Lyminge
Excavations
2013
Interim report on the University of Reading excavations at Lyminge, Kent
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Introduction

The second season of AHRC-funded excavations on Tayne Field targeted a 30m x 30m window immediately to the north of trench opened up in 2012. Geophysics indicated a range of potentially significant features in this area, including a further two suspected Sunken Featured Buildings (SFBs) and other anomalies whose orientation appeared to conform to the site axis of the ‘great hall’ excavated in 2012. A further aim was to establish the survival of Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the area occupied by World War II mess huts at the western extremity of Tayne Field captured on aerial photographs and clearly identifiable from the geophysical plot. To this end, the main trench was augmented by a western extension measuring 15m long and 5m wide. As in the previous interim report, the results are presented in chronological order, commencing with evidence for prehistoric activity.

Results

Prehistoric

Evidence for prehistoric activity in the 2013 trench was restricted to redistributed/residual worked flint present in almost all features and a single firmly identifiable post hole or small shallow pit containing very degraded prehistoric pottery.
Prehistoric flint was retrieved from every type and date of context on site although in lesser quantities than in 2012, confirming that the greatest concentrations lie off the plateaux of Tayne Field in proximity to the River Nailbourne (Mudd and Lawrence 2013: 4-5). Preliminary analysis of the 2013 flint has not yet taken place, but observation in the field suggests that the assemblage is similar to that recovered in 2012, comprising small numbers of microliths, a very few fully formed tools, and a great quantity of debitage.

2. Phase plan of all features excavated in 2013

**Anglo-Saxon**

**Phase 1**

**Sunken Featured Buildings**

Two sunken-featured buildings were excavated in the 2013 campaign. SFB 7 was the best preserved of the two, SFB 6 being heavily truncated by a later complex of Anglo-Saxon timber halls constructed in this location (see below: Eastern Hall Complex). Preliminary dating suggests that both SFBs date to the 6th century, to be confirmed by future radiocarbon dating.

SFB 7 was oriented approximately north-east by south-west and comprised a rectangular pit measuring 3.9m x 2.6m with a maximum depth of 0.37m. It had been cut by two later structural features associated with phase 3 of the Eastern Hall Complex (see below). It was furnished with two gable-end post holes, positioned slightly off-centre on the shorter sides of the pit, accompanied by two internal post holes on axial alignment with the outer posts and two longitudinal alignments of stake holes.

A distinct assemblage of finds was excavated from SFB 7. The pit was backfilled with what appears to be waste material sourced from a midden, containing animal bone, pottery, beads, a knife, small fragments of copper-alloy and a range of vessel glass sherds. Of particular interest amongst the
faunal remains was a scute (protective plate) from a sturgeon, a fish which (along with whales and dolphins) enjoyed royal protection from the Late Saxon period.

SFB 6 was truncated by the end and partition walls of phases 1 and 2 of the Eastern Hall Complex meaning that a relatively small proportion of its fill was left undisturbed. It originally measured 2.5m x 3.5m and had a maximum depth of 0.25m. Surviving areas of undisturbed fill indicated a bipartite sequence with the majority of stratified cultural material coming from the secondary fill. Although the SFB was severely truncated, both gable-end post holes survived below the wall trenches of the later halls; no internal features or stake holes were otherwise identified.

Objects of bone, daub, pottery, glass, iron and copper alloy were recovered, as well as a small circular bone pendant and an amethyst bead.
Pits

Three substantial pits were discovered in the north-west sector of the excavation, one of which (6788) had been cut by the raking post from one of the phases of the eastern complex of Anglo-Saxon timber halls (see below). The stratigraphic evidence is consistent with a radiocarbon sample recovered from the basal layer of the pit which returned a date of cal. AD 341-541 (95% probability). The related morphology of the pits supports the theory that they form a broadly contemporaneous spatial cluster. All were large (extents ranged from 1.5/2m x 1m/2m and depths from 1-1.5m), and sub-rectangular in form with near vertical sides and a flat base. However, their infill sequences demonstrated rather different depositional histories. Pit 6788 had a fairly uniform sequence of fills characterised by assemblages of domestic refuse rich in animal bone, whereas Pit 6788 and the upper fills of Pit 6118 were filled by deposits abundant in ironworking slag. Of the three pits, the last had the most complex, and potentially extended, depositional history.
5. Ironworking evidence in pit 6118 under excavation

This was characterised by a series of steeply slumped fills caused by the compression of a highly organic basal layer rich in mineralised plant materials and fish bone suggestive of human cess. This was sealed by a thick layer of stiff orange clay followed by a capping of redeposited chalk. The resulting void caused by the slumping of the latter was filled by the demolished remains of an iron-smelting furnace comprising remnants of a fired clay kiln-lining and large volumes of run/tap slag, some present in large consolidated blocks weighing as much as 3-4kg.

8. Pit 6118 under excavation, showing slumped capping layers above a primary organic fill.

9. Pit 6118 under excavation, showing slumped capping layers above a primary organic fill.
Phase 2

Four major timber buildings were identified from this phase (broadly contemporary with the great hall excavated in 2012), alongside a range of associated structural elements, including portions of fenced enclosures and potential ancillary buildings.

10. Plan of all Anglo-Saxon phase 2 features

The Eastern Hall Complex

The key discovery of 2013 was a nested sequence of three north-south timber halls rebuilt on overlapping footprints staggered west to east. Of the three individual building phases, the middle shared an almost precise alignment with the 2012 hall arguing for contemporaneity between the two structures; an articulated animal disposal recovered from a wall-trench from this phase
returned a radiocarbon date of cal. AD 655-779 (95% probability). The three phases shared similar constructional techniques, all being of post-in-trench construction with walls formed from single rows of planked timber uprights set towards the exterior of the trench, flanked by external raking-posts. On the other hand, there were notable distinctions in size, layout and the treatment of doorways which necessitate individual description as follows.

In its original guise (Phase 1) the hall measured 12m by 7m externally; wall-trenches of this phase were the smallest dimensions of the three, averaging 0.3m wide and 0.2m deep; external raking posts were absent from the shorter end walls. Entrances were provided at the mid-point of the long walls, door posts being denoted by deeper pits; there was no evidence for an internal partition in this phase of the building.

In Phase 2 the hall was rebuilt on a larger scale measuring 13m by 7.2m externally. It had the most substantial wall-trenches of the three phases averaging 0.4m wide by 0.6m deep. External raking posts were evident on the east and west sides of the building, but were not apparent along the end walls. Entrances were similarly located at the mid-point of the long walls, again denoted by deeper post-settings, those on the eastern side of the building displaying evidence for stone packing. The northern end of the building was furnished with an internal partition wall punctuated by an offset entrance, the door-pits of which were packed with dense concentrations of stone.

The hall reached its most imposing and elaborate form in Phase 3 when it was rebuilt on the larger scale of 15m by 7.8m. With the exception of the doorways, the foundations of this phase were slighter than those of Phase 2, the average dimensions of the wall trenches being 0.5m by 0.3m. On the other hand, the external raking posts were more massively built, those against the western long-
wall being notable for their size and their dense concentrations of stone packing material. The constructional detail of this phase was the best preserved on account of the fact that the structure had been burnt in situ resulting in distinct concentrations of burnt daub that fossilized the position and scantling of the original timbers. On this basis, it appears that the southern end wall was more heavily constructed than the remainder of the superstructure, perhaps taking the form of an elaborate façade facing the major hall excavated in 2012.

Like its predecessor, this phase had an internal partition at its northern end, again with evidence for stone-packing for door posts, though here set into a substantial single pit measuring 3m by 1.2m mimicking the massive long-wall entrances.

Each of the latter comprised a substantial pit measuring 3m by 1.8m and 1.5m deep. Impressions of the original door posts were recorded in both entrances as soil stains; in the case of the western entrance the shape and dimensions of the posts were additionally observed in the outline of packing stones and Roman tile located at the base of the pit. This detail indicated broad planks averaging c.0.7m wide, set on the longitudinal axis of the pit and placed hard up against its outer edges to leave a narrow access less than 1m wide.
Evidence for flooring

Early on in the excavation it was noticed that the fills of structural features associated with the hall sequence shared concentrations of fine flint gravel, a depositional constituent absent in other parts of the trench and indeed 2012’s excavation. The clue as to the gravel’s derivation came with the discovery of consolidated lumps of opus signinum from the wall-trenches and raking posts of the Phase 3 hall. Comparison of the bonded constituent of the opus signinum with the flint gravel confirms that they are derived from the same source, identified as the stream-bed of the River Nailbourne. The most economical explanation as to why the flint gravel is concentrated in this sector of the site and nowhere else, is that it is derived from the preparation/taphonomic reworking of opus signinum flooring specific to these halls.

Associated structural elements

Fragmentary remains of a fenced enclosure was identified to the south of the hall complex. The fence appears to have been constructed using narrow foundation trenches, 0.2m wide, to receive a single row of closely-spaced timber planks. It is difficult to reconstruct how this feature relates to the overall site layout, but the most likely explanation was that it was used to regulate movement between the newly revealed hall and its larger east-wall counterpart excavated in 2012.

A further structure potentially related to the fence was group of 6 oval post-holes discovered a short distance beyond the northern end wall of the Phase 3 hall, one of which cut SFB 7. Quite what this cluster of features represents in structural terms is difficult to establish, but an association with the hall seems likely on account of the two being axially aligned. If the fenced boundary surviving on the opposite side of the hall originally formed a closed circuit around the building, then it could have marked a formal entrance controlling access from the north, a hypothesis that will hopefully be clarified by further excavation.

The north-west sector of the excavation produced a series of shallow and ill-defined foundation trenches which are likely to belong to the same phase as the major halls because they shared the same alignment. Stratigraphic support for this theory was provided by sections of wall trench which had cut into pits 6788 and 6118, in the process redistributing ironworking residues contained in their upper fills.

It was very difficult to make coherent sense of these structural features given their poor state of preservation and their location in a part of the site defined by sticky clay subsoil which baked to the hardness of concrete. Whatever their precise configuration, it would appear that these structures are of a much lighter construction than the principal halls and, on this basis, attract interpretation as ancillary storage buildings, not implausibly for stabling horses.
The Western Hall

Traces of a further substantial post-in-trench building were identified in the western extension, but only with considerable difficulty owing to damage inflicted by later features, including a medieval ditch and a substantial pit associated with the demolition of WWII mess huts. Interpreting the plan of this building is further hindered by the fact that only two of its walls were exposed in the trench. The provisional theory is that the building was orientated east-west, the wall to the east (measuring 4.8m in length) being the fragment of an end wall, and that to the north (13m in length) one of its long walls.

The two wall foundations differed in terms of their constructional characteristics. The putative end wall comprised a trench measuring 0.5m wide and 0.3m in depth with a deeper post setting at its southern end, potentially marking an entrance; internal detail included a single row of planked timbers set towards the outer edge of the trench much like the walling of the eastern hall complex. The section of long-wall was flanked by a series of four massive exterior raking-posts, each with a dense concentration of flint used as packing material. The foundation trench averaged 0.8m wide by 0.2m deep, its southern extremity being punctuated by a pair of sub-circular post-settings. Good structural detail for walling was found within the section of the trench to the north of these settings.
It comprised two components: smaller pairs of planks set in parallel alignment (of similar form and configuration to those of 2012’s hall) towards the inside of the trench flanked by an offset row of larger planks. Walling of this type is otherwise unattested in Anglo-Saxon England and it may be the case that more than one phase of foundation trench is represented.

16. Long wall trench of the western hall with plank ghosts excavated, indicating the triple plan construction
Associated material culture

As in the case of 2012’s hall, a considerable quantity of artefacts and other cultural material, dominated by pottery, animal bone, metalworking slag and vessel glass, was recovered from the wall-trenches of the timber buildings, particularly from the eastern hall complex. It must be presumed that a significant proportion of this material will be residual given that the foundation trenches of the phase 2 hall had been dug into the fill of a pre-existing sunken-featured building of a significantly earlier date. As stated in relation to the opus signinum flooring, there was also considerable reworking and redposition of materials between the constituent phases of the hall complex, thereby adding an additional element of residuality to the cultural assemblages. As a result of these factors, only diagnostic artefacts and/or distinct deposits can be confidently linked with the construction and use of the halls. Most notable in this regard, both for its intrinsic beauty and for providing direct evocation of the elite activities of the royal mead-hall, was an exquisite bone gaming piece recovered from the eastern long wall of the phase 2 hall. This shares the same composite construction as the set of gaming-pieces represented in the ‘princely burial’ of Taplow, Bucks (a hollow cylinder furnished with a pair of lathe-turned end-caps secured internally by a central copper-alloy pin) and is similarly likely to be of late 6th- or early 7th-century manufacture.

Saxo-Norman

Features datable to the Saxo-Norman period, confined to the south of the E-W medieval ditch that bisected the excavation trench, belong to a more general spread of 11-12th-century occupation (pits, ditches, gulleys and post holes) identified in 2012. More examples of the large intercutting latrine pits so conspicuous last season were repeated in the south-eastern corner of the 2013 excavations (Thomas and Knox 2013: 14). These were characterised by layers of cess-like material, capped with dumped chalk and stone, sometimes interleaved with midden deposits.

A continuation of two of the north-south boundary ditches identified in the previous year’s excavation was identified in the eastern sector of the trench. The larger of the two was notable for
containing several animal disposals, including a fully articulated horse, and a deposit of burnt grain at the terminal.

**Medieval**

The medieval period was represented by a single east-west ditch that bisected the site in two. It averaged 1m wide and 0.3m deep and produced a range of diagnostic medieval pottery and tile in addition to residual Anglo-Saxon and prehistoric material; dense concentrations of snail shell indicated that the boundary was originally hedged. This forms one of a series of parallel E-W ditches visible as earthworks across Tayne Field attesting to medieval cultivation.

**Conclusions**

The results of 2013 confirm in spectacular fashion that the great hall excavated in 2012 sat at the southern edge of a formally-planned complex of monumental timber structures, akin to other royal/aristocratic residences known from Anglo-Saxon England (Hamerow 2012). Although more work is needed to clarify the nature of some of its newly revealed components (e.g. the western hall), the evidence recovered in 2013 provides a robust framework for reconstructing the overall spatial layout of the complex as well as defining architectural variations between its constituent buildings.

The remarkable sequence of building aggrandisement represented by the eastern hall complex is particularly important for it provides a vertical stratigraphic record for estimating the overall duration of the complex, to be aided by future radiocarbon dating. Similar sequences of rebuilding have been identified on comparable sites such as Cowdery’s Down, sometimes accompanied by evidence for a change in constructional style and/or an increase in scale/architectural sophistication (e.g. Millet & James 1983, Buildings B6/C7 and B4/C8). While it is notoriously difficult to pin specific functions to Anglo-Saxon halls, the desire to perpetuate these particular structures over multiple human generations must indicates that they played a pivotal role (both functional and symbolic) in the life of places of royal residence. At Lyminge, this importance is directly attested in the resources and sophisticated constructional techniques lavished on the buildings.

One of the clearest expressions for this architectural exuberance is the massiveness of entrance portals piercing the long walls of the phase 3 hall. But no less relevant is the compelling evidence that one or more phases of the building were provided with a type of flooring – *opus signinum* – usually associated with Anglo-Saxon churches of the 7th and 8th centuries, both locally (St Pancras, Canterbury, Reculver) and further afield (Old Minster, Winchester, St Paul’s, Jarrow) (Gittos 2013, 90; 157). The use of this opulent, ‘Romanising’, flooring to embellish the interior of a timber (albeit very high status) hall may seem idiosyncratic, but is not altogether unattested in a Kentish context: precisely the same combination was displayed by the largest of the Anglo-Saxon timber halls excavated by Brian Philp in the south-west quadrant of the Roman shore fort at Dover (Philp 2003, 58). Although interpreted as a monastic church in the excavation report, there are strong grounds for assigning it a ‘secular’ use in connection with a royal complex (Welch 2007, 203), a reattribution that is now considerably strengthened by the parallel evidence from Lyminge. If it is accepted that *opus signinum* flooring was used in association with secular halls at both Lyminge and Dover, then we are presented with an entirely new perspective on the interplay between native architectural traditions and the Romanizing style of continentally-inspired churches in conversion-period Kent.
In addition to helping to resolve the nature of the Anglo-Saxon settlement in its 7th-century persona as a place of royal residence, the 2013 excavations have also shed new light on preceding phase of early medieval habitation. Two new SFBs of the later 5th/6th centuries were investigated bringing to seven the total number excavated in the village since 2010. While undeniably important in their own right, these discoveries do beg a wider question: why is it that investigations on Tayne Field have yet to reveal clear evidence for ground-level post-built structures of the type usually found in association with Anglo-Saxon SFBs, otherwise clearly attested in 2010’s excavation at the end of Rectory Lane? An explanation for this absence may yet be forthcoming in the final season’s excavation, but at present it is possible to add an entirely new ingredient to this early phase of the settlement: the substantial pits located in the north-west sector of the excavation. If the radiocarbon determination recovered from the basal fill of pit 6118 is indeed a reliable guide to the dating of the group as a whole (entirely plausible given their shared morphology and spatial clustering), then this is a highly significant finding. The introduction of pits of this large scale into the Anglo-Saxon settlement repertoire is generally believed to be a 7th-century and later phenomenon associated with greater settlement stability and the need to regulate waste on a more systematic basis (Reynolds 2003; Hamerow 2012). At Lyminge, the explanation is likely to be different. One possibility worth considering is that the pits were used in association with public assemblies when, for short periods, the resident population of Lyminge would have been swelled by an influx of inhabitants from a wider territory. Lyminge’s identification of an early Anglo-Saxon tribal centre (informed by place-name and cemetery evidence: Thomas 2013), would certainly make it a likely candidate for such periodic gatherings.
Overall, 2013 will be remembered as a season of scintillatingly rich Anglo-Saxon archaeology that was both challenging and immensely rewarding to excavate. Some of the discoveries have far-reaching consequences for Anglo-Saxon settlement archaeology and almost a year down the line, as we ready ourselves for a final season of excavation, their memory has barely faded. This was early medieval archaeology at its inspirational best.
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Bibliography


