Anglo-Saxonism and Victorian archaeology: William Wylie’s Fairford Graves

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William Wylie’s Fairford Graves is prominent among a series of publications dating from the mid-nineteenth century reporting the discovery of early medieval cemeteries and defining their national and racial significance for English history. This paper discusses interpretative themes in Wylie’s text and images. It is argued that Fairford Graves was more than a set of descriptive observations upon the excavations and finds. The paper shows how Fairford Graves was a statement about Wylie’s identity as well as the imagined Teutonic origins of the English. Seen in this light, the investigation, interpretation and publication of the early medieval burials from Fairford were active resources in a burgeoning Anglo-Saxonist discourse in early Victorian society.

Introduction

The mid-nineteenth century in England witnessed a rapid growth of interest in the material remains of Europe’s early medieval barbarians. An influential generation of antiquaries, historians and archaeologists quarried a new vein of Dark Age discoveries. This work augmented an existing historical and philological focus on the Germanic roots of England’s people, language and customs, typified by Sharon Turner’s *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, and built upon James Douglas’s *Nenia Britannica* in which burial mounds and furnished graves were attributed to the Anglo-Saxons for the first time.¹

Between 1840 and 1870, furnished graves found in the course of barrow-digging and agricultural and industrial improvements, were interchangeably ascribed to the ‘Saxons’, ‘Anglo-Saxons’ or ‘Teutons’. Influenced by the intellectual inheritance of Whig history and romantic nationalism, and set in the context of British imperialism, the burial rites thus uncovered were widely seen to denote the migration and settlement, racial and tribal characteristics, and the material civilization and religious beliefs, of the earliest English.

Among the more prolific writers on Anglo-Saxon graves in the early Victorian period were John Yonge Akerman, Charles Roach Smith, Thomas Wright and John Kemble. Many more scholars also contributed reports on discoveries and excavations to the publications of the era’s burgeoning archaeological and antiquarian societies. The early Victorian era established the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ chronological and racial label, securing it to burials and cemeteries as part of a body of academic knowledge and Anglo-Saxonist discourse. As a consequence of this research, from the beginning archaeology in Britain developed an overtly nationalistic and racial strand. This approach drew both upon a persistent Whig tradition of defining English cultural, religious and legal history as originating with the Anglo-Saxons, and incipient Victorian concepts of social evolution and race.

The ramifications of archaeological research into early medieval graves reached beyond the small circle of Victorian antiquaries, historians and archaeologists. Interpretations of graves and grave-finds served to contribute to an early Victorian sense of England’s history and the population’s Englishness. Through archaeological practice, the industrious and empire-minded Victorian upper and middle classes portrayed themselves as the heirs to an Anglo-Saxon racial, cultural and linguistic legacy. This explicit agenda is summed up by Charles Roach Smith in 1856 in his introduction to the Inventorium Sepulchrale—a report detailing early medieval funerary remains found in Kent by the eighteenth-century antiquary Bryan Faussett:


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The English archaeologist can select no worthier course of study than that which directs him to the history of those from whom he inherits not only his material existence and the language he speaks, but also many of the civil and political institutions under which he lives in freedom, and surrounded with advantages and privileges unknown to many nations and countries . . . [T]hose [antiquities] of our own land appeal first to our regard and challenge our sympathy, because they once belonged to those from whom we spring; and because they teach us something, at least, of the habits, customs, and arts of our forefathers.⁵

This desire to dig up England’s past was a reaction to the existing tradition of expeditions to, and the accumulation of antiquities from, overseas. It was part of a culture of collecting and displaying England’s history.⁶ However, while recent scholarship has recognized that early medieval archaeology’s birth and development in England was strongly influenced by the same Anglo-Saxonist racial discourse as infused early Victorian art, architecture, literature, history and philological enquiry,⁷ less attention has been paid to how Anglo-Saxonism was perpetuated in academic and popular culture through reports of archaeological discoveries.⁸

In order to address this issue, this paper will explore the role of early medieval funerary remains as a medium for propagating Victorian Anglo-Saxonism. In this regard, the paper takes a distinctive trajectory from other recent studies. The focus here will not be primarily a consideration of the biography of an individual scholar’s contribution and background.⁹

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Equally, the paper is not aimed at distilling generic interpretative themes developed in the work of different excavators, collectors and writers in Victorian Britain. Instead, this study investigates a single archaeological report and seeks to demonstrate how it embodied and promulgated contemporary Anglo-Saxonist discourse. Different themes are identified in the interaction of Anglo-Saxonism with early medieval mortuary discoveries. These include choices over how data were described, illustrated and interpreted. The style of interpretation included the selection of comparanda, analogies and textual references, and a use of both prose and poetry. In this regard, it is argued that the reports of this era are less factual than they claimed to be, but explicitly used early medieval funerary artefacts, human remains, graves, monuments and their landscape setting as discursive ‘props’ to emphasize the Teutonic racial origins of the English. The report chosen for discussion is William Wylie’s *Fairford Graves* (Fig. 1). Wylie’s research and *Fairford Graves* itself have received scant attention in recent years, even though the book promoted a vivid vision of the early Anglo-Saxons that Victorian scholars of early medieval historical sources had little hope in matching. Moreover, once written and disseminated, the influence of *Fairford Graves* upon subsequent interpretations of early medieval burials lasted for well over a century. We will begin by introducing the author and his background.

**William Wylie as antiquary**

William Michael Wylie graduated from Merton College, Oxford in 1834. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in June 1851, at the time of his Fairford discoveries. Wylie died in 1887 after a lifetime of antiquarian pursuits. As a Fellow and as a regular contributor to the Society’s *Proceedings* and *Archaeologia*, Wylie was a gentleman of widespread interests whose ‘linguistic powers were never at fault’. Through his researches, correspondences and extensive travels, he accumulated a wide knowledge of the latest archaeological discoveries across Europe. In his obituary, Wylie’s early reports were recognized for their ‘vast amount of scholarship and industrious application’. Throughout the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s, Wylie acted as a translator and commentator

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10 E.g., S. Lucy, ‘From Pots to People’.

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on recent continental archaeological finds. His obituary succinctly states that he was a ‘medium of communication’ between antiquaries in France (including Cochet and Rigollot), Germany (Lindenschmit and von Dürrich), Switzerland (Keller), Italy (Garrucci), and those in Britain (including Charles Roach Smith and John Kemble).  

A particular interest of Wylie’s was the Teutonic origin of the English. This fascination appears to have been inspired by the discoveries at Fairford and he retained this interest in subsequent researches. For

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Fig. 1 The frontispiece to *Fairford Graves* with decoration inspired by saucer brooches from the Saxon cemetery

example, inspired by the work of his ‘esteemed friend’ John Kemble,\(^\text{16}\) Wylie published a far-reaching review of archaeological and written sources for pagan Teutonic burial rites entitled ‘The Burning and Burial of the Dead.’\(^\text{17}\) Like Kemble, however, Wylie was also interested in continental discoveries. Wylie reported the unearthing of pagan furnished Frankish burials from Normandy\(^\text{18}\) and Alamannic burials from Oberflacht in Swabia.\(^\text{19}\) He also reported the discovery of Carolingian brooches from Saxony\(^\text{20}\) and gold ornaments from the grave of a ‘Lombard lady of rank interred after the general Teutonic fashion’ from Ascoli in central Italy.\(^\text{21}\) Wylie’s interpretations of these graves focused upon the supposed shared racial affinity of the tribes and nations to which they belonged. For example, although recognizing that the Oberflacht graves belonged to a different tribe, Wylie placed his emphasis upon their ‘Teutonic character’ and their similarities with finds from elsewhere on the Continent and from England.\(^\text{22}\) Similarly, he argued that two brooches associated with Roman remains from Croatia were ‘manifestly Teutonic’.\(^\text{23}\) When Wylie discussed the vessels discovered by Cochet at Envermeu, he compared them with those illustrated by Richard Neville from Linton Heath, and by John Yonge Akerman from Cuddesdon, as evidence of a similar date, style, burial custom and hence race.\(^\text{24}\) Furnished graves also inspired Wylie’s interest in the history of weapons and warfare. Weapons were distinctive to nations but also suggested Teutonic martial qualities shared between the

\(^{16}\) See Williams, ‘Heathen Graves’.


Saxons and their neighbours. Elsewhere he discussed the development of weaponry and military equipment from the Roman era into the early Middle Ages. As with his discussions of graves, Wylie’s study of weapons drew upon archaeological as well as classical and early medieval literary evidence.

Wylie’s medieval interests extended to Christian period graves and monuments. Inspired by Cochet, he deployed widespread literary references to support his interpretations of the provision of leaden crosses and other Christian artefacts as amuletic and possibly deriving from pre-Christian pagan rites. Similarly, Wylie reported upon mortuary discoveries at Rouen where successive phases of Christian burials were revealed dating from Roman times, through the Merovingian, Carolingian and Norman eras, into the high Middle Ages. Wylie confidently compared these findings with English material. He also reported to the Society on medieval church brasses and stained glass windows.

While Wylie’s early medieval funerary interests formed the core of his studies throughout his lifetime, his communications to the Society of Antiquaries encompassed an eclectic range of other continental archaeological discoveries, including Iron Age tombs from Veii and Praeneste in Tuscany, ‘Keltic’ burial mounds from Swabia and early reports on discoveries from the Swiss prehistoric lake villages. He also presented on prehistoric grave-finds, Italian prehistoric bronzes,

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Roman shrines and cult practice, ancient inscriptions, and even Buddhist monasteries in India. In his final presentation to the Society before his death, Wylie noted the existence of a prehistoric road near Brigg in Lincolnshire.

Wylie’s Anglo-Saxonism was clearly not developed in intellectual or scholarly isolation. As with many antiquaries of his day, Wylie joined a social group of scholars who engaged in a wide diversity of antiquarian and archaeological pursuits. Wylie’s passion for the study of the past was also derived from travels across Europe and an awareness of contemporary politics and social conditions. It is against this spectrum of interests and influences that we can appreciate his fascination with the Teutonic race and its interactions with the Celts and Romans. Having outlined Wylie’s background we can now consider his interpretations of the early medieval graves unearthed in a quiet corner of Gloucestershire.

The Fairford graves

Wylie’s first archaeological research was the investigation of an ‘Anglo-Saxon necropolis’ at Fairford. This seems to have occurred through circumstance rather than by design. Through the 1840s, Wylie had been living in Italy because of the frailty of his wife’s health. Upon his return in 1847, he took up residence in this Gloucestershire village. Prior to his arrival, in 1844 and 1845 thirty-six graves had already been uncovered. Some of the finds from these graves had entered the collection of John Yonge Akerman and were published and illustrated in Akerman’s _An Archaeological Index_. Brooches and toilet implements from Fairford were also used to illustrate an influential article by Thomas Wright in the _Journal of the British Archaeological Association_, which characterized the key archaeological signatures of the Anglo-Saxon race (Fig. 2).
were the Fairford finds isolated. A range of early medieval sites in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire were also being investigated at that time, including cemeteries at Brighthampton, Broughton Poggs, Filkins, Frilford, Kemble, Long Wittenham and Stanlake.45

By his own admission, Wylie at first assumed that the bones and armour discovered by the local labourers whilst quarrying stone were

Fig. 2 Two illustrations of artefacts (toilet implements and a saucer brooch) from graves uncovered at Fairford and held in Akerman’s collection. Their illustration in Thomas Wright’s article in the Journal of the British Archaeological Association, vol. 2 (1847) demonstrates how, even prior to Wylie’s excavations, the Fairford burials had become established in the archaeological literature.

related to a skirmish of the civil wars. Upon closer inspection, Wylie realized that the remains were from early medieval graves. Wylie communicated his discoveries to Charles Roach Smith (a prolific collector and student of Roman and Anglo-Saxon antiquities), who presented his discoveries to the Society of Antiquaries and reported them in the Society’s *Proceedings* together with engravings of some of the brooches recovered. A detailed published report appeared in *Archaeologia* for 1852 with an assessment of the discoveries’ significance by Smith. This report was accompanied by a full-page engraving of a sword and a series of brooches (comprising of cast saucer, applied saucer, bird, small-long and great square-headed brooches), together with two smaller engravings of saucer brooches (Fig. 3). Quickly following upon the *Archaeologia* report was a much fuller account that incorporated Smith’s *Archaeologia* text and the illustrations together with a discussion on further finds and new illustrations. This text was published in 1852 by John Henry Parker of Oxford and entitled *Fairford Graves*. Subsequent discoveries after 1852 from the same cemetery were reported in the *Proceedings of the Society*. Wylie’s elaborate and (for reports of his day) lengthy text conveyed the grave-finds in a readable and popular style.

**Archaeology as material history**

We can begin by considering how Wylie promoted the importance of archaeological evidence for understanding the origins of the English. As with his contemporaries, particularly Charles Roach Smith and Thomas Wright, Wylie was keen to establish the distinctive value of studying the Anglo-Saxons through their material remains. Archaeological data served a broader historical narrative of Whig history inherited from the eighteenth century. Moreover, archaeologists in the early Victorian era were challenging the reliability of the written sources that had been

46 Wylie, *Fairford Graves*, p. 11. It seems to have been a common attribution, since Stephen Stone records the insistence of local people that furnished burials at Stanlake in Oxfordshire were ‘unquestionably the remains of those who fell in one of the numerous skirmishes between the Royalists and Parliamentary forces toward the close of the reign of Charles I’: S. Stone, ‘Account of Certain (Supposed) British and Saxon Remains Recently Discovered at Stanlake’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 2nd ser. 4 (1857), pp. 92–4.


48 C.R. Smith, ‘Notes on Saxon Sepulchral Remains found at Fairford, Gloucestershire’, *Archaeologia* 34 (1852), pp. 77–82.

49 Wylie, *Fairford*.


used to build this narrative since the Reformation. Writing only a couple of years before Wylie, Edwin Guest confidently asserted that ‘we may rely on the good sense and the good faith’ of the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers in preserving accurately the histories of the fifth and sixth
centuries AD. Yet in the same year, John Mitchell Kemble expressed his deep reservations that the sources were no more than myth. Throughout the report, Wylie revealed his belief that the digging and reporting of graves contributed to the writing of a new chapter in the racial history of the Saxons set against a wider European backdrop. For instance, he noted explicitly that: ‘The subject is not merely interesting to us alone as a national one, but intimately concerns all who claim to belong to the great and noble Teutonic family.’ For Wylie and his contemporaries the writing of history was the aim, but burials were regarded as a more reliable source than written evidence, seemingly because of their direct and tangible qualities as well as their funerary context.

The quality and character of *Fairford Graves*

The significance of furnished graves provides a background for understanding the nature of the archaeological report composed by Wylie in 1852. If *Fairford Graves* is considered in isolation and with the benefit of hindsight, it appears extremely ‘antiquarian’ with its mixture of description and literary digressions. By modern standards, the lack of detailed contextual information about the graves in both the written account and the illustrations restricts an appreciation of the archaeological remains. Indeed within the preface, Wylie acknowledges (albeit as a customary literary turn of phrase) his limitations as an archaeologist by the standards of his day. Certainly, there is no evidence that Wylie had been involved in discovering archaeological sites before and he did not subsequently pursue barrow-digging on any scale. This further supports the suggestion that Wylie’s recording of the graves was due to circumstance rather than a coherent plan to dig up ancient Teutons. Wylie clearly failed to reach the highest standards of archaeological recording of his time. For example, mention could be made of the detailed contextual information, factual descriptions and illustrations achieved by Richard Neville in 1852 for excavations at Little Wilbraham in Cambridgeshire. Likewise, the grave-by-grave catalogue in John Yonge

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52 E. Guest, ‘On the Early English Settlements in South Britain’, *Proceedings of the Archaeological Institute* (1849), pp. 28–72, at p. 41. To illustrate the contemporary belief in the accuracy of many of the historical sources, it is worth noting that Guest states, ‘I am not ashamed to confess that it carries with it my entire belief’: Guest, ‘Early English’, p. 44.


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Akerman’s report of excavations of early medieval burials at Long Wittenham, Berkshire was of a higher standard than *Fairford Graves*.

In contrast, only some of the Fairford burials were adequately described in Wylie’s report, which instead follows the well-established antiquarian format of a daily journal of discoveries rather than a catalogue arranged according to the location or context of the graves. The positions and relationships between artefacts and skeletons within specific graves are often rendered unclear. As with many contemporaries, Wylie clearly did not excavate most of the graves himself and indeed he admits that he was only present ‘from time to time’ when skeletons were found. It is therefore unclear whether his observations relied on the accounts of the labourers who excavated the graves or upon his own observations. It hence remains open to question whether details were missed or misunderstood.

While Wylie’s methods and report do not match modern standards and seem second-rate by comparison with the best of his period, it is important to remember that for their day the standard was still very high. If Wylie could not compete in hindsight with the lavish account of Neville or the detail of Akerman, it must be remembered that these antiquarians were themselves exceptional. Indeed, their standards of publication were not commonly matched until the mid-twentieth century. It is also important to recognise that, compared with most reports written between 1840 and 1870, Wylie’s account was extensive and detailed. His descriptions often appear accurate in relation to the objects from the excavations that still survive. Moreover, the interpretations he proposed were extensively developed and explicit, demonstrating knowledge of comparable archaeological discoveries (with the assistance of Smith) and presented in relation to a range of written sources. It is likely that Wylie utilized James Douglas’s *Nenia Britannica*, and it seems that he was aware of more archaeological resources than he explicitly references. In summary, *Fairford Graves* can be regarded as the work of a serious and dedicated antiquarian who simply had little prior experience of recording and reporting archaeological discoveries. What cannot be claimed of Wylie’s report, however, is that it restricts itself to factual observation, and his choice of facts is in itself revealing.


58 Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 13. The low proportion of cremation burials may be explained by this ‘hands-off’ approach by Wylie.

59 Detailed catalogues were only to become commonplace in the mid-twentieth century, e.g. E.T. Leeds and D. Harden, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Abingdon, Berkshire* (Oxford, 1936). For a general review of the quality and character of mid-nineteenth-century barrow-digging, see B. Marsden, *The Barrow Diggers* (Stroud, 1999); Parsons, *Exploration*, pp. 94–6, 100–1.
The archaeologist as scholar and pioneer

It appears that for Wylie the report was an opportunity both to convey information about the Fairford discoveries and to demonstrate his learned, cultured background as an Oxford graduate. Wylie exploited his University education through an interpretation of the evidence involving repeated references to, and quotations from, classical, medieval and antiquarian literature.60 Wylie therefore wove into his text an emphasis upon his own education and background with a rich racial interpretation of the significance of the furnished graves at Fairford. Hence, the report was a means of constructing his own social identity as a middle-class gentleman and scholar.

As with other contemporary grave-excavators and barrow-diggers, Wylie situated himself as an individual explorer, pioneer and custodian of the past. In the preface to *Fairford Graves*, Wylie portrays himself as a saviour of remains that would otherwise have been lost ‘like so many others, unnoticed and known’.61 Here Wylie accepted that the research he was pursuing was part of a larger archaeological programme yet to be completed, also reflected in the evangelistic nationalism of the report as a whole (see below). Without his attentions, ‘These Fairford memorials would have passed away to oblivion, and failed to take their part in the history of the race, which it yet remains for the antiquary to write.’62

While the labourers threatened to disperse and destroy, the archaeologist is an unsung hero, whose ‘unthanked toils’ reveal the ‘manners and customs of the Teutonic race’.63 Wylie also emphasized the hazards of the frequent misinterpretation and misattribution of artefacts by auctioneers ignorant of the contexts of their finds. He regarded them as disenfranchising artefacts from their appropriate place in history.64 It appeared that Wylie’s identity as an archaeologist and his pursuit of England’s Saxon roots are both defined as much by class and education as by the empirical observation of archaeological evidence in context.

Wylie also defined himself in relation to the labourers who found the graves while quarrying for stone in the field. Caricaturing them as ignorant agents of destruction, Wylie described how black earthenware vessels were ‘damaged by the pickaxe of the labourer’65 or ‘shattered to

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60 Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 12.
62 Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 11.
pieces in the digging’. Furthermore, Wylie was eager to ridicule the labourer’s attempts at interpreting the archaeological remains. This overt Victorian class prejudice was integral to his hermeneutic framework, serving to contrast rustic interpretation with his own educated standpoint. For example, Wylie described a worker as making the comment that one large skull was ‘big enough for two’. Meanwhile, concerning the discoveries of ceramic vessels in graves, Wylie condescendingly noted that, ‘the labourers after holding a consultation, came to the satisfactory conclusion that these vessels were a teapot and sugar-basin of the ancients; and having taken up this idea gravely, it will, beyond a doubt, swell their stock of traditionary events’. Here the working-class anachronistic unfamiliarity with both the archaeology and history of the Teutons, and perhaps also Victorian middle-class tea-drinking etiquette, are simultaneously made apparent.

The Fairford labourers remain nameless and numberless but Wylie did not completely ignore their positive qualities. For example, he recognized the need for skilled labour in archaeology; workers who were experienced in digging deep ditches. In contrast, Wylie claimed that ‘common labourers are useless’. He also admitted their agency in the subordinate roles of bringing him artefacts and conducting the excavations. When it suited him, Wylie also made use of the labourers as a source of historical information. For example, as it was convenient to his argument, he accepted ‘a belief among the peasantry’ that a battle was once fought in Fairford Park:

When the cemetery was discovered, they were fortified in this belief, conceiving it to be the burial-place of the slain, and nothing will now shake their conviction of the reality of such an event. Such legendary history, handed down from father to son, is not always to be rejected as imaginary, because merely oral.

While denigrating the labourers’ historical knowledge, he simultaneously perpetuated the view of the rural worker as the primitive custodian of timeless tradition, equivalent to the primitive peoples encountered elsewhere across the globe. This allowed Wylie to perceive a link running from the Saxon past to the English ‘peasantry’ of his day.

67 Wylie, Fairford, p. 19.
70 Wylie, Fairford, p. 12.
71 Wylie, Fairford, p. 35.
Ironically, Wylie provided hints that some of the finds were accurately interpreted by the labourers, who may have contributed more than Wylie admitted to his understanding of the archaeological evidence. Wylie accepted that he did not realize some of the beads were made of amber until the labourers had noted that they burned freely in fire. Wylie appropriated this observation into antiquarian discourse by quoting Tacitus’s description from *Germania* of amber’s Baltic origin. Thus the rustic observation is translated into Wylie’s discussion of the date, connections and racial affiliations of the grave’s occupant. Much has been made of the use of ethnographic analogy in Victorian archaeological investigations. However, the use by antiquarians of England’s rural working class as, variously, figures of derision, ‘noble savages’ and sources of folklore has received less attention.

It is noteworthy that the Fairford discoveries that led to Wylie’s first and only archaeological treatise based on first-hand observations, prompted his election to the Society of Antiquaries in the summer of 1851. Hence, the book’s insistence on his status and education may have been motivated by aspirations of social advancement and affirmation of his fellow antiquaries newly found approval. The report was concerned with the past, but also defined himself and his antiquarian contemporaries as exclusive mediators of archaeological knowledge. Having considered how Wylie defined his own identity in writing the report, let us now consider how he selectively presented and interrogated the evidence to emphasize a narrative of Anglo-Saxon settlement and the Teutonic character of the earliest English.

A landscape of conquest

It is a frequent assumption that nineteenth-century accounts display limited interest in the landscape and mortuary context of early medieval graves in favour of describing and illustrating portable artefacts. *Fairford Graves* illustrates how the ancient landscape (including surviving place names, settlements and ancient monuments) was investigated to enhance the reader’s appreciation of both the Saxon settlement and the extirpation of the Britons. Wylie began his account with a history of the region under Roman rule. The significance of the proximity of Fairford to the Roman city of *Corinium* (Cirencester), from which extensive Roman artefacts and buildings were uncovered throughout
the nineteenth century, would not have been lost upon the reader. In
making this history explicit, the Saxons are portrayed by Wylie as the
rightful heirs to Rome.75 Wylie next associated the area with the
pre-Roman British ‘Dobuni’ tribe. Their demise was seen as evidence
of the ferocity of the Saxon invasion and the antipathy between the
races. ‘The abdication of Britain by the Romans was fatal to the very
existence of the Dobuni, who, in common with so many other British
tribes, seemed to have disappeared before the hostile and devastating
Teuton.’76 Wylie then imposed an image of the catastrophic impact of
the Saxon invasions on the Gloucestershire landscape. Concerning the
fate of the Britons, he alluded to the imagery of Gildas when he stated
that, ‘Some of them may have taken refuge, and maintained a precarious
existence, among the (at that period) wild recesses and dense thickets
of the Cotswold Hills, where the invader would scarcely care to follow
them.’77 Regardless of how implausible this might seem to a modern
visitor to the Cotswolds, Wylie here translated the imagery of Gildas’s
Ruin of Britain onto the Victorian rural landscape.78 He reported that
some villages in the Cotswolds today preserve words and habits
resembling those in parts of Wales, again using rural communities as
fossils of earlier epochs. In contrast with the ‘wild recesses’ of the
Cotswolds, Wylie then portrayed an idyllic image of ‘Saxon Fairford’
in which he (perhaps deliberately) merged the past with the present:

Saxon Fairford, then, is a pretty village on the banks of the little river
Coln, well known for its crystal waters and its trout, to all lovers of
angling. Here it quits the steep slopes and valleys of the Cotswold
ridge, and flows some four miles through the plain to join the
Thames near Lechlade.79

Having quoted from antiquarian descriptions of the village, Wylie
described the location of the cemetery on the summit of a bank that
slopes to the meadows by the Coln.80 The landscape is portrayed as
embodying the homely and civilized valleys of the Coln and Thames as
indelibly ‘Saxon’, in contrast to the upland British regions further west.

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75 This is a theme developed elsewhere, see H. Williams, ‘Forgetting the Britons in Victorian
Anglo-Saxon Archaeology’, in N. Higham (ed.), Britons in Anglo-Saxon England
(Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 27–41.
76 Wylie, Fairford, p. 8.
77 Wylie, Fairford, p. 8.
78 ‘Others held out, though not without fear, in their own land, trusting their lives with
constant foreboding to the high hills, steep, menacing and fortified, to the densest forests,
and to the cliffs of the sea coast’; M. Winterbotham (ed. and trans.), The Ruin of Britain and
79 Wylie, Fairford, p. 9.
80 Wylie, Fairford, p. 11.
Yet as we have seen, although dismissive of local folklore and also previous antiquaries who suggested mounds recorded nearby were the graves of the slain of ancient battles, he did not reject the notion that the Britons and Saxons clashed at Fairford. ‘In the absence of all further record, it can scarcely be thought to savour of romance, if we deem it possible that, after Cirencester had thus fallen to the Saxon invader, this traditionary battle was the last struggle of the British Dobuni.’

Wylie returned to the landscape setting of the cemetery at the end of his account, noting the presence of nearby ‘Roman’ fortifications and roads, the ‘Celtic ritual centre’ at the White Horse near Uffington (pertaining to the Iron Age hillfort, barrows and the white horse itself), and the ‘cromlech’ at Ashbury (referring to the Neolithic monument called ‘Wayland’s Smithy’). In this way, Wylie portrayed the White Horse as a British monument appropriated by the Saxons to commemorate Alfred’s victory, and the Celtic cromlech as having been named by the Saxons ‘Wayland Smith’s cave’ to honour their pagan gods. Archaeological circles of the Victorian era were well aware that the Saxons encountered and reinterpreted ancient monuments, and occasionally reused them for cemeteries, as reported by Richard Neville for Linton Heath in Cambridgeshire. Consequently, these appropriated ancient monuments were perceived as testimony to the invading Saxons’ obliteration of earlier races. By situating the Saxon cemetery in relation to these long-abandoned monuments, Wylie was suggesting that the burial ground illustrated the supremacy of Saxon over Celt. ‘The victors seem to have resolved on blotting out the Celtic name even in the national memorials of the race.’ Therefore, Wylie simultaneously portrayed the Saxons as banishing the Celts but also as succeeding the Romans. The Saxon cemetery was rendered a patriotic monument in a landscape that preserved traces of the Saxon conquest of England.

The cemetery as pagan sacred space

The pagan and funereal context of the Fairford discoveries was integral to Wylie’s Anglo-Saxonist discourse. Certainly the desire to link

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81 Wylie, Fairford, p. 35.
83 Wylie, Fairford, p. 37.
84 Williams, ‘Forgetting the Britons’.
monuments to historical events has always been strong in early medieval studies. Yet, for Wylie the cemetery was less a record of a single event and more a testament to the process of history itself. He develops this more clearly in his later publication, ‘The Burning and Burial of the Dead’: ‘the early domestic history of our race is only to be found recorded in the tablets of the dead’. Wylie thus viewed the cemetery as a repository of pagan Saxon customs and beliefs. In another subsequent publication, the cemeteries of the Saxons and Franks were seen as pagan ‘consecrated’ sacred space. While graves found in isolation might be ascribed to Saxon raiding-parties, Wylie recognized that the significance of Fairford resided in the evidence that the graves were those of a settled community. The regular orientation of graves with their heads to the south, their consistent ordering and the presence of women and children all suggested that the graves were those of the occupants of the surviving village’s pagan predecessor.

The cemetery as sacred space gained an enhanced significance by being recognized as part of a broader phenomenon found throughout the country and on the Continent. Hence, Wylie incorporated Smith’s comments on his preliminary report in Archaeologia into Fairford Graves in order to identify comparable evidence from other sites. Wylie highlighted the Teutonic nature of the cemeteries as a shared feature of different Saxon and Frankish tribes. Aware of Saxon burial mounds discovered in Kent, Wylie imagined the graves at Fairford to have once been covered with tumuli and other memorials. The absence of such remains was due, Wylie thought, to disturbance of the field in early modern times. This did not prevent him from ascribing a comparable function and significance to the Saxon cemetery and the village’s church and churchyard. Visiting the site of the nineteenth-century excavations helps to explain the significance attached by Wylie to the cemetery as a sacred and commemorative place. Wylie described it as ‘just out of Fairford, to the west, on the summit of the bank that gently slopes to the meadows of the Coln’. The location of the early medieval cemetery on a small ridge above the flood plain of the river is not atypical for the Upper Thames region but was significant for Wylie’s narrative.

86 E.g., Guest, ‘Early English’, p. 48.
87 Wylie, Fairford, p. 455.
89 See Douglas, Nenia, p. 126.
91 C.R. Smith, Fairford; Wylie, Fairford, pp. 26–8.
92 Wylie, Fairford, p. 11.
93 Wylie, Fairford, p. 11.
The river Coln is a tributary of the Thames, and as such implicitly evoked the ancient ‘sacredness’ attached to this river. Although Wylie does not make this point himself – in his poem ‘The Saxon Chieftain’ (see below) preferring the metaphor of a ‘tree’ for the English empire and the Saxons as its root – John Yonge Akerman, in a slightly later report on excavations of an early medieval cemetery at Kemble, also in Gloucestershire, could not resist using its location at the source of the Thames as a landscape metaphor. Akerman saw the relationship between the Saxons as the well-head of the English race and the spread of its civilization across the globe via the British empire. It is therefore likely that the significance of the river to the Fairford cemetery was not lost on the contemporary antiquarian reader.

Wylie may have been aware of the significance of the spatial relationship between the cemetery location and the medieval church of Fairford, facing each other across the valley as successive sacred places of Fairford’s pagan and Christian inhabitants. The dissociation from, but inter-visibility with, churches is a characteristic used by antiquarian accounts to define the pagan cemetery. Indeed, in his poem ‘The Saxon Chieftain’, Wylie suggested that the primitive Teuton was already on the road to conversion, just as John Mitchell Kemble, in his 1849 *The Saxons in England*, regarded the pagan Germans as prepared for, and awaiting, Christianity and salvation.

### Pagan burial and sacrificial rites

The identification of burial and sacrificial rites and their discussion with reference to written sources augmented Wylie’s emphasis upon the Teutonic and pagan character of the Fairford graves. For example, many of the large stones overlying the Fairford burials showed signs of having been burned. Meanwhile iron-working ‘scoriae’ (slag) was retrieved from certain graves. This led Wylie to argue that ‘fire-rituals’ may have taken place at the graveside. Wylie also employed the

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94 Wylie references the connection with the Thames, as do Davis and Thurnam when describing the location from which the bones were recovered and used in their *Crania Britannica*: J.B. Davis and J. Thurnam, *Crania Britannica*, 2 vols (London, 1865), II.

95 ‘The site chosen by the ancient inhabitants for their cemetery [commands] . . . a view of the source of the [Thames], whose onwards course may be likened to that of the race to which these early remains must be ascribed’: J.Y. Akerman, ‘An Account of the Discovery of Anglo-Saxon Remains at Kemble, in North Wiltshire’, *Archaeologia* 37 (1857), pp. 113–21, at p. 113.


analogy of Herodotus’s account of Scythian burial practices, regarding the Scythians as closely related to the ancient Teutons.\(^99\) This kind of analogy from literary and written sources relating to fire-symbolism can be traced in Wylie’s subsequent publications. When commenting on a similar occurrence among the Alamannic graves at Oberflacht, he suggested the apotropaic explanation that slag was associated with the same ‘amuletic belief in the products of the furnace that there seems to have been in those of the smithy’.\(^100\) Wylie also linked pagan practice to surviving folk traditions. Hence, he explained the presence of fragments of Roman pottery in grave-fills as indicative of funerary ritual, quoting Shakespeare’s Hamlet as supporting evidence.\(^101\) This interpretation seems to derive from Douglas’s *Nenia Britannica*, although without direct reference.\(^102\)

Wylie attributed aspects of burial practice to the attention and respect afforded to the dead, noting that in many graves, stones were used with ‘great care’ to protect the corpse.\(^103\) He also recognized the practice of marking graves with piles of stones. The orientation of the graves was thought to reflect the pagan practice of south–north orientation that Wylie believed was widely found in other Saxon and Frankish cemeteries.\(^104\) At every stage of his report, Wylie demonstrated his attention to burial practices as well as grave-goods.\(^105\) He even suggested that a pit containing charcoal and a decorated urn containing bones were associated with ‘sacrificial rites’, presumably entertaining a romanticized vision of grisly pagan rituals as vividly described in his poem ‘The Saxon Chieftain’ (see below).\(^106\) Therefore, despite that from a modern perspective Wylie failed to record adequately the evidence for these ritual practices, his interpretative emphasis upon the mortuary context cannot be questioned. Moreover, the discoveries of ritual practices were crucial to Wylie in promoting the view that the graves were as Saxon and pagan as the artefacts they contained.

\(^100\) Wylie, ‘The Graves of the Alemanni at Oberflacht’, p. 150.
\(^101\) Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 25. The reference is to Hamlet, V.i.238. This is a broader theme used elsewhere by Wylie: see Wylie, ‘Burning and Burial of the Dead’; Wylie, ‘Note on the Worship of the Matronae’; Wylie, ‘The Graves of the Alemanni at Oberflacht’, p. 140.
\(^102\) Douglas, *Nenia*, p. 10. John Yonge Akerman, writing a couple of years after the publication of *Fairford Graves*, interprets the absence of reference to Douglas as an indication that Wylie was not aware of the text: ‘Mr Wylie . . . did not fail to perceive these shards; and, singularly enough, although he had never seen the Nenia Britannica . . .’: Akerman, *Remains of Pagan Saxondom*, p. xvi. However, it seems more likely that Wylie was simply not systematic in his referencing.
\(^103\) Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 28.
\(^104\) Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 28; Wylie, ‘Envermeu’.
\(^105\) Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 29.
\(^106\) Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 29.
Bones of ancestors

Wylie’s account was written soon after Richard Knox’s influential publication of 1850, *Races of Man*, and was conterminous with Daniel Wilson’s espousal of craniology inspired by Scandinavian and Irish precedents. Hence, Wylie was writing just prior to the widespread adoption of craniology during the later 1850s and 1860s, and within an environment where ethnological concepts of race were newly established. The bones from the burials at Fairford were thus central to Wylie’s racial interpretations.

As Wylie defined the Saxons in terms of physical prowess, stature was an implicit indicator of the Teutonic affinities of the occupants of the Fairford graves. Wylie’s account dwells on some extremely tall skeletons, for which there are a number of possible explanations. It might have been that Wylie was inaccurately recording the height of skeletons during excavation or exaggerating their stature to support his preconceived, racially motivated expectations of the physical attributes of the Anglo-Saxons. What is more likely is that Wylie accurately recorded the lengths of the skeletons but simply selected those of tall stature as ‘indicative’ of the racial characteristics he was looking to be embodied in the Fairford burials. Regardless of the explanation, the racial undertones of this emphasis on stature and robusticity are clear. For example, one skeleton found interred with brooches was estimated to have been six feet and six inches in stature, while a ‘warrior’ was deemed to have been seven feet in height. As mentioned above, Wylie recorded the extraordinary size of one skeleton by quoting the exclamation of the labourer who found its skull that it was ‘big enough for two’. In this description we see further these implicit and underlying racial assumptions: ‘It contained the remains of a warrior, measuring six feet six inches in length. The bones were very large. By the skull was a knife; and what I suppose to have been a drinking-cup formed of staves of oak, bound together with three bands of brass.’

The skulls from the Fairford graves soon assumed an important place in Victorian Anglo-Saxonist discourse. As examples of the ‘Saxon race’,
skulls from Fairford were widely used in craniological research. In Bernard Davis and John Thurnam’s *Crania Britannica*, skulls from Fairford were among remains from only a handful of early medieval cemeteries used to contrast the physical and mental capabilities of the Celt, the Roman and the Saxon (Fig. 4). *Crania Britannica* was defined by confusion over the identification of races from skull-morphology among those found in pre-Roman graves. However, the characteristics of the Saxons were clearly discerned by Davis and Thurnam.115 Perhaps unsurprisingly, the skull selected by Davis and Thurnam for their inspection (presumably by mutual agreement with Wylie) was that of ‘a man of almost gigantic stature, being estimated at seven feet’ and buried with weapons. Davis and Thurnam decided the remains were

115 Morse, ‘Craniology’, p. 11.
‘Mercian’ rather than ‘West Saxon’. While they employed the Fairford discoveries to highlight the problems of assigning cranial forms to discrete races, Davis and Thurnam also confidently ascribed a precise historical and familial context of Saxon male supremacy to explain the ‘mixed’ racial traits from the male skull from Fairford:

. . . a cranium of a Mercian of mixed blood: on the paternal side an Angle, on the maternal of British descent. It must be admitted to possess great value and interest, in connexion with the question of the mixture of races, and the effects of such admixture on cranial types. We further learn from it the caution requisite in forming conclusions as to the attribution of crania, even from cemeteries so clearly of the Anglo-Saxon period as that of Fairford.116

More ironic still, Davis and Thurnam referred to the authority of Wylie himself (who was neither a medical expert nor a practitioner of craniology): ‘Many of the skulls exhumed were thought by Mr. Wylie to have much more of the Anglo-Saxon characteristics, than the three here described.’117

Davis and Thurnam were evidently inspired by the mixture of racial traits displayed by the skulls from Fairford when discussing how Britons may have ‘retreated before irresistible foes and found safety in Wales and in Dumnonia’ while others became ‘serfs’ of their ‘new Saxon masters’.118 This led them to suggest that the largely male invaders settled with the Britons leading to a ‘great mixture of races’. Davis and Thurnam identified evidence for this in the modern populations of southern England. The occurrence of blond hair and blue eyes indicated the ‘preponderance of the blood of the one [race] or the other’.119 Hence the blood of the British was seen by Davis and Thurnam as a ‘compound’ of Celt and Teuton.120 Simultaneously they claimed that ‘millions of people in the British Isles . . . exclusively belong to one or the other’ of these two races.121 In the conclusion of Crania Britannica, they explicitly emphasize Wylie’s argument that physical prowess more than superior mental abilities distinguished the Saxon from preceding races. ‘The series of Anglo-Saxon skulls, in their great resemblance to those of modern Englishmen, indicate the true derivation of the essential characteristics of our race, from a Teutonic origin. The form and proportions of these crania probably evince more power than refinement.’122

116 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, II.
117 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, II.
118 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, I, p. 184.
119 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, I, p. 185.
120 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, I, p. 198.
121 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, I, p. 198.
122 Davis and Thurnam, Crania Britannica, I, p. 238.
Davis and Thurnam replicated considerable portions of Wylie’s report and stressed the associations with burial rites and grave-goods to sustain their racial attributions. In this sense, the evidence from the bones was never isolated from the context in which they were discovered. The discoveries at Fairford and Wylie’s interpretation of them seem to have been pivotal in the conclusions of Davis and Thurnam. Subsequently throughout the Victorian period, Fairford skulls were repeatedly employed as evidence for both racial mixing and Teutonic supremacy.123

Grave-goods: style, craftsmanship and inheritance

Fairford Graves attributed a ‘Teutonic’ character to selected grave-goods.124 This was a common element in Victorian cemetery reports but Wylie directed this interpretation in a number of distinctive ways. It is notable that Wylie paid little attention to variations in grave-goods as evidence of the social identities of the deceased, other than to regard those with weapon burials as ‘warriors’.125 Instead, Wylie considered similarities of brooch-types and vessels with those from other Anglo-Saxon and Frankish cemeteries as an indication of a common Teutonic origin.126 In addition to artefact styles, the technologies employed were also perceived as indicative of the primitive, yet skilled, Germans. Wylie was particularly impressed with the bronze fibulae:

We here find the Weylands of this rude period able to mould copper, – the basis of all their ornamental works, – into the forms they required. Then follows the finishing of their ornamental devices by the graver’s skill; the richly gilding of the face of their work; and the tinning or silvering the back; and the fabrication of the tempered steel pin, copper probably being found too ductile to secure the folds

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124 Wylie, Fairford, p. 17.

125 Wylie, Fairford, p. 20. Wylie does suggest that double fibulae might be a sign of the military and social rank of the possessor rather than the sex, although he does equate earrings with females: ibid., p. 14. An absence of artefacts is interpreted as evidence that the individual had belonged to the ‘poorer class’: ibid., p. 29.

126 Wylie, Fairford, pp. 15 and 17.
of their coarse garments. How many modern trades were here involved!\textsuperscript{127}

The Fairford report admired the complex technology of bead-making revealed in certain graves (Fig. 5). Wylie speculated on whether the amber finds indicated commerce with the Baltic (see above).\textsuperscript{128} Yet with

\textsuperscript{127} Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{128} Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 31.

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his desire to emphasize their workmanship and technological advancement, he found it hard to explain why the inhabitants of Saxon Fairford failed to use coinage and instead reused Roman coins as pendants.\textsuperscript{129} The distinction between Roman and Saxon was chronological but also racial. Indeed, through the study of the artefacts, Wylie appeared to regard the Teuton as the antithesis of all things Roman, drawing upon Tacitus as a model for the Germans as noble savages. He alluded to the superstitious paganism of the Saxons, arguing that their reluctance to polish amber suggested that female barbarians valued it for its magical properties in an unaltered state.\textsuperscript{130} Concerning the use of beads, Wylie regarded this as evidence of uncivilized tastes: ‘The Anglo-Saxons, indeed, seem, up to the Norman Conquest, to have had a great taste for disfiguring their persons with barbarous decorations.’\textsuperscript{131} Aware that the Venerable Bede recorded that glass manufacture was unknown in Britain before the seventh century AD, Wylie speculated that glass vessels from graves were evidence that Roman glass-making may have lingered ‘as a mystery, in some early Teutonic hands.’\textsuperscript{132} Yet Wylie had to accept connections between the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons. He cited Pliny to suggest that the Teutons may have had similar superstitions with regard to gems and fossils.\textsuperscript{133} While once again Nenia Britannica is not referenced, this discussion closely mirrors an extensive footnote by Douglas.\textsuperscript{134} Wylie accepted that designs on brooches show an acquaintance with Roman commerce and decorative art and that Roman art had influenced the minds, ‘even of these barbarous Teutons’.\textsuperscript{135} However, despite these hints at Romano-Saxon interactions, Wylie steadfastly adheres to a view of the Roman and the Saxon as discrete.\textsuperscript{136} He ascribed a primitive wonder to the Saxons as an explanation for their occasional adoption of Roman styles. Germanic tribes must have ‘gazed with intense amazement on the fresh relics of Roman art and luxury’ that they ‘altered to the grosser genius of an uneducated people’.\textsuperscript{137} In this regard, Wylie is undoubtedly comparing the early Saxons to the ‘primitive’ peoples encountered by the nineteenth-century

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Wylie, Fairford, p. 15.
\item Wylie, Fairford, pp. 33–4.
\item Wylie, Fairford, p. 33.
\item Wylie, Fairford, p. 18.
\item Wylie, Fairford, p. 33.
\item Douglas, Nenia, p. 9.
\item Wylie, Fairford, p. 30.
\item There were varied opinions on the character and nature of Saxon interactions with the Romans in this period. John Akerman was of the opinion that the relics suggest interaction between the Romanized Britons and the Saxons evidenced in the pottery of the period: Akerman, Archaeological Index, p. 123. See also Williams, ‘Forgetting the Britons’.
\item Wylie, Fairford Graves, p. 30.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
British in the colonial context. In this sense, Wylie created a delicate balance, both regarding the Saxons as barbarians and illustrating the promise of civilization embodied in their art and artefacts and their inheritance of Rome.

Teutonic weapons

Wylie recognized the distinctively Teutonic nature of the brooches found at Fairford. However, unlike Charles Roach Smith and other contemporaries who paid close attention to fibulae, he focused more attention on the weapons from the Fairford burials (Fig. 6). Drawing upon literary descriptions in the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf and illustrations from later Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, the antiquaries and archaeologists of the 1850s regarded the presence of weapons in graves as indicative of the distinctive fighting styles and burial customs of the different Teutonic tribes. Wylie viewed the swords as ‘essentially Teutonic’, referring to their form, decoration and their method of manufacture. Among others, Plutarch, Tacitus, Sidonius Apollinaris and Gregory of Tours are employed in support. This observation was sustained by perceived parallels between a spearhead recovered from a grave at Fairford and weapons described in the Icelandic saga literature. He further supported his Teutonic ascription via comparisons with finds from other early medieval cemeteries across Europe and Scandinavia.

Weapons defined racial differences. Wylie knew that Frankish graves had different types of martial implements (e.g., seaxes and franciscas). This allowed him to see the Saxons and Franks as distinctive in their fighting strategies while sharing a common Teutonic heritage. Wylie appreciated the contrast between the predominance of

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138 Guest, ‘Early English’, p. 38: ‘Many who have discussed these questions seem to have looked upon our heathen ancestors as hardly raised above the New Zealander in civilization. Yet we have reason to believe that in military science they were inferior to none of their contemporaries; and in their barrows we find ornaments and utensils which were certainly not the work of Roman or British artists, and which nevertheless display no mean skill in the arts of manufacture.’ See also Giles, ‘Collecting’, pp. 293–4.

139 This view has its roots in an increasingly positive view of the primitivism of the Saxons during the late eighteenth century; see Sweet, Antiquaries, p. 215.


141 Wylie, Fairford, pp. 20–2.

142 Wylie, Fairford, p. 13.

143 Wylie, Fairford, p. 21. Wylie, ‘Frankish Warrior’: ‘There is so close a resemblance between Frankish and Saxon arms and ornaments, that an inattentive observer might readily confound them.’ Wylie argues that graves from Dieppe were those of Saxons because of the lack of distinctive Frankish weapons such as arrows or battleaxes: Wylie, ‘Teutonic Remains . . . Dieppe’.

144 Wylie, Fairford, p. 23.

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spear and sword from the Fairford burials and the evidence of the popularity of the battle-axe from the Bayeux Tapestry. This suggested to him that the axe demonstrated later Scandinavian influences upon Anglo-Saxon weapon use.145 Weapons also provided evidence of continuity into later periods. Wylie speculated that weapon burial may have been a precursor to medieval church monuments with their martial symbolism: ‘Perhaps in this early practice of depositing the weapons of the deceased in his grave, we may recognise the germ of the after-custom

of suspending arms and banners over knightly tombs, and even of the present use of escutcheons in churches.\textsuperscript{146} In these varied ways, weapons embodied the racial characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons and the successive influences to which they were subject. The weapon graves at Fairford indicated to Wylie a common Teutonic custom as well as a chivalric precursor.

### The poetry of race

Sandwiched between the text of \textit{Fairford Graves} and the accompanying illustrations, Wylie included his poem. Entitled ‘The Saxon Chieftain’ and subtitled ‘Written on Opening a Saxon Grave, March 7 1851’,\textsuperscript{147} the poem is intended to be read in relation to a sketch of the weapon grave (see below). In this way, it prompts consideration of the grave as a material link between the Victorians and their Teutonic heritage.

The poem begins by commenting on the form of the grave and emphasizing the pagan sacredness of the land in which the chieftain sleeps.\textsuperscript{148} It moves on to reference the sacred pagan banqueting denoted by the bucket found in the grave,\textsuperscript{149} and the heroic victories alluded to by the weapons.\textsuperscript{150} The second stanza is described as a ‘pious requiem to the noble dead’ by ‘friendly’ diggers gazing upon the chieftain’s ‘giant form’. The emphasis is then transferred to the connection between the chieftain and the excavator:

\begin{quote}
Though ages on their winged flight have roll’d,
Since on life’s scene thou play’dst thy pageant part,
Still sounds the Saxon tongue as erst of old,
In Saxon breasts still beats the Saxon heart.

God bless’d the empire-tree which thou didst plant,
And still will bless, and mighty increase grant,\textsuperscript{151}
\end{quote}

The third stanza identifies the divine inspiration of the Saxon’s cause in both the distant past and in the Victorian imperial present. Mention is made of the romantic qualities ascribed to the Anglo-Saxons and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[146]\textsuperscript{} Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 23.
\item[147]\textsuperscript{} Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, pp. 38–40.
\item[148]‘In Hertha’s lap the Saxon chieftain sleeps; While she, the first, last parent of us all; O’er her child bending, sadly silent weeps; And round him wraps her russet robe for a pall’: Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 38.
\item[149]‘Still at his head the festal goblet stands, Oft at the banquet quaffed in Woden’s name’: Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 38.
\item[150]‘Still seeks the trenchant blade those nerveless hands; That bore it once to win a hero’s fame; –, Still therefore the faithful shield, once prompt to save; –, Alike all dull’d, and tarnish’d in the grave’: Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 38.
\item[151]\textsuperscript{} Wylie, \textit{Fairford}, p. 39.
\end{footnotes}
inherited by the Victorians that provided a divinely sanctioned mandate to colonize the globe, abolish slavery, and spread ‘manly liberty’, justice, mercy, peace and plenty. Stanza four develops this theme, identifying a providential connection between migrations past and present. Here Wylie perceived the Teutons as originally deriving from the Himalayas, before moving to the Baltic and subsequently to England. The empire is justified by this missionary perspective. If the liberty of the empire is threatened, the Saxons will return to Asia, bursting like an avalanche ‘from the north to renovate the world’. The fifth stanza develops the Christian missionary aspect of this imperial conquest, pouring ‘The light of Heaven on Himalayan hills’. In the final stanza, the poem contrasts the pagan chieftain and the Christian Victorian while maintaining the emphasis upon their relationship. The poem ends with a moral Christian message for contemporaries to denounce the pagan desire for luxuries exhibited in the grave-goods and ‘sadder, wiser, quit yon Saxon grave’. The primitive, pagan yet noble Saxon was therefore defined in relation to the civilized Christian he was to become. Thus, in the discussions of the burial rites and material culture, as well as in the poem, we see Wylie engaged in the Whig search for the Anglo-Saxon roots of Anglican religion and English liberal values.

Illustrating the Saxons

*Fairford Graves* reproduced the engravings of artefacts already published in *Archaeologia* and the *Proceedings* (Fig. 3). In addition, there was a series of accurate sketches by ‘A.W.’ (Figs 5 and 6). Certainly, they are neither as accurate nor as lavish as those that accompanied some other Victorian excavation reports such as Richard Neville’s *Saxon Obsequies*, John Yonge Akerman’s *Remains of Pagan Saxondom*, Charles Roach Smith’s reports of finds from Kent, or those from John Brent’s

153 ‘Where Asia’s mountains court a sapphire sky, And woods of primeval shade the Ganges’ source, The fair-haired Teuton heard the “small, still” cry, Of Heaven impelling to a westward course, Calmly he left the much-loved father-land, And held through Asia’s wastes his pilgrim way’: Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 39.
156 ‘We know the truth. Blind Pagans now no more, At Hertha’s shrine no victim foully bleeds; In forest glade, or on the sounding shore, No Wooden orgies fire to sanguine deeds’: Wylie, *Fairford*, p. 40.
158 MacDougall, pp. 92–3.
159 This author is unaware of the identity of the artist although one possibility is Wylie’s wife.
reports of excavations at Sarre, also in Kent, all of which employed professional illustrators. Yet the images were clearly intended to be a part of the message of the book. In the preface, Wylie states that ‘It seemed most desirable to give numerous illustrations of the various relics; and these, in fact, are far more likely to be of use to the antiquarian reader, than any attempt to describe them in writing.’

Charles Roach Smith, who first described the Fairford discoveries, was repeatedly and staunchly an advocate of the value of illustrations in recording objects before they could decay or become lost or separated. As with other illustrations accompanying excavation reports of the mid-nineteenth century, the aim was to convey factual information to facilitate comparisons with artefacts discovered elsewhere. Wylie clearly subscribed to the spirit of Smith’s attitude concerning the utility of illustrations, with quantity presiding over quality.

Yet there was more than the desire to record and describe behind the value placed on such illustrations by Wylie and his contemporaries. Images also served to render and disseminate the tangibility and iconic character of the grave as repository of Saxon racial history. Wylie’s overt speculations concerning the racial significance of the grave-goods are emphasized by the choices made over how objects were portrayed. For example, the beads depicted by Wylie are drawn to actual size, suspended as they may have been worn (Fig. 5). Another plate depicts a spear and sword drawn to different scales crossing each other as if part of a military display (Fig. 6). Plate IX shows a pair of tweezers that Wylie described as ‘still elastic’, their continued functionality providing a tangible link between Saxon past and Victorian present. Each object is drawn in isolation, and yet their physicality evokes the people that fashioned and used them, their tastes, technologies and level of civilization.

161 Wylie, Fairford, p. vi.
162 C.R. Smith, Fairford, p. 77. ‘For the purposes of science it is not necessary that sketches should be elaborately prepared and artistically finished. Truth and fidelity to the objects portrayed is indispensable; but these requisites may be ensured by a little care and attention; and it is better that engraving be given, even rudely, and in the lightest outline; if supplied liberally, than that they should be limited in number for the sake of elaborate execution’: C.R. Smith, ‘Preface’, Collectanea Antiqua 1 (1858), pp. i–x, at p. vi.
163 Wylie, Fairford, plate IV.
164 Wylie, Fairford, plate X.
165 Wylie, Fairford, p. 20.
166 See also Wright, Celt, Roman and Saxon.
Of equal importance is the reception and reproduction of these illustrations amidst the contemporary audience of antiquaries. A few years after the publication of *Fairford Graves*, John Yonge Akerman employed colour illustrations of finds from Fairford in his *Remains of Pagan Saxondom* (Fig. 7). Concerning one of the Fairford square-headed brooches, Akerman considered it ‘remarkable for its distinctive Teutonic character’. In this way, through the medium of illustration the Fairford discoveries became iconic representatives of artefact-types and their racial attribution.

The final illustration in *Fairford Graves* brings the Saxons directly to the viewer through the display of the burial tableau (Fig. 8). Complementing the poem (the final section of the text), the final drawing is of ‘The Saxon Chieftain’ as found when excavated. This illustration follows the exemplar of James Douglas’s plan-illustration of a Kentish weapon burial in *Nenia Britannica*, as well as less distinguished nineteenth-century sketches of weapon burials like those from Ozengall in Kent and Long Wittenham in Berkshire. The same style of illustrating weapon graves is found in continental excavations. These included Abbé Cochet’s sketch of a Frankish weapon burial from Envermeu, and those depictions of coffins and burials from Oberflacht. These images accompanied communications by Wylie himself in articles in *Archaeologia*. In contrast to certain imaginative artistic portrayals of graves in early nineteenth-century art, ‘The Saxon Chieftain’ was portrayed as an archetypal noble warrior, the ancestor of the knights whose effigy tombs can found in Gloucestershire’s churches. The grave-plan stood for the rest of the graves that were not afforded an illustration. This idealized depiction of an English ancestor was employed to sustain the textual racial discourse.

169 Wylie, *Fairford*, plate XIV.
174 Marsden, *Barrow Diggers*, p. 84.
175 The power of images in propagating the Anglo-Saxon origin myth can be traced back to Joseph Strutt in the late eighteenth century: Sue Content pers. comm.; see also Sweet, *Antiquaries*, pp. 214–15.
In *Fairford Graves* the illustrations of certain objects and of a selected burial thus worked in tandem to construct a material discourse on Anglo-Saxon racial origins. Indeed, it can be argued that the images had a more enduring impact than the text, allowing the report to convey
Fig. 8 The final illustration in *Fairford Graves*, the burial alluded to in the poem ‘The Saxon Chieftain’
clearly the material habits and customs of the earliest English; a point Wylie himself makes in the preface. 177

Conclusion: Victorian archaeology and Anglo-Saxonism

Like many Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Wylie’s publications reflect his widespread interests. Hence his focus on the graves of the Anglo-Saxons was, in part at least, inspired by the circumstance of his residence in Fairford rather than a prior obsession or a radical ideological standpoint. 178 Moreover, the report may have been as much about self-promotion as a way of gaining election to the Society and of flattering his contemporaries. *Fairford Graves* defined the identity of the author and his readership as much as it propagated a tightly defined Anglo-Saxonist discourse that gained its height of popularity in the early decades of Victoria’s reign.

These points aside, it remains the case that *Fairford Graves* is one of the most elaborate and romanticized accounts of Anglo-Saxon discoveries among the many excavation reports of the period, and Wylie was among a group of writers who for the first time provided a diagnostic material context for the earliest English. 179 The ‘Anglo-Saxon cemetery’ promised to overcome the partial and fragmented written evidence for the period, to shed direct light on the earliest stages of Teutonic migrations and settlement. 180 This analysis of *Fairford Graves* has demonstrated how text, poetry and images emphasized the tangibility of this historical process. For antiquaries and archaeologists, the activity of amassing and displaying collections served to constitute their personal and group identities and inform broader concepts of nationhood. 181 Yet Wylie’s report itself was a vehicle for disseminating Anglo-Saxonism. This ‘prospecting’ for an overt national English identity built on Anglo-Saxon origins is clear in the fact that Wylie offered the British Museum

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177 Sam Smiles argues that images employing archaeological discoveries of artefacts are constitutive, not representative, of historical knowledge in nineteenth-century art. When this approach is applied to Victorian Anglo-Saxon excavation reports like Wylie’s *Fairford Graves*, it can be argued that their accuracy and the account of the discoveries, rather than fanciful reconstructions, served to render effective messages about Anglo-Saxon racial history through detailed, accurate but selective illustration. See S. Smiles, ‘British Antiquity and Antiquarian Illustration’, in M. Myrone and L. Peltz (eds), *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 55–66, at p. 56.

178 Rhodes, ‘Faussett Rediscovered’, p. 56.

179 A range of topographical features such as barrows and camps alongside churches, castles and coins were ascribed to the Anglo-Saxons by many eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquaries. Many remained rightly uncertain about their accurate dating while graves were not ascribed a Saxon label: Sweet, *Antiquaries*, pp. 205–10.


181 E.g., Giles, ‘Collecting the Past’.

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his Fairford artefacts to encourage them to purchase the Faussett collection.182 It is also clear in the last sentences of Wylie’s text:

These [archaeological remains], no doubt, will one day be eagerly sought for and revealed, when public feeling awakes in England, as in Denmark, to a sense of the honour and importance of claiming and preserving national monuments as national treasures. Till then, they are safer in the secret guardianship of the conservative earth. 183

Coda: a brief biography of an excavation report

Wylie’s Fairford Graves was widely referenced and its illustrations and finds reproduced in a range of Victorian publications, including Akerman’s Remains of Pagan Saxondom, Davis and Thurnam’s Crania Britannica (see above), Thomas Wright’s popular survey of British archaeology entitled The Celt, the Roman and the Saxon,184 and De Baye’s Industrie Anglo-Saxonne.185 Through such surveys, both the Fairford discoveries and Wylie’s account of them entered into the archaeological discourse as classics. Through the report, the Fairford graves showed the Saxon settlement of the upper Thames valley.

The report’s influence extended into the culture-historic studies of the early and mid-twentieth century. The Fairford collection was donated to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford where its presence influenced the endeavours of subsequent generations of archaeologists to the present day.186 For example, E.T. Leeds relied upon the sizeable collection of both geometric and zoomorphic cast and applied saucer brooches from Fairford to challenge the date and origins given by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the Saxon conquest of the region.187 The cemetery contributed to his theory that an ‘earlier wave of colonists’ unknown from the written sources had settled in the region.188 Nineteenth-century illustrations of the Fairford finds and new photographs adorned Leeds’s influential study The Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements. Leeds regarded the site as ‘one of the largest cemeteries yet discovered in Wessex’189 and used it to provide representative examples of key finds-types, including both applied and cast saucer brooches and

183 Wylie, Fairford, p. 37.
185 Le Baron J. De Baye, Industrie Anglo-Saxonne (Paris, 1889), pp. 6, 19, 60, 118.
186 MacGregor and Bollick, Catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon Collections, p. 6.
square-headed brooches. Leeds reiterated that the site was too early to accord with the written evidence for the late sixth-century conquest of the region. In discussing the chronology of Saxon expansion, Leeds used the lower frequency of cremation at Fairford and Brighthampton to suggest that the rite declined ‘while the Saxons were engaged in pushing their settlements further westwards’. Leeds later drew upon the Fairford evidence in discussing the possibility of a Saxon invasion along the Icknield Way, suggesting that archaeologists must ‘once and for all . . . discard the entries in the Chronicle as worthless’.

In his overview of the Saxon settlement, G. Baldwin Brown regarded Fairford as a ‘classic’ and ‘well-known’ site. Following Leeds, he discussed ‘The Problem of Fairford’, namely that the cemetery challenged the historical evidence that the battle of Mons Badonicus vanquished the Saxons. Its close proximity to a ‘fortified Romano-British city that we are told only fell before a successful campaign of the West Saxon Ceawlin in 577AD’, suggested to Baldwin Brown that there was a contradiction with the conventional historical data. He argued that the location of Fairford indicated there must have been a period of time when the Saxon and British communities were not actively hostile. The Fairford finds are also given prominent treatment in general archaeological accounts and narratives of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, providing typical examples of brooches in Reginald Smith’s catalogue of medieval antiquities in the British Museum, and being discussed in relation to the settlement and emergence of the West Saxons by R.H. Hodgkin. Hence Fairford was an important archaeological site into the twentieth century and employed to examine critically the same historical process of Saxon settlement discussed by Wylie.

In the late twentieth century, the Fairford report and finds continued to contribute to the same narrative. Even H.P.R. Finberg’s study of continuity in population and territory between Roman and Saxon estates at Withington in Gloucestershire used Fairford and other furnished cemeteries around Cirencester to illustrate the encroachment

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190 Leeds, *Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, pp. 61–2: ‘The cemetery has produced far too many objects belonging to the early stages of Anglo-Saxon art, to admit of its being assigned to a period which began later than the middle of the sixth century.’


of Saxon settlement. Unlike Wylie, Finberg regarded these settlements as evidence for the Saxons competing with the local Celts for the rich farmland of the Cotswolds. Building on the work of Leeds and Baldwin Brown, Fairford became one of many hundreds of known Anglo-Saxon burial sites used in national and regional studies of artefacts and burial rites, and also in discussions of Saxon settlement in the upper Thames valley. In some of these, Fairford was merely another dot on the distribution map, while in others it retained its prominence as the ‘biggest Gloucestershire Anglo-Saxon cemetery’. Recent early Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavations in the area, including Berinsfield and Lechlade, display only a dim awareness of the Fairford cemetery and its iconic role in nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century studies, however in discussions of new discoveries its illustrations continue to be used for comparative purposes. Likewise, although the landscape studies and large-scale excavations in the region mention the cemetery only in passing, they recognize that Anglo-Saxon cemeteries like Fairford remain the primary evidence for fifth- and sixth-century activity. Finally, Wylie’s account has retained some prominence as an example of the extremes of Victorian romantic nationalism. In this way, the report is used to help define the more ‘scientific’ and ‘enlightened’ studies that claim to have surpassed it. Often, in fact, it is merely the

198 ‘A large cemetery at Fairford, in the upper Thames valley, but only twelve miles from Withington as the crow flies, is generally accepted by archaeologists as dating from the first half of the sixth century’: H.P.R. Finberg, Roman and Saxon Withington: A Study in Continuity (Leicester, 1955), pp. 30–1.


201 C. Heighway, Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire (Gloucester, 1987), p. 25.


emphasis that has been changed in these studies, while Wylie’s vision of the material evidence has been retained.

Wylie described the Fairford graves as a national monument that he hoped would become a national treasure. 205 The monument in question was actually a composite one comprised of the Fairford graves welded to Wylie’s text. In part, his aspirations were realized. This short sketch of the ‘life history’ of the Fairford graves and text, 206 illustrates how the monument contributed to a shifting but tenacious discourse of Anglo-Saxon origins. Even with the increasing twentieth-century balancing of Anglo-Saxon immigration with native survival, recent scholarship inherited from Wylie’s text a conception of the period as one of conflict, settlement, and mixing between ‘races’ and ‘cultures’. 207 With the discovery of new sites and the development of different perspectives on the period, the singular significance of the discoveries from Fairford have been diluted and Wylie’s report has become obscure and open to parody. Yet this paper has attempted to show the powerful and enduring influence of the text and illustrations of Fairford Graves.

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205 Wylie, Fairford, p. 37.
207 E.g., Heighway, Anglo-Saxon Gloucestershire, pp. 20–1.