilltop affords views over the Berkshire region, and from the Thames valley. Lowbury hilltop frames the southern horizon as part of the northern escarpment of the Berkshire Downs. These visual relationships may have contributed to the significance of the hilltop. As well as forming a political or social boundary, the hilltop marked the visual boundary of the Upper Thames region. In this way the barrow acted as a symbolic and physical marker of territory. Could it be relevant that the information was orientated with the head to the south, so that the dead would ‘look out’ to the north over the Thames valley? The barrow may have centred or maintained links between a high status social group and an important physical and political boundary marked by the southern edge of the upper Thames region. Equally the grave may have marked the northern extent of the estate on the eastern Berkshire Downs (Hawkes 1986, Eagles 1994).

Table 1. A summary of information on the location of Lowbury Saxon barrow and comparison with neighbouring prehistoric sites and Early Medieval burials.
On an inter-regional scale, the upper Thames region and the local territory around Dorchester-upon-Thames was also "liminal" (Morris 1995:21), because the region was a focus for conflict and changing boundaries between the West Saxon and Mercian kingdoms during the later seventh century (Blair 1984). Indeed, Ashdown and the area around Lowbury Hill may have marked the northermost extent of the West Saxon kingdom for some time during the later seventh century (Eagles 1984:25). The relationship of the Lowbury barrow to these shifting territories at a number of nested levels appears complex, and may have been important in selecting the location of the grave.

Summary

In summary, the specific location chosen for the Lowbury barrow may have been associated with important routeways and placed on the edge of a local and regional territory away from concentrations of settlement. It is argued that the grave was placed to emphasize its association with the material remains of the distant past in the form of the Romano-Celtic temple. Furthermore, the barrow was placed on the summit of one of the highest hills in the region. This situation afforded extensive views over the surrounding landscape. These characteristics are not shared by other locations in the area. Some of these aspects do not explain the location of the Saxon barrow. For example, it is difficult to explain the barrow’s situation solely in terms of monument reuse (Härke & Williams 1994, Härke & Williams 1997, Williams 1997, 1998). Instead, it is the combination of factors that begins to suggest a logic behind the grave’s placing in the landscape.

Other high-status burial sites

In addition to a detailed study of the location of the Saxon barrow at Lowbury, it is important to consider whether comparable principles of location apply to other high-status burial sites across southern and eastern England.

Ashwell

Within the upper Thames region, similar patterns were identified by fieldwork around the early seventh century cremation barrow Burial at Ashwell (NMR SP 9620135); see also Dickinson & Speake 1992, fig. 44 & 45). The barrow was placed on a ridge-top, close to the Roman road through the lower Thames valley to the south of the barrow (Grundy 1893, fig. 40). In later centuries, the barrow was located on a salt road from Dinting in the west Midlands to the upper Thames region (Blair 1984). The location affords views in all directions, but especially southeast over the Thames valley towards Dinting. In the far distance, the Berkshire Downs define the southern horizon. The barrow is some distance from the concentrations of seventh-century burial sites, presumably reflecting concentrations of settlement, found to the southeast near the confluence of the River Thames and the River Windrush (Dickinson 1976, fig. 44). Also, the monument is close to hundred-boundaries; these are on the boundary of the territory of Saxon estates and churches set at Bampton, Minster Lovell and Shipton (Blair 1994:70). This boundary is very important because it defines the edge of Wychwood. It is sought by scholars who wish to place the barrow on the boundary between the kingdoms of the Gewisæs (the "West Saxons in the upper Thames region") and the Wicæs of the southeast of England in the seventh century (Leeds 1939:355, Dickinson & Speake 1992, Blair 1994, Hooke 1998).

Barrows in the vicinity of Ashwell are largely undated, and many have been suggested as Saxon in date (Leeds 1939:355, 367; Hawkes 1986, Dickinson & Speake 1992, Blair 1994:45). There is no direct evidence to support this assertion, and it has not been realized that the date of the barrow cannot be ascertained from form and size alone (Grimes 134:4, pass Hawkes 1986:91). It therefore seems more appropriate to assume a prehistoric date for most of them, and this view is supported by evidence from antiquarian excavations (Leeds 1939:244-45). The views and topography of these undated barrows vary considerably, but many are on hillsides with restricted views overlooking narrow valleys in contrast to the Ashwell monument. A few large barrows are placed on high summits with wide and distant views at Shipton, Leafield and Lew. The views, although comparable to Ashwell although they do not overlap as closely related to boundaries and routes of movement.

Early Medieval burial sites of the local region around Ashwell are not found in comparable locations. At Berford and Minster Lovell (Leeds 1399:365-7; Kennet 1969, Dickinson & Speake 1992) barrows were placed on hillsides south of the Windrush valley like Ashwell. However, observations suggest that these sites do not afford comparable all-round views in the manner of the Ashwell barrow. Furthermore, these burial sites are in the open moorland at the intersection of hundred-boundaries. The most numerous of other Early Medieval burial sites in the region (Mechanely 1964, Dickinson 1976, Dickinson & Speake 1992) are placed on valley floors, ravines and hillsides rather than on ridge tops and summits of hills. Like Lowbury, the location of Ashwell stands out from surrounding barrows and Early Medieval burial sites.

However, there are slight differences between the locations of Lowbury and Ashwell. While some Romano-British pottery was found at the barrow material (Ditchfield & Speake 1992) and Neolithic material has been recovered since 1963 (Leeds 1939:242; NMR 917740, 332276), there is no evidence that these sites do not afford comparable all-round views in the manner of the Ashwell barrow. In the environs, there are well attested cases of Early Medieval monuments reuse for burial at Lymnham (long barrow) (Conder 1896) and the Stanlake Down barrow cemetery (Dickinson 1973, Williams 1997). There is also an attribution that the barrow at Bathford was on a Bronze Age barrow cemetery (Blair 1998, Semple 1998). It appears that the Saxon barrow is set apart from concentrations of prehistoric barrows to the north and southeast (Barclay et al 1996) but may have reference to the material remains of the past in a different way. From the Ashwell barrow, the Leafield and Lew barrows, and possibly also the Stilton barrow, barrows would have been skylined. Additionally, the barrow overlaps the remains of the Roman small town near the the Medieval village of Ashwell. Few other locations can command these visual references with prominent ancient sites. These patterns of intervisibility combined with the physical similarity of the barrow to smaller barrows may have created links between past and present in an equivalent manner to the reuse of an ancient site.
Taplow
The wealthy male burial at Taplow Buckinghamshire (NGR SU 960822) is dated to the early seventh century. The grave is one of the richest in Britain, with wide and distant views over the Thames valley (Smith 1905, Stocker & West 1995). The barrow is not placed on the break-of-slope, but it is set back in a slightly higher position that encourages wide views. The barrow was placed within the perimeter of an earthwork fortification of prehistoric date (Smith 1905). There are high patterns of material artefacts connected to the barrow's construction (Smith 1905). The site is adjacent to, and intervisible, with the River Thames. The Thames may have been an important boundary between the interior of the Middle Saxons and a postulated tribal territory identified as the Sunning (Gelling 1974, Blair 1991). Downstream from Taplow, the Thames forms the boundary between the kingdoms of the Middle Saxons and Saxon Britain (Blair 1991). The barrow was close to the early monastic foundation upstream at Cookham (Gelling 1979, Hole 1995b: 86). Furthermore, the river valley would have been an important route for water and land traffic (Stocker & West 1995). All travellers moving by water along the Thames or by land along its banks would have seen the barrow skyline from great distances downstream (Fig. 47). It was again a yardstick that demonstrated the reach of prehistoric barrows (e.g. Cock Marsh barrow; Grimsell 1934-49:50) and Early Medieval barrow sites (e.g. Cock Marsh, Cookham, Bourne End; Grimsell 1934-49:50, Marsh, Cookham, Bourne End; Grimsell 1934-49:50). These barrows do not occupy similar topographical locations, viewed from or relations with routes and boundaries.

Cuddesdon
The fourth high status burial in the Thames valley is situated upon a mound at Cuddesdon (NGR SP 59902). The wealth of the grave goods retrieved from this site suggests the presence of a barrow burial of the early seventh century although evidence for a barrow was not found (Dixon 1974). The wealth of the grave was located on the highest point of the hill and has wide and distant views in most directions. A Roman villa is known to have existed on the hill-top and the grave may have been situated in relation to the turreted, Roman settlement immediately to the east of the barrow's association with the Oxfordshire, and in Roman times. The grave would have been perceived from a distance with the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Didcot upon-Thames (see above). The location of the highest prominent landmark to the hundred-boundary and in many ways the situation of the site. The two important barrows, Aitford, and especially Lowerbury. Although relationships with important route-ways are more elusive, the barrow (assumed one was present) would have been placed from lower ground to the east and south, and built during the Saxon period. The landscape ascribed to the barrow would be commanding landscape for people moving through the Upper Thames valley.

Discussion: the Thames Valley high status burials
The fact that four high status barrow burials within the Thames valley display similar criteria for location might not seem surprising until we realise just how few Early Medieval barrow sites in the region that can be reassembled in a comparable way. While monument reuse by Early Medieval barrow sites appears commonplace, few are on ridge tops or hills, with extensive views, associated with boundaries and routes of movement. In contrast to high status graves which appear to be placed with reference to regional territories or prominent hill tops, the few grave sites can be argued that the Early Medieval barrow sites were closely associated with regional patterns of settlement and land-use even when reusing ancient structures.

Wiltshire
Outside the Thames valley similar locations were chosen for high status graves. In Wiltshire, the extremely wealthy female burial on Southwold Hill was chosen, and the weapon graves from Maiden Bradley and Coombe Bissett (Mooney 1964, Broom 1964, Spence 1998). Maiden Bradley and Coombe Bissett were the primary monument, and many are close to roads and possible early boundaries. Some sites might be regarded as peripheral while maintaining intervisibility with early centres of power. However, some are not on the highest tops of hills with all-round views. It seems as if these affordances could not be reconciled with these other criteria. The wealthy female grave inserted into a long barrow at Maiden Bradley, seems to be placed adjacent to the most important boundary features as recorded by the footpaths of the Bokerley Dyke and the route of the Roman road Ackley Dyke. Yet such a position could not allow a hilltop location with extensive views, and indeed, the line of the Bokerley Dyke completely obscures the views eastwards while views west and north are extremely restricted. Two important grave goods in the Ford barrow were placed adjacent to the Roman road between Winchester and Old Sarum, one inserted into a prehistoric barrow, the other under a primary mound. The site is quite low and has restricted views, although two hillocks and at least two barrow groups are sky-clouded from the location. It appears that some barrow sites had to "make do" with far from ideal conditions while trying to fulfil a number of conflicting strategies.

These relationships are more significant when we realise how few Early Medieval barrow sites from Wiltshire share these affordances. As with the upper Thames region, monuments were not placed on ridge tops or hills, and the Early Medieval barrow sites of Wiltshire. Many barrow sites are close to parish boundaries (Broom 1974), but very few are on the summits of hills or prominent hill tops. The high status graves of Wiltshire spanned from other Early Medieval barrow sites in both their wealth and the location in the landscape.

These themes have been discussed in terms of high status graves in Wiltshire and the Upper Thames region (Table 2). High status barrows from other regions might employ aspects of these location strategies. For example, Fenland grave sites (Iveson 1993). At Bury Grange in the Fenland, the primary barrow was located on a prominent hill spur with spectacular views in most directions. The site is immediately adjacent to the road between Boston and Little Carlton that forms the modern parish boundary. The site lies among a high concentration of prehistoric monuments. It is intervisible with numerous prehistoric barrow burials in comparable locations and the Neolithic Long barrow at Aldringham.

Table 2. A summary of information on the location of high status Anglo-Saxon barrows of the seventh century in Wiltshire and the Upper Thames region.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial Type</th>
<th>Monument Name</th>
<th>Boundary, hundred, district of barrow elevation</th>
<th>Topography</th>
<th>Routes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lowbury</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, long distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthall</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, long distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maiden Bradley</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, long distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coombe Bissett</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, long distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roundway Down</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, long distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford Laverton</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Summit</td>
<td>All-round, short distance</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Sutton Hoo barrow cemetery in Suffolk (Carver 1998) might be another example of this strategy. The site, situated on a ridge overlooking the River Deben with views in all directions. The river would have been an important route of movement that may have included waterborne traffic moving upstream from the North Sea to the Royal centre at Rendlesham. The location is strikingly similar to the Taplow barrow. However, evidence for monument
barrows acting in functional terms as "territorial markers", the inhabitants of these barrows may have been protected by druidic bonds and used to create solidarities between them (Charles-Edwards 1976-85-87 for Welsh and Irish examples, Ellis 1943:100-105 for Scandinavian parallels). The idea was present in the land-marking between the living and the dead. Yet, also, they were the places from which the dead commanded and dominated the living, those dwelling in and moving through the landscape. On another level, the barrows during the mortuary practices may have established the basis for the creation of the first "pre-Saxon" or "Roman" past while simultaneously re-using the "archaic" or "ancestral links" with ancestral homelands and myths of Germanic origin (Williams 1998).

While the location of graves might represent aspects of elite sacred geography, they may also have served an aesthetic purpose to construct and legitimate the ritual landscape, their size and power being based on that of the group. During the seventh century, elite authority and success was widely understood, from stable (Yorke 1980). Leaders may have been mobile, moving from place to place, placing artefacts and materials from a wide variety of places and traditions (Clark 2001a). In this context, the graves of "nobility" individuals may have been significant in the way the landscape, image, and identity was constructed. The graves were a representation of the past and the dead, serving the role of the memory of those who had passed away, the present, and the future. As a result, they may have been used as a means of communicating with the dead and the ancestors, establishing a connection between the living and the dead. This connection was not only physical but also symbolic, as the graves were not just a place for the burial of the dead but also a place for the living to pay their respects and honor the ancestors. The graves were a reflection of the social, political, and religious values of the society, as they were often decorated with intricate designs and inscriptions, representing the achievements and status of the deceased.

More than anywhere else, isolated high status graves are marked by the amount of expenditure and "conspicuous consumption" of resources that must have formed a dramatic and theatrical funerary display at the grave site. This investment of wealth appears focused on the spatial and physical treatment, decoration and reclamation of the dead body. The creation of this display was achieved by the elaborate mumification of the body or by cremation. This socially constructed "image of death" was assumed to be one of the most important and powerful of the social structures that defined the individual's position in society. The graves were not just a place for the burial of the dead but also a place for the living to pay their respects and honor the ancestors. The graves were a reflection of the social, political, and religious values of the society, as they were often decorated with intricate designs and inscriptions, representing the achievements and status of the deceased. 

We must also understand the placing of the dead in terms of the dead body into the wider landscape and the ways in which the physical elements of the landscape continue to reside at, or close to, their tomb (Williams 1997b, 1998; Simplot 1988). In such prominent locations the dead may have been thought to influence and oversee the living, protecting and defending the land of their kins and subjects within the view-sphere of their graves. Rather than

ideologically and Politically re-shape and re-place the past with their own visions of society, status and identity.

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Fig. 45. The Ashwell barrow viewed from the west. Today the barrow (diam c. 17 m) is surrounded by a stone wall and covered by trees. In antiquity it would have been wider and taller. The mound covered a primary wealthy cremation burial of the early seventh century. The ground rises to the north of the barrow on the right of the picture, yet the site retains exceptional views in most directions. Photograph: the author.

Fig. 46. View from the northeast approaching Ashwell barrow along the road from Minster Lovell towards Burford. The monument dominates the skyline along this route that could have been in use in Saxon times. Photograph: the author.

Fig. 47. View of the location of the Taplow barrow on its hilltop taken from a location immediately east of the River Thames. Before the building of Taplow Court (the building on the hilltop), the barrow would have been shrouded from the River Thames for many kilometres. Photograph: the author.

References


Swords and brooches. Constructing social identity.

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This paper focuses on a sample of Germanic burials from the 5th and 6th centuries AD in south and west Norway, all containing gilded objects decorated in Nidum Style and Salin’s Style I. The material has been chosen against a background of questions concerning the social context of these decoration styles. I will give a brief presentation of the archaeological material, theoretical framework and interpretations. The paper refers to a thesis in manuscript and a further developed and rewritten version which is to be published (Kristoffersen 1997, in press; see also in press a).

South and west Norway is a primary area for the distribution of Migration Period animal art (fig. 48, table 4) and seems to be central in the development of Style I. The area is united by other cultural similarities as well.

Within this area, there are 93 finds with 137 gilded objects decorated in Nidum Style and Style I. The number of objects increases through the Migration Period and is by far the greatest in the last phase. There is also a change in the types of decorated objects (tab. 3). 83 finds are from burials. Most of them are found under mounds, usually large ones. The majority are inhumation burials in stone cists. They are richly furnished, many with gold and silver objects, and imported glass and bronze vessels. There is, however, variation, especially in the last phase. Shields are seldom preserved.

Against this general background of archaeological context, combinations of various types of objects have been studied. Two categories are distinguished: burials with weapons (14) and burials with relief brooches (43). Weapons and relief brooches are never combined. When these objects occur together in a grave, they seem to have belonged to different individuals. Relief brooches are often combined with smaller brooches and spindlewhorls. Keys and iron weaving bobbins occur in these assemblages (fig. 51–54), as well as gold bracelets. In seven of the weapon assemblages, decorated sword equipment occurs; usually pommels, scabbard mounts or buckles (fig. 50). Scales are also found in three graves (fig. 49). This small group consists of often exceptionally rich assemblages that include the well-known Eseve and Stensmo burials. The categories with weapons and brooches are through correlation with osteological sex-assessments related to different gender-related social identities.

In terms of theoretical framework, the graves are regarded as products of rituals, and I focus on social aspects of rituals as they are discussed by Turner (1967), Bloch & Parry (1982) and Bourdieu (1977, 1996). Rituals are emotionally charged, public situations in which social construction works very well — social categories and relationships become real, because they are presented as real.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of decorated object</th>
<th>D1</th>
<th>D2a</th>
<th>D2b</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relief brooches</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief brooches with a spine foot</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cruciform brooches</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clasp buttons</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clasps</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sword equipment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckles</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golden scabbard mounts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mounts for glass vessels</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>137</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Object-types with animal art from the three phases of the Migration Period.