

Buried antiques: examining the reuse of objects and landscape features in conversion

period Anglo-Saxon burials

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4. Bags and workboxes

In the investigation of reused objects found at sites in Northumbria displayed in figure one, bags and workboxes were common features in these graves. Workboxes are small copper alloy boxes, often with suspension loops for chains containing a range of materials often needles, pins and fabric scraps (Hills 2015). In this project workboxes have been found in association with reused objects, such as at Garton where the workbox is associated with a jet and gold pendant and a large amber bead. At Street House some reused items were found in a bag, such as in Grave 52 where glass beads along with some Roman bottle glass fragments were placed in a bag on the left of the chest of the deceased. This is also seen elsewhere, for example, at Kirkburn in East Yorkshire where an inhumation was found with the edging for a purse and a fragment of blue glass and a broken jet bead. A similar type of assemblage was found at Street House (see Figure 4). Both the Finds from Garton and Kirkburn date from the same period as the cemetery at Street House.



Figure 4. The collection of items found in a bag at Street House in Grave 52 (Sherlock Undated:24)

5. Conclusions

This project has illustrated that the Anglo-Saxon people in the 7th and 8th centuries in Northumbria commonly located their burial sites in relationship with prehistoric landscape features, most commonly Bronze Age burial mounds, but also other features including Roman and Iron Age sites. The reuse of antique objects as grave goods may be a much rarer practice. In Northumbria, this practice is found specifically at the site of Street House. Finds from the burials at Street House are associated with the royal burial and reused objects found outside of this royal site are sparse and isolated, suggesting the reuse of objects is a high-status practice. Reused objects are also found in association with small personal bags or workboxes; this is seen in Northumbria but the excavation of sites in the 19th and early 20th century has meant that this association may not always have been recorded. Examples of this are seen at Street House Cemetery, but also possibly at other cemeteries shown by the data collected in this project. The relationship between bags and reused objects is also seen in comparable sites outside Northumbria.

Sherlock, S.J. (2012) A royal Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Street House, Loftus, North East Yorkshire, Hartlepool: Tees archaeology.
 York Museums Trust (2019) Collections Search, https://www.yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/collections/search/?search_text=workbox [date accessed: 11/10/2019]

3. Collecting Data

Data from 55 burial sites within the geographical range and time period were collected (see Figure 1). These data were collected from a range of sources including gazetteers of Anglo-Saxon burial sites (Lucy 1999, Meaney 1964) along with grey literature reports, published site reports, and local historic environment records. These data were then sorted into categories in relation to the presence of reused landscape features or objects. Of the total 55 burial sites, 20% (11) of the sites studied had reused objects present, with 50% (5) of these sites also being located near previous landscape features, primarily Bronze Age burial mounds but also later Iron Age and Roman features. Fifty one percent of the total sites studied were associated with an older landscape feature, with 18% of these sites also having a reused object present in the burials. Below is a sample of my data collection spreadsheet



Figure 2. A gold and blue glass pendant from Street House made from a recycled Iron Age Colchester type 6A glass bead (Sherlock 2012:46)



Figure 3. An example of a workbox found in the study area at Kirby Underdale in East Yorkshire, found containing threads (York museums and gallery trust 2019)

References

Hills (2015) 'Work boxes of Reliquaries? Small copper-alloy containers in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon Graves in Ruhmann, C. & Brieske, V., 2015. Dying Gods: religious beliefs in Northern and Eastern Europe in the time of Christianisation, Hanover: Die Publishing Company
 Lucy, S. (1999) 'Changing burial rites in Northumbria 500-750', in Hawkes, J. and Mills, S. (eds) *Northumbria's Golden Age*, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 12-43
 Meaney, A. (1964) *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon burial sites*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
 Sherlock, S.J. (Undated) *The Saxon Princess Exhibition Guidebook*, Redcar: Kirkletham Museum.

1. Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria stretched from the modern county of Northumberland in the north to the Humber estuary in the south. The conversion period, from the 7-8th centuries AD, is the period when the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms converted to Christianity. The aim of my project was to investigate how both features in the landscape and objects were reused by people in their burial customs during this important conversion period. The research explored the occurrence of the reuse to see how common it was and how the practices can be interpreted within the social context of the conversion to Christianity.



Figure 1. Map showing all sites studied that have a reused object or landscape feature, or both. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2018

2. Street House Royal Cemetery

The excavations at Street House cemetery (Sherlock 2012) in North East Yorkshire were the inspiration and formed the basis of the data collection for this project. The site is a royal Anglo-Saxon cemetery with multiple examples of reuse of earlier objects, many of these being high-status items, such as the gold and recycled glass bead pendant in figure two and several gold and garnet pendants found at the site. The physical location of Street House is also associated with a prehistoric landscape feature, being situated within an Iron Age enclosure. As part of the project, I visited the Kirkletham museum where the objects from the Street House cemetery are displayed.