Charcoal Burial in Early Medieval England

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
5th March 2009
Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

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Until relatively recently, archaeologists and historians have tended to ignore the burial practice of the late Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD 800—1100) in favour of other aspects of the archaeology of this period, or of the burial practice of earlier periods, assuming that burial in this period is uniform and well-understood. In fact, the late Anglo-Saxon period shows a great deal of diversity in burial practice. One of these diverse forms of burial is so-called “charcoal burial”, in which the body or coffin is laid on or under a layer of wood charcoal.

This thesis examines the possible symbolic associations of charcoal burial, as well as how those associations might have been used to convey issues of status, identity, group membership or religious belief. Data presented includes the historical context of sites with charcoal burials, as well as their chronology, distribution and demographic characteristics. The manufacture and use of charcoal in the late Anglo-Saxon period is also studied, as are examples of similar burial rites from outside England.

In addition to archaeological data, textual sources provide information on the symbolic context in which this burial rite occurred, suggesting that charcoal burial was one of a number of types of burial associated with ideas of cleanliness and protection, serving to define a space for the body against the “filthy” and possibly threatening earth. This rite was selected for the burials of specific, usually high-status individuals, rather than being associated with any specific segment of the population. Its application appears to have varied from site to site, representing a flexible, creative burial practice capable of producing a range of symbolic associations for funerals.
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This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

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1. Introduction

The term “charcoal burial” refers to one of a variety of enigmatic variant burial practices found in cemeteries of the late Anglo-Saxon period, as well as, in much smaller numbers, during the high medieval period. Although over 300 burials containing layers of charcoal are known from approximately 40 cemeteries in England, the significance of this practice has remained unknown. Archaeologists and historians have interpreted it in various ways, but there has never been a serious study of the rite, despite the fact that it appears to be inconsistent with traditional beliefs about Christian cemeteries.

Generally speaking, a charcoal burial is any burial in which the body or coffin has been deposited on a layer of charcoal. However, although the term “charcoal burial” has been in use in British archaeology for approximately the last 40 or 50 years, it has not always been used consistently. In fact, the term itself contains some problematic assumptions about burial practice in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The problems of this shifting definition as well as of the category itself are discussed further below, along with a detailed discussion of the variations in what has come to be known as “charcoal burial”.

The overall goal of this thesis is to use a single type of late Anglo-Saxon burial as a lens through which to examine not only burial practice in the period, but also attitudes toward death and the dead, beliefs about the afterlife, and the social pressures which informed burial practice. The possible meanings of charcoal burial can be understood only by placing the rite within its social and symbolic context.

In addition to comparing charcoal burial to other types of Anglo-Saxon burial practice, I examine the distribution of this phenomenon across the country and within the late Anglo-Saxon period. The demographic characteristics of individuals who received charcoal burial are also considered. The wide range of evidence excavated from dozens of cemetery sites allows us to place this burial practice within its original context of varying treatment of the dead.
The late Anglo-Saxon period provides a challenging but potentially rewarding combination of historical and archaeological evidence. Surviving textual sources include chronicles, wills and charters, legal codes, homilies, liturgical texts, educational texts and poetry. Each of these types of evidence can provide some of the information necessary to create a context for charcoal burial and its possible meanings.

By integrating textual and archaeological sources, and by examining charcoal burial in the context of the late Anglo-Saxon burial rite generally, both within individual cemeteries and at a national level, I propose to build the most complete picture of a late Anglo-Saxon funerary practice to date. This will allow us to understand this otherwise enigmatic practice within its social, economic, aesthetic and magico-religious context.

Charcoal burial is a challenging aspect of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice. There is no direct textual evidence for it, and it has few obvious connections to earlier or later aspects of burial practice in England. However, I hope to demonstrate that a contextual study of this burial practice will allow us to shed some light on its possible significance. Charcoal burial is only one element of the wide range of possible burial practices found in late Anglo-Saxon churchyards, and even a detailed analysis of its uses will leave many questions about burial in general unanswered. However, this study has the potential to illuminate at least one of the ways in which funerary practices expressed responses to death and beliefs about death and the dead body. Additionally, it may be possible to clarify some of the uncertainties in our understanding of late Anglo-Saxon funerary practice generally.

1.1 A note on terminology and orthography

The study of charcoal burial takes the archaeologist through three periods, although as always the boundaries between these periods are not as clear as might be hoped. Throughout this thesis I have used the terms “Late Saxon” and “Late Anglo-Saxon” to denote the period from c. 800 or c. 850 to c. 1100. This division in the archaeological record roughly parallels the division of pre- and post-Conquest used by historians. “Early medieval” can be a difficult term; some archaeologists do not apply it to the Late Saxon period, using it only to refer to the centuries immediately following the Conquest, as opposed to the “high” or “later” medieval periods. Others use the period
to cover any aspect of the post-Roman west. In this thesis, it refers broadly both to the Anglo-Saxon period and the immediate post-Conquest period, when some of the burial practices of the late Saxon period persisted.

Old English in the late Anglo-Saxon period consisted of a number of different dialects. Like most pre-modern languages, it was also characterized by a lack of standard orthography. In some cases, this has meant that names may have multiple spellings, or two manuscripts of the same text may have different spellings. For instance, the two extant versions of the Old English *Soul and Body* poem, copied at different times and in different places, vary greatly in spelling.

Similarly, personal names and place-names vary in spelling. Oxford, for instance, appears as *Oxnaforda* in the A manuscript of the *Burghal Hidage*, but as *Oxeforde* in the B manuscript. Additionally, characters which do not appear in modern English are represented in varying ways in modern works, with spellings sometimes modernized. Thus, the name of Athelstan, King of Wessex from 924 to 939, is variously given as Athelstan, Æhelstān, or Æthelstan, and that of Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham from 1099 to 1128, as Ranulf, Ranulph, or Ralph.

In most cases, I have not made any effort to represent multiple spellings or versions of a text. The textual history of many Old English documents, and the various dialects used in their creation, are extremely complicated and well outside the scope of this thesis. In cases where multiple versions of a spelling exist, I have attempted to use the version which seemed to me to be most commonly used, and to remain consistent throughout. Although I hope that I have succeeded in being consistent, I make no claim to being correct.
2. What is charcoal burial?

2.1 Introduction

“Charcoal burial” is a relatively little-studied aspect of late Anglo-Saxon and medieval burial practice. The practice of depositing charcoal in graves has been known for a century and a half, and during that period it has been discussed in a variety of different ways. However, it is only in the last fifty years that archaeologists have begun to examine the funerary practices of the late Saxon and early post-Conquest periods in any real detail. These practices have now begun to be seen, like burial practices in other periods and other parts of the world, as representing complex and multi-layered practices which relate to social identity and to beliefs about death, the dead body and the afterlife.

This chapter reviews the history of the study of charcoal burial and, by extension, the recent history of the study of late Anglo-Saxon and medieval burial practices. The history of charcoal burial as an archaeological concept is intimately connected to the development of late Anglo-Saxon archaeology in the latter half of the twentieth century. Additionally, the many challenges raised by the category of “charcoal burial”, a category projected on the past by modern archaeologists, are discussed.

2.2 Early reports of charcoal burial

The history of the archaeology of the early Anglo-Saxon period has been studied in some depth (e.g. Lucy 2000, 1-15; 155-73), and recent works have reviewed the general history of medieval archaeology, particularly that of the later period (e.g. Gerrard 2003), but there has been limited study of the history of pre-Conquest, post-Conversion archaeology. In the absence of such a study, a quick overview of the context of early finds of charcoal burial is necessary.

Late Anglo-Saxon archaeology, especially the study of standing churches, has gone hand in hand with the study of textual sources of the period. This connection was typical of nineteenth-century medieval archaeology, which was largely driven by its association with history and the history of architecture. Studies of churches were
often grounded primarily in local history and in attempts to verify the antiquity of particular churches (e.g. Mitchell 1886). Cemeteries were not the subject of systematic study, so most discoveries of charcoal layers in graves were accidental. In some cases, graves considered to be particularly important were examined (e.g. Fowler 1880), but this was rare, and the excavation of entire cemeteries even rarer. As will be discussed in more detail later, medieval burial practice as a whole was not problematized.

Early discoveries of charcoal layers in burials therefore took place in a scholarly environment where detailed planning and description of graves was not seen as a high priority. The result is that early reports may be somewhat ambiguous. Dating of the finds is often unreliable.

The first possible discussion of what would eventually become known as “charcoal burial” dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Edward Miller’s *The History and Antiquities of Doncaster*, published in 1804, includes an account of a burial at Conisbrough, South Yorkshire, “surrounded by irregular stones placed edgeways, and at the bottom, matter, which had the appearance of charcoal” (Miller 1804, 262). Miller’s information about the burial seems to have been second-hand at best, and it would be some time before similar practices were reported in other areas. In 1856, Thomas Ross, mayor of Hastings, was excavating to locate what he believed to be the foundations of a medieval tower. He encountered a number of burials on layers of charcoal, but was unable to determine their date. “Such an unusual mode of interment”, Ross remarked, “I have not seen anywhere explained” (Ross 1861, 308). Ross made no further effort to study or identify the burials, although he did note the discovery in a short note to *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (Ross 1857). It is still unknown whether these burials were genuinely medieval, but the publication of the find illustrates a problem in studying this type of burial generally. In 1974, when the term “charcoal burial” was being commonly used to describe a type or category of burial in late Saxon studies, E. W. Holden published a brief note in the same journal describing Ross’s find. Because of the lack of an entry for charcoal in the journal’s index, Holden noted, “it is therefore only by chance that such a reference is picked up” (Holden 1974).
As Holden observed, it is not possible to say with certainty that all early excavations of these burials have been reported or, if reported, recognized as such. A general lack of interest in studying early medieval burial may have led to burials with layers of charcoal not being recorded. Additionally, even if they were recorded, they may not have been identified as such. Few journals or HERs use “charcoal burial” as an index or search term, meaning that records can be difficult to identify or locate. The term is now in widespread use, so recent excavations rarely suffer from this problem, but it must be borne in mind that earlier finds may be lost to us.

The next recorded excavation of a burial on a layer of charcoal took place in 1874, when J.T. Fowler excavated the site of the former chapter house of Durham cathedral (Fowler 1880, 1883). Fowler identified the first burials containing charcoal which could securely be dated to the early medieval period. Fowler was primarily interested in locating structural features of the chapter house, demolished in the late eighteenth century, and the graves of the bishops of Durham. All of these features were recorded in Browne Willis’s 1727 work on English Cathedrals, and Fowler based much of his interpretation on Willis’s plan. The late Saxon graves below the first chapter house and the post-Conquest graves associated with it contained a wide variety of burial practices, including seven charcoal burials. This picture of diversity in burial rites was completely at odds with the common view of Christian burial as generally simple and unfurnished. Interestingly, Fowler does not seem to have regarded the material components of the burials as particularly notable other than, in the case of the rings, crosiers and vestments, as works of art. In a thirty-five-page excavation report, he devotes one brief footnote to understanding the meaning of the burial rite. Fowler’s note makes it clear that he is unfamiliar with this burial practice, but the whole body of the report demonstrates that he is also not very concerned about it. For Fowler, what was important was to identify the graves of great historical figures such as Ranulph Flambard (bishop 1099-1128; see Chapters 5 and 9), Geoffrey Rufus (bishop 1133-1140), and others, and to learn more about the history of the Durham cathedral chapter, of which Fowler himself was a canon.

Two more burials on layers of charcoal were excavated in 1890 on the site of Old St Chad’s, Shrewsbury. These burials were found in stone cists with head niches, and were believed by the excavators to predate the church’s earliest Saxon phase. In each
cist, “considerable traces of a layer of charcoal” were found under the body (Nurse and Auden 1890, 362). No comparative material is discussed in Nurse and Auden’s excavation report, suggesting that they were unaware of the work of Ross and Fowler. However, although the burials were regarded as “interesting”, there is no detailed discussion of the burial material, either the cists or the charcoal; the authors were primarily concerned with dating the burials in order to fit them into a historical framework relating to the development of the church in Shrewsbury. They do not seem to have been aware of previous examples. These burials, however, were referred to when later 19th-century construction work revealed similar examples elsewhere in Shrewsbury (“Topographer” 1896).

The lack of exploration of burial practice in these reports is not surprising; as will be seen, for many years Christian burials were not considered important subjects of study for archaeologists. Additionally, dating these burials could be problematic. The charcoal-filled cists at St Chad’s certainly appear consistent with a late Anglo-Saxon date according to the evidence available to modern archaeologists, but in the absence of any dating technique, Nurse and Auden could only guess at their age. Similar burials from different sites might therefore be assigned to very different periods. Although charcoal burials were known early in the history of late Anglo-Saxon archaeology, therefore, they did not excite any comment until much later.
2.3 Excavations of charcoal burial in the 20th century

There do not seem to be any recorded excavations of charcoal burials in the early twentieth century. However, the 1960s saw a dramatic expansion in urban archaeology in Britain. The increase in urban development in the 1960s was accompanied by an increase in the awareness both of the potential of urban archaeology and of the threat it faced from increasing development (e.g. Biddle 1974). Among the major urban excavations of this period were some excavations of late Anglo-Saxon church cemeteries such as St Alkmund’s, Derby, or the Old and New Minsters at Winchester (see Chapter 5). A large number of sites containing charcoal burials were among the cemeteries studied in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. These included the Old and New Minsters at Winchester, Chichester Cathedral, St Mary Major, Exeter, and Castle Green, Hereford, as well as sites in Oxford and York (Dodd 2003, Henderson and Bidwell 1982, Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, Rule 1971, Shoesmith 1980, Tyler et al. 2001).

During this period, it began to be recognized that charcoal burial was a common element of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice. Excavation reports discussed the rite, assigning it possible functional or symbolic roles. Archaeologists were aware of comparanda and related new charcoal burials to previously discovered ones, typically the charcoal burials from Winchester (e.g. Ralegh Radford 1976). Burial with charcoal became widely recognized as a late Saxon practice, and indeed at some sites the presence of such burials was used as an indicator of late Saxon date (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, Fox-Wilson 1987, 14). The term “charcoal burial” came into wide use to describe these graves, although it is not clear with whom it originated. This sometimes led to confusion as different writers used the expression to describe different types of burial. As early as 1965, finds of charcoal at St Julian’s church, Kingston Buci, E. Sussex, were being interpreted as possible evidence of burial (Steer 1965, 11). The publication of interim reports from Winchester (Biddle 1966, 1967, 1968) and Lund (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963) clearly made an impact in raising awareness of this form of late Anglo-Saxon burial. By 2006, awareness of this type of Late Saxon burial had become so widespread that the Medieval Britain and Ireland entry for Bishopstone, E. Sussex, specifies that the cemetery does not contain any charcoal burials (Gaimster et al. 2006, 306).
Although these excavations greatly increased the amount of available data about charcoal burial and late Anglo-Saxon burial in general, the circumstances of excavation necessarily imposed some limitations. Rescue and developer-funded excavations were frequently conducted with limited time and money, and complete excavations of cemeteries were the exception rather than the rule in the 1960s, just as they remain today. The partial nature of the data must be borne in mind when analyzing these excavations. Nonetheless, they remain a vital source of information about this enigmatic burial practice.

As charcoal burial began to be recognized, a number of different interpretations were offered to explain its role in late Saxon funerary practice. These are discussed below. Let us now consider the various types of evidence excavated from late Saxon and post-Conquest cemeteries which have come to be considered under the heading “charcoal burial”.

2.4 Defining charcoal burial

The term “charcoal burial” began to appear in the archaeological literature during the early years of widespread archaeological excavation in English towns. This development went hand-in-hand with the beginning of serious archaeological study of medieval and late Saxon Christian cemeteries. The first occurrence of the phrase was probably connected with the excavation of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester (e.g. Biddle 1969), but by the mid-1970s, “charcoal burial” and “charcoal grave” were in common use (Ralegh Radford 1976).

Some archaeologists made an effort to refine the concept of “charcoal burial,” creating sub-categories. Graves from Winchester Old Minster and New Minster, for instance, were roughly divided into two further subcategories based on the amount of charcoal they contained (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 228-9). Victoria Thompson, in her study of late Saxon attitudes to death and dying (2004, 121), divided charcoal burial into a number of sub-types depending on other features of the grave but did not examine the relationship between these types.
As might be expected, the term has been used to describe more than one type of late Saxon or medieval burial. Some reports tentatively describe any burial containing burnt material as a “charcoal burial”; this has led to confusion in some cases. Not every author uses precisely the same definition. Warwick Rodwell (1989: 163) describes charcoal burials as ‘covered with a layer of charcoal,’ a slightly different definition than commonly used. English Heritage’s thesaurus defines it as “Inhumation rite in which charcoal is included with the buried corpse” (http://thesaurus.english-heritage.org.uk/thesaurus_term.asp?thes_no=1&term_no=70027, accessed Feb. 13, 2008). In fact, however, the term is generally used more narrowly in the archaeological literature. Even without a specific definition or a single authority controlling the use of the term, in practice most archaeologists use it in a fairly consistent manner. The characteristics of a “charcoal burial” according to the definition currently in use are as follows.

The classic charcoal burial includes a layer of charcoal intentionally deposited on the floor of the grave. In the case of a burial with a coffin, this layer normally lies underneath the coffin. In burials without coffins, the body, possibly wrapped in a shroud, appears to have been placed directly onto the charcoal layer. Many burials identified as charcoal burials consist only of a body, with or without a coffin, placed directly onto a layer of charcoal.
The thickness of this layer can vary considerably. Some charcoal burials, like examples from Lincoln and Bath, rest on layers no more than one or two centimetres thick (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 16; Cunliffe 1979, 90). Examples from Oxford ranged from 5 to 8 cm, while examples from York were up to 15 cm thick (Hassall 1973: 270, Philips and Heywood 1995: 87).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Grave number</th>
<th>Depth of charcoal</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barnstaple Castle</td>
<td>G97</td>
<td>20-30mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>1968 grave</td>
<td>1-2 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>6 cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>1 cm</td>
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<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>up to 10 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>KB 1993 / 16</td>
<td>5 cm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exeter, St Mary Major</td>
<td>CG1</td>
<td>10 cm</td>
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<td>Exeter, St Mary Major</td>
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<td>Exeter, St Mary Major</td>
<td>CB17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exeter, St Mary Major</td>
<td>CB58</td>
<td>12-15 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynsham Abbey</td>
<td>None given</td>
<td>6 in (approx. 15 cm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Mark's, Lincoln</td>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>2-5 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Mark's, Lincoln</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>1-2 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford, Blackfriars</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>8 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford, Blackfriars</td>
<td>131/2</td>
<td>7 cm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>8-15 cm</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1: Sample thicknesses of charcoal layers from excavated cemeteries

In some burials, however, the layer of charcoal extends further. Charcoal may be found around the sides of the coffin, as at Winchester (Biddle 1969, 321) and Bath (Bath Abbey Heritage Centre AHC 93). Similarly, some of the charcoal burials excavated at York Minster consisted of a layer of charcoal on which the coffin had been placed, with charcoal subsequently inserted around the sides of the coffin up to half the height of the coffin (Philips and Heywood 1995, 87). A charcoal burial from Staple Gardens, Winchester, rested on a layer of charcoal 10 cm thick, but the charcoal around the sides of the burial was c. 46 cm thick (WMS Staple Gardens report).
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Figure 2.2. Charcoal burial from Staple Gardens, Winchester, showing charcoal around sides of body. Courtesy Winchester Museums Service

In other cases, charcoal may be found both over and under the body or coffin. Charcoal under and above the body was found in some of the charcoal burials at Winchester (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 228), York (Phillips and Heywood 1995: 87) and Exeter (Cathedral Close excavation archive EXEMS: 24/2005), among other sites. At St Mary Major, Exeter, burials of this type were so common (about 10% of all charcoal burials from the site) that excavators dubbed them “coverlet burials”. A partial burial excavated from the cemetery of St Helen-on-the-Walls, Aldwark, York, was “encased in a thick layer of clean charcoal” (Dawes and Magilton 1980, 16).

“Coverlets” could also be found over the body without a corresponding layer of charcoal under the body. Examples of this type have been found at York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 87) and Castle Green, Hereford (Shoesmith 1980, 27).

In some cases, charcoal was combined with other substances. Some of the charcoal burials excavated at Castle Green, Hereford, contained small amounts of grain,
apparently intentionally placed with the charcoal (Shoesmith 1980, 27-9). At Calke Abbey, Derbs, a single charcoal burial included a layer of charcoal as well as a layer of lime (National Trust 1992, 118). At Durham cathedral chapter house, a charcoal burial in a stone cist was laid on a layer of charcoal which in turn covered a layer of earth deposited inside the cist itself (Fowler 1883, 245).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 2.3:** Charcoal burial from Castle Green, Hereford, showing inclusion of grain and clay in burial. Note void left by coffin. After Shoesmith 1980, 28.

Charcoal burials can thus roughly be divided into four basic types:

1) Burials in which the body or coffin is laid upon a layer of charcoal,
2) burials in which the layer of charcoal is under the coffin and extends up the sides of the grave cut,
3) burials in which charcoal has been deposited both beneath and above the body or coffin, and
4) burials in which charcoal has been deposited only above the body or coffin.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to identify from existing notes or publications which type a burial falls into. Excavation reports or archives often simply refer to a
burial as a “charcoal burial”. Grave plans and photographs usually represent the grave after excavation to the bottom of the grave cut, which can make it difficult to identify whether a burial contained an upper layer of charcoal.

Nonetheless, variation in charcoal burial practice is notable – at some sites, a variety of different types are found. For instance, charcoal burials from Castle Green, Hereford (Figure 2.4) include both burials lying directly on a layer of charcoal and burials where the charcoal has been placed over and around the coffin. Similarly, charcoal burials from York Minster include both graves placed on charcoal beds and a grave with charcoal only above the body (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 87).

By recognizing diversity within the broad range of practices included in the term “charcoal burial”, it is possible to identify variation without creating definitions of charcoal burial that exclude some of the burials which have historically been covered by the term.
Figure 2.4: Sequence of charcoal burials from Castle Green, Hereford, showing both charcoal layers under coffin (74) and coffin voids (Shoesmith 1980, 24).

2.5 Identifying charcoal burial

Because of the durability of charcoal, and because of the large quantities of charcoal often involved, charcoal burials are comparatively easy to identify in the archaeological record. Unless the burial has been heavily disturbed, the charcoal layer will generally remain detectable. By contrast, other features like a coffin or an organic grave lining might leave little or no trace. In extreme cases, burials containing charcoal have been identified even when heavily disturbed. At the cemetery of St Mary Major, Exeter, a large number of small patches of charcoal, as little as 30 cm wide, were identified as the fragmentary remains of disturbed charcoal burials. In some cases, no skeletal evidence was recovered, and the burials were identified only by the presence of charcoal. Some of these burials were "fragmentary to the extent of
just being portions of the charcoal bed surviving” (Cathedral Close excavation archive EXEMS: 24/2005, context record cards). Given similar levels of disturbance, fragments of burials which did not contain charcoal would have been unlikely to be identified.

Despite this, it is not always possible to identify charcoal layers accurately. At St Bertelin’s church, Stafford, for example, the excavator, Adrian Oswald, identified a large area of black deposit found in the cemetery as the decayed remains of a large wooden cross of unusual design. C. A. Ralegh Radford concurred in this identification (Oswald 1955). However, Martin Carver has suggested that this patch of organic material was the layer of charcoal accompanying a charcoal burial (Biddle 1986, 9-10). The excavation was carried out in poor soil in adverse weather conditions (Oswald 1955, 3), possibly complicating identification. Since the site has been excavated, this possible alternative identification cannot be verified.

Other substances may be mistaken for charcoal in graves. Layers of carbonized wood are found in many late Saxon and medieval graves (Rodwell 1989: 163, Mays et al. 2007, 242). These may represent biers, grave covers, or parts of coffins. It can be difficult to distinguish between charred planks and a layer of charcoal. A “possible” charcoal burial in the cemetery of St Martin’s church at Wharram Percy, was originally identified as a possible charcoal burial (Hurst and Rahtz 1987, 58) but is now believed to be a charred-coffin burial or similar (Mays et al. 2007, 242). Just as Carver claims that Oswald mistook charcoal for decayed wood, it is possible for decayed wood to resemble charcoal. Ten graves excavated at Staple Gardens, Winchester in 1984 and 1989 are recorded as “charcoal burials,” but in some cases these graves appear to contain either carbonised or decayed wood (WMS Staple Gardens report).

Another type of burial sometimes misidentified as “charcoal burials” are burials where a small amount of charcoal is present in the grave. A number of burial practices involving charcoal are known from the Conversion Period well into the middle ages. Although charcoal is found either in the grave fill or associated with the body, none of these burial rites are usually considered to be “charcoal burial”. Examples include the presence of “grains” of charcoal associated with bodies at Camerton, Somerset (Horne
1928, 62-3), or the flecks of charcoal found in the fills of six graves at Addingham, West Yorkshire (Adams 1996, 165). A burial from Wootton Wawen, Warks contained “considerable charcoal flecking” while in another “the skeleton rested on a bed of loose stones and heavily charcoal stained soil with larger pieces of charcoal, all of which were concentrated around the skull” (James 1980, 43). In some cases, these may be considered together with charcoal burials. Some of the “charcoal burials” at Staple Gardens, for instance, contained only small quantities of charcoal (WMS Staple Gardens report). This type of find is relatively common: 15% of all graves at Raunds, Northants, contained some amount of charcoal (Boddington 1996, 13), although none of the deposits were large enough to qualify as a “charcoal” burial *per se*.

Despite these reservations, the term is in wide use and widely understood (Sprague 2005, 122). In shorter excavation reports, it is not unusual to read only that “a charcoal burial” or “charcoal burials” were excavated, without any more description of the graves themselves (e.g. Corbishley 1984, Guy 1979, Rodwell and Rodwell 1982). Despite some of the variability in the use of this term seen above, this probably represents a charcoal burial of Type 1: a simple burial, with coffin or without, lying on a charcoal layer.

2.6 “Charcoal burial” as a category

Nonetheless, the term “charcoal burial” is not without its problems. Interpretative categories are not present in the archaeological record; they are created and imposed on the record by archaeologists themselves. A term which describes a striking or recognizable phenomenon will gain wide currency, and in turn influence future interpretation.

The creation of artefact typologies can tend to emphasize the similarities between objects placed within those categories while tending to de-emphasize both their similarities with objects outside the category and their differences from objects within the category. Christopher Tilley has discussed this tendency in relation to the terms “megalith” and “megalithic”, which he claims have had a powerful effect on discourse in the archaeology of prehistoric Europe. Applying the same term to possibly
disparate phenomena tends to override alternate explanations. Tilley demonstrates that monuments classified as “megaliths” are often considered as part of a group even though the differences between them are far greater than the similarities (Tilley 1999, 82-101).

Examples of this can be seen in early medieval studies. For instance, graves from sites across Britain and the continent contain weapons; these were commonly described as “warrior burials” until relatively recently (Härke 1990). Modern works are more likely to use the term “weapon burials” (Härke 1997; Lucy 2000), but in both cases this presupposes that the weapons included in a grave carry greater interpretative weight than other artefacts. Burials from this period also include other types of finds such as jewellery, pottery, tools, and other types of artefact, but these types of assemblage are not used to name or describe categories of burial. A burial which contains a sword and a pot would be considered a weapon burial with a pot, while a burial containing a sword and no pot would also be considered a weapon burial. No one would suggest that the first burial was a “pottery burial” which also happened to contain a sword.

A similar trend is visible in the case of charcoal burials. In examining grave sites, it is common to read, for instance, that a charcoal burial contained head-support stones. A burial with a layer of charcoal without head-support stones would also be described as a “charcoal burial”. By contrast, a burial on a layer of charcoal with head-support stones and a burial with head-support stones but no layer of charcoal would almost never be classified together as “pillow-stone burials.” Just as the largest, most “dramatic” objects in the early Anglo-Saxon burials are granted interpretative primacy, charcoal takes precedence in some unwritten hierarchy of classification, presumably because of the large amount of charcoal and its striking appearance in the context of excavation.

It is important to remember that the inclusion of charcoal is merely one of many axes of variability in late Saxon and medieval burial practice. When a grave is referred to as a “charcoal burial”, an implicit statement is made about the relative importance of these axes; some, such as the presence of charcoal or cists, are used to create categories, while others are regarded as mere variants within those categories.
However, the variability of late Saxon burial practice, as discussed in Chapter 4, calls for an understanding of burial rites which is additive and inclusive rather than separated into restrictive categories. The addition of charcoal to a grave is only one of many practices which are combined in different ways to produce individual burials.

In this sense, “charcoal burial” *per se* does not exist. No effort has ever been made to demonstrate that burial with charcoal was recognized as a distinct type or burial rite in the late Saxon or medieval period. Until this can be established, it is more appropriate to think not of “charcoal burial” but of “the inclusion of charcoal within graves”, one of many possible axes of variation within a diverse late Saxon burial practice. The term “charcoal burial” is a convenient shorthand, but it is necessary always to be cautious to avoid assuming that this modern category was a historical reality.

Whatever reservations may exist about the term, the widespread presence of charcoal in graves of the late Saxon and medieval periods suggests that a real phenomenon is taking place. These charcoal layers are clearly intentionally and selectively deposited within a context which can be confidently associated with ritual and religious practice. Here the comparison to “weapon burials” returns. Extensive archaeological research on the weapons found in burial in the early Anglo-Saxon period suggests that weapons were indeed considered extremely important, and that powerful symbolic or supernatural values were associated with them. Thus, although the term “weapon burial” serves to create a category which may not actually have existed in Anglo-Saxon burial practice, it remains a valuable shorthand term, referring to burials which have one important symbolic element in common. Similarly, the term “charcoal burial” may encode a number of possibly inaccurate assumptions about late Anglo-Saxon burial practice. However, it is clear that a real phenomenon existed. It must be borne in mind that this phenomenon does not consist of a group with impenetrable barriers but rather represents one position on one of a number of axes contributing to the totality of a late Anglo-Saxon burial.

For the purposes of this thesis, then, the term “charcoal burial” will be used to refer to a late Saxon or medieval inhumation where the body is associated with a substantial layer of charcoal, either over or under the body or coffin. Charred-coffin burials and burials which merely contain a small amount of charcoal are excluded.
In some cases, it may not be possible to determine anything about a burial other than that the excavator chose to identify it as a “charcoal burial”. In such cases, the excavator’s identification must be accepted unless there are credible reasons to doubt it. Where reasons for doubt exist in the sites described in Chapter 5, they will be addressed in the site summaries.

2.7 Interpreting charcoal burial

Since the first recorded discussion of the rite, charcoal burial has gone from being an anomaly in a field where burial practice was not generally regarded as meaningful or important to a recognized part of a range of diverse burial practices in a society where death and the dead played an important role in religious life and the construction of identity. At the same time, comparative material from continental Europe has begun to be connected to the English examples, particularly charcoal burials from Lund in present-day Sweden (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963; Cinthio 1997, 2002; Mårtensson 1980). Although studies of English and Scandinavian charcoal burials have not influenced each other as much as they might, a number of similar trends can be seen in their discussion. Various interpretations have been proposed, mostly based on “common sense” analysis of the charcoal burial population from one site and limited comparison to other sites.

It is not the intention of this section to evaluate these interpretations of charcoal burial. Whether or not they are consistent with the evidence will be discussed in Chapter 14. The goal of this section is to outline the various interpretations that have been put forward for charcoal burial since it began to become recognized as a late Saxon variant burial practice in the 1960s.

It is tempting to arrange these explanations in chronological order; in fact, as the following section will show, they can be divided into three rough thematic groups. All these types of explanation have been suggested for charcoal burial throughout its history, although some become more or less common over time.
Broadly speaking, there have been three types of response to interpreting charcoal burial within the archaeological literature. The first is simply to ignore any possible “meaning” of charcoal burial. This is an understandable response within the constraints of medieval churchyard excavation. Many reports simply list the presence of “charcoal burials” and leave the matter there. No attempt is made to interpret the rite as having either a functional or a symbolic character. Charcoal burials may provide useful evidence that a cemetery is late Saxon in date, but like the other variations in burial practice during this period, they are not regarded as events that can be meaningfully interpreted. In other cases, the lack of discussion is justified by the enigmatic nature of the burials – since there are no textual sources for the rite, there is no simple way to understand its meaning.

The second approach to interpreting charcoal burial is to regard it as a functional practice. Normally these explanations are connected with its adsorbent properties, which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 12. Patrick Ottaway (1982, 131) argued that charcoal packing was “probably intended to absorb bodily fluids” resulting from decomposition. The inclusion of charcoal in the grave is seen as a sanitary measure, intended to keep the coffin or grave cut clean and prevent odours from escaping. This explanation has appeared in a number of other discussions of charcoal burial (Thompson 1979, Dawes and Magilton 1980, Hadley 2001). Some archaeologists (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963, 54) have suggested that adsorbency may have been considered especially important in cases where the deceased had suffered from an epidemic disease or where the body had to be transported some distance.

Adsorbency is not the only proposed functional explanation for charcoal burial. Other explanations have included the idea that charcoal was intended to mark the location of the grave (Fowler 1880), perhaps to protect against future intercutting, or that it was intended to prevent the body from decaying (Richards 2002, 164). These explanations are similar to discussions of charcoal burial in many reports: the interpretation is presented as highly speculative, outside the main body of the article. In Richards’s paper, no more than one or two sentences are devoted to the purpose of the charcoal deposit, while Fowler places his suggested explanation in a footnote. This type of
“blue-sky” speculation actually contributes a great deal to the discussion by reminding us that the two main explanations for charcoal burial are not the only ones.

In recent years, functional explanations for the inclusion of charcoal appear to have lost some of their popularity, although they have not completely disappeared. A second group of historians and archaeologists has focused more on the symbolic elements of charcoal burial, viewing it as a ritual, liturgical or magical act rather than a pragmatic one. The most developed of these arguments is the interpretation of Victoria Thompson (2004, 118-22), who identifies the charcoal in charcoal burials as being associated with ash, an important symbol of penitence and mourning. Thompson’s discussion of charcoal burial is the most substantial to date and is discussed further in Chapter 14.

Christopher Daniell (1996, 158) similarly argued that charcoal burial was one of a range of symbolic acts which allowed penance to “continue into the grave”. For Daniell, charcoal burial is one of a number of similar penitential practices, possibly including the placement of stones within the grave. Daniell’s suggestion that substances deposited in graves were conceived of as playing an active role will be important in my analysis of charcoal burial.

Other symbolic explanations for the role of charcoal burial have been proposed, not only for English charcoal burials but for those found in Scandinavia as well. Christopher Daniell, for instance, has suggested that charcoal burial may have been intended to make the grave a comfortable resting-place for the deceased (1996, 158). Other suggestions have included that of Ragnar Blomqvist and Anders Mårtensson, who connected Swedish examples with the pious desire for the soul’s salvation (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963, 54). It is worth noting that Blomqvist and Mårtensson offer both symbolic and practical interpretations of charcoal burial. Once again, most of these are brief discussions, almost casual in their presentation. Interpretations are seldom supported by direct argument. No archaeologist or historian has attempted to examine in what way charcoal burial was supposed to communicate its symbolic content to the mourners.
The connection with Scandinavia has sometimes been treated as an important factor in interpreting charcoal burial. C.J. Ainsworth, discussing charcoal burials from St Mary’s, Goring-by-Sea, argued that the presence of charcoal was related to Scandinavian funerary practices, possibly because of a symbolic connection to the practice of cremation (Fox-Wilson 1987, 13-14).

A common thread in many of these analyses of charcoal burial is that the practice is associated with status. It is generally believed to denote high social status (Fleming 1993, Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, Cinthio 2002), either because extra effort in burial necessarily denotes high status or because it correlates to another trait, such as coffin elaboration. Although these interpretations show that the meaning of the rite is being considered, they tend to imply the existence of a single linear scale for status, rather than understanding an individual’s status as a set of identities or affiliations. If “high status” is indicated by charcoal burial, an assumption which I will suggest is likely to be based in fact, what is the connection between interment on a layer of charcoal and possessing high social status? How did this particular symbol come to be associated with high status? Furthermore, why do some apparently high-status individuals receive this rite but not others?

Until now, the study of charcoal burial has gone along with the general trends in late Anglo-Saxon funerary studies. Early archaeologists remarked on the presence of charcoal burials, but the agenda of research was solidly focused on ecclesiastical and architectural history, ignoring the questions raised by burial archaeology. After the proliferation of urban excavations in the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when medieval archaeology was beginning to flourish, charcoal burial became well-known, but interpretation and analysis was limited. Most discussions of charcoal burial were confined to off-the-cuff, “common-sense” analyses, not considering the ways in which this variant burial rite might be part of the construction of identity or belief about death. Additionally, a focus on excavation and the problems of publishing large projects kept some data off the archaeological “market” well into the 1980s and 1990s. Some important sites remain unpublished. Delays are of course common in all areas of archaeological publishing, but the absence of a single cohesive study of, for example, the extensive cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester is regrettable.
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Nonetheless, recent work on late Anglo-Saxon and medieval funerary practice has opened new possibilities in the study of this period. New ways of approaching the evidence, both material and textual, can be combined with the data generated by a generation of intense cemetery excavation and centuries of textual scholarship.

Having cast doubt on the utility of "charcoal burial" as an analytical category, it remains to demonstrate that the inclusion of charcoal in graves is worth studying. The deposits imperfectly represented by this term are clearly intentional, clearly occur within a ritual context, and, although relatively limited in numbers, are found at a wide range of sites. Consequently, this distinctive practice provides a unique approach to the burial archaeology of the late Anglo-Saxon period. By examining various aspects of this rite, we can learn more about the practice of burial in late Anglo-Saxon England generally. The next chapter discusses some of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this approach.
3. Theory and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter concluded by outlining a variety of interpretations proposed by archaeologists and historians for the practice of charcoal burial. Each of these interpretations draws on a set of ideas and assumptions, seldom made explicit, both about the context of burial practice in the Late Saxon world, and about how burials are to be interpreted in general. These occur within a context of changing ideas about funerary archaeology, both within the Anglo-Saxon period and in general. This chapter outlines some of these different approaches, with special emphasis on those which have most informed my analysis of charcoal burial. In addition, some of the special methodological problems relating to studying burial within a Christian context in a historical period are considered.

3.2 Approaches to the funerary archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England

The history of funerary archaeology has long been dominated by attempts to use grave-goods or the distribution of graves to gain information about social structure or other elements of living society (e.g. Myres 1969). In its earliest form, this mode of archaeological thought was expressed by early archaeologists who posited direct relationships between funeral customs and “peoples” (Lucy 2000, 11-14; examples include Wright 1852, Leeds 1913). Artefacts found in graves were considered primarily as works of art and as indicators of ethnic identity; changes in burial practice therefore indicated changes in population rather than changes in burial practice within a given population. Ethnicity was also associated with ritual, religion and mythology, particularly in the case of Anglo-Saxon England, where a particular type of paganism, reconstructed from later German, Scandinavian and Icelandic sources, was believed to correlate with “Germanic” identity. This reconstruction of religious belief was derived largely from textual sources. In the case of Anglo-Saxon England, there were usually textual sources from much later periods, such as the Icelandic Eddas, which were assumed to be relevant because created by people sharing an ethnic heritage with the early Anglo-Saxons (Wilson 1992, 3-4).
Grave-goods in Anglo-Saxon burials were therefore generally assumed to be the possessions of the deceased, being taken to the afterlife, or possibly offerings to the gods. The relationship between the deceased and the grave-goods was therefore one of identity. A burial with a spear, for instance, was the burial of a warrior.

Similarly, religion was assumed to be of paramount importance in medieval burials, especially because a long tradition of the study of medieval Christianity from a historical perspective meant that it was believed to be well-understood. Christian burial was generally thought to be a reflection of Christian beliefs about the afterlife, and not to be a worthwhile subject for research.

In 1985, Lorna Watts and Philip Rahtz eloquently summarized some of these problems in attitudes toward church excavation. Discussing their excavations at the church of St Mary-le-Port, Bristol, Rahtz and Watts wrote:

Scant attention was paid to graves. This was principally due to lack of time and resources, and the decisions made that the structural and stratigraphic sequence was the principal aim of the excavation; but also because in the early 1960s the importance of the investigation of medieval Christian cemeteries had hardly been realized ... The general impression, including the ‘official’ view of central government and local museum sponsorship, was that we knew all we needed to know about Christian burial, that in any case they had no finds, and that there was an element of impropriety in disturbing or even looking scientifically at interments of a community whose religious beliefs and mortuary practice were at least nominally those of our own day. ... By 1960 the Corporation of Bristol had issued strict orders that all disinterments should be done behind screens and all remains packed in wooden boxes for decent reinterment in municipal cemeteries (Watts and Rahtz 1985, 128).

Ironically, as Watts and Rahtz point out, the vaults underneath the church were therefore “emptied by unskilled workmen, any coffin being smashed in the process. In one case a lead coffin was put to one side and attacked by vandals for dubious reasons” (Watts and Rahtz 1985, 128).
It is only in the recent decades since this excavation that the archaeological potential of medieval burials, including those of the late Anglo-Saxon period, has finally come to be recognized, at least in some parts of the archaeological community. New studies have highlighted the mortuary variability of late Anglo-Saxon England (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). The work of Annia Cherryson, Jo Buckberry, and Dawn Hadley has focused attention on mortuary variability and burial location (Buckberry 2007, Hadley and Buckberry 2005, Cherryson 2007, Cherryson 2008), drawing out the complexities of burial in this period with detailed regional case studies. Similarly, Andrew Reynolds (1997, 2002) has examined marginal burials to show the ways in which burial location and body treatment were used to create social identity in the landscape.

In some ways, this development has paralleled developments in the wider world of mortuary archaeology, discussed in the next section.

### 3.3 Changing concepts of mortuary practice: the wider context

New developments in archaeological thought in the 1960s and 1970s questioned the possibility of using archaeological methods to determine past beliefs about death and the afterlife. Instead, cemeteries were seen primarily as a source of information about living society. This approach to understanding mortuary practice was typified by the work of Lewis Binford (e.g. Binford 1971). Burial practices, particularly the inclusion of grave goods, were believed to reflect the social rank or status of the deceased, a “social persona” which combined aspects of the roles the individual had played during life. Tainter (1975, 1) summarized this view, arguing that “both the structure and the organization of social systems, as well as the status positions occupied by the members of such systems, are symbolized at death through variations in the form of mortuary ritual... Since much of mortuary ritual is preserved in the archaeological record, the analysis of burial patterns can potentially yield detailed information concerning the social organization of prehistoric groups.” Although there were attempts to apply this type of reasoning to the provision of grave-goods or location of graves in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, this approach never became widespread in the field of Anglo-Saxon archaeology, possible because the previous culture-historical
model was so well entrenched. By contrast, the next wave of archaeological thinking about burial practice had a significant impact on studies of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Archaeological research in the 1980s began to focus on some of the weaknesses in the idea that burial rites simply reflected the “social persona”. Ian Hodder’s work on social symbolism (1982a, 1982b, 1987) set the tone generally, while archaeologists such as Michael Parker Pearson criticised processual concepts of burial practice. Hodder argued that processual claims to be able to infer social structure from burial practice were invalid because the relationship between social structure and burial practice was not uniform. Burial patterns were “not a direct behavioural reflection of social pattern”, but “structured through symbolically meaningful codes which can be manipulated in social strategies” (1982b, 10).

Although Michael Parker Pearson approached burial from a somewhat different, Marxist-influenced perspective, his case study of burials in modern Cambridge raised similar objections: because of differences in ideology between groups burying their dead in municipal cemeteries in modern Britain, social status was expressed in very different ways (1982). Parker Pearson found that large and elaborate monuments in modern cemeteries tended to correlate with marginal groups in society. Large and elaborate monuments did not necessarily express higher status, because some groups considered elaborate monuments appropriate to reflect high status while others did not (1982, 112). High-status sectors of the populace espoused an ideology of “dignified restraint” that ruled out elaborate commemorative monuments. The relationship between social structure and burial practice was thus translated through ideology.

Additionally, Parker Pearson argued that burials were used as part of strategies of dominance and control. The apparent uniformity of most modern British burials masks a society in which social inequality is pronounced. In this sense, both Parker Pearson and Hodder conceive of material culture in general and burial in particular as active. Burial practices do not passively reflect the values of a society, but are actively involved in creating and reproducing those values. This concept has been applied in a variety of ways in the study of Anglo-Saxon burials, discussed in more detail below.
These studies and others revealed the flaws inherent in simply equating social structure with burial practice. However, the reintroduction of ideology and symbolism as factors in the study of funerary archaeology raised some interpretative problems. For example, Parker Pearson’s case studies were from modern British culture, allowing Parker Pearson, himself British, an advantage in terms of understanding the social context within which those burials developed. However, this raises some problems when dealing with other societies. If Parker Pearson had been unable to ascertain the varying beliefs of communities within modern Cambridge, the social role of grave monuments could have remained opaque to him. Likewise, Hodder’s early examples of the interpretation of material culture came from societies where ethnographic information was readily available (1982a). If knowledge of the belief systems and cultural attitudes of a society is necessary in order to understand and explain its burial rites, how can archaeologists approach the study of burial rites in the past? After all, archaeologists frequently study burials in order to ascertain the belief systems and cultural attitudes of past societies. Despite having decisively rejected the previous model, modern archaeological theory seems to present the funerary archaeologist with a tricky chicken-and-egg problem.

This problem is doubly serious because of the increased emphasis on emotion and experience in funerary archaeology in recent years. The previous focus on gaining information about life in past societies has been augmented by work specifically focused on death and on attitudes toward death and the dying. For example, Sarah Tarlow has argued that personal reactions to the emotional stress of death are key to the understanding of funerary practice. Grief and bereavement, not masking ideologies or a desire to reflect social status, are major motivating factors in burial rites (Tarlow 1992, 1997a, 1999). Consequently, “archaeological approaches to death and commemoration which privilege the negotiation of power relationships can underestimate the importance of personal and emotional responses to bereavement and mortality” (Tarlow 1997a, 105).

Burial practices, Tarlow argues, represent emotional responses to the experience of bereavement, expressed through the symbols available to the people responsible for the burial. Although agreeing with Parker Pearson that burials do not necessarily represent the social status of the deceased accurately, Tarlow goes on to argue that
“burials only ‘disguise’ or ‘misrepresent’ the status of living individuals if one assumes that funerary rites should, when undisguised, naturally express the status of an individual through degree of magnificence”. Rather, Tarlow claims, “mortuary rites are culturally meaningful in different ways … we do not see the distortion of a true picture, but the expression of different meanings and different values” (Tarlow 1999, 23).

Once again, however, we are in a difficult position. The “expression of different meanings and different values” will both create and be the product of societal attitudes toward death and mourning. Archaeologists can interpret the symbolism of funerary practice in order to construct models of attitudes toward death and the dead in past societies, but without some knowledge of those attitudes, the symbolism itself may be difficult to interpret. Tarlow’s major work on this subject has dealt with modern burials, whether from present-day Britain (Tarlow 1992), the First World War (Tarlow 1997a), or historical Orkney (Tarlow 1999), although she has discussed some aspects of emotion and burial in the Viking period (Tarlow 1997b).

Nevertheless, Tarlow poses important questions for the archaeologist of funerary practice. The expression of emotions resulting from death is a key element of funerary archaeology. These emotions will be expressed through the meaningful, symbolic elements of burial practice. Both emotional responses and their expression are “socially constructed, rather than part of some universal and essential humanity” (Tarlow 1999, 35). Once again, this might superficially seem an insurmountable obstacle. Since emotional responses vary from culture to culture, it is not possible to understand them without reference to their social context. But since “emotions are constructed through practices and ways of communicating, which we see in the archaeological record” (Tarlow 1999, 35), we have access to that cultural context. Emotional responses are expressed through metaphor, and material metaphors can be understood by placing them in context (see below).

This is a main starting point for my investigation of charcoal burial. Anglo-Saxon burial practice is understood as representing an emotional response to death, expressed through one of a range of material metaphors available to the bereaved.
Other studies of death and burial suggest ways in which these metaphors may be interpreted and understood.

### 3.4 Meaning in early medieval burial: some recent studies

Studies of early medieval burial influenced by post-processual thinking have included the work of Ellen-Jane Pader (1982) and Helen Geake (1997). Pader’s analysis of grave-goods from early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries rejected both attempts to assign burials to ethnic groups or dates on the basis of artefact types as well as simplistic attempts to infer social structure on the basis of “wealth scores” (Pader 1982, 193-5). However, Pader was cautious about analyzing the symbolic meaning of grave-goods outside a broader understanding of the context: “the symbolic nature of material representation is such that the artifacts themselves must not be analyzed as if one explanation were universally appropriate, whether within a cemetery or within a region” (Pader 1982, 199).

Geake’s analysis of burials from the “Conversion Period” was more optimistic. “In addition to the basic theoretical stance that material culture is meaningful,” she argued, “decisions have to be made as to what the material culture of burial archaeology means” (Geake 1997, 4). Her study concluded that Conversion-period grave-goods were “being used to construct and express a pan-English neo-classical national identity”, one paralleled in other aspects of material culture (Geake 1997, 136).

Material metaphors often function by evoking loosely connected symbolic associations, rather than by clearly standing for specific concepts. Like Geake’s exploration of the way classical associations were used to create a new type of identity, recent work in the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England has explored some of the ways in which those associations were created in burials.

Martin Carver’s interpretation of the elaborate Conversion Period cemetery at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, draws on a long tradition of writing about this site, particularly the rich ship-burial excavated from Mound 1 in 1939. Interpretations of this burial have tended to include references to literature, especially the Old English poem *Beowulf.*
However, Carver has forcefully argued that seeking firm analogies to other cultures or to specific literary images within the burial misses the point. The Sutton Hoo Mound 1 burial, Carver argues, is

The result of a historically unique but ritually derivative event ... a palimpsest of allusions ... Sutton Hoo is not the reality behind Beowulf, because it is itself a heroic poem in which the choice of grave goods and the burial rite were metaphors for the political anxieties and aspirations of the burial party at a pivotal moment ... . The sceptre with its form derived from the Byzantine emperors, its faces derived from Germanic ritual and its stag derived from Celtic art, is a feast of metaphors, a stage-prop in a theatre of death, a triumph of 'intertextuality,' in which a seventh-century working party (assisted by a later one from the British Museum) generated a striking image to serve the politics of their day (Carver 2002, 484).

By interpreting the burial as a “heroic poem,” Carver casts it as an act meant to create allusions rather than direct references to external reality. Symbols do not exist as codes to be read off by the viewer of the grave or funeral, but as emotional, legendary, and aesthetic keys, prompting the participant to create his or her own mental connections. These symbols are derived from sources available to the participants in the burial rite, and used to create a new set of meanings or impressions, just as the creators of the Sutton Hoo burial used symbols from Byzantine, Celtic, Germanic and Frankish art to create the physical expression of a new identity.

Carver’s concept of the “palimpsest of allusions” points toward the associative nature of grave-goods in this Conversion Period burial. In some ways, this concept also applies to charcoal burial. Rather than identifying a specific meaning which might be attached to this practice, I propose to examine the possible symbolic associations of charcoal burial. It is possible that in a literate society (or at least a society in which some percentage of the religious elite were literate), meanings might be more tightly defined, but there is still, as will be seen, no evidence for a ‘code’ of burial practices. As we shall see in Chapter 4, it is not possible to group late Anglo-Saxon burials into tightly defined categories; rather, they must be understood as combinations of common symbolic elements intended to create appropriate states of mind by appeal to
historical, religious and folkloric ways of interpreting the material culture of the grave. Carver’s analysis of pagan Anglo-Saxon burial in the period of transition exemplified by Sutton Hoo Mound 1 identifies the furnished burial as a work of art, a subjective, impressionistic object, felt and experienced rather than “read”. Although the interpretation of burial may have been more constrained by the existence of institutional religion, I contend that charcoal burials may be understood as similar in some ways.

Carver’s approach to burial can apply not only to pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon burials, but also to the graves of the late Anglo-Saxon period. As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, the late Anglo-Saxon church did not necessarily exercise any central control over the practice of burial. The diversity and combination of burial elements suggests that burials were being created out of a set of possible symbolic references and ingredients from various sources. The origins and material characteristics of objects or substances used in the graves may have been among these sources.

Howard Williams (2006) also views burials from early medieval Britain as performances, specifically as sequences of events intended to create social memories of the deceased. Although archaeologists encounter burials as single contexts and tend to think of them in the form of the ubiquitous grave plan, in fact burial rituals are sequences of events, and Williams argues that these events make up a series of acts of display and concealment – of the body, of accompanying grave goods, and of the grave itself – which are used in the creation of memory:

To remember is more than to recall events and places: memory operates in a social context and therefore can be regarded, in part at least, as a collective cultural and social phenomenon.... Equally, memory is not a passive phenomenon. To remember is more than to passively recall events and places. Memory in a social sense is a question of active participation and practice: to participate in bodily acts, to perform in rituals (Williams 2006, 3).

The concept of “social memory,” as pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), is central to Williams’s understanding of early medieval burial practice. Burials are theatrical, participatory events which have as their goal the creation of both social and
individual memory. Unlike individual memory, social memory consists of the narrative which society at large creates relating to the past – in this case, to the life of the deceased and his or her meaning with relation to society. Social memory is constructed through both commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices (Connerton 1989, 7). Funerary customs such as burial rites, grave-markers, and post-mortem commemoration fit into both categories, creating and transmitting social practices. Following Hertz (1960) and Huntington and Metcalf (1991), Williams believes that burial is a transformative process:

The mourners transform the corpse, and in so doing, the body affects the living through its presence and changing form, influencing the way the funeral is remembered, and how the dead are regarded. Linked to this process, the mourners selectively forget elements of the deceased’s identity and create a new ‘ancestral’ identity for the deceased through the ritual process (Williams 2006, 21).

Williams believes that it is possible to use archaeology to examine the “technologies of remembrance” (Williams 2006, 21-3), that is, to understand how memories were created by the individual stages of the funeral process. However, Williams goes on to argue, although we can see the processes by which memories were created, we cannot know what those memories themselves were (Williams 2006, 20).

Drawing on Williams’s work, Zoe Devlin (2007) has analyzed early and middle Anglo-Saxon funerary practices as mnemonic events, interpreting grave goods, grave location, and other aspects of burial rite as “technologies of memory” used to create lasting memories for the deceased as well as to create and negotiate relationships between the living and the dead which had to be maintained over time.

In each of these studies, burial is viewed as a creative, syncretic act intended to create distinctive symbolic impressions on its participants. In the case of late Anglo-Saxon burial, this may have been explicit in the planning of burial ceremonies: the clergy, as will be further discussed in Chapter 14, were actively concerned with using the symbolic elements of religious rites to communicate Christian messages. This concept could logically extend to funerary practice. Although the material elements of the
burial, chosen to create these associations, were not as spectacular as the elements found in earlier burials, they can still be interpreted in the same way, as guides to particular symbols and their associated emotional or spiritual states.

Although Williams’s reservations about the impossibility of reconstructing meaning may apply to many areas of funerary archaeology, I suggest that in the case of late Anglo-Saxon funerary practice, it is possible to make limited inferences about the impressions or sense-pictures charcoal burial was intended to create. Conversion to Christianity did not rob burial practice of its active, theatrical role in the creation and reproduction of belief or of attitudes about death, the dead and the afterlife. In fact, the intellectual and aesthetic trends of the late Anglo-Saxon church, discussed in more detail in Chapter 14, may make late Anglo-Saxon burials more susceptible to this type of analysis than earlier burials. The organization responsible for perpetuating the “overarching cosmology and ideology” of this period left extensive textual, artistic, and material evidence for the symbols it used to communicate and the meanings they were intended to convey, as well as evidence that it was actively concerned with communicating its beliefs through ritual symbolism.

This approach to burial practice can already be seen in Roberta Gilchrist and Barney Sloane’s 2005 study of medieval monastic cemeteries, Requiem. Utilizing data from 76 cemeteries in England, Scotland and Wales, Gilchrist and Sloane reject the traditional view of medieval burial as standardized and uninteresting, arguing instead that “the material culture of medieval burial actively represented relations between the living and the dead, and framed the context for memory of the individual” (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 5). Different aspects of burial practice, from the preparation of the body to post-burial treatment, represent the agency of the mourners and serve as “a means of demonstrating private and communal belief that was expressed both diversely and intimately” (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, xv).

These approaches to death and burial in the periods before and after the one being examined here share several characteristics. All view the elements of burial practice as symbolic and intentional, expressing beliefs, emotions and ideas through the medium of the burial rite. Additionally, all view the burial sequentially rather than as a single event. Lastly, in each case burial is viewed as a way in which symbolic
associations and impressions are used to create meanings and memories for the participants.

This does not mean that we can say with certainty exactly what impressions were created in the case of a specific burial. Naturally, no two individuals will have experienced a burial rite in exactly the same way. Historical archaeologists have struggled with the issue of disparate interpretations of symbolic statements which must have occurred historically (e.g. Beaudry et al. 1991). Even given an action with clear symbolic intent, we cannot assume that people passively accepted its meaning. They may have disputed it, resisted it, altered it, or interpreted it in many different ways. We cannot accurately determine emotional or spiritual reactions which took place entirely within the minds of participants or observers. Nonetheless, certain sectors of society will have shared a common symbolic vocabulary or "palette." Other practices related to death and the dying will tend to reflect elements of that symbolic vocabulary. Similarly, textual and artistic sources can provide clues to the symbolic associations which might have been carried by materials such as charcoal. Late Anglo-Saxon England provides a wealth of possible methods by which to reconstruct this symbolic palette. Textual and artistic sources can provide clues to the ways in which the literate, usually monastic religious elite who created them would have perceived the burial rite. However, these are not the only possible sources by which to understand the symbolic content of late Anglo-Saxon burials.

3.5 Symbolism, materiality and material culture

Although textual sources can provide important information about the ways in which ritual events such as burials were constructed, the study of the material culture of burial provides a different perspective. Recent thinking in archaeology has focused on the active role of material culture in human society: "material is not seen ... as just a passive product of economic behaviour, but as an instrumental component of symbolic actions" (Beaudry et al. 1991, 174). But material culture does not convey meaning in the same way that text does. The meanings of material culture are created and experienced differently from the meanings of texts.
Interpreting symbolism in the archaeological record can be a difficult proposition. A strong tradition of writing on the subject exists in other fields. The symbolism of material culture can seldom be understood by direct correlation but instead functions by evocation. Material components of burial evoke elements of social memory associated with the artefact, substance or place being encountered. They may also, more rarely, be part of a formalized system of metaphor. But how are these metaphors and evocations to be understood?

Unlike linguistic metaphors, material metaphors are to some degree constrained both by the physical properties of objects or substances and by their social uses. In linguistic metaphors, the relationship between the sign and the signified is arbitrary in most cases. There is no inherent connection between, for instance, the word “charcoal” and the substance itself. By contrast, the symbolism of a material object or substance will tend to be related to its physical properties, its origin, or its uses in society. These metaphors “need to be understood temporally in their actional and biographical contexts: how the artefact is produced, and from what sources in raw materials, the manner in which these materials may be combined in a technological process, its subsequent exchange and consumption contexts, how it may be destroyed, what is done to the thing, how it is used and in what sequence it occurs in relation to other artefacts in a series of events” (Tilley 1999, 264).

Tilley uses the example of a restaurant advertising itself with the image of a pot. The pot is vaguer than, for instance, a sign bearing the word “restaurant.” It conveys the concept of “restaurant” by its associations with cooking, but a similar sign might also advertise, for instance, a potter. However, although there is some play in the interpretation of the symbol, it is not limitless. A restaurant would be less likely to advertise itself with the image of, for instance, a bicycle. The roles of the object in society constrain its possible meanings to observers within that society, although they may simultaneously make the meaning hard to grasp without the necessary context.

Because of this constrained relationship, it is possible to identify some of the symbolic aspects of grave deposits such as charcoal. It is necessary to review the physical properties of charcoal, as well as to determine how, where and by whom it was produced in Anglo-Saxon society. Similarly, the distribution and use of charcoal
will have had a major influence on how it was perceived by participants in funeral rites. An object’s symbolic associations cannot simply be “read off” from its physical properties – once again, we must look outside the object itself, using both textual and archaeological sources to determine the context within which it occurred. When that context is identified, we can determine some of the symbolic associations of the substance, and therefore the possible reasons for it to be included in the burial process.

3.6 Archaeology and History

Unlike archaeologists who study prehistoric cultures, the student of the later Anglo-Saxon period is studying a literate culture, although not one where literacy appears to have been widespread (Kelly 1990). A variety of texts has been preserved, and these texts, particularly the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, have been used by generations of historians to develop an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon period (e.g. Stenton 1971). An extensive literature on Anglo-Saxon history exists although, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is only recently that archaeology has begun to play a serious part in the study of the later Anglo-Saxon period.

Archaeology and history, in the sense of the study of textual sources, have often enjoyed an uneasy relationship, with archaeology sometimes thought of as being merely an auxiliary discipline used to fill in the gaps in the textual sources or provide examples to illustrate facts ascertained by history. Another common view is that although the historical sources can be biased toward particular groups, or focused only on certain types of events, archaeology preserves an accurate record of people and processes ignored for the most part by textual sources. Archaeology is therefore presented as a more “democratic” discipline, unearthing the stories of those neglected by literate elites (Moreland 2001, 10-20).

Within the study of the early medieval period, archaeology and history have been cooperating profitably for some time. Most major archaeological projects involve at least some analysis of the textual sources, and Martin Carver (2002, 489, 492-3) has advocated an even closer integration between the two disciplines in the study of this period. This thesis will make extensive use of textual sources, which can shed valuable light on beliefs and practices related to burial in the late Anglo-Saxon period.
However, Bailey Young (1992), among others, has warned of the possible pitfalls of textual sources being consulted by archaeologists without a background in historical source-criticism. The specific difficulties of dealing with textual sources from the late Anglo-Saxon period illustrate the potential problems. Late Anglo-Saxon documents, especially those relating to religious belief and practice, are not simply journalistic descriptions of the situation as it actually existed; they are creative expressions of ideals, often set in a polemical context. For instance, the prolific late Anglo-Saxon homilist and hagiographer Ælfric of Eynsham discusses fitting conduct for priests in his pastoral letters (Whitelock et al. 1981). The picture Ælfric paints is startlingly negative: priests are not well-educated, and must be prohibited from a whole range of irresponsible and irreligious behaviour. But Ælfric, a monk writing in an age of monastic reform, was a harsh critic of the secular clergy, with an interest in portraying them as negligent and incompetent in contrast to regular monastic communities. His bleak picture of the level of spirituality among late Anglo-Saxon priests must be understood within the context in which it originated. Many of the late tenth and eleventh-century liturgical or homiletic texts derive from this reform movement.

Although this means that making good use of textual sources requires a grounding in their context, in a way it also means that textual and archaeological sources can be considered in the same way with respect to funerary archaeology. Sarah Tarlow (1999, 3-4) has summarized the relationship with reference to modern historical archaeology: “rather than thinking in terms of written records being more ‘biased’, or archaeological evidence less informative, students of the recent past now recognize that all human action, including the creation of both material and written ‘texts’ is ‘interested’; that is, that the particular social context of the authors helps to structure the things they do and their ways of doing them. These interests, far from being distortions of the true past, are important to our understanding of history and should be the focus of our study.”

Ælfric’s polemics, to return to the previous example, are therefore better considered not as distortions of actual Anglo-Saxon religious practice, but as informative about their creator, his viewpoints and his social context. The same is true of charcoal burial or any burial practice, which cannot be read as simply reflecting some fact or set of
facts about the life of the deceased, but must be seen as an attempt to create a series of symbolic associations conveying messages about life, death and the body. It is the substance of those messages and the ways in which they were expressed in charcoal burial that are the focus of this thesis. By studying both texts and burials, it should be possible to place the rite itself in context, allowing its many possible symbolic associations to be understood.

In this thesis, therefore, I have treated textual and archaeological evidence as two aspects of the same set of cultural and liturgical symbols. The organization of Christianity in later Anglo-Saxon England may have narrowed and formalized the symbolic palette of burial beyond Carver’s loose ‘palimpsest of allusions’, but the diversity of burial shown in Chapter 4 suggests the absence of a single overarching symbolic system.

I will therefore examine a range of potential symbolic associations, including the use, production, appearance, and physical characteristics of charcoal, together with textual attitudes toward the body, the grave, and other elements of burial. Additionally, symbolic evidence can be compared to spatial and chronological distribution of charcoal burials themselves. This evidence is synthesized in Chapters 14 and 15.

3.7 Data collection and methodology

A substantial body of textual sources from late Anglo-Saxon England exists, and much of this is relevant to establishing the context of charcoal burial. Old English and Latin texts consulted for this purpose include law codes, wills, charters, chronicles, and homilies.

The primary body of data for this research is of course the charcoal burial cemeteries themselves. In fact, compiling a complete list of charcoal burial sites provides some major challenges. Like other variant elements in late Anglo-Saxon burial practice, charcoal burials have not always been recorded or listed as such. Searching the catalogue of the Archaeology Data Service (http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/, accessed 14 Feb 2008), for instance, returns only four results for “charcoal burial”, although the ADS catalogue in fact contains records of dozens of sites where charcoal burials have been
excavated. Different record-holders index their collections differently, and “charcoal burial” appears to have become recognized as an important category only gradually. Many HERs still do not use the term, and sites which are flagged with “charcoal burial” are not necessarily sites with a large number of burials of this type.

The collection of site data therefore involved the consultation of published work, museum archives and unpublished reports. A web site cataloguing sites as they were located was created (http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/~jeh30/), and this was circulated to relevant groups, leading to a number of contacts from informants. City and county Sites and Monuments Records, now mostly renamed Historic Environment Records, were also contacted. Much of the information presented in Chapters 5 and 6 was obtained by a lengthy process, familiar to most archaeologists and historians, of searching through excavation reports and archaeological journals, following references and attempting to locate sites of the desired type. This diverse process of data gathering would not have been possible without the generous assistance of many individuals listed in the Acknowledgments. Only sites within the modern country of England were examined, although the borders of a modern nation-state and a medieval kingdom may be somewhat different in extent and clarity.

Gathering data on a number of fronts simultaneously, consulting a variety of databases and record holders as well as published sources, was necessary because, given the current state of recording and indexing, there is simply no way to conduct a single systematic search of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. A central database or gazetteer, of the type that exists for other periods or regions, would be an invaluable asset to the archaeologist of the period. At present, however, in order to create anything like a comprehensive list, a number of complementary methods must be used.

More sites may exist; it is impossible to prove their absence. Additionally, it is very possible that a large number of charcoal burials have gone unrecorded even at excavated late Anglo-Saxon sites, partly because of the difficulty of distinguishing charcoal burials from some other types of burials (discussed in Chapter 2), because late Anglo-Saxon burials are given a low priority, or because post-exavation recording or data storage has been inadequate. In addition to possible difficulties identifying charcoal burial sites, it may be that sites of this type have not been
excavated in certain regions, owing to local variation in development or research agenda. This problem is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Although the problems described above offer challenges to anyone attempting to study any type of burial in the late Anglo-Saxon period, it has been possible, by pursuing multiple avenues of investigation, to identify 41 charcoal burial sites, as well as a number of sites which may have produced charcoal burials. This is, it is hoped, as close to a complete listing of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries containing charcoal burials as can be achieved given the limitations of the data. Unfortunately, it was not possible to gather as much data as was hoped for two key sites, the cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester. Because the site is still being prepared for publication, it was not possible to gain access to the complete records of the excavation, including either complete demographic data or site plans. This information would have been particularly valuable because of the very large numbers of charcoal burials recovered from these cemeteries, which would have made detailed analysis of the demographic data possible. Fortunately, however, a number of articles have been published on the cemeteries (Biddle 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1975a, 1975b, 1976, 1983; Kjolbye-Biddle 1975, 1992), and from the evidence published in these, including conclusions drawn from cemetery data, it is possible to reconstruct some aspects of these cemeteries. It is to be hoped that the final publication will not vary significantly from the data presented in these articles.

Within the data set, an effort has been made to assemble as much contextual detail relating to the charcoal burials as possible. Each site entry therefore includes:

- the name and location of the site
- the general historical background (e.g. of the city or town)
- the specific historical background of the church or cemetery (where known)
- the circumstances and extent of the excavation
- general information on the cemetery gained from excavation, including its history, size and other characteristics
- as much data as is available about the charcoal burials, including number, location, skeletal data, grave form, other inclusions, and any dating evidence.
This data is then analyzed in subsequent chapters to identify patterns in the
distribution of sites as well as in dating, demography and the locations of burials
within churchyards. Some of the sites included in Chapter 5 have limited available
data. In some cases, this is because the excavation is too old, as at Conisbrough, S.
Yorks, Hastings, or Durham (Miller 1804, Ross 1857, Fowler 1880), or because the
excavators lacked the time or resources necessary to make a full record, as at Exeter
Castle or Bosham (S. Blaylock, pers. comm., Tatton-Brown and Worssam 2006). As a
result, the data set used in each chapter is a slightly different subset of the main data
collection.

Despite some of the limitations of the available data, Chapter 5 contains descriptive
summaries of every English cemetery known to contain one or more charcoal burials.
4. Burial Practice in Late Anglo-Saxon England

4.1 Introduction

The presence or absence of charcoal in graves is only one of a large number of variables in the late Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest period. Although often thought of as uniform, burial in this period displays a great deal of diversity, suggesting numerous intentional or customary choices in the funeral process. A comprehensive description of Anglo-Saxon and medieval burial practice, encompassing its many nuances and variations, is beyond the scope of this work, but if charcoal burial is to be understood it must be understood contextually. This chapter provides an overview of the many possible areas of variation in late Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest burial practice, and identifies some of the most commonly found elements within those areas of variation.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the archaeology of burial practice in the late Anglo-Saxon and high medieval period has only really become a major part of British archaeology since the end of the Second World War. Prior to this point, much more scholarly attention was focused on early burials, and to some extent this remains the case. Cemeteries of the early Anglo-Saxon period (from approximately the mid-fifth to seventh centuries AD) in England may contain cremations as well as inhumations, frequently with extensive grave-goods. Jewellery, dress accessories, vessels, and weapons are common features of these graves, and these have been the subject of detailed typological analysis. Early studies tended to focus on artefacts from an ethnographic or art-historical perspective, while more recent work has addressed issues of status, gender, age, and the symbolism of funerary practice (e.g. Geake 1997, Lucy 1997, Pader 1982, Stoodley 1999).

Toward the end of this period, distinctive changes in burial practice can be perceived. Far from becoming standardized, a high degree of diversity in funerary practice remains, but the types of burials found differ from the early period. Accompanied burials generally have fewer grave goods than furnished burials from the early Saxon period (Geake 1997, 124-7). At the same time, so-called “princely burials” such as the inhumations at Sutton Hoo, Snape, or Taplow begin to appear (Carver 2005, Filmer-
Sankey 2001, Geake 1997, 146-7). Finally, cemeteries without grave-goods begin to proliferate in this period, although these are difficult to date or identify (Cherryson 2008, 119-20). Some of these are associated with churches, while others, which may contain a small number of furnished graves, are not (Geake 2003, 149-52). Only a small number of churchyard cemeteries can be dated to this period. The decline of grave-goods in this “Final Phase” or “Conversion Period” has traditionally been ascribed to the influence of Christian beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, but Helen Geake and others have argued that more complex processes are at work (Geake 1997, 2003). Different groups were going through a complex process of adaptation and reaction to Christianity, which variously may have meant adopting elements of Christian burial practice, asserting pagan identity, or employing elements of both traditions.

Conversion was presumably a partial and lengthy process. Even once Christianity was widespread, church control over burial practice does not seem to have been the norm for some time. Early textual sources recount the burial in churches or churchyards of high-status individuals such as bishops or royalty (see Section 4.12), but there is no evidence as to whether this was a widespread practice. In Wessex, for instance, Annia Cherryson (2008, 116) characterizes the transition to burial in churchyards as “far from rapid or as straightforward as traditionally thought”. In fact, a small number of 7th-century burials in cemeteries associated with churches coexist with burials in cemeteries with no known church as well as with barrow burials. Some non-churchyard cemeteries appear to have been long-lived, and cemeteries of this type are found well into the ninth and tenth centuries, including some cemeteries founded in the seventh century, such as the field cemeteries at Bevis’ Grave, Hampshire and Templecombe, Somerset (Cherryson 2008, 118). Cemeteries with no associated church are known from towns which have also produced large contemporary churchyard cemeteries, suggesting that the two types of cemetery may have coexisted. (Cherryson 2008, 119-21).

Some cemeteries from this period eventually develop into late Anglo-Saxon churchyard cemeteries, such as Castle Green, Hereford, which has early graves of probable seventh-century date (Shoesmith 1980, 24-5). Overall, the balance seems to have shifted toward churchyard burial beginning in the mid- or late eighth century,
Sankey 2001, Geake 1997, 146-7). Finally, cemeteries without grave-goods begin to proliferate in this period, although these are difficult to date or identify (Cherryson 2008, 119-20). Some of these are associated with churches, while others, which may contain a small number of furnished graves, are not (Geake 2003, 149-52). Only a small number of churchyard cemeteries can be dated to this period. The decline of grave-goods in this “Final Phase” or “Conversion Period” has traditionally been ascribed to the influence of Christian beliefs regarding death and the afterlife, but Helen Geake and others have argued that more complex processes are at work (Geake 1997, 2003). Different groups were going through a complex process of adaptation and reaction to Christianity, which variously may have meant adopting elements of Christian burial practice, asserting pagan identity, or employing elements of both traditions.

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with the proportion of this type of burial increasing throughout the period. By the end of the ninth century, it appears to have been the norm (Blair 2005, 243-4; Hadley and Buckberry 2005, 125-6). It can therefore be seen that variation in burial practice was a common feature of the Middle as well as the late Anglo-Saxon period, particularly in terms of varying burial location. It is within this period of transition and variation that charcoal burial first begins to appear. By the late Anglo-Saxon period, churchyards appear to have been the most common location for graves, but as we will see, significant variation remained in other aspects of burial.

4.2 Common aspects of Late Anglo-Saxon burial

The "normal" or "typical" burial of this period is an unaccompanied supine inhumation, oriented with the head to the west. The hands may be found in a variety of positions on the body. Dress fasteners such as buckles, brooches and wrist-clasps are common finds in early Saxon graves. These are generally taken as indicative of clothed burial. However, such items are very rarely found with the body in the later period, suggesting that the normal mode of inhumation was naked in a shroud. Textual sources such as the homilies of Ælfric describe the dead body as being wrapped in a shroud (reaef) (Thompson 2004, 34), and this is supported by images such as the Bayeux Tapestry's depiction of Edward the Confessor being carried to the grave in a shroud, although to what extent images of this type represent actual practice is unclear. Bronze pins, possibly used to fasten shrouds, are found accompanying some inhumations at sites such as St Helen-on-the-Walls, Aldwark, York (Dawes and Magilton 1980, 14). These pins were found in inhumations with and without coffins. Other shroud pins may have been made of other metals or of wood. The presence or absence of shrouds may also be indicated by the position of the skeleton: "parallel-sided" skeletons indicate the presence of tight shrouds or coffins, while "jumbled" skeletons have been suggested as marking clothed burial or burial in very loose shrouds (e.g. Boddington 1996, 36-7).

The percentage of these extended, supine, unaccompanied burials varies from cemetery to cemetery. In some cemeteries, almost all burials are of this type. At some sites, however, "minority" or "variant" burial practices are actually in the majority, as at Raunds Furnells, discussed below.
Jo Buckberry (2007) has categorized elements of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice into two groups. Grave types represent the overall form of the grave. Grave types in the late Anglo-Saxon period include, for example, cist graves, stone-lined graves, plain-earth graves and other types of grave structure. It is not usually possible for a single grave to have more than one grave type. By contrast, grave variations can be combined. Grave variations include elements such as layers of charcoal or other materials in the grave, pillow-stones, grave-goods, and similar inclusions. Unlike grave types, grave variations can be combined; for instance, it is fairly common to find graves which contain both head-support stones and layers of charcoal or other linings.

Buckberry’s division is a very important step forward in analyzing the diversity in late Anglo-Saxon burial practice. I propose to further subdivide the analysis of grave variation. Drawing on the model used by Howard Williams to describe Early Anglo-Saxon and other burials as a series of enclosures, I will examine a series of aspects of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice beginning with the treatment of the corpse itself and ending with the position of the cemetery itself in the landscape. It was within this context that charcoal burial was practised.

4.3 Body treatment and position

With a small number of exceptions, discussed below, late Saxon and medieval burials are found in an extended supine position. The primary area of variation is the position of the arms. Where the position of the arms is recorded, they may be crossed on the chest, at the waist or on the pelvis, or straight by the sides of the body (Boddington 1996, 35; Miles 1986, 62; Waldron 2007, 20). At some cemeteries, “the position of the hands … does not seem to vary significantly” (White 1988, 18). In these cases, the hands are typically at the sides.

Before being positioned within the coffin or wrapped in a shroud, the body may have been prepared in other ways. Textual sources suggest that embalming was not practised in Anglo-Saxon England; embalming is described in detail in Bishop Werferth’s late ninth-century translation of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great in a
manner that suggests the reader was expected to be unfamiliar with it (Thompson 2004, 21). No evidence of this practice has been found in late Anglo-Saxon burials. Bodies of the deceased appear to have been washed before burial in some cases. The *Regularis Concordia* describes the bodies of monks who die being washed (Symons 1975, 65). This practice would be impossible to detect in the cemetery evidence.

Other pre-burial treatment of the body might include dressing it in special clothes. The *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham* describes dying monks being dressed in a shirt, cowl, stockings and shoes, with a stole to be added if the deceased was a priest (Jones 1998, 142-3). Similarly, two Old English service books contain instructions for dressing the dying person in linen gloves and socks, which are also to be worn after burial if the patient dies during a prescribed period (Thompson 2004, 78-9). The same sources include the practices of covering the dead body’s eyes and fastening the jaw shut, as well as laying the body on a haircloth anointed with ashes (Thompson 2004, 81-2). As discussed above, it is difficult to determine the percentage of burials where shrouds were used, but even very high-status burials may have included shrouds; the Bayeux Tapestry shows the body of King Edward the Confessor being carried to the funeral in a shroud, although it is not necessarily certain that this is an accurate representation of contemporary funeral practice.

### 4.4 Burial ritual

The ritual of death in late Anglo-Saxon England began before the body was interred. Indeed, in some cases it could begin before the individual had died. In cases where death was predicted, a priest could be summoned to hear the dying person’s confession and administer last rites (Thompson 2005, 110-6). In monastic communities, the *Regularis Concordia* and Ælfric’s *Letter to the Monks of Eynsham* prescribe that psalms be sung for sick monks whose condition is worsening (Symons 1975, 64, Jones 1998, 140-3). Similarly, the Abbotsbury guild statutes instruct guild members to journey to visit members who may be dying in order to arrange for the funeral (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 519).

Following death, monastic sources specify the singing of psalms for the soul of the deceased (Jones 1998, 143). The church would have been responsible for funeral
practices including masses, possibly depending on the wealth of the deceased. The so-called “Canons of Edgar” instruct the priest to “readily see to the funeral” in case of a death (Whitelock 1981, 4). Lay participation in these rites is indicated by guild statutes which specify that guild members are to attend the funeral of a guild brother and pray, and that masses might be said for the souls of departed brothers at a later date (Whitelock et al. 1981, 59, 519).

In addition to these religious rituals, there appears to have been another set of lay burial practices which had a more uneasy relationship with the church. The tenth century homilist and reformer Ælfric of Eynsham condemns some of these practices in his Pastoral Letter for Wulfsige III, written around 993 c. 995. Ælfric urges priests not to participate in the haedenan sangas, “heathen songs” of the laymen, and condemns eating and drinking in the presence of the corpse as “heathenism” (Whitelock et al. 1981, 218). Elsewhere, “beer-drinking” in the presence of the corpse is forbidden (LS I XXI, 459). English penitentials also assign penalties for burning grain “for the health of the living,” either in the house of the deceased or “where a dead man is buried” (Meaney 2006, 145-7).

Although some of these practices are described as “heathen” by contemporary writers, it is not necessary to assume a continuation of pagan ritual practices. Late Anglo-Saxon writers used the word haeden to refer to a variety of things, including the practice of pagan religion. However, unbaptised children or adults are also referred to as haæden, as are a variety of activities “inappropriate for a good Christian but not, to our minds heathen” (Meaney 2006, 128). Rather than specifically pagan practices, these might be interpreted as lay or secular funerary practice. These popular traditions are likely to have been perceived by their practitioners as well within the range of Christian funerary practice, although they incurred the disapproval of the hardline reformers responsible for many of the surviving textual sources.

Rites of this type will typically not be detected in the archaeological record, although finds of grain in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries both before and after the conversion may provide evidence for the practice of burning grain (Adams 1996, 165; Shoesmith 1980, 27-9). Following this treatment, the body would have been transported to the grave, perhaps in a coffin.
Other actions may have been performed at the graveside. The law code VI Æthelred, issued at King’s Enham c. 1008 x 1011, requires that burial payment be paid *æt openum graefes* ("at the open grave,") suggesting a public function with members of the community attending (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 352). The laws of King Æthelberht of Kent, although they date from the early seventh century and are therefore earlier than the late Anglo-Saxon period, similarly prescribe that some of the payment in compensation for a homicide is to be paid at the graveside (Liebermann 1960, 4).

### 4.5 Coffins and other containers

The most common form of elaboration in graves of this period is the coffin. Many burials show evidence of coffins, either as stains left in the soil of the grave by decaying wood (e.g. Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 301) or as nails (e.g. Shoesmith 1980 11, 14). Not all burials with coffins contain evidence for nails; many coffins were held together with wooden pegs or joins. At Old Minster, Winchester, the excavators identified no coffins with nails in the earliest generation, dated c. 675 to c. 700. In later generations, however, the percentage ranged from ten percent to over forty percent toward the end of the sequence (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 223). In some cases, the coffin may have been no more than a shell or bier used to transport the body to the grave, lacking a lid.

Identifying coffins in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries can be extremely difficult. Excavators have relied largely on finds of nails or similar coffin-fittings in graves, or on the outline of the grave-cut itself; grave-cuts closely surrounding the body are assumed not to be large enough to contain coffins. However, it is not always possible to identify the precise edges of the cut, or to guarantee that rectangular cuts contained coffins. The percentage of burials which contained coffins is therefore always an estimate rather than an exact count.

A striking example of this comes from the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval cemetery at St Peter’s church, Barton-upon-Humber. Waterlogged conditions in the eastern area of the graveyard created very favourable conditions for the survival of organic material. Evidence of timber was found in forty graves, in which only one coffin was
primarily held together with nails. Most of the excavated coffins were primarily or completely of timber construction. By contrast, contemporary graves from the western half of the cemetery produced “for the most part, not a hint of former timber structures” (Waldron 2007, 22-4). Some coffins contained linings of their own.

Coffins from graves at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, for instance, were sometimes filled with clay (Waldron 2007, 25-6). Pillows of textile or plant matter are known from a small number of graves and may well have existed in others, possibly overlying “pillow-stones” (Waldron 2007, 26-7).

Far from being uniformly simple wooden boxes, coffins could be made from various materials and decorated or elaborated using a wide range of methods. Burials from Old Minster, Winchester, dated to the ninth century, include not only coffins with nails but examples “bound together with elaborate iron strips” (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 223). Similar coffins were found at New Minster. The examples at Old Minster have been interpreted as representing high-status burials; they are predominantly male, and seven of the 21 examples are found inside Old Minster itself. Similar iron fittings are known from coffins at St Guthlac’s, Hereford (Shoesmith 1980, 30-8). Another grave from the same site contained a dug-out coffin, in which a large timber had a chamber cut into it for the body.

Other timber structures are known from late Anglo-Saxon graves. Burials from St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, produced evidence for what appeared to be fragments of clinker-built boats (Waldron 2007, 23). Similar boat fragments are known from York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 86-7, 517) and Caistor-by-Yarmouth (Rodwell 1993, 53). Timber biers or partial coffins have also been suggested for graves from Barton (Waldron 2007, 22).

Stone coffins are also known from several cemeteries and are usually associated with high-status graves. Bede’s Ecclesiastical History recounts the acquisition of a coffin “beautifully made of white marble, with a close-fitting lid of the same stone” for the grave of Saint Æthelthryth (iv, 19). This has been interpreted as a description of a reused Roman sarcophagus (Karkov 2003, 400). Monolithic stone coffins were recovered from the cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 228). Stone coffins have been excavated at a wide range of sites.
including York Minster (Philips and Heywood 1995) and Raunds (Boddington 1996, 45) Burial in stone coffins continued after the Conquest; at Durham Cathedral chapter house, the body of Bishop Geoffrey Rufus (d. 1140), among others, was interred in a stone coffin. Wooden coffins and stone cists were also excavated at this site (Fowler 1880). The use of stone coffins appears to have been widespread, but only a small percentage of any one cemetery population was buried in this manner. Although lead inner coffins are known from the Roman world (Toller 1977), only one is known from an Anglo-Saxon site. This example, a wooden coffin lined with lead, was excavated at Staple Gardens, Winchester (Kipling and Scobie 1990, 8-9). One other possible instance of a lead coffin or coffin lining was discovered in 1839 at Romsey Abbey, Hampshire (Scott 1996, 23). Although there are late Anglo-Saxon burials from this site, the early date of the find means that there is no way to reliably assign it to the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Other containers are sometimes used in a similar manner to coffins. Burials at York Minster contained the remains of iron locks, suggesting that the bodies were buried in chests (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 489-500). Similar burials in chests are known from Ripon, N. Yorkshire (Hall and Whyman 1996, 83).

In some cases, planks surviving within the grave appear to have been charred before deposition. These so-called “charred-coffin burials” are often difficult to tell from charcoal burials, but they indicate another means by which the coffin might be specially prepared for burial. Examples are known from sites including Staple Gardens, Winchester and St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber (Kipling and Scobie 1990, 1; Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 301).

Coffins are usually interpreted as an indicator of higher status than uncoffined burials. Furthermore, coffins decorated with metal fittings and stone coffins are usually seen as being more prestigious than plain wood coffins. However, the most famous of elaborated Anglo-Saxon coffins is the coffin of St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who died in c. AD 687 and whose relics were a major centre of pilgrimage. Cuthbert’s remains were interred in an oak reliquary-coffin decorated with carved figures of Christ, the archangels, the apostles and the Virgin and Child. This elaborately-decorated wooden coffin is a potent reminder that even apparently plain wooden
coffins may have been embellished in ways not detectable in the archaeological record.

It is not always possible to accurately identify the remains of coffins in the archaeological record. Even among sites where coffins can be detected, the percentage of coffined burials found varies. Only 20% of graves excavated from the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Castle Green, Hereford in 1973 contained evidence for coffins (Shoesmith 1980). The waterlogged area at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber demonstrates that even in areas where timber is well-preserved, not all graves contain coffins (Waldron 2007). However, in many cemeteries, preservation conditions make determining percentages difficult.

4.6 Grave structures

Coffins are not the only structure which might surround the body in an early medieval grave. In some instances, the grave itself is lined with stones. Two “cist-graves” of this type were excavated at Old St Chad’s, Shrewsbury in 1890. These “rough Stone Chests” had niches for the heads of the deceased, and were also covered with stone slabs (Nurse and Auden 1890, 361-2). Stone linings are known from many late Saxon cemeteries, including York Minster, Winchester Old and New Minsters, and others (Phillips and Heywood 1996, Kjølby-Biddle 1992). Stone cists can range from loose or partial linings of stone around the edges of the grave, as at St Bride’s, Fleet Street (Grimes 1968, 184), to almost-complete stone coffins (e.g. Shoesmith 1980, 29).

Head-niches of the type found at Shrewsbury are common. In addition to stones, these linings may also include tile.

Variations in the shape of the grave-cut itself are known primarily from Early and Middle Saxon cemeteries. They do not occur frequently in Late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, although some grave-cuts are notably larger than others, perhaps because coffins varied in size or to make room for grave inclusions (e.g. Phillips and Heywood 1995, 87).
These various types of container and grave structure make up Buckberry’s “grave types.” It is probably a mistake to draw too clear a line between containers and grave structures; cists may have been perceived similarly to coffins.

Moving outward from the treatment of the body itself, there are a number of items which are found associated with the body. In graves with coffins, these are typically found inside the coffin.

4.7 Stones

Stones are a common find in Anglo-Saxon graves. These are most commonly associated with the head. So-called “ earmuff” stones consist of a single stone placed on either side of the cranium. “Pillow” stones are single stones or clusters of stones found beneath the head, although the term is frequently used to describe any stone associated with the head. In other examples, “head-boxes” are found, in which stones on either side of the head support a stone slab laid over the face. Stones of this type are found in both coffined and uncoffined burials (e.g. Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 301). A unique find, excavated in 1912 at Newent, Gloucestershire, is a carved stone, variously interpreted as a “funerary tablet” (Zarnecki 1953) or a stone replica of a gospel book (Thompson 2004, 88-90), which was associated with the skull of a burial. Inscribed but otherwise undecorated stones excavated at Hartlepool may likewise have been pillow-stones (e.g. Cramp 1984, 447-9), although this identification is uncertain.

The best-known example of this practice is probably the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Raunds Furnells, Northamptonshire. More than half the excavated graves at this site contained stone arrangements of some kind, and over a third contained head supports. Stone arrangement occurred more frequently, but not exclusively, in the graves of adults. Among adults, stone pillows occurred more frequently among males than females. In addition to head pillows, some graves had the head and upper chest completely enclosed by large stones, while others had stones associated with the legs. In at least one case, stones covering the body appear originally to have been placed on top of a wooden cover which subsequently decayed (Boddington 1996, 36-43). Because organic preservation was poor, it is not clear if most head supports were
associated with wooden coffins, but in the case of the massive stones used in head
covers it seems unlikely. The variety of stone arrangements present at Raunds clearly
demonstrates the extensive variation possible in this single aspect of late Saxon burial.

Stone arrangements have been interpreted as representing a concern for appearances
(Boddington 1996, 39-42). Stones to either side of the head kept the head upright,
sparing the mourners the unpleasant sight of the deceased’s head lolling to one side. A
fragment of an Old English Soul and Body poem suggests that the head of the corpse
might need to be straightened after death (Thompson 2004, 103). Similarly, head-
boxes may represent a desire not to see earth thrown directly onto the face of a loved
one. Other objects are occasionally found in place of stones around the head. Skulls
from disturbed burials may be placed on either side of the head, as at Trowbridge,
Wiltshire (Cherryson 2007, 136).

In addition to large stones associated with the head, stones may be found on or close
to other parts of the body. The burial of a male between 17 and 25 at Raunds had an
arrangement of stones supporting one knee (Boddington 1996, 44). Other burials
included groups of stones associated with the pelvis, chest, arms or legs (Boddington
1996, 40). Some individuals also appear to have had pebbles placed in their mouths.
Four skeletons from the cemetery of St Nicholas Shambles, City of London, all in
otherwise unelaborated graves, had pebbles in this position (White 1988, 25), as did a
single burial from the cemetery at Raunds (Boddington 1996, 69).

White quartz pebbles are found in late Anglo-Saxon graves from a variety of sites.
The significance of this practice is unclear, although Warwick Rodwell has suggested
that it is connected to Revelation 2:17, which includes the passage “To him that
overcometh, to him will I give of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone,
and upon the stone a new name written, which no one knoweth but he that receiveth
it” (Rodwell 1992, 3).

White quartz pebbles are known from Middle Saxon contexts at Lichfield Cathedral
(Rodwell 1992), but also occur in the later Saxon period, for instance at Kellington,
North Yorkshire (Mytum 1993).
4.8 Grave linings

In some cases, the floors of late Anglo-Saxon and medieval graves are lined with substances other than earth. One of the most common of these linings is charcoal, which is discussed throughout this thesis. However, other substances have been found on the floors of contemporary burials, including sand, chalk, and plant matter.

Graves excavated at the cemetery of St Nicholas Shambles in the City of London included not only a single charcoal burial but ten graves with floors of chalk and mortar (White 1988, 18-20). One mortar-lined cut was also found at York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 88). Graves excavated at Winchester contained ‘bright yellow sand’ (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 227), intentionally deposited in the grave. At St Peter’s Church, Barton-upon-Humber, some of the coffins had been packed with clay distinct from the fill of the grave (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 302).

Organic substances are also found in some graves. A grave from Winchester Cathedral, probably the burial of “a prominent and prosperous layman who died between the late-eleventh and mid-thirteenth centuries”, contained evidence of a layer of leaves between the body and the floor of the stone coffin, particularly beneath the pelvis and abdomen (Ottaway 1982, 130-3). Grain is also found in some late Saxon burials, although not in sufficient quantities to form a layer. Excavations at Castle Green, Hereford, on the former site of St Guthlac’s church, revealed a number of charcoal burials including one in which the upper layers of charcoal contained grain (Shoesmith 1980, 28).

Perhaps most closely related to charcoal burial is the practice of burial on a layer of ash. Although this type of grave lining is best known from the high medieval period (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 120-7, Blair 1999, 38), examples are also found from late Saxon cemeteries such as All Saints, Oxford (Dodd 2003, 237). Unlike charcoal layers, ash is frequently found in positions which suggest it was used to line the coffin rather than the grave cut.
4.9 Grave-goods and dress items

In contrast to even the reduced level of grave-goods from “Final Phase” cemeteries, middle Saxon and later cemeteries contain very few artefacts. The standard burial practice appears to have been to inter the deceased without belongings or clothes. However, there appear to have been some exceptions to this general practice.

It appears to have been acceptable to bury clergy with the accoutrements of their profession. At Durham cathedral chapter house, for example, the bishops were interred in their episcopal vestments, wearing rings and with croziers laid alongside them (Fowler 1880). At other cemeteries, including the post-Conquest phase of St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, burials are found containing chalices and patens (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 303). Similar burials come from medieval phases at Lichfield (Rodwell 2003, 10-11). These are thought to be the burials of priests, equipped with the liturgical tools needed to administer the sacrament of communion. In the later middle ages, monks were sometimes buried in their habits (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 23). Again, the burial of St Cuthbert, who was buried in rich vestments with leather shoes and a variety of liturgical items, shows that individuals considered to be of exceptional sanctity might be buried in exceptional ways.

In a small number of other cases, dress accessories or other grave-goods are found in what appear to be the graves of lay people. These include personal accessories such as jewellery and dress-fittings, coins, knives and other small items. Finds of this type have been excavated at sites such as York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 88-92) and Staple Gardens (Kipling and Scobie 1990). In the latter case, Roman coins, possibly disturbed during the digging of the grave, were included with a burial. In general, though, burial with grave goods appears to have been extremely rare in this period.

Late Anglo-Saxon graves sometimes include wooden rods or wands. Examples from St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber include examples made out of willow or poplar (Waldron 2007, 26-7). Wands made of hazel were common in the earlier phases of the late Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest cemetery at Guildhall, London (Bateman 1997, 119). Similar wands are known from early Christian cemeteries in Scandinavia,
for instance at churches in medieval Lund (Cinthio 2002 88-9, 94; Mårtensson 1980, 55-61).

A unique grave inclusion comes from excavations at St Martin’s church, Wallingford, Oxon. One individual from this cemetery was buried with a pierced scallop shell (Booth et al. 2007, 267-8). Burials with scallop or cockle shells are known from the later middle ages (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005 97-8; Lubin 1990, 21), indicating pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, but are not usually known from the late Anglo-Saxon period.

4.10 Above-ground markers

A variety of types of above-ground grave marker are known from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, both slabs lying over graves and standing stone monuments such as “end-stones.” “Hogback” monuments of Anglo-Scandinavian type are also known. Excavations at York Minster uncovered a wide variety of stone sculpture associated with the cemetery, sealed by datable Norman foundations. At many other sites, similar monuments have been found outside of a funerary context, sometimes built into the fabric of later medieval churches (Morris 1989, 153).

Funerary sculpture from York Minster included items dated to the 7th and 8th centuries as well as Anglo-Scandinavian carvings of the early 10th century. In the early period, stelae, crosses and inscribed slabs are found, while in the later period, recumbent grave-slabs with “end-stones” at the head and foot are common (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 84). In some cases, it is unclear whether grave-slabs no longer associated with graves were intended to be vertical or recumbent (Cramp 1991, xiv). Decorative features include carvings of animals, legendary figures, and religious iconography.

Stone grave markers were not the only form of above-ground commemoration available in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. Wooden markers or structures must also have existed, but in most cases have not survived. However, some graves show evidence for slots or post holes at the head end, suggesting that a wooden marker denoted the location of the grave but later decayed (Boddington 1996, 46). Many late
Anglo-Saxon cemeteries show significant intercutting of graves, suggesting that durable above-ground commemoration was not common.

4.11 Post-burial treatment

Burial was not always the end of the living’s interaction with the dead in late Anglo-Saxon England. Bodies might be exhumed and reburied for a number of reasons. The most obvious cases are the burials of saints, whose bodies were considered loci of holiness. These desirable bodies were frequently relocated to new sites. The body of St Cuthbert was moved several times as the community whose patron he was moved from Lindisfarne to Chester-le-Street and subsequently to Durham. In other cases, holy bodies might be moved within a churchyard. St Swithun’s body was moved from its original resting-place to a tomb considered more appropriate for his great sanctity in 971. In other cases, the bodies of saints might be forcibly removed; this may have been the case with the translation of part of the remains of St Oswald from Bardney to Gloucester in 907 or 909. High-status individuals might also have their bodies moved. Following the construction of the New Minster at Winchester c. 901, the body of Alfred the Great was translated from the nearby Old Minster to the new church.

In other cases, burials were exhumed in advance of disturbance. Burials at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber were removed to make way for the construction of the church (Waldron 2007, 29). Similarly, some burials were removed from the cemetery at Barnstaple in advance of the construction of the castle (Miles 1986, 68). However, although this practice can be observed at a small number of cemeteries, in most cases there seems to have been no effort made to protect bodies from construction or intercutting. In some cases, disturbed remains might be placed in ossuaries or specially-dug pits, but in other cases they were inserted into the graves being dug (Cherryson 2007, 135-6). Annia Cherryson (2007, 136) has examined post-burial disturbance in Middle and Late Saxon cemeteries, coming to the conclusion that the urban cemeteries of the Late Saxon period have a much higher level of disturbance. This is likely to be the consequence of the developing insistence on burial within delineated churchyards. In towns, the limited extent of cemeteries would lead to much more frequent reuse of these areas. As a consequence, disturbed burials would become much more common.
Subsequent burials might also be inserted into existing graves. In some cases, this is the result of disturbance, but it may also be intentional, perhaps representing a family or similar connection (Cherryson 2007, 132-3).

Members of the living community could continue to interact with the grave long after the funeral. This interaction is most obvious in the case of saints, whose graves became centres of pilgrimage and devotion. Saints interacted with the living through proximity to their graves, tombs or bodies (Brown 1981, Biddle 1986). The cult of St Swithun, for instance, was initially focused on his grave, in “the most ostentatious site in the entire vicinity of the Old Minster” (Lapidge 2003, 69). These “very special dead” remained present in the world of the living, their souls acting through their bodies. Post-Conquest sources also show particularly evil people continuing to trouble the living after their deaths (Blair 2009). This belief may be related to the special treatment given to the dead at execution cemeteries. Other examples of post-burial interaction between the living and the dead are recorded. Charms recorded in the Lacnunga manuscript include the use of graves and grave-dirt as part of charms to protect against stillbirth (Thompson 2004, 94-6).

Textual sources suggest that exhumation might sometimes take place for judicial reasons. The legal code III Æthelred states that an individual who had been convicted of a crime and executed could be exonerated posthumously by a relative or supporter willing to pay security and undergo an ordeal. In such a case, the body of the executed felon could be exhumed and reinterred in a more appropriate cemetery (Robertson 1925, 68-9). The relationship – even the legal relationship – between two individuals thus extends to the dead body.

4.12 Cemetery organization and burial location

Not every late Saxon or medieval church had a cemetery, and not every cemetery appears to have been associated with a church. Burials have been excavated from within Exeter Castle bailey, where no church is known to have predated the construction of the castle (Blaylock, pers. comm.). Likewise, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries without churches are known from locations such as Chimney Farm, Oxon (Crawford
1989) and Staple Gardens, Winchester (Kipling and Scobie 1990). In some cases, this may be because the church has not been located or because the land was associated or owned by a church (Crawford 1989, 55-6). However, it may also have been true that in some areas, burials were not associated with a church. Dawn Hadley has discussed the evidence for “cemeteries of varying size seemingly unconnected with a church throughout their period of use” (Hadley 2007, 194).

In other cases, churches may have been associated with existing cemeteries. This may be the case at St Mark’s, Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986). Once again, it may be that early phases of the church have simply not been identified, but it is certainly possible that churches were added to existing cemeteries. This may have been the case at St Aldate’s, Oxford, where a church may have been added to a cemetery associated with the nearby St Frideswide’s minster (Tyler et al. 2001, 407-8).

Late Saxon burials are sometimes found outside settlements, sometimes in areas associated with earlier barrows. A number of these cemeteries appear to contain the bodies of individuals who were executed. In some cases, these execution cemeteries contain a high proportion of individuals who sustained some kind of perimortem injury from an edged weapon. Bodies in these cemeteries are also frequently found in positions suggesting they were buried without care rather than in the customary supine extended position. In some cases, the hands are behind the back, suggesting that the individual was buried with his or her hands bound (Buckberry and Hadley 2007, Reynolds 1997). Legal codes demand that individuals guilty of particularly severe crimes be denied Christian burial (Whitelock et al. 1981 53, 466). These crimes were frequently sexual in nature, but also included homicide, oath-breaking, and in one example, failure to be a good Christian (Whitelock et al. 1981, 322). These are discussed in more detail in Chapter 14.

Located away from churches and outside settlements, the placement of these cemeteries is nevertheless significant. Andrew Reynolds (1999, 105-10) has studied the locations of execution cemeteries, which he identifies with sites listed in Anglo-Saxon charters as “heathen burials”. These marginal cemeteries may represent socially undesirable individuals being placed at the margins of the community.
However, by the late Saxon period, churchyards appear to be by far the most common location for burial. By the late 10th century, rituals for the consecration of churchyards appear to be an established tradition in England (Gittos 2002, 201), making it clear that this area was seen not only as a convenient location for burial but as a sacred space. Some burials are found immediately outside the boundaries of churchyards, which may represent a form of excluded burial or reflect shifting positions of boundaries (Hadley and Buckberry 2005, 13). Within the tradition of burial in churchyards, there are a number of possible ways in which graves might be organized spatially.

Some individuals may have been making a choice between churches as burial locations. Eleventh-century laws require individuals to be buried in the cemetery of the minster to which they "belong." Individuals wishing to be buried elsewhere were required to pay a fee to the minster at which they ought to have been buried. This payment – a *sæulseat* or "soul-tax" – appears to have been required from at least the late ninth century (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 46, 352). Anglo-Saxon wills sometimes include bequests to the church where the testator intends to be buried. Examples include the bequest of Ordnoth and his wife to the Old Minster at Winchester, where the couple leave an estate to the church on the condition that when they die their bodies will be fetched "with the Minster's resources" and buried there (S 1524; Whitelock 1930, 16-19). Tantalizingly, the will further specifies that Ordnoth and his wife are to be given "such resting-place as is necessary for us in God's sight and fitting in the eyes of the world." Unfortunately, we have no information on what was considered necessary or fitting for this type of burial. Although less explicit, similar provisions are found in wills throughout the period (e.g. Whitelock 1930, 20-21, 24-5, 76-7).

Within the graveyard itself, different areas might be associated with different types of burial. For instance, 30 graves were excavated within 1.5m of the early church at Raunds. Of these, 23, or 76.7%, were of infants. By contrast, 18.3% of the total burials in the cemetery were of infants (Boddington 1996, 54-5). At Old Minster, Winchester, "the more elaborate and expensive-looking graves" were clustered heavily in areas around the east and west ends of the church (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 228).
Burial within the church itself appears to have been rare in the early years of Anglo-Saxon churchyard burials, becoming more common over time. At first, burial within the church appears to have been limited, at least in principle, to individuals of extremely high status or sanctity. Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* refers to the burials of bishops and other prominent churchmen within churches. In some cases, the saint or bishop is buried in a cemetery near the church and his remains are later translated into the church. Saint Aidan, for instance, (d. AD 651), was originally buried in the monastic cemetery at Lindisfarne and subsequently translated to the church ‘and buried on the right side of the altar, with the honour due to so great a bishop’ (EH ii, 17). Bede describes the burial of St Cedd in the same manner, down to the detail of the position on the right side of the altar (ii, 23). This does not necessarily mean that these saints were actually buried in this manner, but it does demonstrate that Bede considered this a fitting burial for an individual of great sanctity. Royal burials within churches are also noted in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, such as a series of West Saxon (and subsequently English) royal burials at Winchester. Burial within a particular minster seems to have been important to expressing continuity within the royal house. Late Anglo-Saxon wills show that individuals maintained connections to churches with which they had burial ties: the will of Ælfflæd, written at the beginning of the eleventh century, includes a plea for the protection of a foundation at Stoke pa mine yldran on restap, “where my ancestors lie”. The same will includes a bequest to the church where Ælfflæd’s husband was buried (Whitelock 1930, 40-41). Some manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* state that the body of Æthelflæd, “Lady of the Mercians,” was transported from the place of her death at Tamworth to Gloucester for burial, a distance of around 100 km. Burial at St Oswald’s, where Æthelflæd’s husband Æthelred was already buried and which Æthelflæd herself had helped found, was clearly highly desirable.

The legal text known as the “canons of Edgar,” probably written by Archbishop Wulfstan between 1005 and 1008, cautions that no one should be buried inside a church “unless one knows that in his life he pleased God so well that on that account one may consider him entitled to that burial-place” (Whitelock et al. 1981, 324). Nonetheless, intramural burials are known from sites such as Old Minster, Winchester, where 36 burials were excavated from inside the church (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 226).
By the time of the Norman Conquest the practice was very common, and in the
medieval period church interiors were a common location for the burial of high-status
individuals (Daniell 1997, 93-9). At some sites, however, the restriction seems to have
been more firmly enforced, for instance at St Peter’s, Barton, where only a small
number of the earliest phase burials were within the walls of the church. Twenty-four
burials had been exhumed from this area, presumably to make way for the
construction of the stone church (Waldron 2007, Fig. 30). One burial appears to have
been overlooked, and only three internal burials, all in the chancel, occurred during
the first phase of the church (Waldron 2007, 29-30). At St Alkmund’s, Derby, a stone
coffin inside the church may represent a shrine housing the relics of St Ealhmund,
with a later high-status grave associated (Ralegh Radford 1976, 33).

Intramural burials and groups of burials, specifically of charcoal burials, within
cemeteries are discussed further in Chapter 10.

4.13 Scandinavian practices

From around the end of the eighth century, England was a frequent target for Viking
raids. Scandinavian place-names occur over a large area of the North (Hadley 2000,
18), and although the exact nature and extent of this settlement continues to be
debated, it is clear that Scandinavian presence had a significant impact on at least
some areas of early medieval Britain. “Anglo-Scandinavian” towns such as York
present extensive evidence for cultural contact between England and Scandinavia.
However, burials involving distinctly Scandinavian elements are comparatively rare
in England, although they are quite common in Scotland. Artifacts found in some
churchyards may indicate Scandinavian-style burial with grave goods, while single
burials outside churchyards are consistent with Scandinavian burial practice (Richards
2002, 157-62). Scandinavian settlers or invaders, even if pagan (although grave goods
may not be a reliable indicator of paganism) seem in many cases to have respected
existing traditions of burial location. Although cremations are well-known in
Scandinavia, only one Viking cremation cemetery is known in England, at Heath
Wood, Ingleby, Derbyshire (Posnansky 1956, Richards et al. 1995). In some cases,
Viking monuments appear to have disrupted existing English cemeteries, as at the
Mercian royal minster of Repton in Derbyshire. At Repton, a number of furnished
burials of Scandinavian style have been found and it appears that existing burials have been exhumed and placed in a large charnel deposit focusing on a now-missing central inhumation (Richards 2002, 165-70). These two cemeteries represent an unusual expression of pagan Scandinavian identity, usually not found within England (Richards 2002).

Although Scandinavian influence on English burial rites appears to have been minimal, burial practice in Scandinavia is often explained by reference to English examples (e.g. Cinthio 1997); this is discussed more fully in Chapter 11.

4.14 Interpreting late Anglo-Saxon burial practice

Far from being uniform, it can be seen that late Saxon burial practice was characterized by significant diversity. The preceding sections, drawing on recent research such as that of Jo Buckberry and Dawn Hadley (e.g. Hadley and Buckberry 2005, Buckberry 2007), demonstrate this diversity. Although a majority of burials were extended supine inhumations oriented east-west, many other variables existed. It is possible to conceptualize the burial as a series of layers around the body, each of which was capable of being varied. These potential inclusions in the grave form a series of decisions, presumably made prior to burial, and a sequence of actions before, during and after the placing of the body itself in the grave-cut.

Working from the “inside” of the burial outward, the first locus of variation was the body itself, which might be positioned in a number of ways and either dressed or wrapped in a shroud. The container or surroundings of the body might be varied: burials might be coffined or uncoffined, and where coffins were present they might be decorated or elaborated in a variety of ways and made out of a variety of materials. Stones might be placed around the head, or used to line the grave cut. The grave might also be timber-lined, or dug in a particular shape. Moving outward to the last layer, graves could be capped with stone slabs or have above-ground markers of stone or wood, carved or inscribed in a variety of styles.

In fact, slabs or other above-ground monuments are not the last layer of the burial. Graves existed in a landscape, and the environment of the cemetery or church itself
can be considered the outermost layer of the burial. The location of a grave within the churchyard may have held particular significance, either because some areas of the cemetery were considered to be of higher or lower status or because association between the grave and other features of the cemetery – such as other graves – was felt to create particular associations. Burial might also take place within the church itself. At a larger scale, some individuals were buried in cemeteries other than those of the churches to which they “belonged,” and might even be moved from one cemetery to another, as the body of Æthelwulf, father of Alfred the Great, was relocated from Steyning to Winchester. Consequently, the set of all cemeteries forms yet another “layer” of the burial.

As demonstrated in Chapter 3, it is only relatively recently that late Anglo-Saxon burials have begun to be seen as sites of symbolic meaning, aspects of a complex discourse relating to the identities of both the living and the dead. The variability of burial practice demonstrated in this chapter provided a powerful and flexible vocabulary.

One interesting aspect of mortuary variability in the late Anglo-Saxon period is that the “palette” of burial practices seems to vary from cemetery to cemetery. Dawn Hadley and Jo Buckberry (2005, 137) have identified a striking contrast between three mid-to-late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Lincolnshire. At the cemetery of St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, slightly over half of the burials from the late Anglo-Saxon period were buried in wooden coffins (Waldron 2007). By contrast, excavated burials at Barrow-on-Humber produced both evidence for coffins (although largely in the form of nails, as opposed to the well-preserved wood at St Peter’s) and three burials in stone cists (Grainger in press). The cemetery of Fillingham, 15 miles away, contains only stone-lined graves (Hadley and Buckberry 2001). Even within a single region, cemeteries can vary greatly in terms of burial practice.

Additionally, all three of these cemeteries have comparatively limited variation in terms of grave structure, although the cemetery at Barton shows some variation in grave inclusions. By contrast, some larger cemeteries show a very wide range of variation. Burials at York Minster (Philips and Heywood 1995) included burials in
wooden coffins and chests, as well as burials on biers made from sections of boat. Charcoal burials were also excavated at this cemetery, as well as stone-lined graves.

I do not propose to interpret all of late Anglo-Saxon funerary practice here. However, it may be that the amount of variation found in burial practice can provide some information on the otherwise problematic issue of control over burial rites. If smaller cemeteries typically demonstrate less variation in burial practice than larger ones, how can this be explained? It may be possible that the cemeteries of higher-status churches, serving larger and more diverse communities, represent the burial practices of a larger number of distinct groups, or a social context with a larger range of status differentiation. Cemeteries like those of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester attracted burial from royalty, lay magnates, religious leaders, members of the religious community such as monks or canons, and members of the local community for whom the high-status church was also their local cemetery. Representatives from any of these groups might be involved in deciding the composition of a given burial. A complete study of the late Anglo-Saxon burial rite and the ways in which its various components relate to aspects of identity has yet to be done, but the subject has the potential to tell us a great deal about the creation and enactment of identity in this period.

It is within this complex and multi-layered environment that charcoal burial occurs, as one of a wide variety of possible ways in which the "normal" late Saxon and early medieval burial rite might be carried out.
5. Cemeteries containing charcoal burials

5.1 Introduction

Burials containing charcoal are known from a wide range of sites across late Saxon and medieval England. This chapter summarizes each case where excavation has recorded burials of this type. Unlike previous chapters, this chapter and Chapter 6 are not organized by section, but instead by site, listed alphabetically by place-name. Towns with multiple cemeteries containing charcoal burials are organized alphabetically by site name. In many cases, an excavation may be known by several names. The excavations on the site of the Saxon minster at Exeter, for instance, include areas referred to in Exeter Museums Service internal documents as “St Mary Major,” “Cathedral Green,” and “War Memorial”, while ongoing excavations in Leicester are variously “St Margaret’s Baths”, “St Peter’s”, and the current official title, “Vaughan Way”. In each case, an attempt has been made to use the most commonly used name consistently.

The late Saxon period was a period of upheaval in urban or proto-urban England. The military and political crises of the late ninth century led to large-scale programs of fortification. New towns came to prominence, and sites which had been high-status centres declined. Because charcoal burial begins to occur during this transitional period, it is vital to understand the history of sites where it occurs.

Each entry therefore begins with a brief summary of the historical context not only of the cemetery but of its environment. Exeter, Gloucester, Oxford, Shrewsbury, Winchester and York all contain multiple cemeteries which include charcoal burials. For these locations, a historical discussion of the town begins the section and is then followed by entries on each individual site.

Radiocarbon dates from sites where they are known have been recalibrated using OxCal 4.0.5 (Bronk Ramsey 1995, 2001) and the IntCal04 calibration curve (Reimer et al. 2004) in order to give a sounder basis for comparison; these may therefore differ from dates given in the published reports, which have been calibrated using different methods over several decades. For further information, please see Chapter 8.
As discussed in chapter 2, some excavators have encountered burials which may or may not be “charcoal burials” within the definition used in this thesis. These burials are mentioned in the relevant entry. Some sites contain only burials of this type; these are listed in chapter 6. It is not always easy to assess whether or not a burial would be considered a “charcoal burial” by modern archaeologists, particularly given the limited surviving evidence in some cases. The separation of borderline cases between chapters 5 or 6 therefore represents a best reasonable estimate based on an individual assessment of the available evidence.

5.2 List of cemeteries containing charcoal burials

Barnstaple, Devon

Historical context

Barnstaple is listed in the “B” manuscript of the Burghal Hidage, which equates it with the burh of Piletune (Hill and Rumble 1996, 32). This may mean that the burh was considered part of the estate of nearby Pilton, or that it replaced an earlier burh at Pilton. The town was certainly in existence by the tenth century, when a mint was producing coins for Eadwig (North 1994, 145). However, the overall population at Domesday may have been no higher than approximately 350 (Darby and Weldon Finn 1979, 282-3).

The exact date of the construction of Barnstaple Castle is unknown. It may have been built during the reign of William the Conqueror as part of a military campaign in Devon in the 1060s, or it may date to the early twelfth century (Miles 1986 74-82).

Archaeology

Extensive excavations were constructed in Barnstaple between 1972 and 1975 in advance of development. Excavation revealed part of the defences of the castle, as well as 105 inhumations, mostly extended supine, without grave-goods, and oriented east-west (Miles 1986, 62). Burials from this cemetery lay underneath the bank of the castle bailey, placing the cemetery stratigraphically earlier than the construction of the
castle in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Eleventh- or twelfth-century pottery also underlay the bank. However, no other dating evidence was recovered from the cemetery; none of the graves were radiocarbon dated. The cemetery was not associated with any surviving church building. Because Barnstaple’s development as a town is first recorded in the late Saxon period, Miles believed the cemetery to be Late Saxon in date, but left open the possibility that it might predate the foundation of the burh (Miles 1986, 74).

The North Walk cemetery showed a variety of burial practice, particularly involving stones in the graves. Stones were placed around and over the heads of some graves, as well as between the knees of others. Other burials had quartz blocks or pebbles associated with the head and chest, as well as stone arrangements lining the grave cuts (Miles 1986, 66). Most of the burials provided evidence for coffins, either in the form of nails or of wood preserved by impregnation with iron salts. No evidence was found for coffin fittings other than nails (Miles 1986, 63).

A number of graves, including G44, had small amounts of charcoal, “one or two handfuls” in the fill, apparently sprinkled over the body (Miles 1986, 66). In one case, this was found under the body. However, only one burial contained a layer of charcoal sufficient for Miles to consider it a “charcoal burial”. This burial, G97, contained the remains of a child buried on a layer of charcoal (Bayley 1976, 4).

Barrow-on-Humber, Lincolnshire

Historical context

Bede’s Ecclesiastical History (IV.3) recounts that King Wulfhere of Mercia donated an estate “in a place called Adbaruae” to Bishop Chad in order to found a monastery between 669 and 673. This area is identified with modern Barrow.

An area in the north of Barrow-on-Humber has been known as “St Chad’s” since the seventeenth century, and previous construction work in this area has uncovered evidence of burial. However, there is no specific documentary evidence to connect this area to Chad’s monastery, and no standing church. A charter of 971 grants some
of the land Æt Bearowe "which St Chad once possessed before the devastation of the pagans" to Peterborough Abbey in exchange for 40 pounds of silver and a gold cross (S 782). This may or may not have included part of the neighbouring estate at Barton (see below).

**Archaeology**

Excavation in advance of development in 1977 and 1978 revealed approximately 75 burials plus disarticulated material. The foundations of an 11th to 12th century apsidal church post-dated at least some of the burials. Nails or metal fittings were found in only two graves, while five had stone linings. A program of radiocarbon dating provided 10th to 12th-century dates for most of the graves, suggesting that this cemetery did not in fact belong to the seventh-century monastery. The earliest church structure identified by the excavations was a stone apsidal church, probably dating to the 11th or 12th century (Boden and Whitwell 1979).

A number of burials from Barrow-on-Humber contained charcoal. Not all of these were identified as charcoal burials by the excavator. A cist grave, grave 60, contained a body "laid on charred twigs, with further charcoal over the body" (Grainger forthcoming, 10). A multiple burial, grave 73, contained one body "apparently laid on a charcoal bed", while unspecified amounts of charcoal were found in two more graves, 111 and 46. Grave 46 was a collection of disturbed bones with charcoal associated (Grainger forthcoming, 10).

A sample of charcoal from Grave 60 was radiocarbon dated, as well as an unidentified sample from Grave 111. Unfortunately, the site records are not complete enough to identify this sample (Buckberry 2004, Appendix III, p.6). The recalibrated dates (for details of recalibration, see Chapter 8) are given below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2% from</th>
<th>68.2% to</th>
<th>95.4% from</th>
<th>95.4% to</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>HAR-3123</td>
<td>1030 +/- 60</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111</td>
<td>HAR-3125</td>
<td>1130 +/- 80</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>1050</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Table 5.1: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Barrow-on-Humber*
Barton-upon-Humber, North Lincolnshire

Historical context

The town of Barton-upon-Humber lies on the south bank of the river Humber at the foot of the Lincolnshire Wolds. The church and graveyard are located to the west of a middle Saxon enclosure. The settlement, believed to be of “moderately high status” (Waldron 2007, 6), may have been part of the estate of nearby Barrow-on-Humber until the two were separated (Bryant 1981).

By Domesday, Barton was “a town of significance” in Lincolnshire (Bryant 1981, 55). The population of the town has been estimated at around 900 (Bryant 1981, 68). A single church, presumably St Peter’s, is attested at Domesday. This church appears under the survey entry for the domain of Gilbert de Gant, suggesting that it was a proprietary church rather than a monastic foundation. However, John Blair has suggested, based on the apparent wealth and importance of the structure, that the church may have been a minster earlier in its life (Blair 2005, 360).

The church of St Peter has played an important role in the study of Anglo-Saxon church architecture. Its “remarkable” Anglo-Saxon tower and baptistery, attached to an aisled medieval church, are archetypal examples of late Anglo-Saxon architecture. This importance to the study of the late Anglo-Saxon period contributed to the large-scale excavations which have produced a great deal of data about burial practice.

Archaeology

In 1978, St Peter’s, which had been declared redundant in 1972 and was rapidly falling into disrepair, was placed in the care of the Department of the Environment for preservation and display. Excavation and structural study between 1978 and 1984 initially identified the earliest phase as late tenth-century; it is now believed to be possibly as late as the early eleventh century (Rodwell and Rodwell 1982, 288; Waldron 2007, 6). This was a three-celled stone structure centred on the tower. The chancel was demolished in the mid-eleventh century, leaving the tower and annexe as appendages to the new “Saxo-Norman” phase.
Excavation of the cemetery at St Peter’s revealed approximately 2,800 articulated burials from the Anglo-Saxon period to the nineteenth century (Waldron 2007). Of these, 446 graves were dated to the earliest phase, phase E, c. 900-1150. 437 could be dated either to phase D or E, while 32 could not be phased (Waldron 2007, 34). The earliest phase of this cemetery underlay the first phase of the stone church and has been dated to the late tenth century or slightly earlier (Waldron 2007, 6). Graves from this cemetery had been exhumed to make way for the construction of the stone church (Waldron 2007, 29), demonstrating that the church had been built in an existing cemetery, either one not associated with a church or one associated with a church located outside the excavated area.

Only one charcoal burial was excavated from outside the south door of the late Anglo-Saxon tower at St Peter’s. This was F3234, which contained Skeleton 1215, the skeleton of a male aged 25-34 (Waldron 2007, 150). This was dated to phase E, the earliest phase of the cemetery. The structure of this burial is unusual: “the torso had been coated with a layer of sticky blue-grey clay, before charcoal was poured over the corpse” (Waldron 2007, 25). This combination of burial practices is unique among excavated late Anglo-Saxon burials. Although the burial was not radiocarbon dated, it is stratified in a sequence with other burials, some of which have been dated. As a result, this grave has been assigned a date in the early 11th century (Waldron 2007, 25).

Bath, Somerset

Historical context

Formerly the Roman town of Aquae Sulis, Bath played an important role in late West Saxon dynastic symbolism, perhaps because of its Roman associations. It also occupied a strategic position on the borders of Wessex and Mercia.

A charter dated to 675 attests the foundation of a nunnery, possibly a double house, at Bath (S51). The first explicit reference to the monastery is in a charter of 757 (S 265) in which the monastery is described as dedicated to St Peter. Mercia came under the control of Wessex in 918 or 920, and Bath was the recipient of patronage from the West Saxon royal house. A mint was established by the reign of Edward the Elder.
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(North 1994, 128), and Bath is listed among the fortified towns of the Burghal Hidage. Bath was a major centre of the tenth-century reform movement. The monastery received successive grants from Athelstan, Edwig, Edgar, and Æthelred. It was at Bath in 973 that the West Saxon King Edgar staged his coronation (ASC A s.a. 973, Raine 1879, 436-9; Hylson-Smith 2003, 52-4), fourteen years after becoming king of Wessex. This elaborate ceremony involved rulers from other British kingdoms in a performance designed to demonstrate West Saxon supremacy.

The late Saxon church was demolished in 1088. No archaeological evidence of the Saxon monastery church has been found; it may have been directly under the standing medieval church.

**Archaeology**

No comprehensive excavation of the cemetery has ever been carried out, but a series of excavations carried out in the area of the Abbey and Roman baths have revealed late Anglo-Saxon burials, including some containing charcoal.

Excavations concerned with the Roman baths in 1968 uncovered a single grave on a layer of charcoal. Charcoal was also discovered above the body (Cunliffe 1979, 90). A further thirty-one burials, including eight with charcoal, were excavated in 1993-4 (Bell 1993). These were excavated on the south side of the Abbey in advance of construction of the Abbey Heritage Vaults. Radiocarbon dates were obtained from three of the charcoal burial, producing dates ranging from the very end of the eighth century to the last quarter of the tenth, but mainly concentrated in the ninth and tenth centuries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
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<th>68.2% to</th>
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<td>1150 +/- 40</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>BM2903</td>
<td>1170 +/- 40</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>BM2904</td>
<td>1200 +/- 50</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Bath Abbey

Bosham, Sussex

**Historical context**

Bede recounts a church in Bosham at an early date (HE IV.13). Evangelizing in Sussex in 681, Wilfrid discovers that apart from the queen, the South Saxons are “ignorant of the divine name and of the faith.” However, “there was ... in their midst a certain Irish monk named Dicuill who had a very small monastery in a place called Bosham surrounded by woods and sea, in which five or six brothers served the Lord in humility and poverty... .”

Domesday Book shows Bosham as the centre of a large estate of over 50 hides on the north shore of Chichester Harbour (Morris 1976, 16b), with additional estates in Sussex and Hampshire making it a church “in the very top rank of Anglo-Saxon minsters” (Gem 1985, 33). The estate was held by Harold, and had previously been held by his father, Godwine.

A church in Bosham appears on the Bayeux Tapestry. Harold and his followers are seen riding. The text reads VBI: HAROLD DVX: ANGLORVM: ET SVI MILITES: EQVITANT: AD BOSHAM:. To the right of the scene, a building bears the label ECCLESIA. Use of Bosham as a channel port is also recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle s.a. 1049 and 1051, suggesting that it was an important departure point for travel to Normandy. The minster at Bosham was “hugely wealthy” by the end of the eleventh century, probably one of the wealthiest and most powerful such churches in England (Blair 2005, 328). It is difficult to say whether or not this church was a
successor to the earlier foundation described by Bede, but it may well have been, considering its great wealth and status.

Figure 5.1: Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry showing Bosham (Wilson 1985, 2-3).

Archaeology

Architectural features of the standing church of the Holy Trinity, Bosham, are believed to be pre-Conquest (Gem 1985, 35, Tatton-Brown 2006). Inhumations were discovered within the church during lowering of the floor level in 1981. “At least two” inhumations were observed, in which “the lower fill of the graves was examined and found to comprise almost pure charcoal” (Aldsworth 1984, 221). However, these examinations were conducted only by the workers carrying out the lowering. Archaeologists were not informed of the charcoal burials until “the excavations were complete and the bones and charcoal had been loaded onto the back of the lorry” (Tatton-Brown 2006, 139 n.20). As a result, it was not possible to determine the precise date of the burials or any information about the individuals.
Buckfastleigh, Devon

Historical context

Based on later medieval copies of early charter evidence, historians believe Buckfast Abbey to have been founded by King Cnut and Ealdorman Æthelward in 1018 (Stéphan 1970, 6-9). This foundation may have been a refoundation of a previously existing church. The first community were brought in from other monasteries, probably one or both of Tavistock or Winchester (Stéphan 1970, 15). Tavistock itself may have derived its community from Winchester in the early eleventh century. Like the monasteries from which its monks were taken, the early religious community was subject to the Regularis Concordia. The manor appears in Domesday Book as Bulfestra, along with its various holdings.

Not much is known about the late eleventh-century history of Buckfast. The abbey became affiliated with the French abbey of Citeaux in 1147. Following the affiliation, the monastic site was rebuilt “in the Cistercian pattern” (Clutterbuck 1994, 6). When Buckfast Abbey was refounded by Benedictine monks in 1882, the site was found to date back to the twelfth-century reconstruction (Stéphan 1970, vii). No evidence of the original eleventh-century foundation was identified, and it was concluded that the Anglo-Saxon monastery was in a slightly different location; the monastery’s website still states that “we do not know for sure exactly where the Saxon monastery stood” (http://www.buckfast.org.uk/extaordiary-history.html, accessed 14 February 2008).

Archaeology

In 1992, the parish church of Holy Trinity was destroyed by arson; only the masonry survived, and the church is now a ruin. A large-scale archaeological project was undertaken “with the aim of investigation the history of the church and returning it to its rightful position as a valued place for the local community” (Reynolds and Turner 2005, 22). Andrew Reynolds and Sam Turner directed the project; personnel from several universities were involved, as well as from English Heritage. The excavated
site is believed to be the original location of the abbey prior to its mid-twelfth-century relocation, which suggests an eleventh- or early twelfth-century date for the burials.

Post-exavation work on this site is currently underway at the time of this writing. A single charcoal burial was excavated and is currently being examined. The body was contained in a coffin and the sides of the grave were lined with plaster (http://www.stlukes.buckfastleigh.org/html/holytrinity.htm, accessed 14 Feb 2008).

Calke Abbey, Derbyshire

Historical context

The name “Calke Abbey” dates only from 1808; in fact, the site does not appear to have been an abbey but a house of Augustinian canons. It was founded between 1115 and 1120 by the Earl of Chester (Colvin 1989, 7-9). By 1172, Calke had been subordinated to the nearby priory of Repton. The transfer may have taken place in 1153.

Following the Dissolution, the estate changed hands several times. The precise location of the medieval church is not known, but it is probably underneath the present house (National Trust 1992, 121).

Archaeology

Calke Abbey was acquired by the National Trust in 1985. Prior to the house being opened to the public in 1989, the Trust carried out a program of renovation, repair and service installation. During this period of construction, from 1986 to 1988, the Trust also carried out an archaeological watching brief.

During the renovations, a trench was dug 9.2 metres from the east front of the house in order lay a sewer pipe. This trench revealed five extended inhumations, oriented W-E. These were identified as SK 1-5. SK3 was badly disturbed. SK4 and SK5 were represented only by the legs, having been cut by a culvert. SK5 “had been laid on a
bed of charcoal and thin spread of lime within a stone and mortar cist ... Charcoal had been spread thickly over the top of the body after interment. A single stone slab had been placed in an upright position to form the foot end of the cist" (National Trust 1992, 118). SK 5 cut SK4 and was overlain by SK2, suggesting that the area had been in use as a cemetery for some time.

It was not possible to date the burials precisely, but they have been roughly assigned to the 12th-14th centuries. The presence of charcoal was viewed as a datable practice, although because of the history of the site, the excavators assigned this burial to the later part of the range of charcoal burials. This would make the burials “contemporary with the existence of the monastic cell at Calke, which was founded sometime before 1120” (National Trust 1992, 121).

None of the burials was analyzed to determine sex or age. SK3, SK4 and SK5 were so badly disturbed or truncated that little could have been learned from them.

Chichester, Sussex

Historical context

Chichester is one of the fortified burhs of the late ninth century, appearing both in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Burghal Hidage as a defended site (ASC s.a. 895; Hill and Rumble 1996, 32). A mint originated during the reign of Æthelstan (North 1994, 134). Chichester, with its harbour, was an important town within West Sussex.

The town became the seat of a diocese in 1075, when the cathedral of the diocese of Selsey was transferred, probably from Church Norton. The cathedral itself was probably begun shortly afterward (Tatton-Brown 1996, 25) and consecrated in 1184. However, a single possibly spurious charter (S 616) dated 956 records a grant to the “brethren of Chichester”, indicating a probable minster in the town. This minster may have been the precursor to the cathedral.
Archaeology

Reinforcement work on the cathedral’s eastern buttresses in 1966 prompted archaeological excavation in the area. Burials excavated during these investigations predate the foundation of the Norman building (Rule 1971, 133), suggesting the presence of an earlier church or cemetery. One of the seven pre-Norman burials, burial 18/11, was laid on a bed of charcoal. This burial was cut through by another burial, and both were cut by the foundation of the twelfth-century ambulatory, suggesting that at least one burial “generation” may have passed between the interment and the construction of the ambulatory.

In addition to the pre-Norman burial 18/11, other burials from Chichester also contained charcoal layers. These burials may also have predated the Norman church, but there is no firm stratigraphic relationship. Unfortunately, no data from the excavation has survived other than the information presented in the published report (Rule 1971; J. Kenny, pers. comm.). As a result, we have no data on the charcoal burials from Chichester, not even exactly how many there were. Judging from the published report, there are between two and six, but unfortunately it is not possible to be more precise.

Conisbrough, South Yorkshire

Historical context

The first written reference to Conisbrough is the will of Wulfric, one of the largest landholders in the North (S 1536). Dated to 1002 x 1004, the will leaves *pæs landes at Cunugesburh* to Ælfhelm on condition that he arrange for “the monks” to have one-third of the fish. The reference to *munucas* in Wulfric’s will suggests that this is likely to have been a minster. Domesday Book records that the manor was held by King Harold in 1066 and by William de Warenne in 1086 (DB Yorkshire 321, 373v, 379). “A church and a priest” were part of the manor in 1086.
Archaeology

St Peter’s church, Conisbrough, has extensive internal remains of an Anglo-Saxon church. It has been suggested that the site is “a Saxon minster church of probably 8th-century date” (Ryder 1982, 45).

No modern archaeological excavation has identified charcoal burials at Conisbrough. However, a possible charcoal burial appears in an 1804 survey of the region, *The History and Antiquities of Doncaster* (Miller 1804). Miller reports that an “ancient stone”, possibly one of the several sculpted grave-covers now in or around the church (Ryder 1982, 60-1), was moved from the churchyard to Conisbrough church to be displayed, and that “on its removal, the ground was dug to a considerable depth; about two feet from the surface, a body was found, laying north and south, being a different position from any other in the church-yard: near a foot lower, another body, lying due east and west, was discovered, surrounded by irregular stones placed edge-ways, and at the bottom, matter, which had the appearance of charcoal” (Miller 1804, 262). Although this cannot be taken as conclusive proof of a charcoal burial, it is not impossible.

Derby, St Alkmund’s church

Historical context

The earliest references to a church at Derby come from the Chronicle of Æthelweard, which describes the body of Ealdorman Æthelwulf being taken “into the province of the Mercians to the place called Northworthig, but in the Danish tongue, Derby” in 871 (Campbell 1962). The eleventh-century list of saints’ resting-places known as Secgan lists the body of Saint Ealhmund (d. 800) as lying in Nordweordig, and the church dedicated to St Alkmund is generally accepted as the church in question (Rollason 1979, 89). Despite probably being one of the two collegiate churches listed in Derby in Domesday Book, St Alkmund’s did not have a substantial later parish (Hadley 2000, 228). Because of its early date (see below), its possession of the relics of St Alkmund, and its later collegiate structure, the church is usually assumed to have been a minster. “Only a minster would have been chosen to receive the translated
relics of a saint; only a minster could have provided the fitting services to celebrate his virtues” (Ralegh Radford 1976, 56). However, in the post-Conquest period, the minster declined. By the 12th century it had ceased to be a minster and become an “urban parish church” (Ralegh Radford 1976, 58).
Figure 5.2: excavated burials at St Alkmund's, Derby (Ralegh Radford 1976, 30). Shaded burials contain charcoal layers.
Archaeology

The standing church of St Alkmund, built in the 19th century, was destroyed in 1968 during road construction. Excavation revealed the plan of an Anglo-Saxon church (Figure 5.2) as well as ten associated burials and a group of Anglo-Saxon sculptural fragments. Charcoal burials were associated with the earliest church. No radiocarbon dating was undertaken, but fragments of stone crosses were dated to the ninth century on stylistic grounds, including one example “perhaps as early as A.D. 800” (Ralegh Radford 1976, 26). Ralegh Radford argued that the stone cross was unlikely to date from the earliest phase of the church, and that therefore the church must date from an earlier period, possibly as early as the end of the seventh century (Ralegh Radford 1976, 35).

Four charcoal burials were excavated from St Alkmund’s. One burial was within the walls of the early church, while another cut the foundations of the south porticus, which appeared to have been demolished. Ralegh Radford hypothesized that this demolition of the south and possibly north porticus, together with the rebuilding of the eastern annexe, dated to the last quarter of the ninth century, at which time Derby was under Danish control.

Only three internal burials were excavated from this site: a charcoal burial, Grave 35, a stone sarcophagus without any remains, and a grave located next to the sarcophagus. The sarcophagus has been interpreted as a shrine for the relics of Ealhmund, and the proximity of Grave 35 is believed to indicate high status.

Durham

Historical context

Durham cathedral was one of the most important ecclesiastical centres of the North and home to the cult of Saint Cuthbert of Lindisfarne. It was established in AD 995 when the see of Chester-le-Street was relocated. The relics of Saint Cuthbert made the church a major centre of pilgrimage. There is no known evidence, documentary or archaeological, for significant settlement on the site before the construction of the first
church. In the late Saxon and early post-Conquest periods, the cathedral chapter was composed of secular canons. The chapter was reformed in 1083, the canons being replaced by monks imported from the community of Monkwearmouth. Construction on a new cathedral began in 1091, and by 1099 the building was complete as far as the nave (Snape 1980).

Archaeology

In 1874, J. T. Fowler, an antiquarian and canon of the Durham cathedral chapter, led a group excavation in what was then Durham’s Deanery garden. Until 1799, this had been the site of the chapterhouse, built in c. 1135. Fowler was familiar with Browne Willis’s 1727 book on English cathedrals, which contained a detailed plan of the cathedral including the chapter house and the grave-slabs which marked the burials of past Bishops of Durham (Willis 1727, 223).

Figure 5.3: Detail of Browne Willis’s plan of Durham cathedral, showing the Chapter House. Flambard’s grave is at 21 (Willis 1727, 225)
Figure 5.4: J.T. Fowler’s plan of burials excavated within the Chapter House (Fowler 1880, 386). Flambard’s burial is at 4; note position of grave slabs

Fowler’s stated goal was to locate “the bishops and monks whose bones were supposed to be resting beneath” the garden (Fowler 1883, 240). Although the excavations were carried out by a group of amateurs, apparently on the spur of the
moment, extensive records were taken. Fowler’s excavation reports have been favourably compared to some modern examples (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 9).

In addition to the burials associated with the twelfth-century chapter house, the excavation discovered that the chapter house had “been built on ground full of interments” (Fowler 1883, 256). Fowler identified this cemetery, which included children as well as adults of both sexes, as being associated with the cathedral, predating the reform of the cathedral chapter in 1081. Whether or not this is true, the cemetery is presumably earlier than the construction of the chapter house in the mid-twelfth century. In a few cases, Fowler suggested that “those which where found in stone graves or coffins not far below the floor may have been buried in the Chapter-house as having been benefactors to the church” (Fowler 1883, 257).

Including both burial groups, 32 inhumations were excavated. Of these, five were identified as bishops of Durham: Ranulf Flambard (d. 1128), Geoffrey Rufus (d. 1140), William de St. Barbara (d. 1153), Robert de Insula (d. 1283), and Robert de Kellawe (d. 1316).

The burials of the bishops of Durham were extremely elaborate. Grave-goods found within the stone coffins include gold rings, fragments of vestments including gold cloth, crosiers, and fragmentary chalices and patens. Unidentified textile and organic remains were also found. Fowler identified these bishops based on the locations given for the named burials on Willis’s plan.

One of the stone coffins contained a layer of charcoal. Fowler identified this as the grave of the “mighty” Flambard (Fowler 1883, 240), although the precise identification is not completely clear because of possible errors in Willis’s plan. In addition to the thick layer of charcoal, this grave also contained a gold ring set with a sapphire, a silver crozier (Kendrick 1938), and a layer of lime and mortar (Fowler 1883, 244-7). Flambard was a major figure in eleventh- and twelfth-century politics, with a notorious reputation. He remains a figure of significant historical interest (Southern 1970, Prestwich 1994). Since Flambard’s death predated the construction of the chapter house, this is presumably a reburial under the floor of the structure.
The remaining inhumations lay under or outside the chapter house, and in some cases were disturbed by the later burials. These included the graves of adults of both sexes as well as infants. Some burials were in stone coffins and were well-preserved; others were fragmentary. Wooden coffins were represented in a few cases by surviving nails or fragments, and one grave contained a pillow-stone. Fowler interpreted one of the disturbed graves as a later inhumation moved during 18th-century building work on the chapter house (Fowler 1883, 264). One grave contained a spearhead, an unusual find in a cemetery otherwise lacking grave-goods.

There are reasons to be sceptical about some of Fowler’s conclusions. The skeletal sexing is probably unreliable. Nonetheless, Fowler’s excavation contributes a great deal to the study of late Saxon and medieval burial practice. Of particular interest is grave 4, identified by Fowler as that of Flambard. Even if reservations about the grave are accepted, this is the grave of a twelfth-century or later bishop of Durham. This is a fascinating example of the survival of this practice in a high-status post-Conquest context.

Exeter

One of the four late Saxon burhs of Devon, Exeter played an important role in the politics and economy of the period. It appears as a fortified site in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (s.a. 877) and in the Burghal Hidage, although its assessment is unusually small compared to its size (Hill and Rumble 1996, 32). A mint was operating by the late 9th century (North 1994, 125). Overall, Exeter was “an important, wealthy settlement in the south-west” (Conner 1993, 22).

Site: Castle bailey

Historical context

Exeter or Rougemont Castle was founded following the siege of Exeter in 1068; construction was presumably completed shortly afterward. The next record of the castle dates from 1138, by which time it had been reinforced with a stone curtain wall (Renn 1973, 185). Accounts of work carried out within the castle bailey from the 18th
to the 20th centuries report finds of human remains, but these have traditionally been assumed to be associated either with the castle chapel or with the gaol, although in fact the gaol stood in the outer bailey (S. Blaylock, pers. comm.).

Archaeology

In 2004, Exeter City Council commissioned a conservation plan for the castle. Subsequent evaluation excavations, under the supervision of Dr. Stuart Blaylock, were intended to assess the possibility of archaeological survival beneath the castle courtyard, then in use as a car park. A number of features proved to have survived, including a number of burials not associated with any known church. These are presumed to antedate the construction of the castle; the castle chapel, attested at Domesday, cuts some of the burials.

Four of the eight burials discovered in this area contained charcoal. Because the brief of the excavation was limited to evaluation, full analysis of the graves was not possible, but samples of charcoal and bone were recovered. Post-exavcation work is currently being carried out on these samples.

Site: St Mary Major

Historical context

A minster at Exeter existed by the end of the late seventh century; St Boniface is said to have been educated there (Talbot 1954, 28). Little is known about the early history of this site, but there was still a minster in the ninth century, when Asser’s Life of King Alfred (52) records that the king gave Asser “Exeter with all the jurisdiction pertaining to it”. In the tenth century, the minster, probably dedicated to St Mary and St Peter, played an important role in English politics and was patronized by the West Saxon royal house. The Chronicle of John of Worcester associates the appointment of a new abbot for Exeter in 968 with the Benedictine reform movement (see chapter 7), although given the date of the source it is hard to confirm this (Darlington et al. 1995, 418-19). Like the new minster at Gloucester, the church appears to have gone into decline in the latter part of the period, losing much of its land (Henderson and Bidwell
1982, 147). Nonetheless, archaeological evidence demonstrates that the church remained active. When the sees of Crediton and St Germans were combined and moved to Exeter in 1050, this church probably served as the cathedral until the construction of the Norman cathedral, which began in 1133.

**Archaeology**

The parish church of St Mary Major, demolished in 1970, was not always believed to be the site of the city’s Anglo-Saxon minster, but a series of excavations in the early to mid-1970s confirmed the presence of a substantial cemetery associated with a pre-Conquest church.

Excavation of the site uncovered a series of cemetery phases. Cemetery I was dated to the sub-Roman period and contained six burials. Cemeteries II and III were dated to the Middle and Late Saxon periods. These two cemeteries contained 107 burials; among these, 19 fragmentary charcoal burials were unphased but are believed to date to these two phases. Burials from both Cemetery II and Cemetery III contained charcoal. Charcoal samples were taken from some of the charcoal burials and analysed to determine whether they were suitable for radiocarbon dating. Although it was concluded that they were (Gale 1998), the samples were never dated.

The precise dating of these cemeteries is uncertain. A small number of graves from Cemetery III were shown to be stratigraphically later than graves in Cemetery II, and Cemetery III graves appear to be aligned on the minster church, which was not demolished until the twelfth century, rather than true east-west. Cemetery III therefore appears to be later than Cemetery II, with Cemetery II being associated with an earlier church structure (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, 152). A finger-ring from Cemetery II was dated on stylistic grounds to the Middle Saxon period (Graham-Campbell 1982).
Cemetery II

7th - ?10th century

Figure 5.5: Cemetery II, Exeter Cathedral Green (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, 151)
Figure 5.6: Cemetery III, Cathedral Green, Exeter. Note unphased charcoal burials (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, 151)
The most striking aspect of the Exeter charcoal burials is the relationship with coffin fittings. 14 burials in Cemetery II showed evidence for either coffin nails or strapping; of these, three produced only nails. None of these burials contained charcoal. By contrast, 11 burials included both nails and strapping. All of these contained charcoal. Similarly, three burials in Cemetery III contained only nails or only strapping; none of these contained charcoal. Six burials from Cemetery III contained both nails and strapping. All of these were charcoal burials. Only one burial from either cemetery, also a charcoal burial, contained a pillow stone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No charcoal</td>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>No charcoal</td>
<td>Charcoal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nails</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Strapping&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Strapping&quot; and nails</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Distribution of coffin elaboration, Cemeteries II and III, St Mary Major, Exeter (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, 155)

Gloucester

Gloucester was a mint by the late ninth century, producing coins for Alfred the Great (North 1994, 125). By 914 the city appears to have been "organized for defence" (Heighway 1985, 29); in this year, “the men from Hereford and Gloucester and from the nearest strongholds” successfully defeated a Danish army (ASC A s.a. 918).

Site: Blackfriars

Historical context

The Dominican friary at Gloucester was constructed on a site in the town centre which had formerly been occupied by the castle; it is first mentioned in 1241, at which time it was being built, and was completed in 1265. Following the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, the building was converted into a private residence. Large areas of the priory were acquired by the Ministry of Works in the
1950s and 1960s, and the building was partially restored. A good deal of the medieval fabric still survives (Saunders 1963; Heighway 1985, 68-70).

Archaeology

The site of the church was excavated in the spring and summer of 1978. Excavations in the south aisle revealed four graves, one of which contained a layer of charcoal. No other data appears to have been recorded, and the only analysis by excavator Christopher Guy was to identify the grave as a ‘possible post-Conquest charcoal burial’ (Guy 1979, 23). Charcoal burials of probable high medieval date were also excavated at the Dominican friary in Oxford.

Figure 5.7: “Possible post-Conquest charcoal burial” from Blackfriars, Gloucester (Guy 1979)
Site: St Oswald's

Historical context

The foundation date of the church which came to be St Oswald's priory is uncertain, but was probably around the beginning of the tenth century (Hare 1993). This minster was associated with Ealdorman Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred the Great. It was the younger of two important minsters in Gloucester; an earlier foundation, St Peter's, is believed to date from the 670s (Thacker 1981). It is roughly contemporary with the foundation of the New Minster at Winchester by Æthelflæd's brother, Edward the Elder, king of Wessex.

During its early life, St Oswald's (then probably also dedicated to St Peter) was a very high-status site, recipient of the highest level of patronage in Mercia (Heighway and Bryant 1999, 7). The C manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (s.a. 909) records the removal of St Oswald's relics from Bardney in Lincolnshire to Gloucester; these valuable relics, retrieved from Danish-held territory, underscore the church's importance. During this period, Mercia was in a state of political transition as the West Saxon dynasty moved to incorporate the English-held western part of the kingdom into Wessex. Æthelflæd's patronage of the minster is likely to have formed part of this attempt to legitimize West Saxon presence in Mercia (Thacker 1981, 211).

Following the death of its patrons and the West Saxon annexation of Mercia, St Oswald's appears to have lost some of its political importance. It subsequently appears to have lost favour and eventually became 'an insignificant foundation' (Hare 1993, 10). At Domesday, St Peter's appears to be the larger landholder (Moore 1982). In 1153, St Oswald's was taken over by the Archbishop of York and the canons were expelled. The church remained active until being largely destroyed during the siege of Gloucester in 1643; it was finally demolished in 1653.
Archaeology

A series of excavations in 1975-6, 1977, 1978 and 1983 revealed the plan of the church as well as the associated cemetery. The excavators divided the burials into generations based on stratigraphic associations with structural features and radiocarbon dated burials (Heighway and Bryant 1999, 195). 405 of the excavated burials were of Anglo-Saxon and Norman date, covering the period c. AD 900-1120 and c. AD 1120-1230 respectively.

A total of 34 charcoal burials were excavated at St Oswald’s, primarily from the period defined by burial generations B-E, covering the period between c. 900 and c. 1120. However, the rite does appear to have been practised in small numbers for a few generations after this date.

**Figure 5.8: Charcoal burials at St Oswald’s, Gloucester, by generation**

Other burial practices noted at St Oswald’s during this period included the provision of head-support stones (in 28 cases) as well as stones on either side of the feet (in four). Coffins were present throughout the period, including nailed and unnailed
varieties as well as “angle-bracket” coffins with iron straps. Four charcoal burials contained nailed coffins, as well as one possible coffin.

A possible concentration of charcoal burials on the north side of the church was noted at St Oswald’s. 42% of all burials to the north of the church contained charcoal, while the average for burials on the whole was 21% (Heighway and Bryant 1999, 202). The significance of this concentration is unclear. It may indicate a group selecting burial on the north side of the church. Charcoal burials in general tended to be close the church at this site, and this apparent concentration may be the result of a smaller excavated area on the north side.

One charcoal burial from St Oswald’s was radiocarbon dated, producing a date which corresponds with the main period of charcoal burial at the site.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>To</td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>507</td>
<td>HAR 8357</td>
<td>1070 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750 1200 Bone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at St Oswald’s, Gloucester

Goring, Sussex

**Historical context**

Eleventh-century Goring was a moderately-sized settlement located on the Sussex coast on the border between the rapes of Bramber and Arundel. Domesday Book records *Garinges* as a group of four manors, the largest of which had been held by the King in 1066 (Fox-Wilson 1987, 15-6). No records are known of the settlement prior to Domesday.
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<th>Sample</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>To</td>
<td>from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>507</td>
<td>HAR 8357</td>
<td>1070</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Archaeology

Repairs to St Mary’s church in 1974 led to limited excavation under the direction of C. J. Ainsworth. A cemetery was excavated south of the church containing an unspecified number of graves. A single burial was lying “on a level in which there were abundant traces of charcoal” (Ainsworth, quoted in Fox-Wilson 1987, 14). The burial was overlain by the foundations of the twelfth-century tower, giving a probable date in the late Saxon or early post-Conquest period. Before being sealed by the tower foundations, the burial would have been located close to the south wall of the church. Although the burial was only partially excavated, Ainsworth identified the body as that of a male. A report of the excavation was prepared, but it does not appear to have survived except for a lengthy quotation in Frank Fox-Wilson’s *The Story of Goring and Highbury* (1987, p. 14).

Hastings, Sussex

Historical context

The evidence for the nature of early settlement in Hastings is “so slender as to be almost transparent” (Hill 1978, 174). By the tenth century, Hastings was listed as one of the *burhs* of the *Burghal Hidage*, and a mint was established as early as the reign of Athelstan (Hill 1981, 131). In the eleventh century, Cnut granted the manor of Rameslie, which included much of the town, to the abbey of Fécamp (S 949).

Archaeology

Possibly the earliest written record of charcoal layers in (possibly) medieval graves is an article by Thomas Ross in *Sussex Archaeological Collections* for 1857. Ross recounts the discovery of human remains during excavations intended to establish the date of a demolished building on East Hill (the building was later identified as a windmill (Baines 1986, 1)). In the lower strata of this apparent cemetery were ‘several bodies, each on a layer of charcoal of about two inches in depth’ (Ross 1857, 366). Nails were associated with the bodies, and pillow-stones were also noted, as well as burials in which oyster shells were found under the head. In a later note, Ross
remarked that “such an unusual mode of interment I have never seen anywhere explained” (Ross 1861, 308).

When “charcoal burial” began to be a widespread concept in the 1960s and 1970s, E. W. Holden pointed out the similarity in a brief article. He noted that ‘only a few years ago, such burials were practically unknown in England,’ and pointed out that because charcoal had not been seen as important, such references could only be identified by chance (Holden 1974, 161).

Although the burials excavated by Ross resemble late Saxon or medieval examples in many ways, there is no evidence to date them. No plan or drawing exists, and material from the burials was not preserved. Not even exact numbers or locations of burials are available. If these burials were associated with a church, it is not known. Unless further work is carried out, this site, fascinating as it is, must be considered only a ‘possible’ example of the practice. Charcoal burials are found at several other late Saxon burhs and at other sites in Sussex, so it is not implausible that they could be found in Hastings.

Hereford, Castle Green

**Historical context**

A diocese of Hereford existed by 803, and may be as early as the last quarter of the seventh century. The town itself probably dates to the period between the mid-8th and mid-9th centuries, with the defences rebuilt toward the end of the 9th century (Shoesmith 1992, 8-13). Hereford was a mint as early as the reign of Edgar (959-75) (North 1994, 150).

Textual sources include references to St Guthlac’s minster as early as the will of Wulfgeat of Donnington, dated c. 1000 (S 1534). The only other pre-Conquest textual source is an agreement concerning a land purchase which describes it as collegiate and appears to place it on an equal footing with Hereford Cathedral (S 1469). It is clear from these references that St Guthlac’s was already an important church: for instance, it receives one of the largest bequests in Wulfgeat’s will. The minster may
have been founded as early as 716 (Lobel 1969) or may have been later; its original dedication, if not to St Guthlac (d. 715), is uncertain. In the 12th century, the community of St Guthlac was combined with another and relocated to elsewhere within Hereford. The church, by then within the castle itself, was demolished (Shoesmith 1980).

Archaeology

Two major phases of excavation have been carried out on the site of the demolished minster and its associated cemetery on Castle Green, first in 1960 by the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club and subsequently in 1973 by Hereford City Council. These excavations revealed evidence of stone and timber buildings, probably parts of the minster complex, as well as associated burials.

26 burials were excavated in 1960 and a further 106 during the 1973 excavations. In addition to 13 charcoal burials, burials were found with head-support stones, nailed and strapped coffins, and cists.

Three charcoal burials from Castle Green were radiocarbon dated. Charcoal from two graves was sampled, as was bone from a third. Radiocarbon dates from these samples are given below (Shoesmith 1980, 25-8, 39). It is possible that the radiocarbon dates from charcoal may be slightly earlier than the burials themselves if the cut timber was not burnt immediately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2% from</th>
<th>68.2% To</th>
<th>95.4% from</th>
<th>95.4% To</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>HAR-413</td>
<td>960 +/- 70</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>Charcoal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>HAR-414</td>
<td>1030 +/- 80</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>Charcoal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>HAR-986</td>
<td>890 +/- 80</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Bone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Castle Green, Hereford
Burials S80, S46, S86 and S87 all appear to have had charcoal inserted after the coffin rather than as a bed. However, other burials from this site include layers underneath the body. In two burials, the charcoal was mixed with grain in some parts of the grave (see Figure 2.3). As at St Mark’s, Lincoln, and St Mary Major, Exeter, some disturbed charcoal burials at Castle Green survived only as patches of charcoal.

Keynsham, Avon

Historical context

Founded c. 1167, Keynsham Abbey appears to have replaced an Anglo-Saxon church about which little is known. Several textual sources suggest that there may have been a minster at Keynsham (Lowe et al. 1987, 100-1). Finds of fragments of Anglo-Saxon sculpture support this hypothesis.

Archaeology

Burials excavated in the south aisle included one grave filled to a depth of 6 inches (15 cm) with charcoal. This grave has not been dated; it is one of a group of graves which cuts the upper fill of a row of graves associated with a fragment of Norman cable moulding (Lowe et al. 1987, 86). The charcoal burial therefore seems to postdate the construction of the abbey.

Leicester, Vaughan Way

Historical context

The early and middle Saxon history of Leicester is not clear. By the late seventh or early eighth centuries, a Mercian bishopric was based at Leicester (Courtney 1998, 110), but this does not necessarily denote urban activity. Courtney (1998) has argued that even by the ninth century, Leicester may not have been completely “urban” in character. The diocese was relocated to Dorchester following Viking attacks in the 870s and 880s. By the later 9th century, Leicester was part of the Danelaw, and was, along with Derby, Lincoln, Nottingham, and Stamford, one of the “Five Boroughs,”
major trading and administrative sites (Stafford 1985, 116). This group of towns was captured by West Saxon and Mercian forces in the first quarter of the tenth century. A mint subsequently produced coins for Athelstan. Domesday Book describes Leicester both as civitas and burgo (Morgan 1979, 230d).

The church of St Peter is one of the four “lost churches” of Leicester, medieval churches the exact locations of which were thought to be lost. St Peter's does not appear to have been a wealthy church (Courtney 1988, 133). The church itself probably dates to at least the early post-Conquest period and was demolished in 1573 (Gaimster et al. 2006, 333).

Archaeology

Development by Shires GP Ltd. on the former site of St Margaret’s Baths site prompted a series of archaeological investigations by University of Leicester Archaeology Service. This site, in the northeast quarter of the medieval walled city, contains part of the church and cemetery of St Peter. 1340 burials have been excavated, although it is not yet clear how many can be assigned to the early phases of the cemetery’s use.

Although analysis of the cemetery is ongoing and the complete results have not been published, it is known that a group of 12 charcoal burials has been recovered from this site (Gnanaratnam pers. comm.), as well as burials with support stones and stone linings. Intramural burials do not appear to be common in the early period, but later ones include coffined burials with ash dating from the 14th century. Based on associated pottery, the earliest phase of the cemetery is believed to date to the 12th century.

Figure 5.9, prepared from preliminary plans of the cemetery at Vaughan Way, shows the distribution of charcoal burials and of burials containing stone arrangements.
Little is known about the early or middle Saxon history of Lewes. By the late Saxon period it was a burh, had a mint and "seems to have been the most important town in
Sussex by the tenth century” (Lyne 1997, 1). The legal code Æthelstan, issued at Grately in 926 x 930, assigns two moneyers to Lewes. By comparison, both Hastings and Chichester have a single moneyer each (Attenborough 1922, 134-5). A “new mint” is listed in Domesday Book, which describes the revenues of the borough being split between the king and William de Warenne (Morris 1976, 26a).

Warenne was responsible for the foundation of the priory in c. 1078-81. The historical evidence for the foundation is limited; two foundation charters survive, but neither is completely reliable. It appears that the priory was built on the site of an existing church, which Warenne and his wife, Gundrada, claimed to have rebuilt in stone. The refounded priory was staffed by monks from Cluny, and Lewes came to be known as the “second daughter” of the French monastery (Lyne 1997, 1-7).

Archaeology

A series of excavations were carried out at the priory by Richard Lewis between 1969 and 1982. Unfortunately, ill health prevented Lewis from completing the excavation report and it was not compiled until after his death. The excavations revealed traces of a late Anglo-Saxon structure underneath the priory’s Infirmary Chapel. This was interpreted as a church associated with a previous, possibly monastic, occupation. Burials associated with this structure include two charcoal burials, Graves 16 and 18 (Lyne 1997, 16-18).

Burial 16 is the burial of an elderly male. A square chalk pillow stone was placed under the head, along with a layer of charcoal under the body. Nails associated with the body may have formed part of a lid over the grave. Burial 18 also contained a pillow stone and may have rested on a wooden bier. This burial was also of an “elderly” male. Both burials were assigned to Phase 1C of the structure’s history, which was believed to be the final phase of the pre-Warenne church. Only one other burial was identified from this phase. Burial 17 was a limewashed cist containing a poorly-preserved skeleton. The cist and limewashing were believed to be indicative of high status. Based on a combination of the building sequence and the textual evidence, these burials were dated to the period approximately between 1066 and 1077.
Phase 2A represents the first monastic church, and nine burials, including two charcoal burials, are associated with this phase. Debris in the lower fill of Grave 26 identified it as dating to the early part of this period. Both this grave and grave 12, the other charcoal burial from this phase, contain evidence for coffins. Grave 26 included clench-nails similar to those excavated from burials at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber (Lyne 1997, 76-7; Waldron 2007, 23).

**Lichfield, Staffordshire**

**Historical context**

Lichfield was a major Mercian religious centre. Bede (*HE* IV.3) records the foundation of the see by St Chad in the late seventh century, as well as his death and burial there. By the end of the eighth century, Lichfield was important enough to briefly become an archiepiscopal see (Blair 2005, 122). Some Mercian kings were buried at Lichfield, although others were buried at Repton (e.g. ASC s.a. 716).

**Archaeology**

Excavations within Lichfield Cathedral in 1992, 1993 and 2003 have revealed elements of the first church, as well as a sequence of graves dating back to the Middle Saxon period (Rodwell 1993, 24-8). Floor repairs in the south choir aisle uncovered burials including Middle Saxon graves with beads and quartz pebbles. Four charcoal burials were identified during this excavation. The burials of two children overlay the burials of an adolescent and an unidentified individual. The burial of the adolescent was in a coffin (Rodwell 1993, 28).

Excavations during construction work in the nave in 2003 revealed elements of the Anglo-Saxon church, including a sunken shrine which may have held the relics of St Chad, and a fragment of an elaborately-carved and painted stone panel known as the “Lichfield Angel” (Rodwell 2006). This excavation also located three Anglo-Saxon burials inside a stone structure which may have been a tower. One of these was a charcoal burial; although the grave was located, it was not fully excavated (W. Rodwell, pers. comm.). Rodwell discounts the possibility that this is the main body of
the church on the grounds that intramural burial was prohibited, but see Chapter 4 for examples of this practice.

Lincoln

Historical context

Evidence for urban activity in Lincoln is scarce before the late Saxon period. From c. 900 onwards, though, the town appears to have been an important trading centre. Archaeological evidence for settlement is extensive, and the estimated population of the town was around 4-5,000 (Darby 1977, 303) or even higher (Jones and Stocker 2003, 167). The town was a major centre of Scandinavian settlement, with close ties to York (Blackburn et al. 1983, 13). During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Lincoln was a major trading centre, with a mint from the 890s onward (Blackburn et al. 1983, 16).

St Mark’s church is located in the suburb of Wigford, c. 450 m to the south of the walled town of Lincoln. This area, inhabited during the Roman period, appears not to have been reoccupied until the tenth century. Its exact status in relation to Lincoln is unclear; sources refer to it as a “suburb,” but it may represent something other than urban overflow. The first textual reference to the parish church of St Mark occurs in 1147, in a context which suggests that the church was known from at least the beginning of the twelfth century. The dedication to St Mark is unusual, and has been interpreted as suggesting that the church is late within the sequence of Lincoln’s parish churches (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 6).

Archaeology

The Victorian church occupying the St Mark’s site was made redundant in 1969 and demolished in 1972. Excavation was carried out in 1976 and 1977 in advance of development by Lincoln Archaeological Trust in order to establish the history of the church and of the Roman occupation of the site.
The earliest phase of burial at St Mark’s may be as early as the beginning of the tenth century. Stone grave-covers and markers found at the site have dated on stylistic grounds to the tenth or eleventh centuries (Gilmour and Stocker 1981, 62). The first stone church appears to date from the eleventh century. Several of the 124 burials from the earliest cemetery were disturbed by construction of the stone church (Steane 2001, 252). Ten burials containing charcoal were found at this site. In five cases, subsequent grave digging had completely destroyed the skeleton and only “small patches of charcoal” were left, a situation analogous to the survival of charcoal burials at St Mary Major, Exeter (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 16). Only two of the graves were mostly intact.

Grave 457, the “best example” from this site, consisted of a body lying on a 1-2mm thick layer of charcoal. A void separated this from another band of charcoal around the edge of the grave, suggesting that the body was first placed on the charcoal layer and additional charcoal was placed over the top of a coffin, leaving the gap observed in excavation (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 16).

Gilmour and Stocker (1986) assigned eight of the charcoal burials to the earliest phase of the cemetery, and two to the phase contemporary with stone church. The phasing is uncertain, and it is possible that all ten of the charcoal burials are contemporary (Steane 2001). The original phasing has been followed in this thesis. The charcoal burial with the best available dating evidence was Burial 408, which has a stratigraphic relationship both with a radiocarbon-dated burial, Grave 411, and with a dated piece of stone sculpture. Burial 411 was dated using a sample of human bone (HAR-2010). This gave a determination of 1040 +/- 60 bp, which has been calibrated to 890-1160 cal AD.

Grave 408 cut grave 411. It in turn was overlain by grave 396, the burial of an infant. 396 was overlain by grave 370, which was cut by another burial, 374. Burial 374 was associated with a fragmentary stone grave marker, marker 23, which was dated on stylistic grounds to the period between the end of the tenth and the late eleventh century. The association between marker 23 and grave 374 is only probable (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 57).
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A possible concentration of charcoal burials exists at St Mark’s. A dense group of “ordinary” burials is west of the church. Only one of these is a charcoal burial. The rest of the charcoal burials are located to the north-west of this group (See Figure 5.10).
Figure 5.10: Period VIII cemetery at St Mark’s, Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 15). Shaded burials contain charcoal layers.
Figure 5.11: Period IX cemetery at St Mark’s, Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 18). Shaded burials contain charcoal layers.
Little Oakley, Essex

**Historical context**

The manors of Great and Little Oakley appear in Domesday Book, which describes an *Adeia*, at this location, presumably a scribal error for *Acleia* (Barford 2002, 1). The foundation date of the church of St Mary is unknown. It is not mentioned in the Domesday entry, but this is not necessarily proof that it is a post-Conquest foundation; Churches are very under-reported in Domesday (Darby 1977, 52). Early textual evidence for small churches is frequently absent.

**Archaeology**

Based on structural evidence, Warwick and Kirsty Rodwell believed the core of the standing church to be “certainly Norman, or earlier” in date (Rodwell and Rodwell 1977, 61). The church became redundant in the early 1970s and was sold with planning permission to convert it into a private residence. Archaeological work was carried out in advance of the remodel by M. J. Corbishley for Essex County Council.

A single early burial, F54, was found at a level below the foundation trench of the south wall. This burial contained “a large amount of charcoal both on top of and around the skeleton.” M. J. Corbishley concluded that “the possibility exists therefore of a charcoal burial” (Corbishley 1984, 21). Since the burial predates the construction of the stone church, it is unlikely to be later than the middle of the 12th century, and may be earlier.

It is difficult to tell whether or not this is a burial of the type normally considered a “charcoal burial.” The plan and section drawings show a fairly small amount of charcoal, but there was evidently enough to make a significant impression on the excavators. In the absence of any further detail, the identification by the excavators should be accepted.
Figure 5.12: charcoal burial at St Mary's, Little Oakley, predating the standing church (Corbishley 1984, 18)
London

Historical context

London was a major town in the late Anglo-Saxon period; the defended area, *Lundenburh*, was at a slight distance from the main area of Middle Anglo-Saxon settlement, *Lundenwic*, across the Fleet. The first textual record to the church of St Nicholas Shambles appears c. 1144, at which time the church was already in existence. The church was in use until its demolition in the mid-15th century (Schofield 1997, 77-8).

Archaeology

The site of St. Nicholas Shambles was excavated by the Museum of London’s Department of Urban Archaeology between 1975 and 1979. Excavation revealed evidence for a succession of church buildings as well as an associated cemetery. The plan and construction of the foundations led to a proposed eleventh-century date for the Phase I, the earliest church (Schofield 1997, 88).

Probably contemporary with the Phase I church is a cemetery of 234 skeletons. Based on their depth and the disturbance of upper levels of the cemetery by construction following the demolition of the church, the cemetery was believed to date from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries (Schofield 1997, 109-110). Burials from this cemetery were categorized into six types; Type V, charcoal burial, is represented by a single example. This burial, number 5322, was located “within one metre of the north wall of the first church” (Schofield 1997, 93). Burials of Types IV and VI, containing stone and chalk linings, were also typically found in close proximity to the phase I church. The other burial types observed in the cemetery include “simple” burials (White 1988, 18) with or without coffins, burials with pillow-stones, graves with crushed chalk or mortar layers on the floor of the grave cut, cist graves, and graves with stone linings.

The single charcoal burial, 5322, contained the truncated skeleton of an infant (White 1988, 18-19).
Figure 5.13: Burial types from St Nicholas Shambles. Partial burial V is the only excavated charcoal burial (White 1988, 18)
Oxford

Textual sources first mention the town of Oxford in the early tenth century (ASC D, E, s.a.910), when Mercia came under West Saxon control. Oxford and London are mentioned together as major Mercian towns. Oxford is one of the *burhs* listed in the *Burghal Hidage* (Hill and Rumble 1996, 32) and had a mint from the late ninth century (North 1994, 126). Throughout the tenth century and onward, it was a major town. Its population in 1066 has been estimated at 4-5,000 (Darby 1977, 303), although it may have declined later in the eleventh century.

**Site:** All Saints

**Historical context**

The church of All Saints is located on High Street in Oxford, within what is believed to be the limit of the “primary *burh.*” The church is known to have existed as early as 1122, when it was one of a group of Oxford churches and chapels granted to St Frideswide’s Priory (Dodd 2003, 204). During the high medieval period, the church was associated with gilds and appears to have been patronized by prominent townsmen. The late Saxon history of the church is unknown from textual sources.

**Archaeology**

All Saints became redundant in 1971, and the standing building, which was of 18th-century date, was converted into a library for Lincoln College. After the conversion work revealed evidence of the early medieval church, excavations were carried out in 1973 and 1974 by the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee.

The earliest phase of the church building has been dated to the second half of the eleventh century. This was probably a small, rectangular single-celled building (Dodd 2003, 236) which postdates a cellared structure of probable tenth-century date (Dodd 2003, 233).
The first phase of burial at All Saints postdates the demolition or collapse of this structure (Dodd 2003, 237). Sixteen burials were excavated from this cemetery. Of these, one grave contained a layer of charcoal, while another was laid on a bed of ash (Dodd 2003, 221). The charcoal burial, Grave AS55, was radiocarbon dated (see below) and this date was further refined using Bayesian analysis (see Chapter 8). The skeleton was that of a male over 25 years of age (Dodd 2003, 224). A further 32 graves dated to the later medieval period; none of them included charcoal layers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2% from</th>
<th>95.4% from</th>
<th>68.2% to</th>
<th>95.4% to</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>HAR-418</td>
<td>920+/-70</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Bone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.6: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at All Saints, Oxford

**Site: Blackfriars**

**Historical context**

The first Dominican priory at Oxford was established in the early 1220s, but the priory was subsequently moved to a larger site outside the city’s South Gate. Construction at this site probably began around 1236, and the priory remained at this location until the Dissolution (Hinnebusch 1938, 57-68).

**Archaeology**

Excavations throughout the 1960s and 1970s identified burials in seven areas of the monastery, although not all of these were lifted or examined in any detail (Lambrick and Woods 1976).

Nine burials were excavated within the cloister alley. Of these, two contained layers of charcoal. One of these, burial 131/2, was part of a double burial; the lower of the two skeletons was placed on a layer of charcoal as well as being ‘partly covered’ by it (Lambrick and Woods 1976, 193). Both bodies were associated with the remains of
coffins. Burial 128 was an adult male, believed to be in his 40s, while neither of the skeletons in grave 131 could be sexed.

With the exception of the two unsexed skeletons in grave 131, all the burials in the cloister alley were adult males. By contrast, burials in other areas of the site contained the remains of females and infants. This fact led the excavators to conclude that the burials in the cloister alley were likely to have been friars (Lambrick and Woods 1976, 205).

These inhumations are believed to post-date the construction of the church in 1236 and are probably later than 1251, when the crown granted money toward the construction of the cloister (Hinnebusch 1938, 69).

**Site:** Christ Church/St Frideswide’s

**Historical context**

The first record of a monastery or minster at Oxford is a charter dated to 1004 (S 909), but textual sources report a tradition that a monastery was founded in the early 8th century. According to this tradition, Frideswide, after whom the church came to be named, was the first abbess of the foundation and the daughter of its patron. The exact location of this site has never been determined, but burials excavated under Christchurch cathedral are believed to have been associated with the minster. Recent radiocarbon dates from associated burials suggests that the earliest phase of the minster may date to the seventh century, well before the town itself (Dodd 2003, 418).

**Archaeology**

Three separate excavations in different parts of the area of Christ Church cathedral have uncovered areas of the cemetery associated with St Frideswide’s minster.

Excavations in Tom Quad in 1972 located the burials of two individuals buried on layers of charcoal (Hassall 1973, 270). These were both of adults, one unsexed and one male. Grave 2 was radiocarbon dated (see below). This radiocarbon date, along
with others from the site, was further subjected to Bayesian analysis in order to provide a more precise estimated date range; see Chapter 8 for more information. No other burials were located.

The second series of excavations took place in 1985. These excavations located a group of inhumations within the cloister. The remains of 20 individuals were identified. Two of these were buried on layers of charcoal. F121 was identified as a possible female adult, while F123 was male (Seull et al. 1988, 29, 54). A sample of human bone from F123 was dated (see below) and the date combined with other dates from this and other sites to produce an estimated date range (see Chapter 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cloister</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>HAR-6819</td>
<td>1110 +/- 40</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Quad</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>HAR-190</td>
<td>1100 +/- 100</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.7: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Christ Church, Oxford

Excavations in 1998 in advance of extension of the Christ Church cathedral graveyard identified 37 inhumations. Only three females were identified within this group. Intercutting of graves suggested that the cemetery had been in use over a long period (Boyle et al. 2001, 364). None of the burials from this group contained charcoal layers.

Site: St Aldate’s

Historical context

St Aldate’s church is first recorded in the second quarter of the twelfth century. By this time, it was already an established church. It may be of late Anglo-Saxon date, and was possibly part of the St Frideswide’s minster complex as a subsidiary church along with St Ebbe’s (Tyler et al. 2001, 407-8).
Archaeology

Excavations carried out between August and October 1999 did not shed much light on the sequence of the church, and its early date remains uncertain. 19 burials were excavated within the area of the new baptistery. Eight of these burials contained charcoal layers; these were "concentrated towards the bottom of the sequence" (Tyler et al. 2001, 393). Oak charcoal predominated in the samples (Tyler et al. 2001, 398-402). The charcoal sample from one of the charcoal burials contained burrwood, which may indicate that the oak used to produce the charcoal came from an older tree. This find is discussed in more detail in Chapter 12.

Three of the charcoal burials from St Aldate's were radiocarbon dated (see below) and the dates combined with dates from this and other sites using Bayesian analysis to produce a refined estimated date range (see Chapter 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>846</td>
<td>NZA-12347</td>
<td>1147 +/- 28</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>835</td>
<td>NZA-12349</td>
<td>1210 +/- 36</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>650</td>
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<tr>
<td>855</td>
<td>NZA-12348</td>
<td>1107 +/- 28</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.8: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at St Aldate's, Oxford

Repton, Derbyshire

Historical context

Repton was one of the most important ecclesiastical centres of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia. The community was probably founded in the later seventh century, and probably originally consisted of a community ruled by an abbess and including both men and women (Hadley 2000, 220-1). The earliest phase of the site
appears to have consisted of multiple buildings, one of which included a stone crypt. Subsequent construction created a single church building overlying the crypt (Taylor 1987). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the burial of King Æthelbald of Mercia at Repton in 755 (s.a. 755, although the F manuscript claims he was killed at Repton). A cult developed around the remains of the Mercian prince Wigstan (d. 849); the early 11th-century list of saints’ resting places known as the *Secgan* describes Saint Wystan’s remains as being held at Repton (Rollason 1978, 89).

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (s.a. 874) states that the Viking “raiding-army” wintered at Repton in 873-4. Following the end of Scandinavian rule, Repton’s circumstances seem to have been reduced, but it continued to be an important church within its region. Repton had two priests at Domesday (Morgan 1978, 272d), a feature which has been suggested as an indicator of an early minster church. The medieval parish was very large, containing eight subsidiary chapels, and probably represents a (possibly even larger) Late Anglo-Saxon “parish” reflecting Repton’s former status.

**Archaeology**

When excavations at the site began in the 1970s, it was not anticipated that the occupation would have left any trace in the archaeological record near the church itself. In fact, Repton today is best known for its remarkable Viking-period finds, including burials with grave-goods and a large and unusual mortuary deposit which may represent either members of the “great army” which wintered at Repton or redeposited remains from the monastic cemetery (Hadley 2000, 224-5).

Although the ninth-century burials are the best-known finds from Repton, some graves from later centuries exist. A single burial with a charcoal layer was excavated at Repton. This was the grave of a juvenile, buried on a “thin bed of charcoal” (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1985, 238). The burial was located by the crypt, overlain by the later medieval steps, and not associated with the mass grave outside the defences. The grave appeared to be stratigraphically later than a mortar spread which in turn seals a potsherd of probably eleventh-century date (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1985, 238). It also overlies feature 493, a pit which was probably a scaffolding hole and which contained fragments of stone sculpture. Pit 493 cuts the uppermost of a series of
graves with probably late Saxon features, and has also been provisionally dated to the eleventh or early twelfth century. The charcoal burial, Grave 192, is later than this. It is currently believed that the burial dates from the last quarter of the twelfth century (Kjølbye-Biddle, pers. comm.). If true, this might make the burial contemporary with charcoal burials at nearby Calke Abbey, during the period in which the two houses were associated.

Interpreting the single charcoal burial at Repton is difficult, because it does not appear to form part of any larger excavated cemetery, or at least not one for which data is available.

Romsey Abbey, Romsey, Hampshire

**Historical context**

Sources for the early history of Romsey Abbey are limited. John of Worcester states that it was founded as a nunnery in the reign of Edward the Elder (901-924) and refounded by Edgar in 967. The foundation probably dates to the early part of Edward's reign before 909. The nunnery appears to have had close ties to the royal house of Wessex. A number of West Saxon princesses were educated at Romsey or served as abbesses (Liveing 1906). Romsey is mentioned in two charters of this period, a land grant from 968 (S 675) and a possibly inauthentic confirmation of privileges from c. 970 (S 812). It is also the recipient of a bequest in the will of Ælfgifu, dated to 966 x 975 (S 1484). It has been argued (Hase 1988) that the tenth-century nunnery was founded on the site of an earlier Middle Saxon minster, although there is insufficient evidence to draw a firm conclusion. The late Saxon nunnery was replaced by a Norman abbey, constructed c. 1120.

**Archaeology**

Although evidence of possible medieval and Anglo-Saxon burials at Romsey Abbey, including one in a lead coffin, is known from earlier work (Scott 1996, 21-4), the major excavations at the Abbey site were carried out between 1973 and 1991. These excavations located parts of the fabric of the late Anglo-Saxon abbey, together with
its associated cemetery. Possible evidence for an earlier phase of the abbey was also located, associated with earlier burials.

Unfortunately, the excavation records of the Romsey Abbey excavations for most of the 1970s are incomplete, leaving some gaps in analysis of the late Anglo-Saxon burials. In particular, although the excavators identified Grave 5119 as a “charcoal burial,” it is not clear whether the charcoal from this feature is in fact a grave-lining or is intrusive. This casts some doubt on the utility of the radiocarbon date derived from the charcoal, since the charcoal may postdate the burial. As the complete excavation records have not survived, the identification of Grave 5119 must be regarded as tentative (Scott 1996, 24).

The 1973-1991 excavations at Romsey Abbey located five charcoal burials, including the possible charcoal burial 5119. Two charcoal burials, 3120 and 3159, were excavated to the north of the church in 1975. A sample of charcoal from one of these, 3120, was sent for radiocarbon dating. The second charcoal burial, 3159, appears on the phase plan but does not appear in the site archive. Both burials were dated to Phase 8, contemporary with the late Anglo-Saxon abbey (Scott 1996, 34). Two further charcoal burials, 5119 and 5127, were excavated to the south of the church in 1979. Samples of charcoal from both were sent for radiocarbon dating. In 1989, a small area on the south edge of the medieval monastic precinct was excavated in advance of construction. Among the burials discovered during this excavation was a single charcoal burial, grave 42 (Scott 1996, 24-8). Road work near the Abbey in 2004 uncovered another group of burials, including 12 in situ burials, one of which contained a layer of charcoal, and redeposited skeletal material from approximately 15 individuals.

Of the five charcoal burials excavated from the area around the Abbey and the monastic precinct, four were dated to Phase 8, believed to be contemporary with the refoundation c. 970. One burial, Grave 5119, was assigned to Phase 7, earlier than the construction of the 970 building but postdating a set of chalk foundations which may represent the early tenth-century nunnery.
Radiocarbon dates from the burials at Romsey Abbey produced results consistent with this phasing plan. Table 5.9 shows the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5119</td>
<td>HAR-3765</td>
<td>1170 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5127</td>
<td>HAR-3760</td>
<td>1050 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3120</td>
<td>HAR-2527</td>
<td>1100 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.9: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Romsey Abbey

Shrewsbury, Shropshire

Historical context

"It is no exaggeration to say that we know nothing about the origins of Shrewsbury" (Bassett 1991, 1). Like many late Anglo-Saxon towns, it is first recorded at the beginning of the tenth century, at which time it appears already to have been an important site within Mercia. Ealdorman Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd stayed there in 901; their presence is recorded in a charter they issued while there (S 221). A mint was operating in Shrewsbury in the first quarter of the tenth century (North 1994, 135). By Domesday, it was a large royal borough, with 252 houses and six major churches (Thorn and Thorn 1986, 252a).

Old St Chad’s

Historical context

St Chad’s is recorded in Domesday Book as having been a possession of the bishop of Lichfield in 1066 (Bassett 1991, 3). The origin of the church is not known, but Steven Bassett (1991, 6) has argued based on the size and shape of the church’s medieval parish that it is a minster of Middle Saxon date. The church collapsed in the
eighteenth century and a replacement was built on a different site, although the crypt continued to be visible (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 547).

Archaeology

The cemetery of this church has never been comprehensively excavated. Two burials were located just a short distance outside the north aisle (Nurse and Auden 1890, F. 1). These consisted of stone cists covered by slabs. In each cist was a body, with “considerable traces of a layer of charcoal” between it and the earth of the grave-floor (Nurse and Auden 1890, 362). In the absence of any grave goods, the burials could not be dated, although the excavators believed them to be early Saxon or even pre-Saxon in date, based on traditional beliefs about the history of the church.

There has been no subsequent archaeological investigation of burials associated with this church (N. Baker, pers. comm.). However, the cist-graves illustrated in Nurse and Auden’s report are roughly consistent with late Anglo-Saxon examples from other sites, and it seems probable that these were indeed late Anglo-Saxon charcoal burials, rather than the early interments the excavators expected to find.

Figure 5.14: Cists from Old St Chad’s, Shrewsbury (Nurse and Auden 1890, Pl. 5)
Shrewsbury Abbey

Historical context

The Abbey, dedicated to SS Peter and Paul, dates to the 1080s. Textual sources state that a church was already present in this area before the foundation of the abbey. Orderic Vitalis (XIII. 45, V.14) describes this church being replaced by the new monastery founded by Earl Roger. Domesday Book describes the foundation of the abbey, apparently in progress at the time of compilation: “In Shrewsbury city Earl Roger is making an abbey and has given to it the minster of St Peter, where there was a parish of the city, and as many of his burgesses and mills as yield £12 to the monks…” (Thorn and Thorn 1986 252c). A similar pattern can be seen in towns such as Lewes and Romsey, where existing (possibly declined) late Anglo-Saxon churches were also refounded as Norman abbeys.

Archaeology

Parts of the medieval abbey were excavated between 1985 and 1988, but “no features or deposits of pre-Conquest date were found in the excavation” (Baker 2002, 73). However, construction on the site throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries occasionally revealed parts of the medieval cemetery, possibly including late Anglo-Saxon burials. Finds of burials were reported in 1817, 1866, 1878, and 1879, but these were seldom recorded in much detail (Baker 2002, 45). During sewer excavations in 1896, three burials were uncovered. These burials lay underneath the chapter house and are therefore believed to predate the late eleventh-century refoundation of the monastery (Baker 2002, 44). Unlike these three graves, most of the burials excavated in association with the Abbey have been located to the east of the church and cloisters (Baker 2002, 45).

A brief, anonymous description of these burials was published in Shropshire Notes and Queries for August 21, 1896. The three burials were “enclosed in cists of red sandstone” and were described as having been “remarkably well preserved, owing, doubtless, to the bodies having been surrounded in wood charcoal at the time of burial” (“Topographer” 1896, 29). The author of the report compared the cists to those
excavated a few years previously at Old St Chad’s, the first acknowledgement in print that the rite was widespread.

Trowbridge, Wiltshire

Historical context

Trowbridge is first mentioned in Domesday Book, under the variant name Straburg. The element –byrig may indicate that this was a fortified site at the end of the eleventh century. In 1086, the manor was held by an English landowner, Brictric (Rogers 1984, 12). By the early 12th century, however, Trowbridge was held by the de Bohun family. The Bohuns were responsible for the construction of the first castle, which must have been complete by 1139, when it was besieged (Rogers 1984, 13).

The first written record of a church in Trowbridge dates from 1125, when a sum of money from the church at Trowbridge was granted to a new church founded at Monkton Farleigh by the Bohuns (Rogers 1984, 17). However, the church was destroyed or moved when the castle was renovated in the mid-12th century.

Archaeology

Excavation on the site of the castle in 1977 revealed the foundations of the stone church as well as a large cemetery. Further excavation between 1986 and 1988 located further graves as well as clarifying the settlement history of Trowbridge (Graham and Davies 1993, 7-9).

Burials were associated with a stone church, Structure 17, within a ditch which appears to have bounded the churchyard. The cemetery associated with this structure predates the expansion of the Norman castle, while the church itself is stylistically consistent with other late Anglo-Saxon small churches such as the church at Raunds, Northants. A total of 148 burials were excavated from late Anglo-Saxon and “Saxo-Norman” phases. Coffins do not appear to have been common. Stone slabs or skulls used as “pillow-stones” were found in up to 16 graves.
Charcoal in varying amounts was recovered from seven graves, but only one of these, grave 2064, contained a charcoal layer substantial enough to be called a "charcoal burial". The age and sex of the skeleton in this grave could not be determined.

The majority of the graves are sealed by a clay layer associated with work on the castle's defences, placing the final use of the cemetery in the second quarter of the twelfth century. However, there is no firm evidence for the earliest date of the cemetery; excavators estimated it at c. 950 (Graham and Davies 1993).

Wallingford, Oxfordshire

**Historical context**

Wallingford is an Alfredian *burh*, first attested in the Burghal Hidage with an assessment of 2,400 hides (Hill and Rumble 1996, 32). This is the highest level of assessment found in the Burghal Hidage, on a par with major West Saxon burhs like Winchester. The town may have been newly created as part of the program of fortification. Coins were minted at Wallingford at least as early as the reign of Æthelstan (924-939) (North 1994, 135). Unlike many other West Saxon burhs, Wallingford did not develop into a large town in the later medieval period. The modern town remains roughly within the limit of the late Saxon defences.

**Archaeology**

Excavations were carried out on this site by Northamptonshire Archaeology in 2004, producing a total of 219 burials. These burials were dated to a period between the late 10th and 15th centuries, although burials from the late medieval period were scarcer. The cemetery was heavily disturbed by later digging on the site. The church foundations either did not survive or were not located, although the presence of what appeared to be a mortar-mixer suggested a stone building.

Burial practices at St Martin's included burial with "ear-muff" stones, as well as burial in "stone tombs." A single burial was also found with a scallop shell, perhaps
indicating pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Two charcoal burials were also found among the late Saxon burials (Booth et al. 2007, 267-8; I. Soden, pers. comm.).

Winchester, Hampshire

The Middle Saxon history of Winchester is unclear. It served as an ecclesiastical centre, but whether it had other functions is unclear. The major town of the region appears to have been *Hamwic* (modern Southampton).

In the late ninth century, Winchester was part of a massive fortification program carried out by the West Saxon royal house. A network of fortresses and fortified towns covered Wessex. The Burghal Hidage lists lands assigned to maintain these fortifications; Winchester is one of the largest, with an allotment of 2400 hides. Containing a royal residence, a massive ecclesiastical complex and a mint, Winchester was one of the most important towns in late Anglo-Saxon England, a centre of administration and symbolic power for the West Saxon dynasty which maintained its importance even after their overthrow in the eleventh century.

Site: Old and New Minsters

**Historical context**

The Old and New Minsters of Winchester together formed the ecclesiastical complex at the heart of one of Anglo-Saxon England’s most important towns. Because the two churches are so close to one another, and because the published literature does not always usefully distinguish between the two, the cemeteries of both the Old and New Minsters have been treated here as a single unit. Closely connected with the West Saxon royal dynasty, Winchester’s churches played a vital role in the church reform movements of the late Saxon period (Yorke 1982, 75).

The Canterbury Manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle dates the foundation of the Old Minster to 648, following the conversion of King Cenwalh of Wessex, although Barbara Yorke (1982, 75) has suggested a slightly later date of between 660 and 663. Because of the later prominence of Winchester, it might be assumed that the Old
Minster was associated with an important administrative site such as the royal palace, but it is not clear that Winchester was a major centre before the late ninth century. The palace can only be dated with any certainty to the tenth century (Yorke 1982, 79-80).

The Old Minster was an important cemetery for the kings of Wessex. Kings of Wessex and West Saxon Kings of England buried in the Old Minster include Cynewulf (d. 755), Æthelwulf (d. 856), Alfred (d. 899), and Ælfweard (d. 924). The New Minster was established in 901 by Edward the Elder and functioned alongside the Old Minster. The body of Alfred the Great (d. 899) appears to have been moved from the Old Minster to the New Minster, and Edward the Elder (d. 924) was buried there. However, royal burial also continued at the Old Minster, which housed the bodies of Edred (d. 955) and Eadwig (d. 959). The association continued even after the end of the West Saxon dynasty; Cnut (d. 1035) was also buried in the Old Minster, as was Harthacnut (d. 1042). Magnates such as Earl Godwine (d. 1053) were also buried in the Old Minster. A third major church, Nunnaminster, was also constructed in the early tenth century.

The monastic reform of the late tenth century saw the expulsion of secular canons from both the Old and New Minsters in 964 (Rumble 2002, 81). Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester (963-984) was a major proponent of the reform movement, and worked to found a number of other Benedictine houses, including Peterborough, Ely and Thorney. This period also saw new building work, including a major rebuilding of the Old Minster in 971 (Biddle 1970, 27-9).

The immediate post-Conquest period provides one of the very few written references to the cemetery of a major church. Interestingly, William I gave two churches in Hampshire to the New Minster in exchange for land on which to build a hall (Rumble 2002, 156-9). The charters record that this land had previously been used as a cemetery.

The close proximity of the two churches, which together with Nunnaminster formed a large church area in the south-eastern corner of the city, may not have been very successful. In c. 1110, the New Minster was relocated to nearby Hyde in a complicated process of land transfer (Rumble 2002, 30).
Archaeology

Extensive excavation of these important sites was carried out from 1961 to 1971 under the direction of Martin Biddle. These excavations identified the structural sequence of the buildings as well as large cemeteries. The cemetery of the New Minster contained 109 burials, while 743 graves were associated with the Old Minster. Although detailed interim reports were published in the Antiquaries Journal and occasional articles have revealed more of the results (Biddle 1969, 1970b; Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 1992), publication of the excavations themselves has been slow. While some conclusions reached from the cemetery data have been published (Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 1992), the dataset itself is still in the process of publication. This means that any conclusion reached from the Winchester cemeteries necessarily incorporates an additional layer of interpretation.

Although they were separate establishments and had separate cemeteries, the Old Minster and New Minster are considered together in this entry because of their close proximity. Even without the publication of the complete excavation data, it is clear that the cemeteries of the two minsters make up the largest concentration of charcoal burials in England, far larger than St Oswald’s, the next largest.

Of the 743 Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon burials excavated at Old Minster, 74 contained charcoal. These burials were dated based on the complex stratigraphic sequence of burials and its relationship to ceramic and construction evidence (Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 101-6). According to this phasing of the site, charcoal burials first appear in small numbers in the ninth century, but are most common in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 222). Earlier charcoal burials, dated before c. 970-c.980, typically have thicker grave linings than later examples (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 229). Charcoal burials were located in prominent positions close to the church, along with other types of elaborate and “expensive-looking” grave including burials in stone coffins or in coffins with iron scrollwork (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 228). Although charcoal burials make up only around 10% of the total burials at New Minster, they represent 25% of all internal burials. Charcoal burials are associated with the final phase of burial contemporary with the construction of the Norman cathedral in 1093 (Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 106).
Despite the proximity and contemporaneity of the two churches, there are notable differences in the charcoal burials associated with them. Skeletons from the charcoal burials at Old Minster have been analyzed, identifying a ratio of three males to one female. By contrast, the 23 charcoal burials at New Minster show a ratio of three females to two males (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 231).

Approximately 120 samples of both human bone and charcoal from the Old Minster cemetery were submitted for radiocarbon dating. Unlike the situation at many other late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, a dating program of this scale could perhaps make it easier to date changes in burial practice within the late Anglo-Saxon period, even allowing for the problems arising from using both bone and charcoal as dating samples. Unfortunately, like the rest of the Winchester data, the radiocarbon results remain unavailable.

Site: Staple Gardens

Historical context

The historical context of the Staple Gardens cemetery is unknown. It may be associated with a church of St Paul, first recorded in 1256, but this is uncertain.

Archaeology

Rescue excavations were carried out in 1984. During the final weeks of excavation, evidence of a cemetery was identified. Excavation was therefore extended into 1985, revealing 68 graves containing 78 individuals. Six graves produced evidence of wooden coffins (Youngs et al. 1986, 149).

Further excavations at the neighbouring site of 1-3 Staple Gardens were conducted from May to July 1989 in advance of redevelopment. These excavations located the northern area of "a cemetery dated broadly to the Late Saxon period" (Kipling and Scobie 1990 8), within which 206 graves were excavated.
The “charcoal burials” from Staple Gardens illustrate some of the complexity of the term. The excavation report listed ten burials as “charcoal burials.” However, this term appears to encompass graves containing any amount of charcoal. Four of these may be charred coffin burials or burials containing small amounts of charcoal; the remaining six have charcoal beds varying from 3 cm to 12 cm in thickness.

One notable burial from Staple Gardens is grave 546. This was the burial of an adult male in a lead coffin. The coffin was composed of eight separate sheets of lead bonded by lead strips. The lead appears to have formed the lining of a timber coffin. Two flint “pillow” stones were found within the coffin, along with fragments of cloth, possibly a shroud. A layer of charcoal 10 cm thick was found underneath the coffin, while the sides of the grave cut were lined with charcoal up to a depth of 46 cm (WMS Staple Gardens). This burial is unique in Late Saxon funerary archaeology, with the possible exception of a lead coffin excavated in 1839 at Romsey Abbey, Hampshire, which may have been of Anglo-Saxon date (Scott 1996, 23).

Nine samples from burials at Staple Gardens were submitted for radiocarbon dating, producing dates centred on the ninth and tenth centuries. An estimated date range of c. 850- c. 975 has been proposed for the cemetery (G. Scobie, pers. comm.). One of the radiocarbon dates came from a charcoal burial, G546, and produced a date of 1105 +/- 25 BP. Further discussion of the cemetery dating can be found in Chapter 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2% from</th>
<th>68.2% to</th>
<th>95.4% from</th>
<th>95.4% to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>546</td>
<td>GrN-26191</td>
<td>1105 +/- 25</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.10: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at Staple Gardens

York

One of the most important locations in the kingdom of Northumbria, York continued to play a vital role during the Anglo-Scandinavian period and into the middle ages. There is very little textual evidence for the city in the first half of the ninth century. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that York was captured by the Danes in 866-7.
Archaeological excavation has produced evidence for extensive industrial production and trade links with Scandinavia and Ireland during the 10th and early 11th centuries (Hall and Kenward 2004, 404-9, 419; Mainman and Rogers 2004). York was one of the largest towns in the country. Its population in 1066 has been estimated at around 8,000, although by 1086 it may have declined to as little as 5,000 (Darby 1977, 304).

**Site:** St Helen-on-the-Walls

**Historical context**

St Helen-on-the-Walls, or St Helen-in-Aldwark, is first mentioned by textual sources in the late 12th century. There is no direct historical evidence for the church during the late Saxon period. However, textual records of medieval churches in York are thin; of over twenty pre-Conquest churches, only seven (perhaps slightly more; some references are ambiguous) are mentioned in or before Domesday Book. Located just within the old Roman walls, the church is dedicated to the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great, proclaimed emperor at York in 306. The idea that Constantine had been born to Helen in York was known in the early medieval period, and the dedication may be original. The church was made redundant in 1549-50 and appears to have been demolished shortly thereafter. The exact location of the church was widely believed to be some distance to the north of the real site until excavation revealed it (Magilton and Palliser 1980).

**Archaeology**

The earliest phase of St Helen-on-the-Walls may be as early as the middle of the tenth century, based on limited evidence provided by excavated pottery (Magilton 1980, 37). This small structure was associated with an extensive cemetery. This cemetery was excavated in 1973-4, producing 1041 inhumations. These burials covered the church’s 600-year lifespan; exactly how many of them date from the late Saxon period is unknown. Only 10 could be firmly dated to the earliest period of the site’s history.

One of the burials, Burial 5731g, consisted of the fragmentary remains of an adult female. This burial had been heavily disturbed by reconstruction of the church, dated
to the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Only the feet and ankles survived, 'encased in a thick layer of clean charcoal' (Dawes and Magilton 1980, 16). Charcoal from this burial was radiocarbon dated (see below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>From</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5731</td>
<td>HAR-2900</td>
<td>810 +/- 80</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.11: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at St Helen-on-the-Walls

**Site:** St Mary Bishophill Senior

**Historical context**

The church of St Mary Bishophill Senior is located south-west of the River Ouse, within the walled medieval city. Archaeological evidence suggests that this area was settled in the 8th and 9th centuries (Moulden and Tweddle 1986, 7-14).

St Mary Bishophill Senior was one of at least five pre-Conquest churches south-west of the Ouse. Little is known about its early history. The standing church of St Mary Bishophill Senior, elements of which dated to the eleventh century, was demolished in 1963. It is possible, although not certain, that the church was or was associated with the late eighth-century church dedicated to the Holy Wisdom (Rollason 1998, 155-7).

**Archaeology**

A series of excavations in the area of St Mary Bishophill Senior in 1959, 1964 and 1973-4 revealed evidence of Roman-period occupation and late Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical use. Parts of what appeared to be the precinct wall of the cemetery were believed to predate the eleventh-century church, along with fragments of Anglo-Saxon stone crosses. The earliest demonstrable use of the site as a churchyard is therefore in the tenth century (Ramm 1976, 35).
Two burials containing charcoal are believed to have been associated with the church of St Mary Bishophill Senior. The first probable charcoal burial was excavated in 1959: this was “an extended burial found on a bed of dark material containing charcoal” and was later identified by Ramm as being of “a late Saxon type” (Ramm 1976, 45).

A second example was excavated by York Archaeological Trust at 37 Bishophill Senior in preparation for the construction of a car park. Two burials, one with a layer of charcoal in the base of the cut, were found north-west of the present churchyard. It has been suggested that these were “probably outliers of the churchyard” (Moulden and Tweddle 1986, 55), demonstrating that the late Anglo-Saxon churchyard was larger than the churchyard at the time of demolition. Skeletal data does not appear to have been recorded for either of the charcoal burials; the 1973-4 example, at least, is fragmentary (Moulden and Tweddle 1986, plate VIIa).

Site: York Minster

**Historical context**

Textual sources, including Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, refer to York as an important ecclesiastical centre beginning in 627, when King Edwin of Northumbria was baptised there. The Chronicle describes the baptism as taking place in a wooden church dedicated to St Peter which was shortly replaced by a stone church. This is the first reference to what would become York Minster.

York Minster, dedicated to St Peter, played a central role in York throughout the early medieval period. Throughout the period, members of the Northumbrian royal family and other prominent individuals were buried in the Minster (ASC A s.a. 738, Buckberry 2007, 119). Coins issued in York in the early 10th century bear the inscription *Sancti Petri Moneta*, “the mint of St Peter” (Blackburn 2004, 333-5). York Minster’s important role continued after the demise of the kingdom in 954; when Sweyn Forkbeard died in 1014, later sources state that his body was temporarily buried in the Minster (Lawson 1993, 129). The textual sources present a picture of
York Minster as a centre of learning and of ecclesiastical authority, as well as probably the highest-status burying-place in Northumbria.

**Archaeology**

York Minster was excavated between 1967 and 1973 during emergency construction work intended to shore up the cathedral foundations. Excavation inside the cathedral uncovered evidence for Roman military structures, the Norman cathedral, and 100 burials from the Anglo-Scandinavian period cemetery, although no structural features associated with the pre-Norman church have been identified (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 192-3).

A wide variety of burial elements were present, including stone coffins, decorated grave-slabs, burials in chests, graves with tile linings, and burials on what appear to be parts of boats as well as burials in ordinary wooden coffins (Philips and Heywood 1995, 88-92). 15 burials from York Minster contained layers of charcoal. Three of these burials produced evidence for coffins, and one lay under a marker slab. Adults of both sexes were found with charcoal, but in most cases the remains were insufficient to determine the sex or age of the deceased.

Charcoal from six of the charcoal burials at York Minster was analyzed in order to determine its date. The resultant date ranges are summarized below. They show a very wide range of possible dates, making precise dating impossible. The overall date range seems to be centred in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.2%</th>
<th>95.4%</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>From</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>HAR-2235</td>
<td>1160 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38a</td>
<td>HAR-2234</td>
<td>1070 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38b</td>
<td>HAR-2122</td>
<td>1070 +/- 80</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>HAR-2237</td>
<td>1130 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>106</td>
<td>HAR-2111</td>
<td>1040 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>107</td>
<td>HAR-2113</td>
<td>990 +/- 80</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.12: Radiocarbon dates from charcoal burials at York Minster
5.3 Conclusion

These sites make up the corpus of charcoal burials in England. Additionally, a small group of sites contain burials which could not be positively identified as charcoal burials, or which have previously been identified incorrectly as charcoal burials. These sites and the burials from them are summarized in Chapter 6.

The data collected from these sites are of variable quality. Nonetheless, we still have an extensive body of material on which to base the study of charcoal burial. Different sites can contribute different data to further our understanding of this practice. The next four chapters examine different aspects of this data, beginning with the geographical distribution of charcoal burial sites and moving on to dating evidence. Demographic information derived from skeletal and historic material is also considered, as is the composition of charcoal from these and other sites.
6. Sites with possible charcoal burials

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 outlined some of the difficulties in identifying charcoal burial. In some cases, this can lead to cases where it is not certain whether or not there are charcoal burials in a cemetery. This chapter lists some “possible” charcoal burial sites, including both cases where the identification remains uncertain and cases where the charcoal burial has now been confirmed to be a charred-coffin burial or other source of charcoal.

6.2 List of sites with possible charcoal burials

Deerhurst, Gloucestershire

Historical context

A church was already in existence at Deerhurst in 804 when it received significant bequests from Æthelric, son of Ealdorman Æthelmund. Æthelric expressed in the bequest his wish to be buried at Deerhurst (S 1187). In the tenth and early eleventh centuries, Deerhurst was an important church, serving as a meeting-place for Cnut and Edmund Ironside in 1016. The church was associated in the mid-eleventh century with the residence of Earl Odda, but declined following his death, becoming a cell of St-Denis (Butler et al. 1975, 349-50). The modern St Mary’s church preserves some of the fabric of the Anglo-Saxon structure.

Archaeology

One unusual feature located at the east end of the church, possibly predating the period III apse, may have been the remains of a charcoal burial. This feature, SEF12, contained “a thick layer of charcoal” (Rahtz 1976, 12). Charcoal from this feature produced a radiocarbon date of cal AD 642-948 at 95% probability (Rahtz 1976, 229). Rahtz suggested that it was “possible though unlikely” that this charcoal deposit, together with fragmentary human bone deposit HB31, formed a charcoal burial which
had been disturbed. However, based on the radiocarbon date and stratigraphic sequence, Rahtz considered it more likely that this was a timber slot. This interpretation is likely to be correct, but this is a notable instance of a possible charcoal burial being disqualified on the grounds that, by 1976, it was already generally believed that the rite was confined to the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Kingston Buci, West Sussex

Historical context

Located near Shoreham, in close proximity to a church with charcoal burials at Goring, Kingston Buci had a church attested at Domesday (Fisher 1970, 134). Elements of the church fabric may be of late Anglo-Saxon date (Fisher 1970, 134).

Archaeology

Installation of heating pipes under the floor of the church in 1964 revealed “early structures” (Evans 1966, 105). C. J. Ainsworth recorded evidence for burials including an empty stone coffin. Raising the flagstones in the nave revealed “very shallow burials” (Steer 1965, 11). The church guide reports that “charcoal was also found,” and explicitly draws the connection to charcoal associated with burials at Winchester and Lund (Steer 1965, 11). However, there is no evidence to suggest that this charcoal was directly associated with a burial.

One major point of interest about the Kingston Buci burials is their early date. Ainsworth’s suggestion that charcoal from a cemetery context may be related to burials comes very soon after the earliest publication of charcoal burials from Winchester and Lund. The idea was clearly being received with interest by at least some parts of the archaeological community.
Marden, Herefordshire

**Historical context**

Ashgrove gravel quarry, located near the village of Bodenham in Herefordshire, went out of use in 1943. The early history of the site is unknown.

**Archaeology**

Observations of human remains in the quarry date to the 1930s, when Alfred Watkins described reported both seeing fragmentary human remains and being told about earlier finds of skeletons (Watkins 1930, 55). An anonymous manuscript letter held by the Herefordshire SMR describes seeing graves in the quarry in 1943, stating that “around two of the skeletons was a scattering of charcoal” (Hoverd 2000, 5). Because of the orientation and lack of grave-goods, the site was believed to be a Christian cemetery, although not associated with any known church (Hoverd 2000, 6).

Excavations at Ashgrove were carried out in 1950-51 by students from Malvern College. Although a brief report was produced, it does not contain any detailed information about the human remains or any mention of charcoal (M. Seddon, pers. comm.). Further excavation in 1999 produced “no material of archaeological significance” (Hoverd 2000, 1).

Without photographs or plans of the Ashgrove burials, it is not possible to determine whether the charcoal observed in the burials represents a complete layer or merely a small deposit of the type found at cemeteries of all periods in Anglo-Saxon England.

**Norwich**

**Historical context**

Norwich developed from a small proto-urban settlement in the Middle Saxon period into a major Anglo-Scandinavian town in the late ninth and early tenth centuries (Ayers 2003, 22-35). It was one of the largest and wealthiest towns in England by the
end of the eleventh century. Domesday Book reports that Norwich contained fifteen churches in 1066 (LD Norfolk, 117), but the identity of the church excavated in the north-east bailey of the castle in 1979 is unknown. There are no known documentary references to this church.

Archaeology

Excavation revealed structural evidence of what appeared to be several phases of a late Anglo-Saxon church. On the basis of associated artefacts, the church was dated to the eleventh century. It must have been short-lived, as the building appears to have been demolished to make way for the castle, itself probably constructed in the late eleventh century (Renn 1973, 262).

Partial excavation of this cemetery produced skeletal remains believed to belong to approximately 130 individuals (Ayers 1985, 49). Graves displayed a variety of types of elaboration, including flint or chalk pillows, stone linings, patches of chalk associated with the grave cuts, and possible timber linings (Ayers 1985, 18). One grave, number 1256, contained “slight evidence” of charcoal, suggesting a “possible charcoal burial” (Ayers 1985, 57). However, the small amount of charcoal means that this grave is probably not a “charcoal burial” as such.

Stafford

Historical context

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports the construction of a fortification at Stafford in 913 as part of a series of such fortifications overseen by Æthelflaed during her campaigns against Viking armies in Mercia. The town was of medium size at Domesday, and suburbs were developing by the twelfth century (Greenslade et al. 1982, 186-7).

The first textual reference to a cult of Saint Berthelm occurs in the twelfth century, but the church dedicated to this saint in Stafford is not mentioned until the thirteenth century.
Archaeology

Excavations in 1954 revealed a unique find: a large deposit of what appeared to be decayed wood. A coin of Æthelred II, dated to c. 1000, was found above the deposit.

Oswald identified this deposit as the decayed remains of a wooden cross. Associated post-holes were believed to be “a wooden structure constructed round the cross, the whole presumably serving as some sort of shire: a shrine which was in existence before A.D. 1000 and which had burials round it” (Oswald 1955, 17). Burials in the area respected the alignment of this possible shrine.

However, Martin Carver has argued that the shape is inconsistent with this hypothesis. If this deposit were indeed a cross, it would be a cross of very unusual shape, with extremely short arms. Carver suggests that the deposit was not in fact decayed wood, but charcoal, the remains of a charcoal burial from which the body had subsequently been removed. However, it is not possible to verify this interpretation of the evidence.

Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire

Historical context

The deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy has been an important site in the archaeology of medieval England; large areas of the settlement have been excavated in a process of investigation spanning decades. The village is located in the North Yorkshire Wolds, 29 kilometres ENE of York.

The first textual references to the church of St Martin occur in the early thirteenth century (Beresford 1987, 5-6). The church is not attested in Domesday Book (DB Yorkshire, 301, 331, 382), but as elsewhere this should not be taken to indicate that no church existed in 1086. Unsurprisingly for a small settlement, there is no pre-Conquest historical material relating to Wharram Percy.
The parish church of St Martin at Wharram Percy went out of use in 1949 and subsequently fell into decay. Excavation by the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group took place between 1962 and 1973, covering the entirety of the church itself and selected areas of the churchyard (Mays et al. 2007, 9). The publication of the excavation in 1987 was “the first major publication of the excavation of a rural medieval parish church” (Hurst and Rahtz 1987, xii).

The first possible phase of the church, associated with early burials, has been dated to the mid to late 10th century. The first stone church, a small two-celled structure, dates to the early to mid 11th century. Dating evidence is limited, but the church is comparable to other Late Saxon churches and clearly predates the Phase III church, identified as early 12th century on architectural grounds (Mays et al. 2007, 10).

Six hundred and eighty-seven articulated burials, spanning the period from before the construction of the first stone church to the mid-nineteenth century, were excavated from St Martin’s (Mays et al. 2007, 77). Of these, only ten could be firmly attributed to the pre-Conquest period, with a further 167 either pre-Conquest or medieval.

One of these graves, Grave V87, contained the bodies of a child and an adult. The burial was ‘covered with a thin layer of charcoal, possibly the remains of a charred coffin lid’ (Hurst and Rahtz 1987, 58). Charcoal from this burial produced a date of 890 ± 70 BP, calibrated to cal AD 1000-1280 at 95% confidence. Based on other radiocarbon dates from the site, a posterior density estimate of cal AD 1020-1230 was produced (Mays et al. 2007, 194). Although this burial was initially identified as a “possible” example in the first published report (Hurst and Rahtz 1987, 58), it is now positively identified as a charred-coffin burial rather than a charcoal burial (Mays et al. 2007, 242).

6.3 Conclusion

These possible examples highlight some of the ambiguity involved in identifying charcoal burial in the archaeological record. Sites where the identification of a feature
as a charcoal burial is uncertain are included in some of the maps in Chapter 7, but the cases where the burial is no longer considered even a possible charcoal burial, such as the charred-coffin burial at Wharram Percy, are not.
7. Dating charcoal burial

7.1 Introduction

The large number of excavated charcoal burial sites has produced a wide range of dating evidence, including radiocarbon dates from samples of both charcoal and human bone as well as stratigraphic relationships with historically-attested structures such as churches. This chapter reviews the dating evidence from sites discussed in Chapter 5.

Burials with charcoal layers have come to be closely associated with the late Saxon period, and are sometimes treated as a definite indicator of late Anglo-Saxon date. For example, the discovery of a burial “on a level in which there [were] abundant traces of charcoal” at St Mary’s Church in Goring, West Sussex was used as evidence that the cemetery was of late Saxon date (Fox-Wilson 1987, 13-14), supporting, in the eyes of the local community, an existing tradition that the church had been founded by Edgar. The presence of this charcoal burial was being used until relatively recently as unambiguous evidence of a late Anglo-Saxon date by historians unaware of the existence of post-Conquest charcoal burials (C. Lewis, pers. comm.).

Even so, it is clear that the majority of burials containing layers of charcoal date from the late Anglo-Saxon period. This chapter will examine the dates of individual sites, correlating them with data from Chapter 7. Radiocarbon dating evidence will be considered, along with other sources of dating evidence, to attempt to reconstruct a chronology of charcoal burial.

7.2 Dating evidence

Not all of the sites listed in Chapter 5 have produced useful dating evidence. In some cases, particularly in cemeteries associated with smaller churches or older excavations, there is no good way to assign a date any more specific that “late Saxon” or even “medieval”. The charcoal burials from Holy Trinity, Bosham, for example, may very well be associated with the Late Saxon or earlier minster which is known to have existed (Gem 1985, 32-3), but because of the circumstances of the excavation, it is not
possible to determine where they fall in the church’s history (Tatton-Brown and Worssam 2006, 139 n. 20). Similarly, we lack the information needed to determine the date of charcoal burials from St Peter’s, Conisbrough, East Hill, Hastings, or St Mary’s, Goring. Sites which do provide useful dating evidence produce a number of different types of evidence.

7.2.1 Historical dating

Charcoal burials are typically found in cemeteries associated with churches, and in some cases we have textual evidence for the construction phases of these structures, or at least evidence suggesting dates by which they existed. In the late Saxon period, this is particularly true of high-status urban minsters and cathedrals such as the Old and New Minsters, Winchester. The New Minster’s construction at the beginning of the tenth century and its demolition in the twelfth are documented events that give a useful guide to dating the associated cemetery.

The later phases of Anglo-Saxon churches are frequently well-documented. This is particularly true in cases where cemeteries predate eleventh- or twelfth-century construction projects such as Norman castles or cathedrals. The presence of datable structures of this type allows us to provide comparatively reliable final dates for cemetery phases at several sites. At Castle Green, Hereford, the exact date of the foundation of St Guthlac’s minster remains unclear, but the church is known to have been relocated during the episcopacy of Robert de Bethune (1131 – 48). Final dates in the late eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries can be similarly assigned to cemeteries or cemetery phases containing charcoal burials at North Walk, Barnstaple, Chichester Cathedral, Durham Cathedral Chapter House, Exeter Castle, St Mary Major, Exeter, and New Minster, Winchester.

However, obtaining accurate dating information about the earliest phases of late Saxon cemeteries can be much more difficult. At Barnstaple, Devon, for example, the cemetery’s use is associated with the construction of the Norman castle, datable to the late eleventh or early-to-mid twelfth centuries. However, the origin of the church and its associated cemetery is unknown. The church was associated with the late Saxon burh, but this does not necessarily imply that the two were founded at the same time.
The burh may have been associated with a pre-existing church, a pattern seen at a number of late ninth- and early tenth-century burhs such as Oxford, Bath and Exeter.

In cases like this, archaeologists have turned to other methods such as radiocarbon dating in order to establish the early dates of cemeteries.

7.2.2 Radiocarbon dating

Samples of either human bone or charcoal from a number of charcoal burial sites have been radiocarbon dated. Under the right circumstances, this can provide valuable absolute dating evidence to compare to historical or other sources, or to help assign an otherwise undated burial to a period. There are, however, a number of pitfalls in dealing with radiocarbon evidence for the dating of charcoal burials. Older radiocarbon dates often cover fairly wide ranges. Among the dates for charcoal burials, margins of error of 60-100 years in either direction are common. Unfortunately, given the short time span of the late Saxon period, this can mean that radiocarbon dates produce unhelpfully wide ranges, useful only for assigning burials to a general period. To further complicate dating samples from the late Anglo-Saxon period, the calibration curve for this period shows a plateau which can cause even very precise radiocarbon determinations to produce wide date ranges (see Figure 7.1).
Charcoal burials are often dated by testing samples of charcoal taken from the grave-cut. Older excavations in particular tended to collect charcoal samples because of the smaller qualities required and the more complex procedures involved in dating human bone. Although this can be helpful in dating burials where bone has not survived in sufficient quantities, it can also mean that these dates are subject to the "old wood" effect. Because radiocarbon dating of wood produces a value for the formation of the tree-ring being sampled, the date will reflect this event rather than the deposition in the ground. In the case of a slow-growing tree, such as oak, which makes up the majority of charcoal samples from English charcoal burials, this can result in a discrepancy which may be in the hundreds of years in the case of a mature tree (Aitken 1961, 100). As a result, it is difficult to compare burials dated on the basis of charcoal samples with burials dated on the basis of bone samples. The type of sample used is listed for every sample in Table 7.1 where it is known, although in some cases the sample has never been published.

In the case of sites discussed in Chapter 5, radiocarbon dates have been collected over the past several decades, using a number of methodologies. These dates have been
calibrated using a variety of calibration curves, with the result that even samples with identical BP values have produced different published date ranges.

Some of the difficulties with the radiocarbon data relating to these sites cannot be avoided. Early values are less precise than values arrived at using more modern techniques, and dates from charcoal samples must be treated with caution, especially in cases where the charcoal is known to have come from mature wood. However, some of the divergences caused by the use of differing calibration curves can be resolved by recalibrating the dates. Radiocarbon dates from the sites listed in Table 7.1 have therefore been recalibrated using OxCal v4.0.5 (http://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk) (Bronk Ramsey 1995, 2001) and the IntCal 04 atmospheric calibration curve (Reimer et al 2004).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Burial No.</th>
<th>Lab No.</th>
<th>BP</th>
<th>68.20%</th>
<th>95.40%</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>BM2902</td>
<td>1150 +/- 40</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>BM2903</td>
<td>1170 +/- 40</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>BM2904</td>
<td>1200 +/- 50</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow-on-Humber</td>
<td>St Chad's</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>HAR-3123</td>
<td>1030 +/- 60</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow-on-Humber</td>
<td>St Chad's</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>HAR-3125</td>
<td>1130 +/- 80</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>St Oswald's</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>HAR-8357</td>
<td>1070 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford Castle Green</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>HAR-413</td>
<td>960 +/- 70</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford Castle Green</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>HAR-414</td>
<td>1030 +/- 80</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford Castle Green</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>HAR-986</td>
<td>890 +/- 80</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1250</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford All Saints</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>HAR-418</td>
<td>920 +/- 70</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Tom Quad</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>HAR-190</td>
<td>1100 +/- 100</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford Christ Church cloister</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>HAR-6819</td>
<td>1110 +/- 40</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford St Aldate's</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>NZA-12347</td>
<td>1147 +/- 28</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford St Aldate's</td>
<td>835</td>
<td>NZA-12349</td>
<td>1210 +/- 36</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford St Aldate's</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>NZA-12348</td>
<td>1107 +/- 28</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romsey Abbey</td>
<td>5119</td>
<td>HAR-3765</td>
<td>1170 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romsey Abbey</td>
<td>5127</td>
<td>HAR-3760</td>
<td>1050 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romsey Abbey</td>
<td>3120</td>
<td>HAR-2527</td>
<td>1100 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester Staple Gardens</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>Gn-26191</td>
<td>1105 +/- 25</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York St Helen</td>
<td>5731</td>
<td>HAR-2900</td>
<td>810 +/- 80</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>HAR-2235</td>
<td>1160 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>38a</td>
<td>HAR-2234</td>
<td>1070 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>38b</td>
<td>HAR-2122</td>
<td>1070 +/- 80</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1050</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>HAR-2237</td>
<td>1130 +/- 70</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>HAR-2111</td>
<td>1040 +/- 70</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>HAR-2113</td>
<td>990 +/- 80</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7.1: recalibrated radiocarbon dates from charcoal burial sites listed in Chapter 5
Radiocarbon dating may produce very broad date ranges, but in some cases it is possible to increase the precision of these ranges by using statistical models to refine them. These techniques rely on stratigraphic relationships between dateable features, including not only radiocarbon-dated burials but other finds such as coins, pottery, sculpture and structures. The level of data required to support this type of analysis is not found at most excavated late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. Although cemetery stratigraphy is sometimes recorded in detail, archaeologists are frequently primarily concerned with establishing the earliest date of a cemetery. Radiocarbon dates are therefore often taken from the earliest burials in a given sequence. However, a small number of sites with charcoal burials have been subjected to a more detailed analysis.

Radiocarbon dates from Castle Green, Hereford, are presented in the published report as uncalibrated dates, calculated simply by subtracting the BP value from 1950. This gives the misleading impression of very narrow date ranges, but these date ranges have been repeated in subsequent publications (e.g. Thompson 2004, 120-1). In fact, as Table 7.1 shows, the date ranges for these samples are fairly wide. However, stratigraphic relationships between radiocarbon-dated charcoal burials and radiocarbon-dated burials of other types provide the opportunity to refine some of the date ranges. Charcoal burial 80 is stratigraphically later than dated non-charcoal burial 85. Additionally, two non-charcoal burials, 83 and 10, have a stratigraphic relationship, with one burial intervening between them. Two radiocarbon-dated charcoal burials are also associated with non-dated charcoal burials. Burial 74 is the latest in a sequence of three superimposed burials (see Figure 2.4), while dated charcoal burial 46 is later than undated charcoal burial 76.

In addition, the historical evidence has a contribution to make to refining the dating of the Castle Green cemetery. The priory was relocated to another site in Hereford at some point during the episcopacy of Robert de Bethune (1131-48), meaning that the cemetery is unlikely to post-date the mid twelfth century.

Subjecting these dates to Bayesian analysis produces two areas of poor agreement. Burial 85’s date does not agree well with the model. This is likely to be the result of the uniform distribution imposed on the dates by the Bayesian model. In the absence of any other dating information, dates are assumed to occur in a more or less uniform
distribution; in fact, however, it appears likely that burial 85 is substantially older than burial 80, a hypothesis supported by the divergence of their dates as shown in Table 7.1. Additionally, Burial 10 produces a low agreement score. This raises the interesting possibility that burial 10 in fact post-dates the traditional end date of 1148 given for the cemetery, and that burial, perhaps in limited numbers, may have continued at this site even after the relocation of the priory. Neither burial 85 nor burial 10 are charcoal burials. Because of the low agreement scores produced by the Bayesian model, the estimated date ranges given in Table 7.2, although they provide a possible refinement of the dates given in Table 7.1, cannot be regarded as conclusive.

**Figure 7.2:** Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates from Castle Green, Hereford
Estimated date ranges from both Christ Church and All Saints are shown in Table 7.3.
Bayesian modelling was also applied to radiocarbon dates from All Saints church, including charcoal burials, charred grain, a charred wattle fence, and a coin of Edward the Confessor dated to 1042-4 (Dodd 2003, 421-6). The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 7.4. Of particular interest is the relationship between the charcoal grave, AS55, and the coin of Edward the Confessor. Late Anglo-Saxon coins typically remained in circulation for periods of only a few years (Stewart 1990), suggesting that the date of deposition is likely to be close to the period of the coin’s minting. Based on this, and on the radiocarbon dates from the stratigraphically earlier burnt grain deposit, the date range for AS55 has been adjusted to produce an estimated date range
of cal AD 1040-1250 (Dodd et al. 2003, 422). Interestingly, this means that the charcoal burial at All Saints too place much later than those at St Frideswide’s. Because only parts of the minster cemetery have been excavated, it is possible that charcoal burial continued into the post-Conquest period, but it may also be that the same rite is occurring at separate periods within Oxford.

![Figure A2.4 Probability distributions of dates from All Saints Church (English Heritage).](image1)

![Figure A2.5 Probability distributions of dates from All Saints Church, Bayesian modelling (English Heritage).](image2)

**Figure 7.4:** Radiocarbon dates from All Saints, Oxford, showing Bayesian modelling (Dodd 2003)
Radiocarbon dates from the cemetery at Staple Gardens, Winchester, were combined by Alex Bayliss of English Heritage to produce an estimated date range of c. 850 – c. 975 cal AD. Bayliss has argued that the earliest burials are almost certain to predate the end of the ninth century, while the latest burials predate the Norman Conquest, making the cemetery roughly contemporary with the periods of heavy charcoal burial at the cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters (G. Scobie, pers. comm.).

### 7.3 Summary

Most sites with excavated charcoal burials produce date ranges from approximately the 9th to the 11th centuries. This is clearly the period in which most charcoal burials took place. In some cases, these are only in small numbers and may represent isolated incidents, but at cemeteries like St Oswald’s, Gloucester, St Guthlac’s, Hereford and the Old and New Minsters at Winchester, long stratified sequences of charcoal burial demonstrate that this rite was in use over a long period of time.

Some cemeteries, however, represent outliers to this dating pattern. The most notable of these are the burials at the Dominican monasteries in both Gloucester and Oxford. These graves cannot predate the thirteenth century, and might be from any part of the period between the foundation of the associated churches (or the construction of the cloister in Oxford’s case) and the Dissolution. The separation in time between these burials and even the latest of the much more common late Anglo-Saxon charcoal burials suggest that the high medieval examples are a variant rite of some kind. By this period, ash burial had become common in monastic cemeteries (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 120-3, 127). In this type of burial, a narrow layer of ash is found on the floor of the grave, showing that the body was laid on a bed of ash within the coffin.
itself. It may be that the small number of high medieval charcoal burials represents a variation on this practice. There seems to be no other obvious connection between the rite as it appears in the thirteenth century and later and the rite found in cemeteries from the late Saxon period. Although the gap between these late examples and the Anglo-Saxon rite has been noted before (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 120-1), the extent of the separation is strikingly visible when the overall pattern of dating evidence is examined.

Some charcoal burials appear from sites where burial only began very late in the period. If the charcoal burials from Calke Abbey are associated with the priory, they date from the early twelfth century at least. This would make them roughly contemporary with the second phase of charcoal burials at Lewes Priory and the last charcoal burial from Durham Cathedral, together with the estimated date for the single charcoal burial at Repton. Charcoal burials from St Peter’s/Vaughan Way, Leicester, are probably from the 12th century or later, based on associated pottery and documentary evidence. Single charcoal burials from All Saints, Oxford, and St Helen-on-the-Walls, York, might also date from this period, or might be later. This period also represents the decline of charcoal burial as a practice at St Oswald’s, Gloucester, although a small number of examples date to the early twelfth century or later. Some radiocarbon-dated burials from sites such as York Minster may also be this late.

The very earliest charcoal burials are hard to date accurately, but Bath Abbey and St Frideswide’s, Oxford, produce radiocarbon dates which may suggest an eighth-century origin, while Cemetery II at St Mary Major, Exeter has been assigned a date range from the seventh to tenth centuries (Henderson and Bidwell 1982, 155-6).

Charcoal burials from churches such as the minsters of Winchester, St Oswald’s, Gloucester, St Mary Major, Exeter, and St Frideswide’s, Oxford are clustered in the ninth to eleventh centuries. By far the majority of charcoal burials are from this period. Between them, the Old and New Minsters, St Mary Major, and St Oswald’s account for more than half of all charcoal burials, and all these sites have charcoal burials concentrated in this period.
It is difficult to draw conclusions about the evolution of the development of charcoal burial from the fragmentary dating evidence available. Its overall date range is broadly the ninth to eleventh or early twelfth centuries, consistent with the late Saxon period as a whole. The earliest examples are probably connected with high-status monastic sites in Wessex and Mercia, but it seems to have become widespread among major urban churches by the end of the ninth century. The post-Conquest period sees the rite declining, perhaps as new currents of religious reform altered the symbolic associations that had made it appealing to large numbers of people, or possibly as control over burial practice passed to clerics who had not been exposed to the tradition. Nonetheless, the rite persisted for some time into the twelfth century, not only at sites where it had been practised throughout the eleventh century but at sites, such as at Calke Abbey, where there does not appear to have been an existing tradition of charcoal burial.
8. Geographic distribution of charcoal burial

8.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials. Cemeteries are considered both in terms of geographic distribution and according to the organization of late Saxon burial practice (see Chapter 2). In particular, density of charcoal burial within a cemetery is plotted in order to determine whether the frequency of the rite shows any geographic variation or variation in type of cemetery.

Analyzing the geographic distribution of charcoal burial sites presents some problems of interpretation. First, it must be remembered that the number of charcoal burials and total burials reported at any site reflect the numbers observed rather than the numbers buried. Preservation can be a significant problem, as discussed in the case of St Mary Major, Exeter, in Chapter 2. At this site, careful recording of patches of charcoal may have led to over-identification of charcoal burials compared to burials without charcoal. At most late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, it has not been possible to excavate the entire cemetery area, leaving open the possibility that the number or percentage of charcoal burials identified does not reflect the original composition of the cemetery. For instance, some cemeteries show greater concentrations of burials containing charcoal in the area around the church itself. In cases like this, excavations which do not cover the full extent of the cemetery might report a higher percentage of charcoal burials than actually existed in the cemetery as a whole. Additionally, at some sites, the excavated sample is so small that percentage is an unreliable guide to the presence of charcoal burial. 100% of all burials excavated at Old St Chad’s, Shrewsbury or Holy Trinity, Bosham, contained charcoal, but only two burials were excavated from either cemetery.

When considering the typology of churches, it is important to note that clearly-defined categories are a later imposition by historians rather than a phenomenon existing in the early medieval period. The textual sources used to identify a church as being of a particular type are often limited and fragmentary, and it is not necessarily the case that the distinctions drawn by church historians—between reformed monasteries and
secular minsters, for instance—would have been clear to all Late Saxon churchgoers. Nonetheless, these necessarily loose categories remain an important part of the history of the Anglo-Saxon church, and they are used here with the provision that they represent an approximation.

8.2 Geographic distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials

By plotting the distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burial, it may be possible to identify regional variations in burial practice, suggesting that the rite was associated with certain regions or groups of churches. The distribution of cemeteries from Chapters 5 and 6 is shown in Figure 8.1.
Figure 8.1: Distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials

This map appears to show a relatively even distribution of sites across the country, with a number of cemeteries in major West Saxon towns such as Winchester and Exeter. Cities or towns with multiple cemeteries containing charcoal burials are represented once on this map.
Figure 8.2: Number of charcoal burials in English towns

Figure 8.2 shows the number of charcoal burials (CB) excavated at these sites. In cases where multiple cemeteries within a city contain charcoal burials, these have been combined to create a total for the city. Table 8.1 shows the data used in construction of this map. Here, the distribution can be seen to be heavily focused in the south and south-west, with the major concentrations in towns such as Winchester.
and Exeter. Concentrations are also found in northern towns such as Lincoln, Derby, Leicester, York and Durham. Sites are listed by number of charcoal burials, greatest to least.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Charcoal Burials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leicester</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lichfield</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romsey</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosham</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Wallingford</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstaple</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow-on-Humber</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barton-upon-Humber</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calke</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conisbrough</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
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<td>Goring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keynsham</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little Oakley</td>
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<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trowbridge</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 8.1: Number of charcoal burials
However, varying numbers of charcoal burials may reflect varying patterns of excavation as well as burial practice. Cemeteries which are only partially excavated may contain large numbers of unexcavated charcoal burials. Table 8.2 also shows the total number of burials (TB) excavated from these cemeteries and the percentage of charcoal burials included among the total burials. The distribution of these percentages is shown in Figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3: Percentage of charcoal burials by cemetery
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>CB</th>
<th>TB</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>St Mary Major</td>
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<td>107</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>St Aldate's</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>St Alkmund's</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>New Minster</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>21.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calke</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckfastleigh</td>
<td>Holy Trinity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
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<td>56</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Abbey</td>
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<td>16.00%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>14.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes</td>
<td>Priory</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>Blackfriars</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>Minster</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Old Minster</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>743</td>
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<td>405</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>Christchurch</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>St Mark's</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>6.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>All Saints</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynsham</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>Blackfriars</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>Staple Gardens</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>2.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow-on-Humber</td>
<td>St Chad's</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>1.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wallingford</td>
<td>St Martin's</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>0.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstaple</td>
<td>North Walk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trowbridge</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton-upon-Humber</td>
<td>St Peter's</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>0.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.2: Charcoal burials as a proportion of total burials

Figure 8.3 and Table 8.2 appear to show that the percentage of charcoal burials found at a given cemetery is not dependent on region, with medium to high percentages of charcoal burial found both in the north and in the south.

An overall percentage of charcoal burial may be useful at a country-wide scale, but it can disguise local variations in the incidence of charcoal burial, either across different areas of the cemetery or across the period of the cemetery’s use. This is discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 10.
8.3 Regional variation in charcoal burial

There are three notable gaps in the spread of cemeteries containing charcoal burials: Kent, East Anglia, and the northwest.

A lack of charcoal burials in the northwest is unsurprising. There appears to be very little Anglo-Saxon archaeology in this region. No major late Saxon cemetery has been excavated from this area, and there do not appear to have been high-status churches equivalent to those in other regions. There are no major late Anglo-Saxon towns in this region north of Chester (Hill 1981, 141). The lack of excavated charcoal burials in the northwest cannot be treated as representing a distinct regional burial custom, because we have insufficient evidence for burial practice in this region during the late Anglo-Saxon period.

In the cases of Kent and East Anglia, the situation is more complex. We may be seeing a genuine regional variation in burial practice, or we may be seeing a pattern in the excavation of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. It is therefore necessary to compare the distribution of excavated late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries with charcoal burials to the overall distribution of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in order to identify possible variations. Unfortunately, this is more challenging than it might appear. There is no single catalogue of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and in some cases it can be difficult to date cemeteries of this type. The creation of such a catalogue is a project beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, for comparative purposes I will map sites from two existing samples.

8.3.1 Geographic distribution of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries

Not all regions have seen equally-intense studies of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries; this may account for some of the regional variation in the distribution of charcoal burials. In order to evaluate this claim, I have selected a sample of excavated late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in order to compare them to the published distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials.
The sample consists of the annual *Medieval Britain and Ireland* reports of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, published in the journal *Medieval Archaeology*. These reports consist of short accounts of excavation or other archaeological investigation. Sites including charcoal burial which appear in these reports are mapped in Figure 8.4, along with late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries reported in this yearly feature. It can sometimes be difficult to separate late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries from Middle Saxon or early post-Conquest cemeteries, particularly in cases where the available information is limited.

As a consequence, some charcoal burial cemeteries are excluded from the distribution map, notably those excavated too early to appear in the journal (which began publication in 1957). Additionally, late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries with fewer than ten total burials have been excluded from the sample, ensuring that only substantial cemeteries are represented, rather than isolated finds. Lastly, some charcoal burial cemeteries of high medieval date have been excluded, since the corresponding sections of the *MBI* reports have not been consulted.

The distribution appears to show a fairly large number of excavated late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in areas which have failed to produce any charcoal burials, notably East Anglia. Unlike the north-west and south-east, where comparatively little excavation has been carried out in late cemeteries, this area has a number of well documented cemetery excavations which do not contain charcoal burials. This apparent regional variation must be borne in mind as we move on to consider some other possible types of variation in the distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burial.
8.4 Hierarchy and organization in late Anglo-Saxon churches and cemeteries

The late Anglo-Saxon period was a time of significant change in church organization. The organizational model of the Middle Saxon period, in which large “minsters” appear to have served large areas, began to develop into a system where a large number of small churches served smaller individual areas, forming the basis for what
would eventually become the medieval parish system (Blair 2005, 498-504). This proliferation of churches may have been related to patterns of landholding as well as to the impact of the Viking invasions on the larger minsters. Historians of the English church disagree about the exact date and pace of this change, but its effects can be clearly seen throughout the late Saxon period. A large number of smaller churches began to be built – and, apparently, to acquire cemeteries – during the eleventh century in particular, so that by Domesday a large number of small churches are visible, particularly in eastern England (Barrow 2005, 19).

The result of this reorganization was a setting in which several different types of churches coexisted. Surviving minsters, staffed by groups of secular canons and functioning in some cases as “mother churches,” existed alongside urban and estate churches which were the personal property of their founders. The monastic reform movement of the 960s and later had also created a number of monasteries adhering to the Regularis Concordia, including monastic cathedrals such as Winchester. New or refounded communities required grants of land to fund them, and were therefore concentrated in areas of West Saxon royal power or areas where other reformist clergy or aristocrats owned land (Blair 2005, 350-3). Following the reform movement, some cathedrals were staffed by communities of monks, while others remained populated by secular clerics.

Legal codes from this period also show the diversity of churches being recognized. One of the features used in ranking churches was the presence or absence of a cemetery. The law code II Edgar (2-2.1. Whitelock et al. 1981, 97-8) states that if a thegn has a church on his land which has no graveyard, he is to pay his tithes to the old minster to which the herses belongs (hynres or hernes is an ambiguous term relating to the area of a church’s authority) (Blair 2005, 428-9). If, however, the church has a graveyard, the thegn is entitled to pay a portion of his tithes to his own church. The law code VIII Aethelred, issued c. 1014, goes into more detail about the ranking of churches. The law states that all churches do not have the same worldly wirde (translated by Whitelock et al. as “temporal status”) even though they are all consecrated in the same way. Violation of the sanctuary of a church is punishable by a fine, the value of which varies according to the status of a church. The violation of a "head-minster" or "chief minster" is to be atoned for by a payment of five pounds.
Three further categories are specified: *medemran mynstres* (“that of a rather small minster”), *Ponne git laessen* (“one still smaller”), and that of *feldcircan*, “a field-church”. These are valued at 120 shillings, 60 shillings and 30 shillings respectively (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 389-90).

This diversity of church foundation can sometimes be recognized in the archaeological record. For instance, urban or estate churches frequently follow a simple pattern in their construction. Late Anglo-Saxon churches from Lincoln, Raunds, Northants, and many other sites follow a simple two-celled structure which has come to be considered diagnostic of small churches in the late Anglo-Saxon period (Boddington 1996, Gilmour and Stocker 1986, Taylor and Taylor 1965, 77, 501, 537, 648, 676, 679).

To what extent was this difference in *worldlice wirde* reflected in burial practice? Specifically, can charcoal burials be associated with churches of one of the various types? Table 8.4 lists cemeteries with charcoal burials by the type of church with which they are associated.

The categories used in this table represent an approximation of the function and organization of each church. The separation into categories expressed in VIII Æthelred bypasses some aspects of variation, such as cathedrals (presumably included among “head-minsters”) or whether a church was monastic. There are several difficulties to overcome in assigning a church to a category, which are discussed below. For the purposes of this table, however, the following categories are used:

**Cathedral** includes Episcopal and archiepiscopal churches such as the Old Minster, Winchester, York Minster, and Durham Cathedral, as well as the cathedrals of Chichester and Lichfield. Anglo-Saxon dioceses were sometimes reorganized. The diocese of Leicester, for instance, was relocated to Dorchester in the late ninth century, while the dioceses of Crediton and St Germans were combined and transferred to Exeter in 1050. As a result, churches sometimes serve as cathedrals only for part of their history. Most cathedrals were organized similarly to minsters, although some were eventually reformed to be served by chapters of monks. Details on the
organization of individual cathedrals can be found in their individual entries in the sites chapter.

Minster includes a large category of Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon churches. These are collegiate churches, served not by monks but by a body of priests or canons. Middle, Saxon minsters could be extremely wealthy and powerful, with estates and territories covering a large area. Some of these churches were later reformed into Benedictine monasteries, and others became estate churches, but many retained some of their importance even in the face of the proliferation of smaller churches. Middle or Late Anglo-Saxon communities of nuns, or communities housing both men and women, are included in this category. “Minster” is a problematic category, and it is not always possible to be certain whether a later church developed from an earlier minster. The evidence for identifying a church as a minster is discussed in the section for each site in Chapter 5.

Monastery refers to communities living by a monastic rule. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, this is typically the Regularis Concordia, the tenth-century document based on the Rule of St Benedict. Post-Conquest, sites discussed include houses of Dominican monks or “black friars” such as at Gloucester or Oxford. Other monasteries include the Norman refoundations at Lewes Priory and Shrewsbury Abbey.

Urban small churches were numerous in the late Anglo-Saxon period. By Domesday, towns such as York, Lincoln and Norwich had large numbers of small churches in addition to high-status sites. Unlike minsters, these churches were often the property of landowners. In many cases, these went on to become medieval parish churches. Textual records for these churches are often scanty before the medieval period.

Rural small churches are also called “estate churches” and include small churches which were typically the property of landowners. Like their urban counterparts, there is frequently little or no historical information for the earliest phases of these churches.

Lastly, the unknown category covers cemeteries not associated with any known church. Cemeteries of this type include Staple Gardens, Winchester and the cemetery predating the construction of Barnstaple Castle. These may either be associated with
churches which have not been excavated, or they may be cemeteries not associated with any church.

One church in the charcoal burial list does not fit into any of these categories: although a post-Conquest foundation, Calke Abbey was never a monastery (the name “Calke Abbey” is a much later coinage), but a house of Augustinian canons.

Several factors are involved. First, a church may have several functions during its lifetime. The Old Minster at Winchester housed a college of secular canons throughout the ninth and early tenth centuries. However, the canons were expelled and replaced with monks in the 960s. Additionally, the Old Minster was the cathedral of Winchester. How is it to be classified: as a minster with a community of canons, as a Benedictine monastery, or as a cathedral? Churches with this type of complicated history may have multiple entries under “type.” For the purposes of Figures 8.5 and 8.6, the category considered most significant in the church’s history or most likely to have been associated with the charcoal burials is used.

In other cases, it is not possible to determine the nature of the church associated with a particular cemetery. No early textual records survive for St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, but its setting and construction have led Warwick Rodwell to interpret it as a rural estate or “parish” church. In some cases a wider range of interpretations is possible. The cemetery at Barnstaple is overlain by the construction of the Norman Castle, and it has been argued (Miles 1986, 73) that it is the cemetery of the late Anglo-Saxon burh. However, it is also possible that the cemetery predates the burh and belongs to an earlier minster which was incorporated into the defences (Miles 1986, 74).

In cases like Barnstaple, it is necessary to select what appears to be the most likely possible interpretation. Further discussion of this interpretation can be found in each cemetery’s entry in Chapter 5.

Although cemeteries of all types contain charcoal burials, if the custom originated with or was more enthusiastically adopted by a particular community, it is to be expected that sites of this type will show a greater percentage of charcoal burials.
Bearing these provisos in mind, Table 8.3 compares number of charcoal burials with church type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>CB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Old Minster</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>St Mary Major</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>St Oswald's</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>New Minster</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>Minster</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford</td>
<td>Castle Green</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leicester</td>
<td>St Margaret's Baths</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>St Mark's</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bath</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>St Aldate's</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Staple Gardens</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romsey</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>Christchurch</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>St Alkmund's</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes</td>
<td>Priory</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosham</td>
<td>Holy Trinity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>Old St Chad's</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>Blackfriars</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>St Mary Bishophill Senior</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>Blackfriars</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>St Helen-on-the-Walls</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conisbrough</td>
<td>St Peter's</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Calke</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckfastleigh</td>
<td>Holy Trinity</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trowbridge</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goring</td>
<td>St Mary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Oakley</td>
<td>St Mary's</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keynsham</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>St Wystan's</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>St Chad's</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnstaple</td>
<td>North Walk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>St Nicholas Shambles</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>All Saints</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton-upon-Humber</td>
<td>St Peter's</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwich</td>
<td>Castle Bailey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.3: Number of charcoal burials compared to church type.
Table 8.3 demonstrates that high numbers of charcoal burials end to be concentrated in cathedrals, minsters and urban churches. The lower numbers of charcoal burials are primarily associated with small urban and rural churches, and it is interesting that no small rural church has more than a very small number of charcoal burials. However, it is possible that this relates to the varying size of churchyards – if high-status churches like cathedrals and minsters have larger cemeteries, a higher number of charcoal burials would follow. Table 8.4 relates the number of charcoal burials to the total number of excavated burials, ranking sites by the percentage of total burials which contained layers of charcoal. Sites with fewer than ten burials have been excluded from the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>% CB</th>
<th>TB</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minster/cathedral</td>
<td>Exeter St Mary Major</td>
<td>57.00%</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>Minster/cathedral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Oxford St Aldate's</td>
<td>42.10%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible minster</td>
<td>Derby St Alkmund's</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Possible minster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>Durham Cathedral</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cathedral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
<td>Winchester New Minster</td>
<td>21.10%</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister/monastery</td>
<td>Bath Abbey</td>
<td>16.07%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Minister/monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
<td>Romsey Abbey</td>
<td>16.00%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
<td>Hereford Castle Green</td>
<td>14.90%</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Minster/monastery</td>
</tr>
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<td>Possible minster/monastery</td>
<td>Lewes Priory</td>
<td>14.30%</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Possible minster/monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Cathedral</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cathedral/monastery</td>
<td>Winchester Old Minster</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>Cathedral/monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minster</td>
<td>Gloucester St Oswald's</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>Minster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minster</td>
<td>Oxford Christchurch</td>
<td>8.00%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Minster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban small</td>
<td>Lincoln St Mark's</td>
<td>6.80%</td>
<td>147</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban small</td>
<td>Oxford All Saints</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Urban small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible minster/monastery</td>
<td>Keynsham Abbey</td>
<td>5.30%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery</td>
<td>Oxford Blackfriars</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Monastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Winchester Staple Gardens</td>
<td>2.13%</td>
<td>282</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Rural small</td>
<td>Barrow-on-Humber St Chad's</td>
<td>1.14%</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Rural small</td>
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<td>Wallingford St Martin's</td>
<td>0.95%</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown/possible minster</td>
<td>Barnstaple North Walk</td>
<td>0.95%</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Unknown/possible minster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Trowbridge Castle</td>
<td>0.67%</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible minster/rural small</td>
<td>Barton-upon-Humber St Peter's</td>
<td>0.11%</td>
<td>883</td>
<td>Possible minster/rural small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.4: Charcoal burial percentage by type
Although the order of tables 8.3 and 8.4 differs, the general trend is visibly the same. Even very large rural cemeteries, such as the cemetery at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, have a low percentage of charcoal burials, while the highest proportion of charcoal burials is found at cathedrals and urban minsters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Colour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Cathedral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Minster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Monastery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Urban small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural small</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.5: Graphic representation of church categories
Figure 8.5: Number of charcoal burials by church type
Figure 8.6: charcoal burials as percentage of cemetery population by church type
This contrast is consistent with other evidence suggesting a difference in burial practice between large minsters and cathedrals on the one hand and urban and rural cemeteries associated with smaller churches on the other. Jo Buckberry (2007, 118-21) has demonstrated that high-status churches such as St Oswald’s, Gloucester, Winchester Old Minster, Exeter Cathedral, and Wells Cathedral typically have a greater variety of both grave types and grave variations associated with them than rural or urban churches such as North Elmham, Norfolk, Raunds, Northants, St Nicholas Shambles, London, or Staple Gardens, Winchester.

However, the percentage of excavated burials containing charcoal layers may be an unreliable guide to the prevalence of this burial practice at some sites. This is because some cemeteries show variation in burial practice from one area of the cemetery to another. For instance, at St Mark’s, Lincoln, charcoal burials were clustered around the eastern half of the Phase VIII cemetery and the south-eastern corner of the Phase IX church (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 15-18). Similarly, charcoal burials were found during excavations in Tom Quad and the cloister at Christchurch, Oxford, but not during excavation of the cathedral graveyard, suggesting that they may have been concentrated in certain areas of the cemetery (Hassall 1973, Scull 1988, Boyle 2001). Concentrations of charcoal burial are discussed in further detail in chapter 10.

However, the combination of Tables 8.4 and 8.5 suggests that charcoal burial was more strongly associated with cathedrals and high-status, typically urban, minsters, than with other types of church. It is very rare at post-Conquest sites, and also rare in smaller rural churches. Smaller urban churches sometimes have very low numbers of charcoal burials, but can have fairly high percentages, as at St Mark’s, Lincoln.

One interesting aspect of this distribution is that it crosses some of the boundaries of late Anglo-Saxon church organization. The reform movement of the tenth century created a group of monasteries spread across Wessex and East Anglia which adhered to the Regularis Concordia. These monasteries advertised themselves as models of the religious life, and writers associated with this movement criticized existing religious institutions in stern terms, portraying minsters and their communities as lax and neglectful. Historians have devoted a great deal of effort to studying the extent and impact of this Benedictine reform movement.
However, the distribution of high proportions of charcoal burial suggests that this division between reformed and unreformed churches had little or no impact on burial practice. The Old and New Minsters at Winchester were the standard-bearers of the reform movement. Bath Abbey was similarly a reformed house (Cunliffe 1984, 352-3), and Exeter may have been reformed briefly in the latter half of the ninth century (Conner 1993, 31; Darlington et al. 1995, 418-9). By contrast, the reform movement never made significant inroads into the north; York Minster was not reformed, and Durham’s community was not reformed until 1083, probably after most of the charcoal burials excavated. St Oswald’s, Gloucester, was never reformed. Nonetheless, charcoal burial occurred at all these sites. The liturgical and organizational changes caused by the tenth-century reform movement do not seem to have had any effect on a common vocabulary of burial practice found across a wide range of sites.

8.5 Villages, towns and cities in late Anglo-Saxon England

Although changes in religious communities do not seem to have any effect on the frequency of charcoal burial, a significant variation is detectable based on settlement context. In the case of many late Anglo-Saxon settlements, it is hard to estimate their size or relative importance. As a result, any attempt to separate sites into categories will necessarily be an approximation. However, it is clear that the period c. 850-1100 was one of major urban development in England. The south saw a widespread program of fortification in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, not only as a response to the military threat posed by Scandinavian armies operating out of the Danelaw, but also as part of an expansion of royal control over economic activity (Reynolds 1999, 179). Many of these towns were associated with smaller existing settlements, including minsters. Winchester, for instance, developed as a fortified town in the late ninth century, but the Old Minster had existed for centuries by this point (Yorke 1982). Similarly, it appears that Oxford was associated with an extant minster (Blair 1988, Dodd 2003), and other fortified towns in Wessex and Mercia are sometimes associated with older minsters, as at Bath and Exeter. New minsters were sometimes founded in these burhs; Winchester and Gloucester both contain examples of this type of foundation.
Additionally, in this period Anglo-Scandinavian settlements such as Lincoln, Derby and Leicester began to grow and gain importance. The settlements of the north seem to have followed different routes to urbanization, but the overall picture across the country is one of growth and development.

Some information on the status of towns and cities is given in Domesday Book, which lists 112 places as civitas, burgus, or villa. However, these terms are not always used consistently – for instance, Stafford is called all three at various points in the Domesday accounts. Populations have been estimated based on entries which describe the number of houses within towns, although like other Domesday entries these are not descriptions of all existing buildings but only those eligible to pay certain taxes. The smallest of the large settlements are sites like Barton-upon-Humber, with a population probably around 900 (Bryant 1981, 68). Very large towns like Winchester or York probably had populations between 5,000 and 8,000 inhabitants. Lincoln may have had a population of around 6,000 (Darby 1977 303-4). Smaller towns like Exeter, Hastings and Gloucester have estimated populations of between 1,000 and 3,000 (Darby 1977, 308). It should be stressed that these are estimates based on a document primarily concerned not with reporting population but with identifying individuals with specific tax responsibilities (Roffe 2007, 137-8).

Despite difficulties with the textual evidence and questions about the exact nature and history of the development of some towns, a pattern of urban development can be seen in the construction of defences, establishment of mints, and expansion of settled areas. The development of these large towns is a distinctive feature of the late Anglo-Saxon period.

However, these late Anglo-Saxon towns are not the only sites to produce large cemeteries. Extensive cemetery excavations have taken place at non-urban churches, perhaps most famously at Raunds, Northants (Boddington 1996). Other such excavations, such as the excavation at St Peter’s, Barton-on-Humber (Waldron 2007) are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Given that we have cemetery evidence from both urban and non-urban contexts, what comparison can we make between the two in terms of the prevalence of charcoal burials?
The pattern of percentage of charcoal burials is striking when considered in this context. The highest percentages of charcoal burials all come from urban contexts: St Mary Major, Exeter, New Minster, Winchester, Durham Cathedral, Exeter Castle, and St Alkmund’s, Derby. No cemetery outside of an urban context has produced more than 20% charcoal burials. The two highest non-urban sites are both monastic centres, Calke Abbey and Buckfast.

The concentration of charcoal burials in urban settings may be related to the lack of charcoal burial sites in East Anglia. Although East Anglia was a centre of monastic revival and had a number of large, wealthy churches, these are typically not found in urban contexts. Hill (1981) for instance, lists only three major towns in East Anglia: Cambridge, Norwich and Thetford. Norwich has evidence for a possible charcoal burial, while no high-status late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries have been excavated at Thetford or Cambridge, although the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Church End, Cherry Hinton, near Cambridge, has been excavated and does not contain charcoal burials (McDonald and Doel 2000). The different pattern of urbanism and high-status church foundation in East Anglia may have contributed to the lack of excavated charcoal burials if, as suggested, high-status urban churches are the most likely sites for burials of this type. It is also possible that the liturgical traditions which inspired charcoal burial did not spread to this region, but given the contact between reformed monasteries in East Anglia and those in Wessex, as well as the proximity of communities practicing charcoal burial in the Five Boroughs, this seems unlikely.

8.6 Distribution and chronology

The dating evidence discussed in Chapter 7 can be compared to patterns of distribution. If the practice of depositing charcoal in graves began earlier or ended later in certain areas, this might be visible in the distribution of dated graves. However, there are some difficulties with this method when it is remembered that the dated graves do not necessarily represent the complete period of charcoal burial within any given cemetery. In some cases, it has been possible to establish relatively secure date ranges based on historical evidence, while in others the ranges are necessarily vague. For each site, a best estimate has been made based on the sources of dating evidence
discussed in Section 5.2. Date ranges are displayed geographically in Figures 8.7—8.12. Sites which have insufficient dating evidence are not shown on the maps.

As can be seen, there is no obvious correlation between date range and location. Early examples of charcoal burial are found both in southern and northern cemeteries, and late examples occur both in the West Saxon heartland and in York. Similarly, there does not appear to be any chronological distinction between cemeteries in *burhs* or towns and cemeteries in rural areas. Although the majority of charcoal burials appear to be in larger urban churches, not all of the earliest examples come from this context.
Figure 8.7: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 700-800

Figure 8.8: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 800-900
Figure 8.9: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 900-1000

Figure 8.10: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 1000-1100
Figure 8.11: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 1100-1200

Figure 8.12: Charcoal burial sites c. AD 1200-1300
8.7 Discussion

The distribution of charcoal burial in England appears to have no significant regional bias. Larger numbers of charcoal burials are found associated with high-status churches in urban environments in the south and south-west, but comparable numbers of charcoal burials relative to overall cemetery size can be observed in high-status churches in the north. It must be borne in mind that varying patterns of excavation may contribute to this pattern, as discussed above. The practice of charcoal burial was clearly not restricted to one area in particular, although it may have been slightly more common in cemeteries in the south and south-west such as Exeter and Winchester.

Much more striking is the distribution of charcoal burial as it relates to the type of settlement and church associated with the cemetery. Very small numbers and percentages of charcoal burials are found in the “parish” or “estate” churches of rural settlements such as St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber or St Chad’s, Barrow-on-Humber. By contrast, large urban churches have much higher percentages of charcoal burial. Late Anglo-Saxon rural churches, even those with large excavated cemeteries, sometimes contain no charcoal burials, whereas only a few cathedral excavations or excavations associated with large urban churches, such as the cathedrals at Wells and Worcester, (Rodwell 2001, Clarke 1980) have failed to produce any charcoal burials at all.

This pattern of burial suggests that burial practice may, in the majority of cases, have been determined by other factors than the liturgical traditions of the religious authorities.
9. Demographic characteristics of charcoal burial

9.1 Introduction

Having explored the distribution and dating of burials with layers of charcoal, I will now focus on these burials at a smaller scale. Given that charcoal burials make up only a small percentage of most late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, the rite must have been considered appropriate for some people but not for others. What can be determined about the individuals for whom charcoal burial was considered appropriate? How do these burials differ from burials without charcoal?

Age and gender have been important areas of study within the early and middle Anglo-Saxon period. In particular, archaeologists have studied the ways in which both grave-good assemblages and position within cemeteries correlate to age and sex, in some cases challenging the traditional view that grave-goods are diagnostic evidence of gender (Crawford 1999; Lucy 1997; Stoodley 1999, 2000).

Late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries do not use grave deposits in this way, but it may be possible that variant burial practices in these cemeteries correlate to age, gender or other factors such as group membership or social status. Jo Buckberry (2004) and Annia Cherryson (2006) have closely examined burial practice in particular regions. There is no evidence for the kind of strong correlation between burial practice and gender which are found in some early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, but there may be observable trends. This chapter focuses on identifying some of those trends in charcoal burial specifically.

9.2 Burial data from late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and its limitations

Skeletal data has provided valuable information about the makeup of a number of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (e.g. Mays 2007, Waldron 2007). However, there are important limitations on its utility in studying charcoal burials.

Skeletal data is not always available for cemeteries containing charcoal burials. Larger cemeteries which have been the focus of lengthy excavations typically produce detailed skeletal reports. Examples of these include St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber,
St Mary Major, Exeter, St Mark’s, Lincoln, and St Oswald’s, Gloucester. In other cases, however, skeletal data is not available. The nineteenth-century excavations at Old St Chad’s and Shrewsbury Abbey, Shrewsbury, for instance, produced no usable skeletal data, nor did Thomas Ross’s investigation at Hastings. J. T. Fowler recorded a great deal of skeletal data at Durham cathedral chapter house (Fowler 1880, 1883), but this is probably unreliable. Although Fowler had surgical training (Fowler 1918, 12), skeletal sexing and ageing is a complex process which, even using modern medical knowledge, is not always reliable (Molleson and Cox 1993, 167). In modern cemeteries, some excavations lack the time, funding or mandate to undertake proper specialist analysis of human remains. The skeletons located at Exeter Castle are examples of this: although their presence was recorded, the circumstances of the work did not permit excavation and analysis. In other cases, such as at Lewes Priory, post-excavation storage of human remains led to a situation in which the remains did not survive in a usable condition (Lyne 1997, 151). Additionally, skeletal data is not available from every site with charcoal burials. The cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester remain in press and the skeletal data is not available.

Additionally, processes of sex and age determination can vary from site to site and over time. An examination of the skeletal data presented in this chapter will show that the proportion of “possible” males or females varies greatly from site to site. This may result from varying bone preservation, but it is also likely to result from different osteologists, working at different times and with different methods, drawing the line between a definitely sexed skeleton and a possibly sexed one in different places.

However, enough cemeteries containing charcoal burials have been analyzed that we can draw some preliminary conclusions about the relationship between charcoal burial and demographic traits such as age and gender. Table 9.1 lists cemeteries where full skeletal recording makes this possible.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Cemetery</th>
<th>Total burials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>St Mary Major</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>St Oswald's</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford</td>
<td>Castle Green</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewes</td>
<td>Priory</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>St Mark's</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>All Saints</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>Christchurch</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford</td>
<td>St Aldate's</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trowbridge</td>
<td>Castle</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>Minster</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.1: Cemeteries analyzed for demographic information

At some cemeteries, only a small number of burials have been excavated, making meaningful comparison of burial data impossible. Cemeteries with fewer than ten burials have been excluded from Table 9.1. In most cases, single charcoal burials excavated outside the context of a wide-scale cemetery excavation have not been identified (e.g. Rahtz 1976, 45; Moulden and Tweddle 1986, 55) Single burials have provided information on the age and sex of the individuals buried at these sites. Data from isolated burials is given in Table 9.2. Single charcoal burials excavated at larger cemeteries have also not been considered compared to the proportions of age and gender in non-charcoal burials, because the sample is too small to make comparison meaningful. However, some of these sites (Trowbridge Castle, North Walk, Barnstaple, St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, and St Nicholas Shambles, London) are considered below in terms of their overall population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>CB (identified)</th>
<th>Skeleton(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goring, St Mary’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lichfield Cathedral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 juveniles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repton, St Wystan’s</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.2: Skeletal data from isolated charcoal burials
The data given for the number of charcoal burials at sites in Table 9.2 may differ from the number of total burials described in their entries in Chapter 5. This difference results from the fact that Table 9.1 only includes burials where it has been possible to identify the age or sex of the body. At St Mary Major, Exeter, for instance, a large number of charcoal burials were identified only by charcoal patches, the bodies having been destroyed by subsequent disturbance.

Osteological analysis typically identifies an approximate age for the skeleton, typically expressed as a range of round ten years or a minimum age. Unfortunately, the sites considered in this chapter were analyzed at different times and using a number of different recording schemes. An adult from one site might be listed as being 35-45 years old, while at another site the age bracket used might be 30-40 rather than 35-45. As a result, age categories other than the general categories of “adult” and “juvenile” or “sub-adult” are not directly comparable between sites.

9.3 Demographic patterns at charcoal burial sites

The proportions of charcoal and non-charcoal burials for which the age or sex of the deceased can be identified are shown below for sites listed in Table 9.1.
Table 9.3: Burials from St Oswald’s, Gloucester (Heighway and Bryant 1999)

The cemetery of St Oswald’s, Gloucester, contains roughly equal numbers of males and females, and this ratio is reflected in the charcoal burials, which are similarly evenly divided. However, the largest category of burials in the cemetery overall is the burials of juveniles. This is not found in the charcoal burials; only one of the 22 aged charcoal burials from Gloucester is that of a juvenile. It is possible that some of the 9 charcoal burials which could be neither sexed nor aged are those of sub-adults, since these skeletons would be less likely to survive in identifiable form.
Table 9.4: Burials from Castle Green, Hereford (Shoesmith 1980)

By contrast, males appear to outnumber females among excavated burials at Castle Green, Hereford: a total of 46 male or probable male burials compared to only 18 female or probable female burials. Of these, five burials of males or probably males contain charcoal layers, while only one charcoal burial contains the skeleton of a female. As at Gloucester, the distribution of charcoal burials seems to correspond roughly with the distribution of the cemetery in general, although given the low number of sexed charcoal burials, it is difficult to say with certainty.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skeleton</th>
<th>Charcoal burial</th>
<th>No charcoal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible male</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsexed adult</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.5: Burials from St Mary Major, Exeter (Henderson and Bidwell 1982)

The cemetery of St Mary Major, Exeter, also shows an imbalance toward males, which outnumber females almost two to one. Once again, a similar proportion of males to females is found among the charcoal burials. At both Castle Green and St Mary Major, there does appear to be some kind of selection for males occurring (or a greater difficulty in identifying the skeletons of females), but there does not seem to have been any particular selection for sex in charcoal burial, which reflects the overall pattern of the cemetery.
Only four skeletons from charcoal burials at Christchurch, Oxford have been analysed, but the cemetery overall presents a similar imbalance, with males making up the majority of excavated skeletons. The small number of charcoal burials does not make it possible to determine whether or not the distribution of sex and age is consistent with that of the cemetery overall.
Table 9.7: burials from St Mark’s, Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986)

One possible exception to this pattern occurs at St Mark’s, Lincoln, where the skeletons of males and females are found in approximately equal proportions in the cemetery generally, but all four of the charcoal burials which could be sexed have been identified as males or possible males. However, the small number of charcoal burials which could be sexed – four out of ten – renders this inconclusive.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skeleton</th>
<th>Charcoal burial</th>
<th>No charcoal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible male</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsexed adult</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.8: burials from York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995)

Conversely, males are predominant among sexed skeletons from the Anglo-Scandinavian period cemetery at York Minster, but the charcoal burials which could be sexed are roughly evenly divided between males and females. Once again, though, this number is sufficiently small that the variance is inconclusive.
Skeleton Charcoal burial No charcoal Total
Possible female 0 0 0
Female 0 0 0
Possible male 0 1 1
Male 3 6 9
Unsexed adult 1 9 10
Juvenile 0 2 2
Unknown
Total 4 18 22

Table 9.9: Burials from Lewes Priory (Lyne 1997)

Skeletons excavated from Lewes Priory have been identified only as males, possible males, unsexed adults, and juveniles. No female or possibly female skeletons were present, either with or without charcoal layers. This may result from the very limited excavated area within the Infirmary Chapel.

Table 9.10: Burials from All Saints, Oxford (Dodd 2003)

Excavations at All Saints, Oxford reveal another imbalance, with males and possible males outnumbering females and possible females. Once again, however, the number of excavated burials is comparatively small, representing only a subset of the cemetery’s population.

In addition to these sites with only a small number of excavated charcoal burials, there are a number of cemeteries where, although charcoal burials have been excavated, the skeletal remains have not been analyzed or the bone report has not been correlated.
Table 9.9: Burials from Lewes Priory (Lyne 1997)

Skeletons excavated from Lewes Priory have been identified only as males, possible males, unsexed adults, and juveniles. No female or possibly female skeletons were present, either with or without charcoal layers. This may result from the very limited excavated area within the Infirmary Chapel.

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In addition to these sites with only a small number of excavated charcoal burials, there are a number of cemeteries where, although charcoal burials have been excavated, the skeletal remains have not been analyzed or the bone report has not been correlated.
with the excavation report, making it impossible to match skeletons to graves. Skeletal data from these sites is summarized in Table 9.11.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skeleton</th>
<th>Barnstaple</th>
<th>Barrow</th>
<th>Barton</th>
<th>Trowbridge</th>
<th>St Nicholas Shambles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsexed adult</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.11: Sex and age data from cemeteries without sexed or aged charcoal burials. (Miles 1986, Grainger in press, Waldron 2007, Graham and Davies 1993, White 1988)

The results from these sites are comparable to the results from other sites in the sample group. Either males and females occur in approximately equal numbers or males predominate by as much as two to one. The number of juveniles varies greatly. At Lincoln, for example, adults outnumber juveniles by less than two to one, while at other cemeteries, such as Christ Church, Oxford, or St Mary Major, Exeter, only a small number of burials of sub-adults were recorded.

Although full demographic data has not been published for the cemeteries of the Old and New Minsters, Winchester, some conclusions drawn from this data have been published. Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle (1992, 231-3) identifies the charcoal burials found at these cemeteries up to the mid-tenth century as predominantly male. After this date, both males and females as well as a small number of juveniles receive charcoal burial. At the Old Minster, the ratio of the sexes is “three males to one female, but for New Minster it is three females to males” (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 321). However, the complete ratios of males to females and adults to juveniles at these cemeteries overall have not been released, so it is not possible to determine if the charcoal burials are consistent with the overall ratios.
9.4 Statistical analysis of charcoal burials

The demographic data gathered from the sites discussed in Section 9.3 appears to suggest that the distribution of charcoal burials among categories of age and sex roughly parallels the distribution of burials without charcoal at most cemeteries. Is it possible to test this by statistical analysis?

The most common test of significance is the chi-square test, which tests data against the null hypothesis that the results are the product of chance. The result of this test is expressed as a level of confidence, a probability that the data are the product of chance (Drennan 1996, 187-91).

However, not all data is suitable for evaluation using this method. Very small data sets can not be analyzed with the chi-square test, because even slight random variations can produce a proportionally high result. A variety of different methods exist to compensate for this limitation. In this section, I will be using the limitation proposed by Drennan (1996, 197): discarding all data sets with any expected values under 1, as well as any with over 20% of expected values under 5. Since each data set has only four expected values, this means discarding all data sets with any expected values under 5.

Comparisons between sites are complicated by variations in sexing and age assessment, as discussed in Section 9.2. For the purposes of statistical analysis, then, possibly-male burials have been treated as male and possibly-female burials as female in this section.

However, even with this simplification, very small sample sizes of charcoal burial mean that expected values are probably too low for reliable significance testing. Values for the largest sites from Section 9.3 are given below.
As can be seen, each of these sites contains at least one expected value lower than five, meaning that the chi-square test cannot be used to determine whether or not these values are the result of chance.

The very small values for sexed adult charcoal burials mean that it is not possible to test the distribution of skeletal sex for significance. However, if unsexed burials are
included in the sample it may be possible to test whether distribution by age is significant. Values are given below for burials by age from some of the largest sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Juvenile</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No charcoal</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
\text{Expected value} \\
\begin{array}{|c|}
\hline
\text{Adult w/charcoal} & 15.62 \\
\text{Adult w/o charcoal} & 246.38 \\
\text{Juvenile w/ charcoal} & 6.38 \\
\text{Juvenile w/o charcoal} & 100.62 \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Table 9.15: aged skeletal remains from St Oswald’s, Gloucester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Juvenile</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No charcoal</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
\text{Expected value} \\
\begin{array}{|c|}
\hline
\text{Adult w/charcoal} & 8 \\
\text{Adult w/o charcoal} & 76 \\
\text{Juvenile w/ charcoal} & 4 \\
\text{Juvenile w/o charcoal} & 38 \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Table 9.16: aged skeletal remains from Castle Green, Hereford.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Juvenile</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No charcoal</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[
\text{Expected value} \\
\begin{array}{|c|}
\hline
\text{Adult w/charcoal} & 21.7 \\
\text{Adult w/o charcoal} & 45.3 \\
\text{Juvenile w/ charcoal} & 1.3 \\
\text{Juvenile w/o charcoal} & 2.7 \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Table 9.17: aged skeletal remains from St Mary Major, Exeter.

As with the sex data, most of the values for aged skeletal remains are unusable owing to low sample sizes. However, the values for aged remains from St Oswald’s are viable. These expected values can therefore be subjected to the chi-square test. The
resulting score is 6.91, with one degree of freedom. This value is significant to .01, meaning that there is only a 1% likelihood that the observed pattern is the result of random chance.

The difference between the low number of juvenile charcoal burials found at St Oswald’s and the expected value suggests that charcoal burial was not as common among juveniles at this site as among adults. However, the statistical test of significance does nothing to tell use why this variation appears at this cemetery. All we can observe is that there is a difference between the percentage of adults buried with charcoal and the percentage of children and that, within the limits of the small sample size, this does not seem to be the result of chance. It is possible, however, that this represents a correlation of charcoal burial with some aspect of identity or status normally reserved for adults.

As can be seen from this section, the primary obstacle to statistical analysis is the lack of any large body of charcoal burials for which skeletal data is also available. The key to further exploration of this question is the currently unavailable data from the excavations at the Old and New Minsters, Winchester. Although very useful data from these excavations has been published (e.g. Kjølbye-Biddle 1992), more complete publication is needed for statistical analysis to be of any use.

9.5 Demographic makeup of cemeteries containing charcoal burials

Despite some of the inadequacies of the data, a few basic patterns are visible in the relationship between charcoal burials and burials of other types in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. First, the proportion of males and females in charcoal burials typically seems to reflect the proportion of males and females found in the cemetery as a whole. There are some cases where this may not be true, but insufficient numbers of charcoal burials have been sexed to allow us to say with any certainty.

One cemetery showed a significant variation in the percentage of juveniles identified in charcoal burials. Juveniles made up 27.1% of the excavated burials without charcoal at St Oswald’s, Gloucester, but only 3.2% of the charcoal burials. However,
resulting score is 6.91, with one degree of freedom. This value is significant to .01, meaning that there is only a 1% likelihood that the observed pattern is the result of random chance.

The difference between the low number of juvenile charcoal burials found at St Oswald’s and the expected value suggests that charcoal burial was not as common among juveniles at this site as among adults. However, the statistical test of significance does nothing to tell use why this variation appears at this cemetery. All we can observe is that there is a difference between the percentage of adults buried with charcoal and the percentage of children and that, within the limits of the small sample size, this does not seem to be the result of chance. It is possible, however, that this represents a correlation of charcoal burial with some aspect of identity or status normally reserved for adults.

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One cemetery showed a significant variation in the percentage of juveniles identified in charcoal burials. Juveniles made up 27.1% of the excavated burials without charcoal at St Oswald’s, Gloucester, but only 3.2% of the charcoal burials. However,
at most cemeteries where juvenile charcoal burials were excavated, the proportions are roughly equivalent.

Charcoal burial does not, therefore, appear to have been reserved to a single category of person. Charcoal layers can be included in the burials of adult males or females as well as of sub-adults. However, the distribution varies according to the general pattern of the cemetery. This may because of partial excavation of cemeteries: if certain areas of cemeteries were segregated by gender, or were preferentially selected for male-only groups such as monastic communities, local concentrations could cause males to be over-represented in the excavated sample. The heavy concentration of males at Lewes Priory, for instance, may result from the very limited area of the excavations – bodies were only excavated within the area of the medieval Lady Chapel – and the monastic, extramural character of the church.

9.6 Demography in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries

We have established that cemeteries containing charcoal burials seem not to have any unifying demographic characteristics. It is also necessary to compare these cemeteries with late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries without charcoal burials.

In fact, the trends seen in cemeteries with charcoal burials can be identified at other late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, both rural and urban, including multiple types of church. For instance, the cathedral cemetery at North Elmham contained a total of 82 males and possible males, 76 females and possible females, nine unsexed adults, and 39 sub-adults (Wade-Martins 1980, 247-50). The cemetery associated with the late Anglo-Saxon church at Raunds produced 97 males, 78 females, 35 unsexed adults, and 170 sub-adults (Boddington 1996), while the pre-Conquest phases of the cemetery at St Andrew’s Fishergate, York, produced 47 males, 34 females, two unsexed adults, and 48 sub-adults (Stroud and Kemp 1993). These cemeteries show similar age and sex distributions to cemeteries containing charcoal burial. Either males and females are approximately equally represented or males predominate slightly over females. The proportion of juveniles is highly variable. There therefore does not seem to be a demographic profile associated with cemeteries containing charcoal burial any more
than the rite is associated with particular demographic groups within the cemeteries in which it occurs.

Overall, then, the demographic data suggests that charcoal burial was not associated with any skeletally-identifiable group within late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries or with cemeteries which share a certain demographic profile. If any group was being singled out for special treatment by being buried with charcoal, it seems to have been roughly evenly distributed among adults, although perhaps not including juveniles in some places.

9.7 The Life, Death and Burial of Ranulf Flambard

Fowler’s excavations at the Durham Cathedral chapter house provide us with a unique opportunity to examine a burial containing a layer of charcoal. Fowler identified one of the graves located within the 12th-century chapter house as belonging to Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham from 1099 to 1128 (Fowler 1883, 242-7). Fowler’s identification was based on the map of Durham cathedral included in Browne Willis’s Survey of the Cathedrals of York, Durham, Carlisle, Chester, Man, Lichfield, Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester, and Bristol (1727). Flambard’s grave-slab was recovered in a slightly different location, and D. M. Wilson has expressed doubt about whether Fowler correctly identified the grave (Wilson 1964, 7). It is possible that the position of the burials on Willis’s map was reversed by the printer (Fowler 1883 269-70), meaning that this would in fact be the burial of another 11th-12th century Bishop of Durham. Whether or not this is Flambard, the contents of the coffin, which included a crosier, a ring and evidence of expensive vestments, indicate a bishop, and the artistic style of the crosier is consistent with this date (Kendrick 1938).

The fact that body in Grave 4 is a Bishop of Durham provides another piece of evidence suggesting that charcoal burial was connected with high status. If the burial was that of Flambard, perhaps more information regarding its origins or symbolism can be obtained. Flambard, as discussed in Chapter 5, was a controversial figure whose relationship with other ecclesiastics and with the crown was often openly hostile. According to the continuator of Symeon of Durham, Flambard engaged in a public act of penitence and reconciliation shortly before his death, restoring his ties
with the community of Durham (Symeon lxxxix-xc). Additionally, Flambard had contact with Winchester; he was at New Minster between 1088 and 1090 or 1091 and was in fraternity with the monks, thus establishing contact with a community where charcoal burial was common during the heyday of the practice (Rumble 2002, 171).

Grave 4 at Durham therefore demonstrates some of the many possible influences on the practice of charcoal burial: not only was Flambard of very high social status, a wealthy and powerful Norman with ties to the crown, he also held a special religious role (bishop), and may have been in a state of penance at the time of his death. Furthermore, he had connections with other communities whose burial practices may have influenced practice at Durham, although burials with charcoal are found at Durham from probable earlier eleventh-century contexts. The number of possible influences on the burial practices of a high-status individual is instructive.

9.8 Conclusion

There is no evidence for a uniform demographic pattern for charcoal burials. They typically seem to follow the pattern of the cemetery in which they are found, or else do not occur in large enough numbers for a valid conclusion to be drawn. In a previous work (Holloway 2003) I suggested that adult males were more likely to receive charcoal burial, but this conclusion may have resulted from a smaller sample size as well as using Fowler’s probably unreliable skeletal sexing. However, one source of data exists which may allow this view to be revised: the unpublished collections of skeletal data from Winchester. The forthcoming publication of a volume of the Winchester Studies series on the Minsters and their cemeteries may allow a fuller picture of the demography of charcoal burial in late Anglo-Saxon England.
10. Distribution of charcoal burials within churchyards

10.1 Introduction

In addition to demographic patterns and the geographic distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials, the patterns of distribution of charcoal burials within cemeteries can also be analyzed. Proximity to the church or to special areas such as the tombs of saints appears to have been seen as desirable in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and it is possible that the layout of the cemetery was segregated in other ways.

10.2 Internal burial

As discussed in Chapter 4, burial within the church itself was restricted, or at least was supposed to be restricted, to those of high status or exceptional holiness. Early textual sources suggest that internal burial was not uncommon for individuals such as bishops or royalty, but very small numbers of internal burials at other sites suggest that the rule was being enforced. Only three individuals were buried inside the first church itself at St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber (Waldron 2007, 30), and only one internal burial was excavated from the late Anglo-Saxon church at Raunds (Boddington 1996, 21). Similarly, only three internal burials were excavated from St Alkmund’s, Derby (Ralegh Radford 1976, 33). Although not completely forbidden, intramural burial does seem to have been reserved for special cases of some kind. By contrast, other churches seem to have accepted intramural burial from an early date. Winchester New Minster seems to have had intramural burials from its foundation, possibly because, as a royal burial site, it had a large number of high-status burials which justified waiving the usual restriction.

Intramural burials sometimes contained charcoal burials, as was the case at St Alkmund’s, Derby. Similarly, the two charcoal burials excavated from Holy Trinity, Bosham were inside the church, and the charcoal burials from Lewes Priory were within the monastic church. Intramural charcoal burials were also excavated at both the Old and New Minsters, Winchester.
10.3 Location within the cemetery

Aside from burial within the church itself, it is possible that different areas of the cemetery had different value. Burial on the south and east side of the church appears to have been considered more desirable at some English cemeteries, with less dense burial to the north of the church at Raunds Furnells, Northants (Boddington 1996, 69). However, this appears to be a preference rather than a restriction. Proximity to the church itself or to other sacred objects within the cemetery, such as crosses or the tombs of saints, may have been sought after. At Raunds, the densest areas of burial were in close proximity to the church (Boddington 1996, 55). Other patterns of burial within cemeteries may reflect group affiliations. Families might have repeatedly used the same area of a cemetery. Specific groups might also wish to have their own area for burial, such as members of a religious community at a church which also served as a site for lay burials. If different groups were buried in different locations, we might expect to see the incidence of particular burial practices also vary from location to location.

Burial clusters of various types have been observed at a number of cemeteries in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The most notable type of differentiation in terms of burial location is by age. Infants at Raunds seem to have been preferentially selected for burial very close to the walls of the church. 76.7% of all burials in this area were those of infants, as opposed to 18.3% for the cemetery as a whole (Boddington 1996, 55).

Given that different areas of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries sometimes contain different proportions of men and women, or children and adults, is it possible to identify areas where charcoal burial is more common? In fact, some sites with charcoal burials do show that the incidence of charcoal burial varies from place to place within the cemetery.

At the Old and New Minsters, Winchester, burial rite was seen to vary between extramural and intramural burials. Charcoal burials, burials in “monolithic coffins,” and coffins with decorative iron strapping were concentrated in the minsters themselves and the area immediately around them. Even among charcoal burials, charcoal burials within the churches had a higher incidence of iron nails, coffin
fittings and other forms of elaboration (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 230). At Old Minster, Trench XXIX covered an area which “was always outside the church and did not contain any graves which could be singled out as being of special importance: no charcoal graves, no stone-built graves, and no graves with elaborate coffins” (Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 98).

Possible concentrations of charcoal burial have been observed at other cemeteries. Excavations at Christchurch, Oxford, for instance, have located burials in three areas of the college, but only two of these have produced charcoal burial. This distribution may be connected with burial in different phases of the cemetery’s history or represent areas of the cemetery selected by different groups.

**St Mark’s church and cemetery**

*Fig 14 Plan of Period VIII church and graveyard*

**Figure 10.1. Period VIII cemetery from St Mark’s, Lincoln. Note concentration of charcoal burials (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 15)**

A possible cluster within a single excavated area occurs in the Period VIII-IX cemetery at Saint Mark’s, Lincoln. Eight charcoal burials were identified in the Period VIII cemetery, predating the earliest stone church and possibly associated with an
fittings and other forms of elaboration (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 230). At Old Minster, Trench XXIX covered an area which “was always outside the church and did not contain any graves which could be singled out as being of special importance: no charcoal graves, no stone-built graves, and no graves with elaborate coffins” (Kjølbye-Biddle 1975, 98).

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Figure 10.1. Period VIII cemetery from St Mark’s, Lincoln. Note concentration of charcoal burials (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 15)

A possible cluster within a single excavated area occurs in the Period VIII-IX cemetery at Saint Mark’s, Lincoln. Eight charcoal burials were identified in the Period VIII cemetery, predating the earliest stone church and possibly associated with an
earlier timber structure. Of these, six were concentrated in a tight group in the eastern area of the cemetery. The majority of the burials in this phase of the cemetery, however, were located to the west of this group.

A further two charcoal burials were excavated from the Period IX cemetery; once again, these were in close proximity in the south-east corner of the site, but given the small number of examples it is hard to say whether this is significant.

Fig 15  Plan of Period IX church and graveyard

Figure 10.2. Period IX cemetery from St Mark’s, Lincoln (Gilmour and Stocker 1986, 18)

Another grouping can be observed within the Anglo-Scandinavian cemetery at York Minster. Excavations close to the cathedral in areas ST, SD and SA produced a dense concentration of elaborated burials. These included burials with grave markers, charcoal burials, and burials on biers or boats. However, excavations further from the site of the cathedral, in areas XK and XL, produced only one charcoal burial and few other elaborated burials. The charcoal burials, like other types of elaborate burial, appear to be concentrated in the vicinity of the church. It should be noted that the
exact location of the Anglian minster at York is not known, but it is believed to be located underneath the Norman cathedral, closer to area ST than to areas XL or YK.

Figure 10.3. Cemetery at York Minster (Phillips and Heywood 1995, 76)

In several cases, the highest incidence of charcoal burial has been within the church itself or in close proximity to it. This was definitely the case at Old Minster, Winchester, and at York Minster. It may also have been the case at St Oswald’s, Gloucester. Proximity to the church could suggest high social or religious status, or perhaps a perceived need for the extra sanctity provided by the church. Distinct clusters of charcoal burials have been observed at other sites, suggesting that groups of some kind were selecting areas of the churchyard for burial, but not necessarily that these areas were considered more or less prestigious.

Charcoal burials excavated from the cemetery at St Peter’s church, Leicester, are found in several different areas of the cemetery, but there is a visible cluster of charcoal burials located to the south of the chancel. More than half of the site’s
Charcoal burials are concentrated in this small area, with the later (probably 14th century) charnel house to the east. Almost all the burials in this area contain charcoal, while in other areas of the cemetery charcoal burials are outnumbered by burials without charcoal. Additionally, all the charcoal burials in this area also contain stones, while only one burial outside this area contains both a charcoal layer and stones. The group south of the chancel therefore represents a unique group of burials within the overall context of the cemetery. However, large areas of the cemetery south of the church remain unexcavated. It may be that charcoal burials are more common on the southern side of the cemetery generally.

Figure 10.4: Concentration of charcoal burials at Vaughan Way, Leicester. One grid square represents 5m
If charcoal burials are likely to be found in clusters, it is possible that other burial practices from among the ones discussed in Chapter 4 might also correlate with charcoal burial in clusters of this type. We have seen that charcoal burial does, for instance, correlate with elaborate coffins at Winchester (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 223). However, because cemeteries are often only partially excavated and many earlier excavations lack complete records correlating burial rite to skeleton or location, it is not currently possible to reliably identify clusters of this type. This could be a fruitful area for further investigation, particularly once the complete Winchester data becomes available.

10.4 Individual burials

At cemeteries with only a small number of charcoal burials, patterns like the ones seen at York Minster and Winchester cannot be observed. However, in some cases charcoal burials are found in close proximity to the church. In some of these cases, only burials in close proximity to the church were identified by an excavation focused on the church itself.

Three sites produced charcoal burials close to the south wall of the church. At Goring, the charcoal burial overlain by the tower foundations was immediately to the south of the church’s (earlier) south wall. At St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber, the single charcoal burial in the cemetery was outside the south door of the church, while at St Alkmund’s, Derby, one of the four charcoal burials cut the foundations of what appeared to be a demolished south porticus. At St Mary’s, Little Oakley, the single charcoal burial predated the foundations of the stone church, suggesting that it may have lain to the south of a timber precursor, but this is uncertain. By contrast, the single charcoal burial from St Nicholas Shambles, London, was within 1 meter of the north wall of the first church.

Two Anglo-Saxon churches have charcoal burials associated with their crypts. The single charcoal burial from St Wystan’s, Repton, was located immediately beside the Middle Saxon crypt, overlain by medieval steps leading into it. The two cists containing charcoal from Old St Chad’s, Shrewsbury, were excavated to the west of the crypt.
However, not all single finds of charcoal burials are located close to churches, although this does seem to be comparatively common. The charcoal burial excavated at 37 Bishophill Senior may have been an outlier of the cemetery of St Mary Bishophill Senior, meaning that at least in this case some charcoal burials were located near the boundaries of the cemetery.

10.5 Conclusion

Not all cemeteries with charcoal burials show notable concentrations. Even the distinct cluster at St Peter’s, Leicester is not as marked as the obvious segregation of burial rites taking place in the cemeteries of medieval Lund (see Chapter 11). Late Saxon cemeteries do not appear to have been divided into formal zones, but there certainly appear to be trends in terms of burial location. Graves of known individuals might have served as burial foci for those who wished to be seen as being associated with the deceased, such as family members or others wishing to emphasize a connection. Some of these groups appear to have also practised charcoal burial; it may be that other concentrations of associated graves were marked by some method that has not survived in the archaeological record.

Since excavations of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are frequently focused on the church itself, this may mean that charcoal burial is over-represented at some sites and that if cemeteries were excavated out to their boundaries the percentage of charcoal burial found would be lower.

Some cemeteries do not show any pattern in the distribution of charcoal burials, or only show them concentrated close to the church itself. Once again, the diversity in the practice of charcoal burial from site to site can be seen. While the practice appears to have been used for some kind of self-defined burial groups at Lincoln and Leicester, elsewhere the only visible grouping is proximity to the church. The evidence suggests that this aspect of late Saxon burial practice was being put to different uses in different cemeteries.
11. Charcoal burial in early medieval Europe

11.1 Introduction

The use of charcoal in graves is not confined to England. Graves containing charcoal have been excavated at sites in Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, France, and Denmark. A possible charcoal burial is known from Wales, but the practice does not appear to have been widespread. In some cases, these are very similar to the known English examples, while in others significant differences are apparent. Similarly, in some cases, links between burial practice in England and burial practice in other countries can be demonstrated; elsewhere, the links are extremely unclear.

This chapter is a summary of charcoal burial sites outside England. It is intended as a supplement to the list in Chapter 5. Unlike Chapter 5, it is not intended to be comprehensive, although in some cases only a very small number of burials with charcoal are known from a given area. Its purpose is to provide an overview of the variety of practices outside England which resemble English “charcoal burial.” Individual cemeteries will be examined in detail as case studies only.

The subject of charcoal burial in early medieval Europe calls for further examination, but within this thesis, its primary purpose is comparative. By examining the contrast between charcoal burial in England and similar rites in other parts of Europe, what can we determine about its role in either area?

11.2 Charcoal burial in Wales

Given the many English cemeteries containing charcoal burial, it seems logical to look for examples of the practice elsewhere in Britain. Perhaps surprisingly, it seems to be rare in both Wales and Scotland.

Burials in enclosed cemeteries in early medieval Wales appear to begin in the 8th to 10th centuries (Petts 2002, 42-5). The burials are typically east-west aligned, often with some form of cist or stone lining, although as in England there is diversity in burial practice. Some elements of Welsh burial practice in this period are also known
from England, such as the deposition of white quartz pebbles in the grave, which occurs at sites such as Llandough (Holbrook and Thomas 2005, 35-7) in Wales, as well as in English cemeteries such as Lichfield Cathedral (Rodwell 1992, 3).

However, despite some similarities in burial practice, evidence for charcoal burial has not been found in early medieval Welsh cemeteries. One “possible” charcoal burial, Grave 1019, was found during the excavations at Capel Maelog, Llandrindod Wells, Powys, between 1984 and 1987. This burial, located to the south of the chancel, contained two distinct plates of charcoal near the base of the grave towards the W. end” (Britnell 1990, 54). These two “plates” of charcoal do not appear to have formed a layer covering the base of the grave cut as in the typical English charcoal burial.

It may be that charcoal layers were included in burials during this period, but that sites containing them have not been excavated. The evidence for early medieval Welsh cemeteries is even patchier than that for contemporary England (D. Petts, pers. comm.). However, from the evidence currently available, charcoal layers do not seem to have been common. This is particularly interesting given that large numbers of charcoal burials are known from English towns on or near the Welsh border, such as Hereford or Shrewsbury (see Chapter 5).

11.3 Charcoal burial in Scotland

Scottish cemeteries have so far produced only limited evidence for charcoal burial. The site of a stone church at Barhobble in Galloway, western Scotland, was excavated between 1984 and 1994 by W. F. Cormack. Over 130 burials were found to have surrounded and underlay this structure, which appears to have been preceded by an earlier timber-built structure. The possible earlier structure was ‘closely associated’ with one of two groups of charcoal burials (Cormack et al. 1995, 24). Charcoal from two burials produced radiocarbon dates ranging from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries (Cormack et al. 1995, 30).

A total of 12 charcoal burials and possible charcoal burials were excavated at Barhobble. Structurally, some of these charcoal graves differ from their English and
Irish counterparts – in four cases, charcoal had been laid both over and under the body, creating “a D shape in section” (Cormack et al. 1995, 35). One more burial had a layer of charcoal only beneath the body. In the remaining cases, sections of the burial were not obtained. Many of the graves had extensive stone elaboration, including capstones. Six of twelve charcoal burials and possible charcoal burials contained this type of elaboration. Among burials without charcoal in the same areas, by contrast, graves without stone elaboration were around twice as common. When burials within the church itself and burials outside the church are separated, the proportions change slightly. Within the church, in area A, four charcoal burials have stone elaboration as opposed to two without. Outside the church, in area E, only one charcoal burial has stone elaboration; five do not. In both areas, the proportions for burials without charcoal are similar: about one third have stone elaboration.

Pebbles, found in several of the other burials at the site, were also found in three of the charcoal burials. One of these, Burial I, contained a piece of “exotic porphyry”. This type of find is known from other graves in Galloway as well as graves in Caithness, primarily from pagan contexts (Cormack 1989; Cormack et al. 1995, 40).

The presence of charcoal in the graves at Barhobble appears to be a unique find in Scottish archaeology. The contemporary monastic town of Whithorn, located on the same peninsula and less than 25 km from Barhobble, had no charcoal burials, although few graves from the same periods as the Barhobble charcoal graves have been excavated (Hill 1997, 187, 234).

Another site with burials containing charcoal was excavated at Hartlaw in 1864 or slightly earlier. Sixteen cist-graves were excavated from two gravel knolls. Excavators reported that “in the course of digging, the site of a grave was always to be detected by the occurrence of charred wood in the surrounding soil” (Stuart 1865, 56). Charred wood was also found in a number of features associated with the graves. The charred wood was believed at the time to have been associated with funeral feasting (Stuart 1865, 59). However, the burials are undated and it is no longer possible to determine whether the charred wood “in and around the coffin” (Stuart 1865, 56) is a “charcoal burial” as such.
11.4 Charcoal burial in Denmark

Denmark produces the greatest amount of evidence for charcoal burial contemporary with English examples. Burials on layers of charcoal are known from a number of church sites in medieval Denmark (Kieffer-Olson 1993, 166, 187-8). The most notable collection of charcoal burials comes from Lund, in modern-day Sweden but medieval Denmark. Lund was an important centre of Danish minting, administration and religion from the mid-tenth century onward.

A series of excavations from the 1960s to the 1980s revealed the buildings and graveyards of four churches in the centre of medieval Lund (Cinthio 1997, 114). The Drotten or Trinitatis Church, built in stone in the mid-eleventh century, is the largest of these. Two other wooden structures, to the south-west and east, were contemporary with the stone church, while a tenth-century wooden structure located to the north is believed to have been replaced by the stone church (Andrén 2000, 11). All four structures were surrounded by burial grounds; most of the area had been used for burial during the late tenth and eleventh centuries, but the central area surrounding the stone church was used for burial for over 500 years. Charcoal burials were found in proximity to all four church structures, but their distribution varied depending on the part of the excavated area and the period in question. The coffins of the charcoal burials were found to have rested on layers of charcoal between 3 cm and 6 cm in depth. In some cases, small quantities of charcoal were also found inside the coffin and above the lid of the coffin (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963, 93).

The distribution of charcoal burials in Lund paints a fascinating picture of the role of variant burial rites in this part of early medieval Denmark (Lund became part of Sweden in 1658). Over 1200 burials from before AD 1100 are known from the graveyards of these churches. These graves fall into five main types – unaccompanied burial, charcoal burial, burial with lime in the grave, burial in log coffins, and burial with hazel sticks. With the exception of burials in log coffins, burials of these types may be found with or without coffins. Stone-lined cuts are also found in some later examples.
The hazel sticks, or *hasselkäppar*, found in many graves will reward further examination. These thin, unbarked hazel sticks, which were sometimes almost as long as the grave cut, are laid on the grave floor beneath the coffin, or under or alongside the body. This practice was also known in Germany and in the Slavic world (Arcini 1999, 33), and it also occurred in a small number of English graveyards (Morris 1989, 80; see Section 4.9). In later medieval contexts, these sticks are well-known, and may be associated with pilgrimage or symbolic if immortality (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 173-5).

A small number of charcoal burials have been found to contain *hasselkäppar* (Blomqvist and Mårtensson 1963, 93), but in general the two rites are found in separate areas of the burial grounds. In the earliest phases of the Trinitatis graveyard (T1 and T2), in use from around AD 990 to 1050, charcoal burials were clustered very close to the wooden church, and extended some distance to the east and south. Burials with lime occupied roughly the same area. By contrast, graves with *hasselkäppar*, together with log coffin burials, were found toward what appear to be the edges of the burial ground. The excavated area around the original wooden church contained 22 charcoal burials, but only two log coffin burials and two burials with hazel sticks. In contrast, the other trenches, further to the north and east of the church, contained dozens of log coffin and *hasselkäppar* burials, but no charcoal burials.

In the later period, from around 1050 – 1100, three churches were active in the area. The large stone Trinitatis church contained burials of all types in its graveyard, including two burials with sticks, seven charcoal burials and three log coffin burials. The church to its south, labelled D, had 26 charcoal burials and no burials at all with sticks, lime, or log coffins. The church to the east, labelled K, had several dozen burials with *hasselkäppar*, a few log coffins, and 13 charcoal burials, mainly to its south. It is clear that these churches – located only around 10 m apart – practised burial according to different sets of rules (see Figure 11.1) Maria Cinthio (1997) has suggested that these may represent the burial practices of different ethnic or immigrant communities in Lund, while Anders Andrén (2000, 14) has argued that this separation may have been more closely connected with status. Osteological analysis has also detected a much higher number of bodies showing signs of leprosy and periostitis among the graves in the main area of *hasselkäppar*, surrounding the eastern
church (Cinthio 2002, 128). It is possible that these individuals were treated differently in death because of their infectious conditions. If we accept that burial near the church implies higher status than burial near the edge of the cemetery, this may be evidence of a marginalized group receiving a marginalized burial rite, or of a low-status population more vulnerable to illness.

It is certainly true that during this period Lund would have had an extensive English presence. During the early eleventh century, it was ‘the most important mint’ in Denmark (Pederson 2004, 64-6), with many of its moneyers having also struck coins for the English king, Æthelred II. Contact between England and Denmark in general was extensive during the eleventh century, although evidence is slighter for the tenth century (Pederson 2004). Other artifacts, either of English origin or crafted in an English style, have been found in Lund, and a mid-eleventh century church bears a dedication to St. Botulf (also Botwulf or Botolph), a common dedication in eastern England but rare elsewhere (Blair 2005, 425). This period corresponds with a major period of Scandinavian settlement in England, as well as rule over England by the Danish kings Sweyn Forkbeard (1013-14), Cnut (1016-35) and Harthacnut (1040-42). Charcoal burials and burials with hasselköppar are also known from the contemporary church of Saint Stefan, also in Lund (Mårtensson 1980).

In addition to trade, military and political contact, the late Anglo-Saxon period was also characterized by religious contact with Scandinavia. Despite limited evidence for Scandinavian religious practices in England (e.g. Hadley 2003, 223-4; Richards 2003), this contact was primarily one-way. English missionaries, along with counterparts from Germany, played an important role in the Christianization of Scandinavia. In particular, English missionaries and religious practices seem to have received royal patronage in Denmark during this period (Abrams 1995). This contact probably explains the presence of a distinctively English burial practice in Lund’s cemeteries. However, as will be discussed below, this does not necessarily explain the meaning or function of these charcoal burials.
Figure 11.1: Charcoal burial from Lund (Cinthio 2002, II)
Graves with:
- charcoal
- lime
- sticks
- log coffin
- other graves
- limit of excavation

Figure 11.2: Charcoal burials from D rotten and associated wooden churches, c. 1050-1100 (after Arcini 1999)
11.5 Charcoal burial in France

Burials containing charcoal are found in a number of cemeteries in France; these are generally dated to the seventh and eighth centuries. Charcoal burials in Francia are found among a range of practices involving charcoal or burning residue. Deposits found in graves include charcoal, ash, and burnt stones. These have come to be known as feux rituels, “ritual fires.” Bailey Young divided these graves into feux rituels of Types I and II (Young 1975, 121; 1997, 30-35). In Type I, evidence of burning within the grave is found, while Type II refers to burials in which ash or charcoal are found either in the fill or in association with the body. This may take the form of small patches of ash or charcoal, but in some instances “vérithables lits de charbon de bois” (Young 1984, 123) are found. Feux rituels are known from a number of cemeteries in France, although complete beds of charcoal are not present in all cases. Examples of this type of burial practice have been discussed by Young (1997, 30-35) and Bonnie Effros (2002, 165-6), but one cemetery will be used as an illustration.

The burial ground of Mazerny, in the French département of Ardennes-sur-Meuse, dates to the sixth to eighth centuries. There is no physical evidence of an accompanying church, but Bailey K. Young (1986, 396) has argued that the varying orientation of one group of graves may be due to their having been aligned on a now lost timber building. This is a common type of burial ground for the Merovingian period; although burial in urban mortuary churches was becoming increasingly common, rural burial grounds typically remained outside settlements, “away from centres of habitation” (James 1979, 60).

Mazerny was excavated in the period between 1963 and 1967, although the results have never been fully published. A total of 273 graves were excavated, of which nine contained beds of charcoal (Young 1984, 123). These were not the only burials in the burial ground which contained charcoal. 58 of the graves displayed evidence of fire in the form of traces of charcoal, ash or burnt stones, while 10% of the graves were recorded by the original excavators as having contained no charcoal. It is unclear whether this means that the majority of graves contained small amounts of charcoal.
11.6 Charcoal burial in Ireland

Only one charcoal burial site is known from Ireland; this is St. Peter’s Church in Waterford, which was excavated between 1986 and 1992. The church is first mentioned in historical records in the fourteenth century, but excavation revealed the presence of an earlier stone structure on the site. The earliest phase of this stone church was constructed in the early twelfth century, but 62 Phase I burials were found to have predated the structure and are tentatively dated to the eleventh century (Hurley et al. 1997, 818). These may be associated with a timber structure predating the stone church, but the evidence is considered to be “equivocal” (Hurley et al. 1997, 190).

Two of the graves associated with the possible wooden church contained layers of charcoal. Both of these were located beneath the stone church, and the individuals’ legs had been cut by the foundations for the eastern nave wall.

The two graves, B3041 and B3071, are positioned less than 2 m apart. In both cases the body lay on a layer of charcoal, but the amounts of charcoal within the layer were very different. Grave B3071 contained a charcoal layer c. 12 mm thick, while the body in B3041 rested on a charcoal layer c. 50 mm thick and was covered by a layer 19 cm deep in places (Hurley et al. 1997, 196). The large amount of charcoal in this latter burial would be highly unusual in a British or Scandinavian charcoal burial. No conclusive evidence for coffins was found in either burial.

The Irish charcoal burials are similar in some ways to the rite as known in England, and it is tempting to say that this is simply a transplanted English practice. It is certainly true that medieval Waterford had significant commercial and cultural ties to England. Later expansions to the stone church on this site included the construction of a semi-circular apse, an uncommon feature in contemporary Irish churches, but well-known in England (Hurley et al. 1997, 191). Malchus (Mael Iosa Ó h-Ainmire), the first Bishop of Waterford, was consecrated in Canterbury in 1096 and had been a monk at Winchester (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, 100), which has the largest number of excavated charcoal burials of any English church. The charcoal burials which predate the stone church at Waterford may date from around this period. There is no conclusive link, however, between the arrival of a bishop with English connections and this brief appearance of a rite also known in England.

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Although an English origin for the practice of charcoal burial in Ireland seems likely, it is interesting to note that the Irish examples have some unusual characteristics compared to their English counterparts, notably the very heavy charcoal layer in grave B3041. The contemporary burials also differed from contemporary English burials, placing the Waterford charcoal burials in a very different context. Of the 62 graves in the Period I burial ground, 34 were wood-lined, an “unusual feature” in Irish burials (Hurley 1992, 54). Wood-lined graves are not common in medieval England, although a number are known from medieval Scottish contexts (Stones 1989, 117-8). At St. Peter’s the excavators interpreted them as having been related to the later stone-lined graves in the Period II burial ground. While it seems likely that cultural contact with Britain or Scandinavia introduced the practice of charcoal burial to Waterford, the rite is found in a different context; it appears to have been used in a different way.

11.7 Connections

Charcoal burial practices in other countries may have been connected to similar practices in late Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest England. The connections are clearest in Ireland and Scandinavia. Lund is believed to have had a substantial English presence, and the single charcoal burial site in Ireland comes from a town with extensive international connections. Simply identifying English charcoal burial as the source of these practices is of course insufficient.

It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the Irish charcoal burials, simply because the practice is so rare. However, the Scandinavian examples can profitably be compared to their English counterparts. The most notable difference between charcoal burials from Lund and English cemeteries is the fact that charcoal burials tend to appear in tightly defined zones, separated from other burial rites such as burial with hazel wands. By contrast, although there are areas where charcoal burials are concentrated in English cemeteries, the clear divisions found in the Lund cemeteries are not seen there.

The difference in distribution highlights the importance of social context. If the form and distribution of charcoal burials were determined purely by religious factors, and
Christianity in Lund in this period were (as it is believed to be) heavily influenced by English Christianity, a close similarity between the two types of cemetery could theoretically be expected. However, it seems that social structures and pressures in Denmark during this period produced different cemetery organization. Defining boundaries between groups seems to have been important. It has been suggested that these groups were ethnic, and that the unidentified southern churchyard was “the English church in Lund” (Cinthio pers. comm.). However, other possible social divisions within this recently-founded town might have been expressed or created through burial. The English associations of charcoal burial might have been an important part of this. Outside its original context, the rite may have gained another connotation – that of “foreignness” or “Englishness”.

It is much harder to draw connections between the burials containing charcoal in Scotland and Frankia and those in England. Frankish charcoal burials form a small part of a much wider range of rites involving burnt material, and there is no obvious connection between them and their English counterparts, which are found slightly later. Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon burials do sometimes include burnt material (see Chapter 13), but very seldom complete “beds” of charcoal. These are sometimes linked to funerary feasts (Lee 2007, 87). However, although there may have been feasting practices associated with funerals in late Anglo-Saxon England (see Chapter 4), charcoal burials do not appear, based on the composition of the charcoal (see Section 13.4), to originate from this tradition.

There is no evidence to support the idea that charcoal burial in England derives from a Frankish source. The dating evidence leaves a gap between the last Merovingian charcoal burials and any but the earliest possible English examples, and the area of Britain most exposed to Frankish culture, Kent, does not have any excavated charcoal burials. A direct connection seems unlikely.

Barhobble is an extremely difficult site to interpret because, like St Peter’s Waterford, it is unique. Burials on layers of charcoal occur in this cemetery within a context of local burial practice very different from most late Anglo-Saxon churchyards. It is possible that more burials of this type will be excavated, but until then it is impossible
to say anything conclusively about this rite and its connection to the contemporary practice in Anglo-Saxon England.
12. Charcoal in Late Anglo-Saxon England

12.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 3, charcoal burial can be understood as one of a number of practices which would have evoked symbolic connections for participants in the burial rite. These symbolic associations would have derived from, among other things, the physical properties of the substance, it uses in society, or its origins. Carver (2002, 484) uses the example of goods assembled from different sources as a method of evoking international connections in the Sutton Hoo burial, while Tilley (1999) talks about the ways in which artefacts become symbols of associated trades. These are only a few of the many possible types of symbolic connection. In order to understand the role that charcoal played in late Anglo-Saxon burial practice, therefore, it is necessary to examine the production and use of charcoal in Late Anglo-Saxon society.

Charcoal is produced by the controlled combustion of wood over a long period. Wood is heated in the absence of oxygen, removing water and other substances. The resulting high-carbon substance has a variety of applications. Its primary use is as a fuel. Charcoal burns at a much higher temperature than unprocessed wood, making it an important fuel for metalworking. Excavated ironworking sites, discussed in detail below, demonstrate that charcoal was a vital component of the metalworking industry in Anglo-Saxon England. Charcoal may also have had other fuel applications, perhaps for heating or cooking (Hagen 1992, 46), but judging by medieval textual sources, the amount of charcoal required for ironworking purposes will have been much larger than for domestic purposes (Foard 2001, 86). One application which will be considered in more detail is the use of charcoal as an adsorbent. Charcoal’s sensory characteristics are important to understanding its symbolism – its dark colour and dry, friable texture.

Evidence for charcoal in the late Saxon and early medieval period is very limited, but a small number of sources do exist which can illuminate some of its role in society. In textual sources, I have followed R. D. Berryman in reading “charcoal” for OE col. This word is usually used to gloss Latin carbo, and probably refers to charcoal in the majority of cases (Zupitza 1880, 35). In some cases it may refer to anthracite coal, but there is no evidence for coal-mining in this period, making this usage unlikely.
12.2 Textual sources for the production of charcoal

There is no direct textual evidence for the production of charcoal in late Saxon England: “no Anglo-Saxon document gives even a partial account of woodland” (Rackham 1993, 7). There is only one recorded reference to charcoal burning, in the form of a charter written in 969 which grants 15 hides of land at Apsley Guise, Beds, to Ælfwold. Charters typically consist of a Latin main text with an Old English section describing the boundaries of the land being granted. The boundaries are described in terms of landmarks such as rivers, woodland, burial mounds and other terrain features (Reynolds 1999, 81-4). One of the landmarks mentioned in the Apsley Guise charter is an ealdan coll pytt (“old charcoal pit”) (S 772). Although this suggests that charcoal burning was a visible activity in the late Anglo-Saxon landscape, it does not provide any information about how it was organized or by whom it was carried out; the charcoal pit is being discussed only as a terrain feature, not an asset.

Although no Old English source details the production of charcoal, there is some textual evidence for the importance of woodland products and their management. Legal documents discuss the rights of owners of woodland, while Alfred the Great’s preface to St Augustine’s Soliloquies uses an analogy derived from woodland management, emphasizing the use of woodland products in construction (Berryman 1998, 1-2).

Although charcoal is not specifically mentioned, the eleventh-century Domesday Book contains extensive references to woodland. Woodland is reported using various measurements, not only relating to linear and areal measurements but to how many swine the woodland can support (Darby 1977). Different types of woodland are sometimes distinguished, including underwood and, in some cases, different species (Darby 1977, 187). It is not possible to translate the measurements used by the Domesday commissioners to modern measurements, and historians have come to very different conclusions about the extent and importance of Domesday woodland. However, the coverage of woodland in this source represents the great economic importance of its products.
Place-name evidence may indicate areas where charcoal was produced. Many Anglo-Saxon vills appear to have had names derived from their economic significances. Place-names like *Shipton* (“sheep farm”) or *Acton*, (“oak-tree farm”) have been interpreted as representing the settlement’s role within the manor to which it belonged (Watts 2004, ix). Similarly, place-names containing the Old English element *col* may indicate that the production or distribution of charcoal was important to the settlement’s economic role. However, interpreting Old English place-name evidence can be problematic. In some cases, the names of estates or settlements are recorded in Domesday Book in 1086, whereas in others the original Old English form of the name must be inferred from medieval sources. Some spellings are quite late, and may refer to coal mining rather than the production of charcoal. Multiple interpretations are often possible, meaning that specific interpretations of place-names remain open to debate. Colburn in North Yorkshire may mean “cool stream” or “coal-black stream,” for instance (Watts 2004, 149). Although charcoal-related place-names are listed in Table 12.1, alternate interpretations are possible. Where the charcoal interpretation is secondary, this is indicated. Nonetheless, there are enough charcoal-related place-names to suggest that the production of charcoal was a notable part of the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval landscape.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place-name</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Possible meanings</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colebatch</td>
<td>Shropshire</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>12th-13th c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleford</td>
<td>Gloucestershire</td>
<td>&quot;ford where coals are carried&quot;</td>
<td>1282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colerne</td>
<td>Wiltshire</td>
<td>&quot;charcoal house*&quot;</td>
<td>1086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coldred</td>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>&quot;charcoal clearing&quot;</td>
<td>1086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colsterworth</td>
<td>Lincolnshire</td>
<td>&quot;enclosure of the charcoal burners&quot;</td>
<td>1086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colton</td>
<td>Staffordshire</td>
<td>&quot;settlement where charcoal is made&quot;</td>
<td>1086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coldridge</td>
<td>Devon</td>
<td>&quot;charcoal ridge&quot;</td>
<td>1086-1316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colwich</td>
<td>Staffordshire</td>
<td>poss. &quot;place where charcoal is made&quot;</td>
<td>1166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colton</td>
<td>Cumbria</td>
<td>poss. &quot;settlement where charcoal is made&quot;</td>
<td>1202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleford</td>
<td>Somerset</td>
<td>&quot;coal ford&quot;</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colgate</td>
<td>W. Sussex</td>
<td>&quot;charcoal gate&quot;</td>
<td>1279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colsterdale</td>
<td>N. Yorkshire</td>
<td>poss. &quot;coalman valley&quot;</td>
<td>1281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colehill</td>
<td>Dorset</td>
<td>&quot;charcoal hill&quot;</td>
<td>1341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Burn</td>
<td>Northumberland</td>
<td>poss. &quot;stream where charcoal is burnt&quot;</td>
<td>1542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coldean</td>
<td>E. Sussex</td>
<td>poss. &quot;charcoal valley&quot;</td>
<td>No early forms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12.1: Place-names containing OE *col* (Watts 2004, 149-52)
Interestingly, the distribution of place-names containing the element *col* and possibly indicating the importance of charcoal production (Figure 12.1) seems to parallel the distribution of cemeteries containing charcoal burials. The number of sites is too small to come to any firm conclusions, especially considering that the majority of cases are first recorded only in the high medieval or post-medieval periods.
12.3 Textual sources for the use of charcoal

Once again, there is very little textual evidence for the use of charcoal. The word *col* appears in a few contexts, for instance in saints’ lives, but there is no textual evidence for the use of charcoal in metalworking, cooking or other applications. However, one use of *col* does provide some possible insight into the symbolism of charcoal in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

The phrase *sweart swa col* or *swa sweart swa col*, (“as black as charcoal”) occurs in a number of texts. One instance is a homily called *Be Heofonwarum and be Helwarum*, which exists in two manuscripts of late eleventh to early twelfth century date (Willard 1935, 33). In this homily, the speaker describes angels belonging to God and the Devil coming for saved and damned souls after death. The evil angels are described as *sweart swa col*; by contrast, the good angels are *beorhtre Ponne sunne*, “brighter than the sun”. Other contemporary Old English homilies dealing with the same theme describe the devils as being black like ravens (Willard 1935, 38-40). The dramatic contrast between the devils as black as charcoal and the angels as bright as the sun suggests that the two were intended to be viewed as parallels; charcoal was to be read as extremely black.

Charcoal is also used to describe colour in non-religious contexts. The Old English medical text known as *Bald’s Leechbook*, probably dating from the early to mid tenth century, describes the process of making *Pa blacan selafe* (“the black salve”). This salve, containing bullock’s urine and a variety of plant ingredients, is to be boiled until it is *swa Picce swa molcen 7 swa sweart swa col*, “as thick as milk porridge and as black as charcoal” (Cockayne 1961, 332-3). Once again, we see charcoal portrayed as an extremely dark or black substance. However, although the phrase appears in this medical text, there is no evidence for charcoal having medical applications in late Anglo-Saxon England (C. T. Doyle, pers. comm.).

Otherwise, textual sources provide little evidence for the use of charcoal in the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods. Based on the archaeological evidence discussed below, it is reasonable to assume that charcoal was used as a fuel in both smelting and ironworking, so records of these activities allow us to identify locations which would
have required supplies of charcoal. Notable examples include the bloomery at Pucklechurch, Gloucestershire, which was under the control of Glastonbury Abbey at Domesday and rendered a payment of 90 massa ferri (Moore 1982, 165b). Similar sites were probably controlled by other churches.

In addition to the use of woodland, Domesday also sporadically records the presence of smiths (*fabri*) and iron-working sites (*ferraria*), possibly smelting sites. H. C. Darby has attempted to associate recorded iron-working sites with nearby woodland in order to identify the source for charcoal used in smithing and smelting (Darby and Terrett 1971, 43, 105, 415). However, Domesday does not record smiths consistently among the rural population. Occupations in general are sporadically recorded. H. C. Darby observes that “there must have been in England as a whole more than 92 fishermen or 64 smiths or 10 shepherds or 10 iron-workers or 6 millers or a single carpenter. We cannot say why these particular individuals were recorded in this sporadic fashion” (Darby 1977, 86). They were probably listed according to the general categories of the Domesday book, by tenurial criteria instead of by occupation. Some instances of iron-working are recorded, such as the due owed by the city of Gloucester to provide “drawn rods for nails for the King’s ships” (162a). Similarly, smiths at Hereford were required to provide horseshoes for the king (Thorn and Thorn 1983, 179a-c).

It is not possible to draw any correlation between Domesday’s record of woodland and excavated charcoal-production or ironworking sites, given the partial nature of the Domesday record and the low number of excavated Anglo-Saxon industrial sites. However, it may be significant that two such sites, Burlescombe in Devon and Ramsbury in Wiltshire, are listed in Domesday as having extensive woodland. Ramsbury has woodland “16 furlongs long and four furlongs wide” (Thorn and Thorn 1979, 3.3), while Burlescombe has 70 acres of woodland (Thorn and Thorn 1985, 112c).

Additionally, Domesday does provide some glimpses of the types of locations where smiths might be found. For instance, a smith is recorded at Buckfast in 1086 (Thorn and Thorn 1985, 104a). Large churches and monastic communities will almost certainly have had or had access to smiths, probably necessitating a steady supply of
charcoal. Other textual sources support this. The ninth-century Latin poem *De Abbatibus* deals with the lives of abbots and monks at an unidentified Northumbrian monastery, possibly Crayke, North Yorkshire. One of these brothers is Cwicwine, identified as *ferrario*, the iron-worker (*De Abbatibus* X, pp. 24-7). Although he has a specialized task, Cwicwine participates in the life of the monastic community, joining the other monks in saying psalms as well as performing additional feats of piety such as fasting.

12.4 Archaeological evidence for the production of charcoal

Excavated late Anglo-Saxon charcoal pits are rare. It is possible that this is because they have historically been mistaken for other types of feature, such as hearths. Recent excavations at Bestwall Quarry, Dorset have identified at least 24 probable charcoal pits which can be dated to the period AD 410-900 (Gale forthcoming). More possible charcoal pits have not been dated, but may be contemporary, indicating reuse over an extended period. The site is located near, but not in, an area of woodland described in Domesday Book. Undated pits from the same areas of this site are believed also to date to the Anglo-Saxon period. Similarly, undated, unexcavated charcoal pits or iron-working sites have been identified within the area of Rockingham Forest, Northants, and a late Saxon or early post-Conquest date has been proposed for some of these (Foard 2001, 65-76). The charcoal-burning and iron-working industries of the late Saxon period require further attention.

The pits at Bestwall produced large quantities of charcoal, the vast majority of it mature oak heartwood. Small quantities of holly were also identified, presumably representing the composition of the woodland from which the charcoal was derived. Although pollen evidence for the presence of other species of wood exists at the site, it is not represented in the charcoal.

The charcoal evidence from Bestwall provides us with a number of insights into the production of charcoal in Anglo-Saxon England. Contemporary features from the site also produced evidence of ironworking, suggesting that fuel production and utilization were located close together. Additionally, the heavy concentration of oak suggests that this species was preferentially selected. Rowena Gale has suggested that “the
charcoal. Other textual sources support this. The ninth-century Latin poem *De Abbatibus* deals with the lives of abbots and monks at an unidentified Northumbrian monastery, possibly Crayke, North Yorkshire. One of these brothers is Cwicwine, identified as *ferrario*, the iron-worker (*De Abbatibus X*, pp. 24-7). Although he has a specialized task, Cwicwine participates in the life of the monastic community, joining the other monks in saying psalms as well as performing additional feats of piety such as fasting.

12.4 Archaeological evidence for the production of charcoal

Excavated late Anglo-Saxon charcoal pits are rare. It is possible that this is because they have historically been mistaken for other types of feature, such as hearths. Recent excavations at Bestwall Quarry, Dorset have identified at least 24 probable charcoal pits which can be dated to the period AD 410-900 (Gale forthcoming). More possible charcoal pits have not been dated, but may be contemporary, indicating reuse over an extended period. The site is located near, but not in, an area of woodland described in Domesday Book. Undated pits from the same areas of this site are believed also to date to the Anglo-Saxon period. Similarly, undated, unexcavated charcoal pits or iron-working sites have been identified within the area of Rockingham Forest, Northants, and a late Saxon or early post-Conquest date has been proposed for some of these (Foard 2001, 65-76). The charcoal-burning and iron-working industries of the late Saxon period require further attention.

The pits at Bestwall produced large quantities of charcoal, the vast majority of it mature oak heartwood. Small quantities of holly were also identified, presumably representing the composition of the woodland from which the charcoal was derived. Although pollen evidence for the presence of other species of wood exists at the site, it is not represented in the charcoal.

The charcoal evidence from Bestwall provides us with a number of insights into the production of charcoal in Anglo-Saxon England. Contemporary features from the site also produced evidence of ironworking, suggesting that fuel production and utilization were located close together. Additionally, the heavy concentration of oak suggests that this species was preferentially selected. Rowena Gale has suggested that “the
dense wood of fast-grown oak has the potential to provide long-lasting high calorie charcoal, which was far superior, volume for volume, to light-weight woods such as willow, and thus ideal for the high temperatures necessary for iron-working” (Gale in press). In addition to supplying the nearby iron-working site, Gale has suggested that the large quantities of charcoal being produced at Bestwall may indicate that it was also being exported.

12.5 Archaeological evidence for the use of charcoal

Charcoal is a common find in late Anglo-Saxon contexts. However, in most cases this charcoal is burning residue, the remains of burnt timber rather than of fuel. Although finds of charcoal in these contexts can provide important information about the use of woodland resources in the late Anglo-Saxon period, they cannot be taken as typical of the use of charcoal. However, a small number of ironworking sites from this period have been excavated, and charcoal samples from these have been analyzed.

Excavations in West Runton, Norfolk in 1964 identified the remains of an iron smelting site dated to c. AD 850-1100 (Tylecote 1969, 196). Charcoal from features identified as smelting furnaces was recovered and analyzed. Another, later smelting site was excavated in Stamford in the 1960s; charcoal from this site was also analyzed. The Stamford smelting site was assigned a late eleventh-century date based on archaeomagnetic dating (Burchard 1982, 108).

A mid-to-late Anglo-Saxon ironworking site was excavated in 1974 at Ramsbury, Wiltshire. A natural depression had been enlarged and used for smelting as well as smithing. Charcoal was retrieved from samples of charcoal rich soil, including both “large fragments” and smaller pieces produced by sieving (Haslam 1980, 53). Radiocarbon dating of six charcoal samples from different areas of the site produced dates suggesting that the site was in use during the eighth and ninth centuries. Limited artefactual evidence supports this date range (Haslam 1980, 55).

A further deposit of fuel charcoal was excavated in 1998 at Town Farm, near Burlescombe in Devon. Topsoil stripping revealed large areas of slag and charcoal spreads. Pits with in situ slag were identified as a probable sequence of smelting
furnaces (Reed et al. 2006, 82-3). Samples of charcoal residue, representing “the remnants of unburnt fuel used in the furnaces” (Reed et al. 2006, 87) were taken from these furnaces as well as from the soil. The size of the fragments indicated pieces of charcoal at least 55 x 20 mm in size. Charcoal samples were used for radiocarbon dating, while fired clay lining from one of the furnaces was magnetically dated. The charcoal samples produced radiocarbon dates suggesting a date range of AD 770-980 while archaeomagnetic dating of the clay lining produced a date in the range AD 675-1000 (Reed et al. 2006, 88).

Another late Anglo-Saxon site from which large amounts of charcoal have been recovered is the metalworking site at Bestwall Quarry, Dorset. Industrial production, including metalworking, pottery-making and charcoal burning, was carried out at this site from the Romano-British period into the late Anglo-Saxon period. Deposits of slag and hammerscale indicate that both smelting and smithing were carried out in close proximity to charcoal burning. The site is not associated with a settlement.

One unique application of charcoal in the early medieval period comes not from Anglo-Saxon England but from the Pictish monastery of Portmahomack, 40 miles northeast of Inverness on the Tarbat peninsula. The monastic site at Tarbat flourished between the mid-6th and mid-9th centuries and sculptural evidence suggests that it was a high-status monastery within Pictland (Carver 2004, 2006). A large pit lined with charcoal at this site appears to have been used as a water filter, purifying water from a nearby water feature (Carver pers. comm.).

This use of charcoal as a filter in water features is not known from elsewhere in Britain, but a general concern with cleanliness is known from textual sources (see Chapter 14). In the high medieval period, monasteries often include elaborate water features (Bond 2001).

Charcoal also served as a pigment in late Anglo-Saxon painting. Painted sculptures such as the Lichfield Angel (Rodwell et al. 2008) and wall paintings like examples from the so-called “Lewes Group” (Howard 1990, 195-6) use pigments containing charcoal. Charcoal forms a component of both black and “false blue” pigments.
12.6 Composition of charcoal

Charcoal can be produced from a wide variety of woods, and the species of origin can be identified in sufficiently large samples. Both charcoal burial sites and iron-working sites from the Anglo-Saxon period have produced charcoal which has been analyzed to determine the species from which it was derived. The similarities and differences in charcoal stock may be significant.

At Ramsbury, the majority of the sample consisted of oak, with smaller amounts of ash, hazel or alder, willow, and possibly maple. Most of the charcoal was from mature timber or branches, with a small amount possibly derived from twigs or smaller branches (Haslam 1980, 53).

Charcoal samples from the late Anglo-Saxon smelting site at West Runton have also been analyzed; oak is in “the great majority” and probably originated from local woodland (Tylecote 1969, 195).

Charcoal associated with the eleventh-century iron smelting site at Stamford produced wood from a variety of species. Corylus avellana (hazel) was present, along with Cratageus sp. (probably hawthorn). The largest fragments of charcoal were mature oak (Quercus sp.) (Burchard 1982, 132).

Charcoal samples from the smelting site at Burlescombe revealed that, as at Ramsbury, a number of different species went into making the charcoal used in the furnaces. The main species present was oak (Quercus sp.), with a wide range of other species represented. These were birch, elder or ivy, ash, alder, holly, maple, blackthorn, willow, poplar, hawthorn, and hazel. Lime may also have been present, as was a fragment of a hazelnut (Reed et al. 2006, 87). The profile varied from furnace to furnace: two of the three excavated furnaces produced predominantly oak charcoal, while the third (and probably the latest) produced predominantly ash (Fraxinus sp.).

Like Ramsbury, West Runton and Burlescombe, the iron-working site at Bestwall Quarry also produced primarily oak charcoal. Charcoal-burning pits, furnaces and slag spreads all produced evidence of primarily oak largewood, with small amounts of
holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) (Gale forthcoming). Significantly, Bestwall produced pollen evidence for the exploitation of other taxa such as *Corylus* sp. (Hazel), but there is no evidence that these were used to produce charcoal (Gale forthcoming). Firewood appears to have come primarily from oak roundwood, not the mature heartwood used to create charcoal.

Charcoal can also come from settlement contexts, such as the multi-period Anglo-Saxon and medieval settlement at Yarnton, Oxfordshire (Hey 2004). Samples of charcoal from this site were also primarily oak. Of 44 samples with charcoal content from this site, 36 contained oak. Pomoideae (apple, pear, or hazel) were also present, as were *Prunus* sp. (sloe/plum) and *Alnus/Corylus* sp. (alder or hazel). The presence of oak heartwood suggested the use of mature trunk wood. Overall, analysis concluded that "oak was clearly the most popular wood utilised" both for building and for fuel (Hey 2004, 365).

Excavated late Anglo-Saxon iron working sites have produced large quantities of fuel charcoal. In both cases, as we have seen, oak charcoal predominates but a range of other species is present. Charcoal burial sites have also produced large quantities of charcoal, and at some cemeteries it has been possible to analyze its composition.

In most cases, the charcoal from charcoal burial sites has not been analyzed, either because it has not been feasible due to budget or preservation limitations or because it has not been seen as important. However, charcoal from a small number of charcoal burial sites has been analyzed in order to determine its origins. Samples from Cathedral Close, Exeter consisted of large fragments up to 30mm in radial cross-section. These samples were all oak, including both heartwood and sapwood (Gale 1998). Seventeen of the 34 burials with layers of charcoal at St Oswald's, Gloucester were sampled. Once again, these were of oak, including a large amount of mature trunk or branch wood (Heighway and Bryant 1999, 302). Charcoal samples were taken from all the charcoal burials found in the 1974 excavation at Castle Green, Hereford. All eight contained oak, mostly from "fairly large timbers," (Shoesmith 1980, 39). Two contained "fragments resembling bark," and one sample included a few fragments of another wood, probably maple (*Acer* sp.). Charcoal from the linings of two burials excavated at Christ Church, Oxford, was also predominantly oak from
young wood (Hassall 1973, 270-1), with one burial possibly containing some elder or birch. An extensive program of sampling was carried out on charcoal from eight charcoal burials at St Aldate’s, Oxford. These burials also contained primarily oak, with very small amounts of hazel (*Corylus avellana*), *Maloideae* (possibly *Crataegus monogyna*, hawthorn) and *Prunus* (probably *Prunus spinosa*, hawthorn). However, oak made up over 80% of all samples, with only three graves produced non-oak taxa (Tyler *et al.* 2001, 398-402). Lastly, thirteen graves from the cemetery of the Old Minster, Winchester were sampled. In each grave, the charcoal proved to be derived from “mature oak branches with an estimated diameter of over 100mm” (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 229).

In general, oak seems to be the preferred source for the charcoal used in burial. There is only one known English charcoal burial where no oak has been identified from the grave. Grave AS55 at All Saints, Oxford, produced a sample of charcoal which has been badly distorted by heat. This sample was tentatively identified as beech (*Fagus* sp.) (Dodd 2003, 389).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exeter, St Mary Major</td>
<td>Oak heartwood and sapwood</td>
<td>Gale 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester, St Oswald's</td>
<td>Oak, mainly &quot;mature trunk or branch wood&quot;</td>
<td>Heighway and Bryant 1999, 202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hereford, Castle Green</td>
<td>Oak, &quot;a few fragments&quot; of <em>Acer</em> sp.</td>
<td>Shoesmith 1980, 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford, All Saints</td>
<td>possibly <em>Fagus</em></td>
<td>Robinson in Dodd 2003, 389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford, Christchurch</td>
<td>primarily oak, &quot;possibly&quot; elder/birch</td>
<td>Hassall 1973, 270-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford, St Aldate's</td>
<td>Primarily oak, also hazel, <em>Maloideae, Prunus</em></td>
<td>Tyler <em>et al.</em> 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester, Old Minster</td>
<td>Oak, &quot;mature ... branches.&quot;</td>
<td>Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>Oak</td>
<td>Phillips and Heywood 1995, 87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12.2: Composition of charcoal samples from charcoal burial sites

Table 12.2 summarizes the charcoal finds from charcoal burials. The use of oak as the main source of charcoal for inclusion in burials is consistent with the evidence from charcoal-burning and iron-working sites, which shows that charcoal was the primary source of charcoal used as an industrial fuel. Textual sources for metalworking at monastic sites suggest that at least some churches already had supplies of charcoal on
hand for this purpose. It seems plausible that the charcoal used in burials came from the same source, since the composition of the charcoal is mostly the same. Inclusions of small quantities of other taxa within predominantly oak charcoal are likely to reflect the composition of the woodland from which the charcoal was manufactured rather than representing intentional selection. *Corylus* frequently grows in association with oak (Gale and Cutter 2000, 204) and *Ilex* grows as understory in oak woodland (Gale and Cutter 2000, 139). It is difficult to draw general conclusions from single variations such as the burrwood identified in charcoal from St Aldate’s or the possible beech charcoal at All Saints. These may reflect variations in local supplies. Dana Challinor has suggested that burrwood may indicate that a tree was burnt specifically for the burial at St Aldate’s, but this does not appear to have been a widespread practice if true. Burrwood may also mean that wood used to create charcoal for charcoal burials was pollarded (Tyler *et al.* 2001, 398-402). Oak was also used in cremations at the only known Scandinavian cremation cemetery in England, Heath Wood, Ingleby, Derbs (Posnansky 1956, 47).

Non-oak charcoal appears in other contexts. A “Saxo-Norman” pottery kiln at Langhale, Kirkstead, Norfolk, for instance, produced evidence for charcoal made from several taxa, primarily *Betula* sp. (silver birch) but also including *Castanea* sp. (sweet chestnut), *Fagus* sp. (beech), *Alnus* sp. (Alder), and *Corylus* sp. (Hazel) (Wade 1976, 127). The heavy preference for oak in charcoal used in both iron-working and charcoal burial contexts is not repeated in the wood from the pottery kiln. Indeed, *Quercus* sp. is not present at all.

Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle (1992, 229) has suggested that oak may have been selected for its symbolic value, being associated with faith, strength and the Biblical story of the crucifixion. These symbolic associations are considered in more detail in Chapter 14. However, although these associations may have existed, oak does not seem to have been preferentially selected for use in burial. Rather, oak was the most common type of wood used in the manufacture of charcoal in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Outside England, the cemetery at Barhobble, Mochrum, has also produced evidence for charcoal in graves. A total of twelve burials contained a layer of “small chunky lumps of charcoal” (Cormack *et al.* 1995, 34). Each grave contained charcoal from
several species of wood, indicating that the charcoal did not represent the remains of a charred coffin. In contrast to the English examples, where oak charcoal dominates, the graves from Barhobble contained primarily alder, with smaller quantities of oak, ash and hazel (Cormack et al. 1995, 34). The difference in composition presumably reflects a difference in the makeup of local fuel stocks.

12.7 Physical properties of charcoal

Charcoal is a highly adsorbent substance. Adsorption occurs when a gas or liquid accumulates as a film on the surface of an adsorbent. Charcoal’s highly porous structure gives it a very high surface area to which admolecules can bond. For this reason, charcoal has a range of industrial and medical applications. In the modern day, charcoal used for these purposes is “activated”: treated with heat or moisture to increase its porosity. The resulting activated charcoal is used to filter liquids and gases, including absorbing impurities which result in odours. Activated charcoal is used in gas masks, aquarium filters, and cat litter, as well as to treat poisons. Texts from antiquity include references to charcoal being used for medicinal purposes (Cooney 1995, 10).

Although activated charcoal was not introduced until the beginning of the 20th century (Cooney 1980, 8), unprocessed charcoal is also adsorbent, although to a lesser degree. Karen Milek (2006) has explored the role of hearth residues in early medieval North Atlantic domestic contexts. Milek’s research demonstrated that charcoal and ash from hearths were spread over house floors to adsorb moisture and wastes.

Archaeologists who have proposed functional explanations for charcoal grave linings have tended to focus on adsorption, with the idea that charcoal was used to line graves in order to soak up odour-causing fluids from the decomposing corpse. This argument is discussed in more detail in Chapter 14. Regardless of whether this was the intention behind layers of charcoal being placed in graves, charcoal has been used for this purpose in at least one other context. To the Friends of Sanitary Improvement, a nineteenth-century tract on the use of charcoal as a disinfectant, describes an experiment with dead bodies:
About a year ago the bodies of a full-grown cat and two rats were placed in open pans, and covered by two inches of powdered charcoal. The pans have stood during all that time in my laboratory, and although it is generally very warm, not the slightest smell has ever been perceptible, nor have any injurious effects been experienced by any of the nine or ten persons by whom the laboratory is daily frequented.

Now, had the bodies of those animals been left to putrefy under ordinary circumstances, not only would the stench emitted have been intolerable, but some of the persons would certainly have been struck down by fever or malignant disorders. (Stenhouse 1855, 6)

12.8 Charcoal and ash

Charcoal has been equated with ash in discussions of penitential symbolism (Daniell 1996, Thompson 2002). Although the two are not identical, charcoal and ash share many characteristics. Both are dry products of combustion, and given the contexts in which they were usually found, it seems natural that the two would be strongly associated. Deposits of ash in the archaeological record frequently contain small amounts of charcoal. However, it seems unlikely that the two substances were seen as interchangeable. If an ash lining for a grave were desired, it would seem to be easier and less expensive than a charcoal lining, and yet charcoal was chosen over ash throughout most of the late Anglo-Saxon period.

12.9 Conclusion

I have argued that it is possible to infer some of the symbolic associations of a substance by examining its production, distribution and role in society. What, then, can we infer from textual and archaeological evidence about the role of charcoal in late Anglo-Saxon and early medieval society? Based on the evidence available to us, it is possible to draw the following conclusions.

Charcoal production in the late Anglo-Saxon period appears to have been carried out as part of the managed exploitation of woodland resources. It was a notable product of
some sites, sufficiently so that it was incorporated into their names. It may have reached churches by render or trade, or may have been produced in situ. It was used primarily as a high-temperature fuel, and, judging from the lack of charcoal finds in domestic buildings, does not appear to have been used as a heating fuel. Its primary use was in metalworking.

Charcoal was therefore not a rare product, but not completely common either. It would have been common in some contexts where metalworking took place. We know that larger churches in particular formed centres not only of religious practice but of economic activity, including craft production. Metalworking activities at church sites included the work of the smith attested in Domesday Book (Thorn and Thorn 1985, 103d-104a) as well as archaeologically attested practices such as the bell-founding at St Oswald’s, Gloucester. Charcoal was not a luxury item, but it was certainly a valuable commodity and would have added to the expense of burials that made use of it. However, large and wealthy church communities would presumably have larger stocks of it available. Additionally, we have seen that charcoal was thought of as a notably or typically black substance. This appearance may have been thought to be desirable for the grave, although there is little evidence to suggest that the later medieval association of black with mourning was prevalent in Anglo-Saxon England.

From a combination of textual and archaeological sources, therefore, we can infer some details of charcoal’s availability and of some perceptions of it. However, other physical characteristics of charcoal are not described in texts from this period. Charcoal is a highly adsorptive substance, and is dry to the touch. Although no contemporary text mentions either of these qualities, I will argue by analogy to other burial practices that they were important to the use of charcoal in late Anglo-Saxon burial practice. In order to do so, however, these rites need to be discussed in greater detail.
13. Related Rites

13.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I discussed some reservations about the term “charcoal burial” itself. The nomenclature used in Anglo-Saxon burial studies can tempt the archaeologist into perceiving burials as falling into a number of fixed categories rather than as compositions made up of a number of different elements. In particular, the debate about whether a given burial is or is not a “charcoal burial” per se, as seen in Chapter 6, tends to obscure the fact that the very existence of borderline cases sheds an interesting light on the role of charcoal in burial practice.

Certain other elements of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice have characteristics in common with the use of charcoal. Possible shared characteristics include dry, powdery texture, adsorbency, dark colour, and even the use of charcoal in other positions in the grave.

13.2 Grave linings

As discussed in section 4.8, charcoal is not the only substance used to line grave-cuts in this period. Graves have been found lined with chalk, lime, mortar and sand. Other linings may not have been preserved, but this group forms a recognizable continuum with charcoal burial. Grave linings of other types typically occur in smaller numbers than graves lined with charcoal, but there are still enough to suggest a widespread, if comparatively rare, burial practice. At Winchester, graves were lined with “bright yellow sand”, a surface contrasting with the soil of the grave cut and fill (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 227). Chalk linings may have been similarly visible.

Like charcoal burials, graves lined with chalk, mortar, sand or other substances have a dry, powdery lining. Texture therefore seems to have been important, as possibly was the contrasting appearance which sometimes existed between the lining and the surrounding soil, creating the appearance of a distinct “floor” to the grave. These layers thus served to demarcate the space of the grave from the surrounding earth.
One example of a grave lining which may be late Anglo-Saxon in date is found in a burial, believed to be that of “a prominent and prosperous layman who died between the late-eleventh and mid-thirteenth centuries”, found in the south aisle of Winchester cathedral. Textile fragments indicated a clothed burial, and the body was placed atop a bed of leaves (possibly including oak) and straw (Ottaway 1982, 130-2).

If the adsorbent function proposed for charcoal burial by many archaeologists is accurate, these burials could perform the same function. Plant matter was used to absorb waste in domestic contexts in the medieval period, although it does not share charcoal’s high adsorbency. The straw might also be used to create a “bedding” effect.

It may therefore be profitable to see charcoal burial as merely the most common of a range of late Anglo-Saxon burial practices involving creating dry, powdery linings for the grave.

13.3 Other uses of charcoal in late Anglo-Saxon burials

“Charcoal burials” are not the only late Anglo-Saxon burials to contain some amount of charcoal. In fact, traces of charcoal identified in some burials have caused confusion, since the term itself has never been clearly defined. Some burials include small amounts of charcoal which appear to have been intentionally deposited. For example, small amounts of charcoal were recovered from the fills of graves at the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridgeshire, but similar amounts were found in the fills of other features, suggesting that this was not an intentional deposition but resulted from some nearby source (McDonald and Doel 2000).

In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether charcoal found in the fills of graves or in association with the bodies was intentionally deposited or merely an incidental redeposition in the fill. Churchyards could serve multiple functions in the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, and small amounts of charcoal might find their way into the fill. However, in some cases it appears that a relatively large quantity of charcoal, often described as “a handful”, was placed (excavators often choose the term “sprinkled”, suggesting a thin coating of charcoal) beneath or on top of the body.
Small amounts of charcoal of this type are known from a large number of cemeteries, including cemeteries which also contain charcoal burials.

"Flecks of charred wood" were found in association with three graves at Caistor-on-Sea (K. Rodwell 1993). Similarly, charcoal "flecks" were found in some graves at St Peter’s church, Holton-le-Clay, Lincs (Sills 1982, 31). Burials associated with an early 11th-century church at Red Castle, Thetford, Norfolk, included two which had deposits of charcoal, one in the mouth and one associated with the head (Knocker 1969, 123).

It is not easy to determine the relationship between burials containing a small amount of charcoal and "charcoal burials". It is possible that small amounts of charcoal may have been deposited accidentally in grave fills. In the case of larger amounts, the absence of the distinctive layer or "bed" of charcoal in a charcoal burial points to a difference in the burial rite. However, many of the possible symbolic interpretations of charcoal discussed in Chapter 14 may be relevant here.

13.4 Charcoal in Early and Middle Anglo-Saxon graves

Interestingly, charcoal occurs in a wide range of burials from pre-Conversion and Conversion-period England. Many of these date from the fifth or sixth century, but 42 possibly seventh-century burials from Camerton, Somerset, contained "grains of charcoal … sprinkled over the corpse at the time of the burial" (Horne 1933, 46-7). Practices vary. "Sprinklings" of charcoal were found in 20 graves from Riseley, Kent (Meaney 1964, 134). Charcoal was found in many of the graves from Stretton-on-Fosse, Warwickshire. One grave, F88, consisted of a decapitated male lying on an "almost complete layer" of charcoal (Ford 2003, 53). Similar deposits of charcoal are known from two other cemeteries in Warwickshire, Bidford-on-Avon and Alveston (Humphreys et al. 1923, Meaney 1964, 263). Four graves at the early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sewerby contained burnt material. The largest deposit was in grave 51, where a layer of charcoal derived from mature timbers of Acer sp. (maple) and Fraxinus sp. (ash) overlay the grave-goods. No skeletal remains were recovered from this grave (Hirst 1985, 30-1).
Large amounts of charred wood, again primarily oak, were recovered from graves at the “Final Phase” cemetery at Snape, Suffolk (Gale in Filmer-Snakey and Pestell 2001, 224-6). Graves at Cannington cemetery, Somerset, dated to the period AD 300-700, frequently contained charcoal. 52 graves included charcoal within the fill, while others included charcoal in association with the body, in one case in the mouth (Rahtz et al. 2000, 84). Small amounts of charcoal are known from other cemeteries in Roman Britain (Philpott 1991, 249, 312, 314, 343).

It is tempting to suggest continuity between these practices and the charcoal burial rites of the late Anglo-Saxon period. The small amounts of charcoal found in some late graves seem very similar to those found in Middle Saxon and Conversion period graves. However, the complete layer found in the late period seems to be an innovation. Although the material used in these burials, charcoal, is consistent, the way in which it is used is very different. Complete layers seem to be virtually unknown. In addition, the appearance of charcoal burial, coinciding with the shift to churchyard burial at most sites, suggests that it was part of a widespread change in Anglo-Saxon burial practice. However, it may be that the earlier practice of including small amounts of charcoal or charred wood in burials established charcoal as one of a number of substances from which grave linings could be created. Even if later burials created different meanings through the use of charcoal, these earlier burials may have established its position in the shared “vocabulary” of burial ritual.

13.5 Ash in late Anglo-Saxon burial practice

The practice of depositing charcoal within graves has been interpreted as related to the penitential symbolism of ash (Thompson 2002, Daniell 1996). Charcoal is not ash, but the two substances obviously have a great deal in common and would be associated in the daily lives of almost any individual in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The symbolism of ash is discussed in more detail in Chapter 14.

Burials containing ash are known mainly from the high medieval period. Over 40 examples are known from monastic cemeteries between c. 1270 and c. 1450, with “a concentration of examples in the years 1300-50” (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005 120-2). The structure of these burials differs from many charcoal burials. In most charcoal
burials, the layer is deposited directly underneath the body or coffin. Unlike the charcoal used to line graves, ash recovered from burial contexts includes a variety of different substances. Ash used to line coffins in 12th to 14th century graves at Bampton, Oxfordshire, included “carbonised bean, pea and grain debris, twig charcoal, splinters of burnt bone and eggshell, and one large, freshly-broken potsherd”; the ash can therefore be identified as “the rakings of a domestic ash-heap” (Blair 1999, 39).

Ash burials and charcoal burials do sometimes occur in the same cemeteries, although the ash burials are typically later finds. This was the case at St Peter’s/Vaughan Way, Leicester, where later medieval burials containing ash were sometimes difficult to separate from charcoal burials, particularly in cases where small amounts of charcoal in the ash burial had stained the deposit (A. Gnanaratnam, pers. comm.). Ash burials were also initially mistaken for charcoal burials at Bampton, Oxfordshire (J. Blair, pers. comm., Blair 1999). An ash burial and a charcoal burial were also both excavated from All Saints, Oxford (Dodd 2003, 221).

Ash is associated with death and burial, notably in traditions associated with St Martin of Tours (d. 397). According to a letter by his hagiographer, Sulpicius Severus, St Martin requested to be laid on a bed of ashes as he died, since “it is not fitting that a Christian should die except among ashes; and I have sinned if I leave you a different example” (Roberts 1894, 23). St Martin’s example was known in late Anglo-Saxon England; Ælfric wrote a Life of St Martin. Ælfric’s narrative incorporates a number of miracles relating to ash which are not present in Sulpicius Severus’s text.

13.6 Charred-coffin burials

Charcoal in Anglo-Saxon graves sometimes comes from the remains of burials where the coffin has been deliberately passed through a fire, presumably before being assembled. These can be difficult to separate from charcoal burials. Charred coffin burials are known from a number of late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, including Wells Cathedral (Rodwell 2001). In some cases, as at Grave V56 at Wharram Percy (Mays et al. 2007, 242), the charred object appears to have been a wooden cover placed on top of a grave without a coffin.
“Charred planks” are reported at some Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, such as the probable 10th and 11th century cemetery associated with Kellington church, Yorkshire (Mytum 1993, 16). A linear carbonised plank ran from the skull to the feet of the body in grave 9 at St Peter’s, Holton-le-Clay, Lincs (Sills 1982, 31).

The origin of this practice is unclear. It has been suggested that the purpose of charring the boards of the coffin was to preserve them in the ground (Rodwell 1989, 163). Removing the moisture from the wood may have been seen as decreasing the likelihood of decay. However, charred-coffin burial has, if anything, been studied even less as a phenomenon than charcoal burial. There is great potential for further research, especially considering the fact that this practice is found in several different historical periods.

13.7 Conclusion

Layers of charcoal deposited in the bases of late Anglo-Saxon graves are only one of a number of burial practices which contain some similar elements. These rites include not only burials with other types of layer in the floor of the grave, such as layers of ash, sand, plant matter, chalk or mortar, but also burials which make other uses of charcoal, such as burials with charred coffins or burials where only a small amount of charcoal has been deposited. Although they are dissimilar to charcoal burials in some ways, these burials share certain characteristics with charcoal and would therefore have shared some of the possible symbolic associations discussed in Chapter 14.

Layers of dry powder in the floor of the grave focus our attention on the qualities they share with charcoal burial. The key element appears to be texture and the way in which these burials create a “floor” for the grave. Some possible meanings of this practice, which may have had the effect of transforming the grave from a simple earth cut into a different type of space in the eyes of participants, are discussed in Chapter 14.

Archaeologists have frequently interpreted the use of charred coffins as a measure to prevent the coffins from decaying in the ground. This may have been the case; other
“Charred planks” are reported at some Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, such as the probable 10th and 11th century cemetery associated with Kellington church, Yorkshire (Mytum 1993, 16). A linear carbonised plank ran from the skull to the feet of the body in grave 9 at St Peter’s, Holton-le-Clay, Lincs (Sills 1982, 31).

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Archaeologists have frequently interpreted the use of charred coffins as a measure to prevent the coffins from decaying in the ground. This may have been the case; other
evidence, discussed in the next chapter, tends to support the idea that preservation was an important concept in late Anglo-Saxon thinking about death, decay and the body.

Small amounts of charcoal deposited in graves are extremely difficult to interpret because the process of deposition is frequently unclear. However, if they are intentional depositions, their significance would affect contemporary understandings of charcoal in a funerary context. This rite is particularly interesting because, unlike charcoal burial, it is found in pre-Conversion burials. It may represent a residue from fire burnt in some kind of graveside ritual or feast.

This overview of related rites demonstrates that charcoal burial is both only one of a number of ways of creating a dry lining for the grave and one of a number of ways in which charcoal and other burning residue could be used in burial rites. Late Anglo-Saxon burial practice is a diverse collection of creative acts, and both the examples discussed in this chapter and the broader variety of rites in Chapter 4 demonstrate that these performances were created using a wide range of substances available to local communities. The specific selection of charcoal layers in so many cases among a range of possible grave linings and burial types strongly suggests that this rite was perceived as meaningful. Chapter 14 will explore some of the possible meanings it might have held.
14. Symbolism and the interpretation of charcoal burial

14.1 Introduction

Determining symbolic meaning within the late Anglo-Saxon period is a difficult process. Material symbols such as the layers of charcoal deposited in graves function by processes of evocation. Rather than specifically standing for meanings (although some viewers may have understood them in this way), symbols of this type usually work by association, evoking images and reminding audience members of ideas or narratives.

However, the play inherent in the symbolic associations of a substance like charcoal seems to present problems for the archaeologist. Given that a material substance has multiple, context-dependent meanings, how do we identify them? It must be borne in mind that this multiplicity of meanings is not only visible to the modern archaeologist but is likely to have been contemporary. A number of different symbolic associations will have influenced the decision to use a particular object or substance in a burial.

14.2 Symbolism and the liturgy of the late Anglo-Saxon church

A symbolic interpretation of charcoal burial is only one of a number of possible ways of viewing the practice. However, in addition to the normal association of ritual with symbolism, there are particular reasons for believing that burial practice in the late Anglo-Saxon world was conceived of as being symbolically charged. Burial practice in the early medieval period took place in a world where symbolism was vital.

The late Anglo-Saxon church perceived its own ritual practice and the world it inhabited as heavily symbol-laden (Hawkes 1997, 312-14). Liturgical acts were believed to be traceable back to Biblical exemplars. Examples can be seen in the writings of Ælfric, who frequently justifies liturgical practice by attributing it symbolic meaning. In his so-called Letter to the Monks of Eynsham, written around 1005, he justifies not singing “heavenly songs” (cantica caelestia) by comparing the practice to the Biblical humiliation of the Hebrews (Jones 1998, 118-21). Similarly, Ælfric justifies the practice of anointing with ashes on Ash Wednesday (Jones 1998 122-3), and refraining from the kiss of peace during the interval between Maundy
Thursday and Easter (Jones 1998, 130-1) by citing specific Biblical incidents or concepts which these practices are meant to evoke. Similarly, eleventh-century ordination instructions, probably attributable to Wulfstan II, claim that in order to be ordained, a priest must know the getacnunge (“symbolic meaning”) of the rites he is to practice (Jolly 1996, 63).

St Augustine of Hippo, in his Homily on Matthew (Sermones S. Augustini, 360), expressed the view that “the appearance of Creation is itself a kind of great book”; that is, that all of creation embodied truths about the creator. The natural world was therefore filled with instructive symbolism which could be understood if studied. However, Jennifer Neville (1999, 165-77) has argued that this concept was not always expressed in Anglo-Saxon literature, and that in some cases the world was seen as being dangerous and chaotic, with God capable of bringing order to it but not always actually doing so.

Despite this ambiguity in some Old English sources, it seems clear that, at least within some segments of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, religious rituals were seen as being explicitly symbolic. Although we do not have much surviving textual evidence for the physical practice of burial, it seems unlikely that this would be the only aspect of religious behaviour not seen as being symbol-laden.

One difficulty of attempting to understand liturgical practice in the late Anglo-Saxon period is that we have limited evidence for the liturgy of smaller churches. Large religious communities with associated scriptoria are far more likely to preserve documents, and everyday liturgical texts are unlikely to have survived the change in language from Old English (Gittos 2005, 64). As a result, much of the available liturgical information comes from these high-status churches. As we have already seen, however, there are some notable differences in burial practice between some areas.

14.3 Symbolic meanings of burial practice

The structure of charcoal burial, combined with textual references to the open grave, suggests that at least some late Anglo-Saxon burials were public events, meant to be
seen and participated in, in the same way suggested for earlier burials (see Chapter 3). Recent theoretical perspectives on funerary practice argue that funerals were complex aesthetic compositions, consisting of a series of stages in which objects and actions were used to create memories of the event, which contributed to the creation of subsequent funerals.

Grave-linings such as charcoal may have played an important part in these “performances”. Individual elements of Anglo-Saxon funerary practice form a stratigraphic sequence when viewed as a whole, and this sequence can be envisioned in terms of a ritual process. Grave 730 from the cemetery to the west of the Old Minster, Winchester, provides an example of this. Rather than encountering the grave as a tableau, we can perceive it as a series of ritual actions. The body may have been treated before death (See Chapter 4). Following this treatment, it was placed in an iron-bound coffin. Either after or during this process, the grave itself was dug, and a layer of charcoal was placed along the bottom. The body was lowered into the grave, and the support stones set up on either side of the head. The grave was then filled in again (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 229).

Textual evidence shows that all of these practices were embedded in a ritual cycle. Sources such as the Regularis Concordia and Ælfric’s Letter to the Monks of Eynsham specify the psalms to be sung at the death of a monk (Symons 1975, 65; Jones 1998, 142-3). Less elaborate rites were prescribed for the death of a lay person, at least in some cases (Thompson 2005). Commemorative practices may have extended long after this; a monument might be erected, or additional services might be performed to recall the dead individual. Services of this type were standard for monks, at least by the date of Regularis Concordia, and might be specified in the will of a layperson (S 1188). Similarly, we have seen (Section 4.4) the role of both clerical and lay authorities in pre-burial practice.

The variety of burial practice in the Anglo-Saxon world defies division into clear categories. Certain elements – the use of stones, various kinds of elaboration on the coffin, various types of grave linings – recur in numerous cemeteries, but they appear in a variety of combinations. It is not possible to infer from the evidence that there was some single, now lost source or sources which dictated late Anglo-Saxon
funerary practice. We do have sources regulating burial location, but the symbolic elements of the burial rite are not addressed in any surviving text. However, there does seem to have been a shared understanding of what burial rites were appropriate for the funeral of a member of the late Anglo-Saxon Christian community. Clergy moved from church to church in the late Anglo-Saxon period, particularly in the case of larger and wealthier churches. Ælfric is a good example of this practice: beginning his career as a monk at Winchester, he was subsequently sent to Cerne, and finally to Eynsham (Hurt 1972, 28-41). Networks of contacts thus formed between communities. For instance, Bishop Ælfheah, who assigned Ælfric to Cerne, had previously been at Deerhurst. In addition to personnel, books, letters and other documents may have circulated containing descriptions of funerals. Homilies written by the most prominent homilists of the day were recopied and circulated in large numbers (Wilcox 2005, 61).

The exact means by which these practices were transmitted from community to community remains unclear. The evidence, however, argues against any clear functional reason for them. They must have been selected because they contributed to the appearance and aesthetic experience desired from a late Anglo-Saxon burial.

If charcoal burial and other related burial practices contributed to the experience of burial, how did they do so? What symbolic, religious or aesthetic principles can be identified that would have helped mourners express or assuage their grief, or conveyed an appropriate allegorical religious message in the eyes of the clergy?

### 14.4 Possible symbolic associations of wood species

Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle has suggested that oak may have been chosen for its symbolic connotations, being believed to be the wood from which the cross on which Christ was crucified was made (Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 229). Oak may also have had properties associated with it in folklore or medical literature.

However, as Chapter 12 discusses, contemporary smelting and metalworking appears to have used charcoal with a similar profile to the samples which have been analyzed from charcoal burials. Mature oak dominates the samples from Ramsbury, Bestwall, and Burlescombe. If many church had access to supplies of charcoal for metalworking or other purposes, they may simply have used the charcoal available to them.
Additionally, the charcoal burials from Barhobble use charcoal derived from different species. If oak charcoal was selected for symbolic reasons, they do not appear to have applied in this case. However, the difference in woodland in the two regions suggests that availability was the main factor. The fact that oak charcoal is the most common type of charcoal found in late Saxon England does not mean that no symbolic significance was attached to the tree, or that this symbolism was not associated with charcoal burial, merely that oak charcoal does not seem to have been specifically selected for use in burials.

14.5 Cleanliness

We have already seen that charcoal has significant adsorbent properties and was used in cleaning and purifying roles elsewhere in the early medieval world. It is possible that these cleansing properties were considered desirable in the funerals of the period. I hope to demonstrate that the physical properties of charcoal as a grave-lining are consistent with late Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward the dead body and concepts of cleanliness expressed in textual sources. To this, the study of charcoal burial adds an additional physical dimension, suggesting the ways in which these concepts could be part of a ritual in which both clerical and lay members of the congregation participated.

Reconstruction images of funerals seldom take into account the appearance of the ground. In a northern climate, bad weather might turn funerals into dismal affairs. Reconstruction drawings of the Anglo-Saxon period frequently depict clouds, overcast skies and rain (e.g. Williams 2006, 198), but the appearance of the grave is not frequently depicted if it is depicted at all. The traditional image of the grave as a neat, rectangular hole in the earth is unlikely to reflect the muddy reality. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes has memorably described an Anglo-Saxon burial as involving a body being placed in “the slime and mire of a chalky trench” (Hawkes and Wells 1975, 122). I will argue that this image is significant in late Anglo-Saxon funerary practice. The discourse of clean and unclean was a major element of late Anglo-Saxon Christianity, and burials would reflect this. Victoria Thompson’s (2004) survey of the textual and artistic evidence for late Anglo-Saxon attitudes toward death, dying and

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the dead has suggested that the grave was seen as potentially threatening and unclean. Much of this section follows her argument, although I do not draw precisely the same conclusions regarding charcoal burial.

Much of the following section is drawn from late Anglo-Saxon textual sources such as legal codes and homilies. These sources can be biased. The writings of Ælfric of Eynsham have had a huge impact on our understanding of theology and homiletics in late Anglo-Saxon England, but they were not necessarily typical of how late Anglo-Saxon Christians thought about the subjects. Nonetheless, the large number of surviving copies of Ælfric’s homilies indicates that they were in very wide circulation. These texts were reproduced in very large numbers, indicating that “the Church hierarchy, including Sigeric, Archbishop of Canterbury, to whom the prefaces are addressed, must have seen their potential value and provided massive and official dissemination” (Wilcox 2005, 1961). Ælfric’s views were thus being widely disseminated, even if we cannot assume that other late Saxon Christians followed them to the letter.

Because many of these texts date from the eleventh century, and we have seen that charcoal burial is found not only in this period but also in the tenth and ninth centuries and possibly even earlier, it must also be borne in mind that Ælfric and others wrote in a period when charcoal burial was relatively common. Ælfric, who had been a monk at Winchester, would almost certainly have seen burials of this type performed. We must not therefore assume that late Anglo-Saxon writing about death, the body, and cleanliness explains charcoal burial; the relationship is likely to be more complex.

The Old English poem Soul and Body consists largely of a dialogue between the damned soul and the body it has left behind. The poem exists in two versions, one in the Exeter Book, collection of tenth and eleventh-century poetry, and the other in the Vercelli Book, a collection of homiletic material probably dating to the second half of the tenth century (Moffat 1990, 1-3). The two versions of the poem are basically similar, and derive from a common exemplar, although the Vercelli Book version includes an additional episode. In both cases, however, the dialogue includes a section in which the soul expresses disgust of the decomposing body, which it addresses as eordan fulnes (“foulness of earth”) (Moffat 1990, line 18). In the longer Vercelli Book
version, an additional section describes a dialogue between the blessed soul and its body. The blessed soul expresses sadness that the body did not have to lie in a _ladlic legerbed_ ("loathsome grave") (Moffat 1990, 63, lines 153-6).

By contrast to the "loathsome grave," we also find references to "clean" burial in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The Northumbrian Priests’ Law, written c. 1008 x 1023 by a member of the circle of Archbishop Wulfstan, states that individuals who fail to do penance for incest, improper marriage or having intercourse with a nun forfeit _clenes legeres_ ("a clean grave") (Whitelock _et al._ 1981, 466). Interestingly, Whitelock renders this reference to a "clean" burial as "Christian burial". The same provision is repeated in I Cnut 33.1 (Liebermann 1960, 220-1, 336). Other law codes contain provisions excluding dead criminals from Christian burial (e.g. Liebermann 1960, 164, 184), although they do not use the same terminology. The sense of the provisions is undoubtedly the same: individuals dying in a state of sin are excluded from the community of the Christian dead. It is interesting to see that the Christian burial from which contaminated souls are excluded is conceived of as "clean". A similar reference to "clean" burial occurs in a version of _Ælfric’s Pastoral Letter_ to Wulfstan. _Ælfric_ specifies that a priest who dies in a brawl or a battle is not to have prayers said for him, but may be buried. In one copy of the letter, Wulfstan has added that the priest is to be buried "in a clean grave" (Thompson 2004, 85).

Just as good Christians – or at least moderately good ones – are to be given "clean" burial, "dirty" burial is prescribed for sinners. _Æthelred_ 4 states that if anyone who "is regarded with suspicion", he is to be made to provide surety "so that he may be brought to justice" (Robertson 1925, 54-5). If, however, the accused is unable to provide surety, " _slea man hine ? hine on ful lece._ " Robertson translates this as "he shall be slain and buried in unconsecrated ground", but the word _ful_ literally means "dirty", the opposite of the "clean" burials granted to the virtuous. Thompson translates the text as "laid in foulness" (2004, 175), and the 12th-century translator who rendered the Old English text into Latin as part of the _Quadripartitus_ chose to translate the sense as _in dampnatis inhumetur_, "let him be buried among the damned" (Liebermann 1960, 220).
Legal codes contain another use of *ful* and *claene*. Anglo-Saxon law codes prescribe ordeals for certain offences under certain conditions. Accused individuals were forced to hold red-hot iron bars or immerse their hands in boiling water. The injuries were then bandaged, and after a specified time, usually three days, the bandages were removed. “If the burn was healing cleanly, the accused was judged innocent; if it had festered, he was held to have been proved guilty” (Rollason 1988, 12). Such festering wounds are described as *ful*. The *Decree Concerning Hot Iron and Water* describes the examination in the following terms:

*And ga he to and in-seglige man ða hand, and sece man ofer ðaene ðæg, swa hwæder swa heo beo ful swa claene binnan ðam in-segle.*

Attenborough translates this text thus. “And the accused shall go to the ordeal, and his hand shall be sealed up; and after three days it shall be inspected to ascertain whether it has become discoloured or remained clean within the sealed wrappings” (Attenborough 1922, 172-3). But the word translated as “discoloured,” *ful*, “foul” or “dirty”, is the same word used to mean “guilty” in discussions of the same ordeal. The law code III Æthelred uses *ful* to describe people who fail an ordeal in this way, while those who pass the ordeal are *claene*. The physical cleanness of the wound is directly connected to the guilt or innocence – the spiritual cleanness – of the accused. And individuals who fail the ordeal may be executed, joining the ranks of those who can be laid in “unclean” graves.

Cleanliness and uncleanness generally are important themes in late Anglo-Saxon religious imagery. Derived ultimately from Biblical sources, a concern with cleanliness appears in such texts as Ælfric’s pastoral letter for Wulfwoge, written in the last decade of the tenth century. Ælfric insists that the liturgical instruments used in the church be *claene* and that no “filthy thing” come into contact with them (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 208). In addition to its literal meaning, “clean”, *claene* also has connotations of purity and sinlessness. It is not possible to discuss all references to this important theme, but some examples of the various meanings of *claene* follow.

Another of Wulfstan’s homilies describes the earth at its creation as *claene* but having been dirtied and “made filthy” (although Wulfstan does not use *ful* here) by the sins of
humanity (Berthurum 1957, 124, I.27-9; Thompson 2004, 93). Ælfric routinely uses *clænysse* to mean chastity (e.g. Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 196, 267, 277). The same use appears in the law code II Æthelred (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 349). Similarly, Ælfric insists on cleanliness throughout his work: in his pastoral letter for Wulfsige III, written in the last decade of the tenth century, Ælfric insists, for instance, that the host is to be kept clean (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 224), to the extent that a blind man cannot be priest because he might allow the host to become dirty. Priests are to serve with “clean hands” and “a clean mind” (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 223). The code known as the “Canons of Edgar” repeats the warning that the host, the body of Christ, is to be kept clean, and states that if it is not used it is to burnt “in a clean fire” (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 326).

Other textual sources show this connection between sin and dirt was widespread: the so-called “laws of Alfred and Guthrum,” written between 1002 and 1008, describe prostitutes as *ful* and command that they be expelled from the country: *clænsie Pa Peode*, “the nation is to be purified” (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 312). Other references to cleansing include descriptions of baptism (Whitelock *et al.* 1981, 144) in an account of Edgar’s establishment of monasteries, probably written by Æthelwold.

The most striking combination of the language of cleanliness, the image of earth, and the relationship to the state of the soul comes from Ælfric’s homily on the birth of Christ (Pope 1967, 214). In this text, Ælfric expounds on the sinlessness of the Virgin Mary, using *clæne* and *ful* in a number of different ways and making the connection to the damp, unclean earth explicit. Ælfric states:

*Paet Paet halige mæden, þæs Hælendes modor,*

*næfde nane fulnyssse, ne furðan galnyssse*

*ne weres gemánan, ac þurhwumode mæden...* (414-416)

That the holy virgin, our Saviour’s mother, possessed no impurity, not even lust nor man’s company, but the maiden continued to live as a virgin (Butcher 2006, 37).

Having used *fulnyssse* to refer to sexual behaviour, Ælfric employs a reference to physical uncleanness:
If, as we often see for ourselves, that the sun shines on foul mud and is not sullied, how much more can the almighty Son of God be born of Mary with no impurity? And she was greatly cleansed through his holy power, so he was not debased... (Butcher 2006, 37).

Here Ælfric makes the connection explicit: just as the ful/dirty earth does not befyldirty the shining sun, the ful/sinful body of a woman does not befyld/ render sinful the Son of God – an argument actually somewhat weakened by Ælfric’s repeated insistence in the sermon that Mary was in fact not a sinful woman, a point which should, given the sun/earth metaphor, be irrelevant. Regardless, the reuse of the same words makes the parallel between the dirty earth and the sinful body extremely clear.

This brief survey of the homiletic and legal evidence for the importance of cleanliness in late Anglo-Saxon religious life shows that, at least from the mid-to-late tenth century, cleanliness was a major preoccupation, at least for a certain segment of the church. The concept encompassed a large number of different ideas relating to sin, the sacredness of the body, and ritual purity. Physical cleanliness was seen as the outward and visible sign of spiritual cleanliness, and was used as a sign of reverence to sacred things and places. Sacred objects could not be allowed to become dirty, because sacredness and cleanliness were profoundly linked. Similarly, the ful/infected appearance of the burns in the ordeal of heated iron is directly connected to the ful/guilty soul of the criminal. These connected meanings must have related to the way in which these concepts were applied to graves. Ful graves were excluded, marginal, heathen. Clæne graves, then, should be protected, included, and Christian.
The many possible meanings of *ful* and *clæne* are well known: the *Thesaurus of Old English* (http://libra.englang.arts.gla.ac.uk/oeteach/oeteach.html, accessed 3 March 2008) gives meanings for *ful* including not only “foul, filthy, squalid” but “infamous, shameful,” “evil”, “a felon”, and “not blessed, unconsecrated”. Similarly, *clæne* can mean not only “clean,” but “without defect, perfect”, “pure, chaste” or “legally sound”. This versatile concept of cleanliness recurs, as we have seen, throughout homiletic and legal sources. How would that cleanliness have been created in the grave itself? Although charcoal is never discussed specifically, we know that another dry powder, ash, was thought of as clean: in his Ash Wednesday homily, Ælfric describes the ashes with which congregants are anointed as *clæne axan*. As Victoria Thompson (2004, 119) has observed, Ælfric specifically contrasts the earth of the grave with the clean ashes.

This being the case, the muddy and filthy appearance of an earth grave in wet weather might have been particularly disturbing to the participants. We have seen that the physical cleanliness of objects was directly connected to their spiritual cleanliness, as in the case of the host, which is ruined if it becomes physically dirty. Physical uncleanness could be seen as threatening to spiritual purity. If Christian burial was clean, and excluded burial (sometimes described as “heathen”; see Chapter 4) was unclean, actually unclean burials might have been seen as presenting a bad image within this framework of symbols.

The other types of grave linings which are found in late Saxon contexts tend to support this interpretation. We have seen that graves were lined with substances including sand, chalk, and mortar. Like charcoal, these substances would provide a dry lining for a grave which might otherwise have been muddy and damp. The symbolism of these substances is therefore partially derived from their inherent physical qualities and the environment in which they were used. All of these types of linings could have been used to create a dry, clean appearance. In a world where “clean” burial was seen as desirable, a grave with this type of lining would be a desirable, reassuring symbolic element within a funeral.

This model of charcoal burial in many ways combines elements of the two existing schools of thought regarding the practice. As we have seen, most explanations of
charcoal burial interpret it either as an act of purely ritual and symbolic significance or as a sanitary practice. However, by placing the rite in its contemporary context, we can see that cleanliness, purity and the threat of contamination were important components of the way people in the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods thought about death. Whether or not charcoal was an effective precaution against decomposition or an effective deodorant, the perception that it was a “clean” substance will have been vitally important to its deployment within a funerary context.

Some practical objections have been raised to the use of charcoal as a sanitary or preservative measure. The most important of these is that in almost all burials where a layer of charcoal is excavated, the charcoal is found to have been outside the coffin. In order to have been of use as a preservative, charcoal should have been placed as close to the body as possible. The most dramatic example of this comes from the late Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Staple Gardens, Winchester, where one of the excavated charcoal graves contained a body in a lead coffin (Kipling and Scobie 1990, 8-9). Obviously, charcoal would not have been any use in soaking up fluids from this body, which would have been contained by the sealed lead lining.

However, the possibility remains that charcoal may still have been placed within the grave in order to preserve or cleanse the body in some cases, even if it was not in direct contact with the body in others. How well the substance fulfilled its practical purpose after the grave was refilled was probably less important than the experience of the funeral for those in attendance. A double or ambiguous function is not impossible; grave-linings might have been seen as preserving the body as well as cleansing the earth itself; given the symbolic associations between “body” and “earth” in sources such as the Soul and Body poem, this would be likely to be an obvious parallel. Mourners underwent a ritual experience where themes of cleanliness and preservation were brought to the fore by the use of a substance associated with these values. Although charcoal may have been of limited functional use in preserving or deodorising the body, its ritual role was nonetheless directly connected to these physical properties.

There is one case where it seems hard to associate the presence of a charcoal layer with a concept of cleanliness: the charcoal burial from St Peter’s, Barton-upon-
charcoal burial interpret it either as an act of purely ritual and symbolic significance or as a sanitary practice. However, by placing the rite in its contemporary context, we can see that cleanliness, purity and the threat of contamination were important components of the way people in the late Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods thought about death. Whether or not charcoal was an effective precaution against decomposition or an effective deodorant, the perception that it was a “clean” substance will have been vitally important to its deployment within a funerary context.

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Humber, where “the torso had been coated with a layer of sticky blue-grey clay, before charcoal was poured over the corpse” (Waldron 2007, 25). The upper charcoal layer may have been thought to act as a preservative or cleansing agent, but the role of the clay is enigmatic.

14.6 Defining the space of the body/grave

In addition to cleanliness, charcoal might also have served to define the space of the grave. This appears to have been a major concern in late Anglo-Saxon burials. This period sees a great deal of diversity in burial containers: bodies are buried in a variety of types of coffin, including examples made only of wood, of wood with metal nails or reinforcements, or of stone, as well as in chests or in the lead coffin from Staple Gardens. In addition to containers, a number of burial practices which reinforce the edge of the grave are also found during this period, such as partial or complete stone lining or tile lining. In addition, some stone arrangements appear to have been intended to protect the body within the grave, possibly to spare the mourners the sight of seeing earth dumped on the face of the corpse (Boddington 1996, 39-40). This may reflect a view of the dead body as requiring protection, even in the grave. Dirt on the body might threaten the fragile “cleanness” of the dead.

Liturgically, this period sees the development of attempts to deal with that uncleanness at a cemetery-wide level by introducing rites for the consecration of cemeteries. These rites were established in England by the end of the tenth century, and involved prayers at the four sides of the churchyard (Gittos 2002, 195-6). These rites appear to represent a local tradition rather than imported Continental material (Gittos 2002, 198). Helen Gittos has described this development as adding “a spatial development to sanctity” (2002, 208). The space of the Christian dead is being separated not only from the space of the non-Christian dead, but from those members of the Christian community who have failed to live correctly. This liturgical pattern may be seen in the archaeological record at sites where some burials are located outside cemetery boundaries, as well as in the more remote “execution cemeteries”.

It is therefore possible to see the act of burial as a series of enclosings: first, the grave is enclosed within the cemetery itself, or within the consecrated space of a church.
Some graves may also have had standing tombs, although these do not survive. A free-standing tomb for the body of St Swithun has been suggested at Winchester Old Minster (Biddle 1970, 82). Within the grave, there may be a stone setting or a grave lining, within which the body will be placed, further enclosed in a coffin or shroud. Layers of separation distinguish the protected space of the Christian grave from the surrounding earth, which was perhaps seen as threatening.

One interesting view of the relationship between the dead and the earth is found in the illustrations of the Harley Psalter, an Anglo-Saxon work derived from the Utrecht Psalter and created, stage by stage, between c. 1020 and c. 1130 (Noel 1995). Of the artists who worked on the Psalter (also known as Harley 603), most followed the art of the original with some modifications. However, one illustrator, known as artist F, “deviated radically, composing wholly new illustrations” (Semple 2003, 234). Whereas traditional depictions of hell show large openings filled with groups of sinners, artist F depicts “small rocky openings and earth-covered pits containing single figures or small figurative groups” (Semple 2003, 236). Hell is depicted as resembling a tomb or grave. Sarah Semple (2003, 240) has argued that this image represents “a distinctly Anglo-Saxon version of hell and damnation,” in which the damned are trapped beneath the earth in a type of living death. This malevolent landscape stands in stark contrast to the sanctified burial spaces of the Christian cemetery and suggests another way in which the earth itself might have been considered threatening for the body of the believer.

14.7 Sleep and rest

The view of the grave as a bed or sleeping-place is widespread throughout Christian art and iconography. It is found in many late Anglo-Saxon sources; legerbed (“lying-bed”) is a common term for a grave; exactly the same term can be used to mean a literal bed. Similarly, a cemetery may be a legerstowe (“lying-place”). The idea of the grave as a sleeping-place draws on core elements of Christian eschatology, in which death is regarded as a period of sleep before the resurrection. (e.g. John 11:11; Matthew 9:24; 1 Cor 7:39, 11:30, 15:51; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:14). The same set of symbols actually occurs in archaeological writing about the charcoal layers found in graves, which are often referred to as “beds”. At Exeter, the upper layer of charcoal
found in some graves was even referred to as a “coverlet” (Cathedral Close excavation archive EXEMS: 24/2005).

“Pillow” stones, either found under the head or on either side, seem like another example of this set of symbols. Christopher Daniell (1996) has argued that they may have been penitential in nature, but one uniquely well-preserved example from St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber suggests that they were in fact part of the attempt to portray the dead body as comfortably sleeping. Waterlogged conditions on one side of the cemetery at St Peter’s have preserved organic remains, including a pillow which overlay the two stones placed on either side of the head (Waldron 2007, 26-7). Pillow-stones in other graves may therefore have supported similar actual pillows which have not survived.

If sleep and the bed are important symbolic associations for Anglo-Saxon burials, charcoal once again plays a role as one of a number of grave linings, perhaps serving as a soft cushion for the body. This interpretation seems difficult to support in the case of burials with coffins. In burials of this type, head-support stones are sometimes found within the coffin, suggesting that it was the coffin itself that was considered to be analogous to the bed.

14.8 Colour symbolism

Although textual sources demonstrate that charcoal was seen as particularly black, there is little or no evidence for the direct association of black with funerals in the late Anglo-Saxon period. The mourners at the funeral of Edward the Confessor in the Bayeux Tapestry are depicted in clothes of various colours, and once again we are faced with the lack of direct textual sources for liturgical practice at burials.

However, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest morbid, negative connotations for black and dark colours in Old English poetry. Darkness is used to create a hostile and threatening environment in poems such as Genesis (105-9) and Exodus (111-3). Hell is depicted as dark in Christ and Satan (453) and Guthlac A (676-8). Rodwell et al. (2008, 79) suggested that the bright reds and yellows of the robes on the Lichfield Angel symbolize the "heavenly nature of angelic messengers, who are commonly
regarded as shining creatures”. The dark appearance of a charcoal burial would provide a sombre contrast to this shining celestial imagery. The potential contrast is particularly interesting considering that stone carving on grave markers might be painted in bright colours (Lang 1990). Tweddle (1990, 154) remarks that “in the pre-Conquest period colour was used lavishly, be it on clothing, jewellery, or everyday utensils ... It is no surprise then to see stone sculpture treated in the same way.”

Discussing the use of colour in Anglo-Saxon manuscript illumination, J.J.G. Alexander (1975, 153) wrote that “darker colours are less frequent and in some cases may have a sinister or threatening import.” Bright colours and white were often used for figures, and Alexander believed that this might have been “an artistic preference ... connected both with poetic conventions of light and dark as good and evil and also, perhaps, with the Old English colour vocabulary.” Ronald Casson (1997, 224) has argued that ‘brightness was the predominant sense of color words in the Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, period ... . Hue was only minimally conceptualized in Old English.”

Given the significance of dark and light in Old English art and colour vocabulary, it seems plausible that charcoal’s darkness played a role in it being selected for inclusion in burial. However, although the dark layer of charcoal would certainly have been a striking and visible aspect of the grave, it is difficult to draw any specific conclusions about its significance.

14.9 Status and symbolism

In the preceding sections, I have suggested a model for the interpretation of charcoal burial as meaningful. Because of the dry, powdery, adsorptive qualities of charcoal, I have argued that it was used to create a clean, dry appearance for the grave, which was considered desirable as the result of contemporary ideas about the decomposition of the body and the religious role of cleanliness. Additionally, I have suggested that grave linings, like other late Anglo-Saxon burial practices which formed layers or boundaries around the body, were part of a system of enclosures, possibly perceived as protecting the deceased from the surrounding earth. The overall effect, perhaps
combining both of these sets of symbolic associations, was to create a protected, clean, sanctified space for the body of the deceased.

However, even accepting that we have a plausible model of the symbolic importance of charcoal within the complex and diverse Anglo-Saxon funerary rite, we are left with a second question. We have seen that no Anglo-Saxon cemetery contains only charcoal burials, and that the highest percentages are typically no higher than 20-25%. Clearly, then, not all dead bodies were considered appropriate recipients for charcoal burial. Why was a clean, dry surface on the floor of the grave not seen as a desirable feature for all late Anglo-Saxon burials? Can we determine what differentiates burials which contain charcoal layers from those which do not? How are we to explain this special treatment?

Drawing on the textual and architectural evidence for the history of the late Anglo-Saxon church, it appears that those churches with a higher percentage of charcoal burials are frequently churches of high status. Chapter 7 demonstrated that high percentages and high numbers of charcoal burials were strongly associated with high-status, usually urban churches. Churches which received large amounts of royal patronage, such as the Old and New Minsters of Winchester, or which were important regional centres, such as Durham Cathedral, have relatively high percentages of charcoal burial compared to lesser churches such as St Helen-on-the-Walls, York, or St Peter’s, Barton-upon-Humber. It would appear that charcoal burial correlates with — although it is not exclusively limited to — this type of wealthy, high-status church.

There are a number of possible reasons why this might be so.

Firstly, it may be that charcoal was used as a preservative in cases where burials had to be transported some distance. The legal evidence for burial practice is summarized in Chapter 4, and based on wills, law-codes, and gild statutes it does appear that bodies were sometimes brought from some distance where burial at a particular church was considered important. Gild members, for instance, appear to have preferred to be buried at the church associated with their gild, as seen in the provisions of the Exeter statutes. Similarly, chronicle sources emphasize the series of royal burials at minsters associated with the dynasty. For instance, the Peterborough manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (manuscript E) records the death of
Harthacnut at Lambeth in 1042 and his subsequent burial at the Old Minster, Winchester, traditional burial site of the West Saxon kings. Similarly, Æthelflæd, “Lady of the Mercians” and daughter of Alfred, died at Tamworth in 918 but had her corpse returned to Gloucester, 100 kilometres away, for burial at St Oswald’s, next to the body of her husband in the church they had jointly endowed (ASC B, C, D s.a. 918). Individuals of lower ranks may have had similar arrangements with local churches. High-status churches with regional or even national networks of pilgrimage and patronage would be much more likely to have bodies transported some distance for burial.

There are therefore a number of possible motives for transporting bodies some distance. Charcoal may have been used to pack these bodies for transportation or as an additional religious/sanitary measure where the body was in a more advanced state of decomposition than was normal for burial. Again, it is not necessary for the charcoal to actually function as a preservative or deodorant, as long as it was thought appropriate to pack a decaying corpse in charcoal. If charcoal burial correlates with the transportation of the body, we would expect to see the largest number of charcoal layers in apparently wealthy burials associated with high-status churches. Higher status churches would have been more desirable locations for burial, and could have established a number of different types of relationships with individuals, ranging from patronage to membership in a religious community or gild. This is consistent with the distribution of charcoal at excavated sites, but is difficult to demonstrate in the archaeological record. However, in at least one case, it seems unlikely that charcoal burial resulted from long-distance transportation: if Fowler’s identification of grave 4 at Durham as the grave of Ranulf Flambard is correct, the historical evidence places Flambard at Durham shortly before his death. Flambard’s grave was probably moved during construction of the new chapter house, but other charcoal burials show no evidence of having been moved.

It may also be that charcoal was included in graves where the body was seen as threatening in some way; for instance, where death was due to a contagious disease, or where the deceased had died in a state of sin such as the ones referred to in the Northumbrian Priests’ Law. The latter explanation seems unlikely, in that charcoal is found in burials from indubitably high-status contexts. Even with precautions, it
seems unlikely that an individual whose sins needed public mitigation in the form of sanitary measures would receive burial in a prestigious location. Charcoal burials contain other indications of high status, or at least wealth, such as the correlation with elaborated coffins (Kjolbye-Biddle 1992; see also Chapter 5). Additionally, the one individual we can tentatively identify as being buried on a layer of charcoal is Flambard, an individual of extremely high status. It may be possible that Flambard’s chapter would choose to express their disapprobation in his funeral; the continuator of Symeon of Durham reports that the relationship between the bishop and the chapter was strained (Rollason 2000, 279). Ultimately, however, the idea that charcoal reflects some kind of negative quality specific to the individual is not compatible with the many other indicators of high status associated with this burial practice, except possibly in that extra care for the burial might sometimes indicate a corpse that was “special” in a negative way, where an improper death had resulted in a need for extra precautions. The other possibility, that charcoal was related to the cause of death, is intriguing but difficult to demonstrate using the archaeological evidence.

Despite their severity, terminal illnesses tend not to leave identifiable bone pathology. Skeletal pathology is more frequently caused by trauma, by chronic conditions which result in long-term bone damage and restructuring, or by illnesses which the dead person sustained earlier in life. Non-traumatic cause of death is seldom identifiable by skeletal analysis (Mays 1998, 122). In addition, poor bone preservation at many late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries means that even if it were possible to determine cause of death from skeletal analysis the material would not be available to do so.

It is also possible that the inclusion of charcoal in the grave reflected positive qualities of piety and penitence. Status in late Anglo-Saxon England was strongly associated with displays of piety. This piety was frequently expressed by donations of valuable estates or objects to the church, as well as by bequests in wills. Penitence in the sense of a specific punishment for sins was not considered a positive trait, but the trait of humility was encouraged, and legal codes written at the height of the Viking crisis call for large-scale public displays of penance for the perceived sins of the nation. Of course, the influence of the church on legal texts must be remembered.
Church sources considered humility particularly important at the time of death; it was one of a number of factors involved in dying properly. On the deathbed, penitential symbolism was evoked by the practice, recorded in two manuscripts, of anointing the dying person with ashes and placing the dead body on a haircloth (Thompson 2004, 77). The seven Penitential Psalms were also a major part of the services not only for the dead but also for the dying (Symons 1975, 64-5, Paxton 1990, 140). Although I have argued elsewhere that charcoal can not be considered simply as a substitute for ash, it may be that the penitential symbolism of ash lent an additional value to charcoal as a grave-lining.

If the symbolic explanations proposed in the first segment of this chapter are correct, then charcoal might have been considered a desirable element for many burials, at least as one of a number of strategies available to create the necessary aesthetic effects. The limiting factor may not have been that individuals failed to meet some standard by which charcoal burial was considered merited or necessary, but that they were unable to afford the additional expense of this practice. We have seen that charcoal was a commercial product, although it is not possible to estimate its cost reliably. Nonetheless, the layer of charcoal and the extra effort involved in the burial presumably incurred an additional expense. We know that payment of burial fees to churches was legally required throughout much of the late Anglo-Saxon period. In addition to this payment, however, wills such as those of Archbishop Ælfric of Canterbury, written between 1002 and 1005, give examples of much larger donations being left to churches. These bequests are explicitly said to be for the benefit of the donor’s soul: Ælfric’s will calls the three estates at Westwell, Bourne and Risborough which he bequeaths to Christ Church his saulsceate.

We have seen that the care of the soul and the care of the dead body were strongly connected in late Anglo-Saxon religious culture. Given this connection, it may be that particularly generous donors, those who had been patrons of the church in life, or other individuals who enjoyed special relationships with the church, were accorded this additional element of the funeral rite. Prayers, masses and special treatment of the body were all part of additional care for the souls of the special dead.
Nonetheless, not all burials believed to be of high status included layers of charcoal, just as not all included stone head supports or particular types of coffin. Charcoal burial exists where two factors intersect. Chapter 10 demonstrates that layers of charcoal in graves are associated with other markers of high status, but there must be a further reason why particular elements in the composition of the funerary rite are preferred over others. This section has proposed some explanations, none of which is entirely satisfactory. The limitation of expense is the most plausible, but it still fails to explain why some apparently high-status burials contain charcoal while others do not.

It is probably not possible to identify the process of decision-making that led to any given late Anglo-Saxon burial being placed on a layer of charcoal. We are not entirely certain who was responsible for selecting the practices to be used in the burial from the “palette” of acceptable burial practices. This task was probably handled by different people or groups at different times or at different churches. Decisions were probably based on a number of factors no longer observable to us. However, it is clear that burial on a layer of charcoal was considered appropriate for a significant proportion of all burials. The symbolic associations of this substance were potent.
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15. Conclusion

15.1 Introduction

Victoria Thompson has concluded that the perfect corpse was perceived by later Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical authors as one “in which growth, change and decay are absent”, and she suggests that these concerns were mirrored in the increasing tendency evident in the archaeological record to enclose the body in the grave, in the ninth to eleventh centuries, with various forms of coffin and grave lining. Others have suggested that the later Anglo-Saxon practice of placing charcoal in the grave may symbolise humility and penance, and may have been informed by the contemporary revival of penitential traditions in England. Yet, it is questionable how widely known these literary traditions would have been, and while a need to protect the body from corruption and to express penance may have been factors dictating burial form, the archaeological evidence reveals that conspicuous social display was also important to at least some members of society. Moreover, where a person was buried as much as how appears to have been important, both to the Church and to the laity… (Hadley and Buckberry 2005, 124-5).

Hadley and Buckberry establish a contrast between two proposed explanations of charcoal burial as a practice: that it represents an element of religious belief, an expression of humility and piety, and that it represents a practice used to indicate the social status of the deceased. The two hypotheses draw on different types of evidence. Thompson (2002, 2004) uses the archaeological fact of charcoal burial as a starting-point for discussion of attitudes toward death, dying and the body in late Anglo-Saxon England. Working primarily from the written material, she focuses mainly on religious belief and ideology, an area which, as we have seen, has been traditionally regarded with caution by archaeologists. By contrast, Hadley and Buckberry are mainly concerned with identifying patterns in late Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian burial practice (Buckberry 2004, Hadley and Buckberry 2005, Buckberry 2007). These varying patterns suggest principles of organization within cemeteries, but the written sources contain no or limited evidence for these principles.
Hadley and Buckberry thus present a dichotomy between the two interpretations, although they recognize that both factors operated simultaneously. But I suggest that this contrast does not in fact exist. Burial practice simultaneously reflects belief about death, the body and the afterlife (or at least popular culture relating to such beliefs) and is used to construct identities for the dead, identities which are often connected to social status and inequality. Proposing that charcoal burial represents high social status merely moves the problem of interpretation up one more level: if a layer of charcoal in the bottom of a grave represents high social status, why does it do so? The answer must be connected to the “web of signification”, the set of symbolic associations of charcoal which include the images of cleanliness and penitence suggested by Thompson.

Status can be expressed through images connected to religious belief, meaning that, within the context of Christian Anglo-Saxon England, displays of penitence and humility can paradoxically double as statements of the deceased’s wealth, influence and social status.

Public displays of piety were a key element of social status in pre-Conquest English society. This can be seen, for instance, in wills. In addition to dividing the testator’s property among his or her inheritors, wills usually include lengthy lists of donations to religious foundations, whether estates, cash, or valuable objects. As discussed in Chapter 4, these are frequently left to the church where the testator intended to be buried, but the wills of wealthy individuals can contain benefactions to a large number of communities. Wills can also contain manumissions, explicitly said to be for the benefit of the testator’s soul. These acts of charity simultaneously display an individual or family’s wealth as well as satisfying both the Christian virtues of charity and piety and the aristocratic virtue of generosity. Similarly, patronage of churches, whether the large donations given to the churches of Winchester by the West Saxon royal house or the smaller-scale patronage seen at churches like Kirkdale, demonstrated importance and influence in the form of an act of conspicuous piety. Since wills can be interpreted in several ways, it seems plausible that the same can be said of burials.
Accepting that charcoal burial could be expressive of status through imagery associated with religious or other belief, do we have enough evidence to demonstrate that it was? I contend that we do.

15.2 Status, belief and charcoal burial

It is not always the case that additional effort or expenditure on a grave represents the high social status of the deceased. Counterexamples can be found in societies where the focus of commemoration is on ritual, while burials in the archaeological record appear simple or unadorned, as well as in examples like Parker Pearson’s 1982 study of cemeteries in Cambridge, where groups with differing ideologies produced very different patterns of burial. Despite these reservations, however, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that charcoal burial is a high-status burial practice of some kind. It is found in large numbers in churches known to be desirable burial locations, such as the Old Minster at Winchester. Within this cemetery, it is found primarily in close proximity to the church, usually considered to be a desirable and thus high-status burial location. It is frequently associated with other elaborations of the grave, such as elaborately decorated coffins or stone burial markers such as those found at Lincoln or York. The vestments, crosier and ring found in the 12th-century charcoal burial at Durham are clear indicators of a Bishop of Durham, one of the most powerful individuals in the north.

It therefore seems clear that charcoal burial was one of a number of practices intended to communicate a positive message regarding the deceased: a statement of the piety or importance of the person being buried. But why was this type of burial connected with this message?

In one way, the layer of charcoal may have served a similar purpose to a coffin, defining the space of the grave, creating a separate zone for the dead body. The dryness of the substance and its adsorbent properties may also have been connected to the idea of a “clean” grave as expressed in various textual sources. This does not mean that the concept of a “clean” grave necessarily refers to charcoal burial, simply that cleanness was thought to be a desirable property for graves and that charcoal linings may have been one way of transforming the earth of the grave from the fultum
adelan of Ælfric’s homily on the Nativity to the clæne legere of the legal texts. It is important to remember that this set of symbolic associations will not have functioned as any kind of coherent symbolic code, but by evocation. Dirtiness is associated with contamination, cleanliness with inclusion, and inclusion with holiness in the liturgical and homiletic texts of the period, and charcoal is one aspect of a funerary rite which would have sought to create an image of cleanliness and safety. The more elaborate ritual of the burial – at the very least, charcoal would have to be laid into the grave and then the body or coffin deposited – may have served to mark out these funerals as those of the special or deserving dead.

However, it is not possible to simply equate charcoal burial with high status. Obviously, not all high-status burials contain layers of charcoal. What separates burials with charcoal from those without?

15.3 The specificity of late Anglo-Saxon burial

Chapter 4 demonstrates the great diversity of late Anglo-Saxon burial practice, ranging from variations in coffin type to the many different kinds of grave lining. Buckberry’s (2004, 2007) research into variation into late Anglo-Saxon burial practice has demonstrated that higher-status churches, typically in urban environments, tend to have a greater variety of burial practices than smaller rural churches (Buckberry 2007, 118). It appears that a higher number of individuals being buried at these churches had the three elements of agency with respect to funeral practice: knowledge of the range of acceptable funeral rites, the power to ensure that their choices with respect to funeral practice were carried out, and the volition or desire to have the burial performed in a particular way. Given the range of rites practised at these larger urban churches, it is not possible to say that charcoal burial simply correlates to “high status”. Many elements of funeral practice appear to correlate with other markers of status like proximity to the church. Access to these inclusions therefore seems to have been limited. Within the range of available burial practices, then, why did some individuals receive burial on a layer of charcoal but not others?

Charcoal layers were selected from among a range of possible burial practice. This selection was intentional and therefore presumably meaningful. Certainly, the notable
concentrations of charcoal burials at some sites suggest that the practice was being used to mark out a particular type of person. Some possibilities have been suggested for groups, including families, religious communities sharing cemeteries with lay populations, and gilds. Any one of these groups might wish to use the symbolism associated with charcoal in the funeral rite. This does not mean that all could or did. Even among groups who wished to convey their grief or the importance of their dead through the symbols of cleanliness and protection expressed by charcoal burial, some might not have known that this particular rite was acceptable, or that it was practised, while others may not have been able to control the form of the burial.

The situation is complicated by the fact that we know little about the processes surrounding a late Anglo-Saxon funeral. We know that gilds were involved to some extent, and we have the cryptic reference to “the minster’s resources” and a “fitting” grave (S 1524). Victoria Thompson (2004, 116-7) has discussed the role of certain types of church servants such as the hostiarius, a “door-ward” whose role may have prefigured the later medieval sexton. In general, however, we do not know whether the deceased or his or her family had any input into the nature of the burial. Ordnoth’s will suggests not, at least in his particular case, but it is impossible to say conclusively.

There is no evidence that charcoal burial was used consistently in burials from site to site or across the rite’s long history. Given the variation in other aspects of burial practice from cemetery to cemetery, this is unsurprising. It appears as if, rather than a universal list of acceptable burial practice, we have common elements of a “vocabulary” of burial practice, some if not all of which were shared by many urban religious communities and some of the smaller rural churches as well. Interestingly, this shared vocabulary transcends some apparent boundaries, such as the division between reformed monasteries and secular minsters, or between “Anglo-Saxon” and “Anglo-Scandinavian” regions. Elements of it do not appear to have spread to the smaller rural churches which proliferated in the later part of this period; or that, although these communities were aware that charcoal burial was part of the accepted vocabulary of burial practice, they did not see a significant need for it.

The overall picture of charcoal burial that emerges from an analysis of the excavated examples is thus one of a rite carried out in a flexible way. Some groups appear to
have adopted it as a tradition, but in other, usually high status, contexts, it was practised intermittently. The individuals responsible for burial practice, whether associated with the church or with the deceased, selected it as being appropriate for the specific burial they wished to create, combining it with other elements such as coffins, other grave inclusions, grave markers, and ritual elements not visible to us. The resulting funeral was a specific composition, its elements selected based not only on availability but on other factors, possibly ranging from the life of the individual to the circumstances of death, or even to the appearance of the grave as dug. Perhaps some individuals required extra symbols of purity because they had died in a way considered threatening, while others were laid on the charcoal layer to symbolize their own spiritual purity, while in other cases the intention was to counteract possible negative connotations of the muddy, “ful”, grave. We cannot reconstruct the motivations behind any specific charcoal burial, even in the case of the historically-attested individual buried in this way. But what can be seen from the diversity of the practice and its appearance over a large area and a long duration is that charcoal burial was only one aspect of a late Anglo-Saxon burial rite characterized by flexibility, not dictated by a standard text or rigidly broken down by social groups but consisting of elements capable of being included and combined to react to the circumstances of a burial.
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