‘Daily Life in a Double Minster’: Interim Report on University of Reading Excavations at Lyminge, 2009

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Introduction

2009’s excavation targeted a parcel of land located between the westernmost of the two trenches opened up in 2008 and the southern boundary of the churchyard. This location provided an opportunity to examine a relatively large horizontal exposure falling within a 100m radius of the nucleus of the Anglo-Saxon monastic complex. This same locale was previously evaluated in 2005 and it was this earlier work, conducted over a 4-week period in June/July 2005 under the Diocesan Archaeologist, Paul Bennett, which provided a spur for the current campaign of research by indicating the survival of Mid-Saxon occupation in accessible areas beyond the perimeter of the churchyard.

The chief result of 2009’s excavation was to demonstrate that the traces of mid-Saxon activity found in 2005 relate to an intensively-occupied zone of habitation forming what can justifiably be called the ‘domestic sector’ of the Anglo-Saxon monastic precincts. This habitation included a concentration of small timber structures surrounded by clusters of rock-cut pits used for the communal disposal of human cess, kitchen waste and other domestic refuse. Further discoveries included a major ditched boundary which appears to have initiated the mid-Saxon occupation sequence, superseded by a perpendicular arrangement of timber palisade trenches contemporary with the main phase of habitation.

Copious artefactual and bioarchaeological assemblages were recovered from the pit-and ditch-fills offering the potential for a nuanced reconstruction of daily life and economic circumstances over Lyminge’s documented period as a monastic community.
Results

Boundaries and related features

One of the key features excavated in 2009 was a mid-Saxon boundary ditch, traced for a distance of 25m on a WSW-ENE alignment at the northern end of the excavation. The ditch had a V-shaped cut and reached maximum dimensions of 2m wide and 1.15m deep within the better preserved eastern portion, indicating that it had originally been an imposing physical barrier. The sequence of deposition within the ditch indicated an initial phase of natural weathering followed by episodes of deliberate infilling incorporating rich assemblages of domestic refuse. The ditch was truncated by seven pits, two pairs intercutting, the presence of which may be the consequence of an attempt to redefine the earlier boundary.

The same boundary was stratigraphically superimposed by a shallower ditch on a divergent, though broadly, east-west, alignment. This section emitted a perpendicular north-south extension of similar depth and dimensions to its counterpart, which terminated 3m from the southern limits of the excavation; an 11m continuation of the same feature was excavated at the northern end of the 2008 intervention. The scale of this composite feature suggests other than a traditional ditched and banked boundary; amongst the possible alternatives, an earthfast timber palisade is preferred as a provisional interpretation. Sections of the east-west portion of the ‘palisade’ were filled with rich deposits of domestic refuse, including unusually dense concentrations of mussel shell.
Structural evidence

Only a simplified interpretation of the structural remains is given for the purposes of this provisional report, leaving complexities in the ground-plan evidence to be addressed at a later stage of post-excavation analysis.

Much of the structural traces discovered in 2009 were concentrated within a defined 12m band located between the north-south portion of palisade trench and the eastern baulk of the excavation. The ongoing task of resolving the complex array of post-holes characterising this sector into discrete buildings is complicated by a pair of later ditches which cut a 10m swathe through the mid-Saxon occupation (see excavation plan). As a point of departure, it may be noted that despite sharing the same general method of post-hole construction as the Anglo-Saxon timber building excavated in 2008, the nature of the structural evidence recovered in 2009 diverges significantly. The key distinction lies in the crowded disposition of the post-holes which offers a marked contrast to the regularly-spaced and precisely laid-out post arrangements seen elsewhere in Lyminge's timber building repertoire. The provisional interpretation offered here, to be tested by detailed analysis of post-impresions and post-hole morphology, is a clustered arrangement of diminutive post-built structures with estimated floor-plans of c.10-15m². It may be noted that one of the few contemporary sites to offer structures of similar character to this hypothetical reconstruction is the Northumbrian double monastery of Hartlepool, where the buildings in question have been interpreted as single-occupancy cells (Daniels 2007).

Aerial view of eastern sector showing dense concentrations of structural post-holes.

However interpreted in structural terms, large volumes of human cess and kitchen waste deposited in adjacent pits provides a clear indication that, in spite of their diminutive proportions, these buildings served as domestic accommodation rather than some ancillary function.

Some of the more diffuse spread of post-holes discovered beyond the core concentration of buildings formed either E-W or N-S alignments, although only further analysis will determine whether these are remains of further buildings or alternatively fenced enclosures.

Pits

A total of 50 rock-cut pits were found within the excavated area. While the general distribution of these features was fairly diffuse, defined clusters, additional to those dug along the alignment of the ditched boundary, were also present, most obvious being a coalescence of eight pits located at the southern end of the excavation to the west of the north-south 'palisade'. This cluster produced two pits notable for depths in excess of 2m, whereas the majority of the other pits excavated in Lyminge fall within the range of 0.75-1m. Although most of the pits were sub-circular in form, the continuum was broken by two rectangular examples with rounded corners, a type also found in the easternmost of 2008’s excavation trenches.

View of pit clusters in southern sector of excavation.
The pits were sampled extensively for environmental flotation and selected examples for micromorphology, phytolith analysis and geochemistry. These analyses will help to determine variations in how the pits were filled and under what depositionary circumstances, aiding an interpretation of waste disposal practices and their influence over the archaeological distribution of artefactual and ecofactual evidence. As found at other sites (e.g. Bishopstone, Sussex: Thomas 2010), a good proportion of the pits displayed complex life histories characterised by alternating periods of use as repositories for human cess, kitchen waste and domestic refuse redeposited from surface middens. In one notable case a pit appears to have been infilled almost entirely with rotted-down organic matter appearing as a homogeneous mass of fine sediment. In other cases, partial and complete animal carcases were deposited in pits, the significance of which must await the results of future zooarchaeological analysis.

Key themes in the portable material culture

For the purposes of this excavation summary, the opportunity is taken to tease out key strands from the provisional analyses of artefactual assemblages; more detailed discussion of the pottery, glass, ironwork and metalworking residues can be found in the relevant assessment reports hosted on the Lyminge website.

Pottery

2009’s pottery assemblage, by a considerable margin the largest generated from 2008-10 campaign, has established Lyminge as a site of key importance for interpreting ceramic traditions in mid-Saxon Kent. Two components of the pottery assemblage can be highlighted for explicit comment in this summary. The first is the imported wares, comprising approximately 7% of the total assemblage by sherd count. Although this proportion is considerably lower than the imports from the nearby coastal site of Sandtun, standing at 29% (Gardiner et al. 2002), the range of continental sources represented at Lyminge is broadly comparable, covering Blackwares, Greywares, Whitewares, Shell-tempered wares and Oxidised wares from sources in northern France, Flanders and Eastern Belgium. Regional imports were also present, including 43 sherds of Ipswich ware, spanning jars and a large decorated pitcher.
The second point to note is that amongst the local coursewares, Lyminge has produced a sizeable assemblage (100+ sherds) of boss-decorated pottery, a tradition which appears to have been restricted to sites in East Kent, nearly all with monastic connections (Cavendish 2011). Whether such localised standardisation denotes a single source of manufacture, or perhaps an interconnected network of local specialists, the Lyminge corpus contributes to an emerging picture that a shared identity was projected through the material practices of Kent’s Anglo-Saxon monastic communities.

Window glass

Lyminge has the distinction of producing the first window glass from Mid-Saxon Kent and 2009 produced a further two fragments to add to the assemblage recovered in 2008. It is an interesting question whether the window glass from Lyminge is derived from the mortared stone buildings forming the core of the monastic complex – the church and adjacent stone structures uncovered by Canon Jenkins in the mid 19th century – or alternatively the timber structures within the domestic sector brought to life in the current campaign of excavations. The former scenario is certainly plausible given the practice of redepositing surface middens into pits and ditches under which circumstances glass and durable artefacts could have been dispersed considerable distances from their primary point of use/deposition. On the other hand, an association with more or more of the timber buildings located within the domestic sector cannot be ruled out given the incidence of window glass at contemporary sites lacking stone buildings (Cramp 2007).
Personal accoutrements

Items classifiable as dress accessories and other personal accoutrements formed a fairly restricted range of dress-pins and tweezers typical of the mid-Saxon period, although at least three of the pins were silver, one having a gilt finish. The absence of other popular categories of metalwork, including strap-ends and hooked-tags, may have some significance given that, if indeed worn, one would expect to find examples discarded in pits and other domestic contexts within the core zone of habitation. The fact that other monastic settlements in Kent appear to share a similar ornamental metalwork profile to Lyminge (e.g. Minster-in-Sheppey) might suggest that the female contingent of Kentish double minsters followed a similar dress-code or costume aesthetic.

Craftwork and economic activities

The most significant discoveries made in relation to craftworking activity in 2009 were a lidded crucible and a copper-alloy folding balance, the first unequivocal evidence that fine metalworking was taking place at Lyminge. More abundant were finds of loomweights, pin-beaters, and quernstone denoting the domestic activities of textile manufacture and the processing of cereals, previously attested in the 2008 excavations.
Provisional conclusions

The results from 2009 help to clarify and augment some of the conclusions set out at the end of the 2008 excavation undertaken to the south. First, they reinforce the impression that the southern arc of occupation laying outside the monastic nucleus of mortared stone buildings was segregated into two distinct zones, comprising an inner core of domestic habitation (the western portion of which was sampled in the 2009 excavations) surrounded by an outer penumbra of agricultural buildings and pit clusters sampled in 2008.

2009 brought new evidence to bear on the use of boundaries to organise space and activities within the monastic settlement. At an early date in the history of the monastic complex, a major ditched-and-banked boundary appears to have been constructed across the chalk spur capped by the monastic church, the function of which was plausibly to define the outer perimeter of the early nucleus. This boundary was subsequently encroached by a sprawl of domestic habitation with further signs of spatial organisation. This included a putative timber palisade, very likely the portion of a more extensive rectilinear framework, the north-south arm of which segregated a zone of buildings to the east and a zone of refuse disposal to the west.

Artefact and environmental signatures, provisional though they are, underscore the ‘domestic’ character of the occupation sampled in 2009: large volumes of mineralised cess containing rich assemblages of digested fish bone and other food waste including prodigious quantities of butchered animal bone; the representation of such domestic activities/crafts as textile manufacture and cereal processing; discarded tools, structural furnishings and other detritus from buildings; and finally, insights into the personal attire and possessions of those who inhabited and passed through this settlement – dress accessories, coins, and the equipage of a specialist versed in the art of fine metalworking.

Taken in conjunction with the results gained in other sampled areas of Lyminge’s monastic precincts, 2009’s discoveries help to paint a vivid picture of the busy outer domain of a Kentish double minster – a domain richly suffused with the material practices of daily life. Work can now begin on filling in the details of this visualisation and understanding its wider meanings for monastic culture in Anglo-Saxon Kent and the archaeology of early medieval monasticism more generally.

References


