‘Life before the Anglo-Saxon minster’: Interim Report on University of Reading Excavations at Lyminge, 2010

Gabor Thomas
©University of Reading
‘Life before the Anglo-Saxon minster’: Interim Report on University of Reading Excavations at Lyminge, 2010

Introduction

The 2010 excavations, conducted in a trench measuring 40m x 25m, took place within a parcel of land sandwiched between the grounds of the Old Rectory and Rectory Lane. Lying some 150m south-east of the present parish church and its Anglo-Saxon precursor, this location provided an opportunity to open up a sizeable window within the eastern sector of the Anglo-Saxon monastic precincts previously sampled in 2008-9. Contrary to expectations, 2010’s trench was devoid of the 8th-9th-century domestic occupation so conspicuous in previous year’s excavations. Instead, our efforts were rewarded by the discovery of an earlier, spatially-distinct, settlement focus dating to the late 5th-7th centuries AD, albeit with limited traces of mid-Saxon occupation of a different character to that encountered 2008-9. This earlier occupation opens up an entirely new dimension to the ongoing campaign of research at Lyminge, for it not only provides the basis for a detailed archaeological investigation into the social antecedents of Lyminge’s documented religious establishment, but also an opportunity to examine how the process of monastic foundation transformed patterns of daily life and cultural identity in Kent, a region key to the earliest stages of the Anglo-Saxon conversion.
Results

Pre-Saxon activity

In contrast to previous year’s trenches, 2010’s excavation produced some indications of prehistoric activity in addition to Anglo-Saxon occupation. Confined to the southern portion of the excavation, these traces comprised the portion of an E-W ditch, and, some 5m to its south, the highly truncated remains of an *in situ* ceramic vessel containing several fragments of burnt quernstone. These features are provisionally dated to the Middle Bronze Age.

Anglo-Saxon occupation

Anglo-Saxon activity was represented by four sunken-featured buildings (SFBs) together with one certain post-built timber hall, potentially of multiple phases. Internal phasing within the settlement was otherwise indicated by the fact that the west end of the timber hall was stratigraphically superimposed by one of the SFBs.

Sunken-featured buildings

SFB 1

The best preserved of the four sunken-featured buildings, SFB 1, constructed on a north-south orientation, was represented by a sub-rectangular cut measuring 4.70m in length, 3.60m in width and 0.5m in depth. Three stratigraphic horizons were discerned in the fill of the structure, the character of which accords with deliberate episodes of post-abandonment backfilling.

Structural details included a pair of primary posts located on a longitudinal axis of the pit, both of which had been replaced during the lifetime of the structure, together with an additional six
posts located at the corners and the mid-point of each of the longitudinal sides of the pit. The base of the pit also displayed longitudinal alignments of stake-holes, both adjacent to the sides of the pit and within its interior; careful examination of these features showed that they had a structural derivation as opposed to representing silted-up root holes.

A varied assemblage of cultural material, including significant quantities of ceramics and animal bone, was recovered from this structure, with a broadly comparable density of artefacts being generated by each of the three stratigraphic horizons. The most spectacular object was a 6kg iron plough coulter evidently placed at the base of the pit towards its south-east corner, an event which took place sometime between the abandonment of the structure and the first episode of backfilling. The most closely datable finds, including disc-headed pins and diagnostic beads, suggest that the backfills were deposited at some point between c. AD 580/600 and AD 640/660, although a slightly later date in the 7th century cannot be ruled out (Scull 2011). The results of high-precision radiocarbon dating are awaited to see if this attribution can be further refined.
Orientated NE-SW, SFB 2 was represented by a sub-rectangular pit measuring 3.80m in length and 2.80m in width, with a maximum depth of 0.24m. The pit was filled by a uniform deposit characterised by a high humic content and rich concentrations of charcoal which gave it dark grey colouration.

The superstructure of this building was supported on 6 posts; a principal pair on the structure’s longitudinal axis, accompanied by further posts in each corner. There was no evidence for internal stakeholes nor of the replacement of posts seen in SFB 1.

This structure was, by a considerable margin, the most productive of the sunken-featured buildings excavated in 2010 and yielded prodigious quantities of Anglo-Saxon pottery, animal bone and portable material culture. The unfragmented condition of a significant proportion of the objects recovered, together with the character of the soil matrix, indicates that primary rubbish was incorporated into the backfill of this structure. Provisional analysis of the small finds, including such diagnostic pieces as a tinned small-long brooch and Kempstone-type cone beakers, places the abandonment and backfilling of SFB 2 between AD 480/500 and AD 530/50, although further work on the vessel glass may modify these dating maxima (Scull 2011).
SFB 3

SFB 3, constructed on a NE-SW alignment over a portion of the Bronze Age ditch, comprised a sub-rectangular cut measuring 4m in length, 2.80m in width and 0.40m in depth. A clear distinction existed between the uppermost stratigraphic horizon of the pit, a silty soil matrix which produced the majority artefacts, and an underlying series of deposits characterised by high concentrations of redeposited chalk.

The structural detail associated with SFB 3 was much more ambiguous than that displayed by the remainder of the SFBs. Restricted to ephemeral depressions at the north-east corner of the pit and midway along its southern edge, the significance of these features remains uncertain and a non-structural derivation is possible.

Whilst the quantity of cultural material generated by this structure was considerably lower than for SFB 1 and 2, diagnostic finds, including a facetted-headed copper-alloy pin and glass fragments from a possible globular beaker, push the abandonment and backfilling of this structure into the 8th-9th-centuries AD (Scull 2011).

SFB 4

This structure, constructed on an approximate north-south orientation, comprised a sub-rectangular cut measuring 3.65m long and 2.80m wide. It was the most poorly preserved of the four sunken-featured buildings; its better preserved western extremity survived to a maximum depth of only 0.20m, whereas the opposing eastern edge had been completed truncated away by the plough.

Sufficient structural detail survived to show that this structure shared the six-post construction of SFB 2, and that the northern of the longitudinal pair of posts had been replaced.

Unsurprisingly, given its ephemeral character, very little cultural material was recovered from this structure and it is therefore more difficult to determine the date of its abandonment with the same degree of precision as SFBs 1 and 2. On the other hand, it did produce a selection of glass beads typologically datable to the mid 6th-7th centuries AD (Birte Brugmann pers comm.) and no diagnostically later finds, demonstrating that in all likelihood it belongs to the same general phase of early Anglo-Saxon occupation represented by SFBs 1 and 2.
Post-built structure/s

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

Reduced to its essentials, the evidence comprised an E-W orientated building measuring 12.8m long and 4.6m wide, the western end of which had been truncated by SFB 1. The posts within each of the four walls were aligned fairly precisely and, in the case of the long walls, the presence of tie-beams can be reconstructed from transverse pairings. A further distinction of the long walls was the presence of double posts, although, unlike some of the buildings from Cowdery’s Down, Hants (Millet and James 1983), these were interspersed with single posts within the same wall alignment. There was considerable variation in the shape and depth of the post-holes, those with a sub-rectangular configuration indicating that some of the timbers had been shaped into planks.

Further alignments of posts were located both within and without the excavated footprint of this building towards its eastern end, but what remains to be resolved through further analysis is whether this evidence indicates multiple phases of construction in respect to the same building or, alternatively, two or more successive structures with overlapping footprints.

View of post-built timber hall and associated structural elements

Provisional conclusions

2010’s excavation had two major outcomes. First, it determined that the eastern limits of the Mid-Saxon monastic precincts most probably lie somewhere in the 30m band between the southern excavation trench of 2008 and the area sampled in 2010 (See location plan above). Whether or not the limits are defined by a physical boundary (further work will attempt to resolve this issue), there is a marked transition in the density and character of the 8th-9th-century occupation either side of this band. To its west, one is within the bounds of an unbroken swathe of pits and related activity forming an arc of Mid-Saxon occupation to the south of the cemetery of the present parish church of St Mary and St Ethelburga and the adjacent site of the Old Rectory. To its east, activity diminishes significantly and takes on a somewhat different guise in the form of SFB 3, a type of construction absent from the occupation discovered closer to the core of the monastic precincts.

Secondly, and entirely unexpectedly, it brought to light an early Anglo-Saxon settlement focus lying on the eastern fringes of the Mid-Saxon monastic precincts, the significance of which has been stated in the introduction to this summary. Some provisional statements on the character of this settlement will follow, but the basic point to be made is that discovery allows us to propose a dynamic model whereby the settlement of Lyminge was comprehensively redefined at some point during the 7th century AD. During this hiatus the focus of activity shifted from a well-established site with late 5th-century origins (now located under the low-lying central portion of the village), to the upper slopes of a chalk spur chosen as the site for the church and spiritual core of the Anglo-
Saxon monastic community brought to light by antiquarian excavations in the churchyard by Canon Jenkins in the 1850-60s (Thomas 2005).

What further provisional comments can be made on the character of early Anglo-Saxon Lyminge? First, the portion of the settlement sampled by the excavations, comprising a diffuse spread of sunken-featured buildings and an averagely-sized timber hall, actually bears close similarities to other sites forming a recently-expanded corpus of early Anglo-Saxon settlements from Kent, most notable being that excavated at Church Whitfield, near Dover (Welch 2007, 203-6). What clearly differentiates Lyminge from these sites (and the mainstream repertoire of Anglo-Saxon settlements represented nationally), however, is the richness of the cultural assemblages recovered from SFB 1 and 2, the latter evidently backfilled on abandonment with large dumps of primary refuse. The clear impression gained from the wide array of portable artefacts contained in these dumps, including evidence for an elite lifestyle embodied in glass vessels and other feasting indicators, combined with Anglo-Saxon England’s first plough coulter (British Archaeology 118, May/June 2011), is of a economically pre-eminent household at the apex of the local settlement hierarchy.

This picture accords well with other evidence attesting to Lyminge’s significance as a district centre in the pre-Christian era, a role shared by other focal settlements in the early Anglo-Saxon landscape – Minster-in-Thanet, Folkestone, Dover and Eastry - that over the course of the 7th century would similarly emerge as royally-founded double monasteries (Thomas 2005). Until now, material witness to these places’ origins has rested solely on inhumation cemeteries of the type excavated on the northern edge of Lyminge in the 1950s and at nearby Eastry (Warhurst 1955; Dickinson, Fern & Richardson 2011). The remarkable discoveries made in Lyminge in 2010 have the distinction of providing the first glimpse of the missing dimension to this picture: the settlement component of a Kentish villa regalis.

References


Scull, C. 2011. *Assessment of material culture assemblages (copper-alloy, bone/antler and vessel glass) from SFBs 1, 2, and 3.*


Gabor Thomas
July 2011