



*Early Medieval Monasticism in the North Sea Zone: A Conference Examining New Research and Fresh Perspectives.* Gabor Thomas / Alexandra Knox, University of Reading and Lyminge Archaeological Project; Helen Gittos, University of Kent; Kent Archaeological Society, United Kingdom, 24.04.2015—26.04.2015.

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## **Early Medieval Monasticism in the North Sea Zone: A Conference Examining New Research and Fresh Perspectives**

The 2015 conference marked the conclusion of eight years of excavations at Lyminge near Canterbury in the Southeast of England. The AHRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council is funding Lyminge Archaeological Project: (27.7.2015). The results provide not only a detailed account of the origins and development of a royal monastery in the kingdom of Kent, but also shed light on many themes central to the interpretation of early medieval monastic foundations in their contemporary contexts. The conference contextualised the results of this research by bringing together an international body of scholars to examine the theme of early medieval monasticism in the North Sea Zone from a variety of archaeological, historical and cross-disciplinary perspectives. The sessions included: *Power and Place: the Politics of Monastic Foundation*, *What did Monasteries Look Like? Architecture and Layout*, and *Production, Consumption and Surplus: Monasteries as Economic Central Places*. The conference concluded with a discussion to identify priorities for future research and opportunities for new scholarly collaboration.

With an optional excursion GABOR THOMAS (Reading), leader of the Lyminge Archaeological Project introduced the guests to the site starting with the 7th century Anglo-Saxon monastery and its disputed legendary foundress and royal abbess St Ethelburga (see Yorke below). The remains of this early nunnery are believed to be around today's Lyminge church, but doc-

umentation and interpretation of Canon Jenkins mid-19th century excavations have not been re-investigated since. The outstanding credit of the recent excavations has been to show that Lyminge was an important place even before this, with Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and traces of settlement extending as far back as the 5/6th century AD. The most important discovery so far is the Anglo-Saxon Royal hall complex from timber on today's village Green. Gabor Thomas / Alexandra Knox, *A window on Christianisation: transformation at Anglo-Saxon Lyminge, Kent, England*, in: *Antiquity* 86, 2012. <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/thomas334/> (27.7.2015).

JOHN BLAIR (Oxford) gave the keynote lecture on great hall complexes and minsters in 7th century England, a topic on which he has been publishing for decades. Still vivid in many a mind is his radical re-interpretation of Northampton and Cheddar: excavated sites that were originally published as palaces but should be regarded as minsters. John Blair, *Palaces or minsters?*, in: *Anglo-Saxon England* 25, 1996, pp 97-121. He described the location of great hall complexes as being focal as they usually were places of assembly, but at the same time marginal as they lay often near good hunting grounds or on borders towards other territories. Together with contemporary burial mounds and gold finds he suspected the great halls to have been part of Anglo-Saxon ostentatious elite display towards the Franks in the

South, the British in the West and the Picts in the North. Stressing the transitory character of buildings accompanying mobile royal life in the Early Middle Ages he compared royal halls like Lyminge or Yeavering with 'glorified campsites' or 'tents in timber'. In the architecture and general layout of hall complexes – but also of minsters – he observes a coherent fashion of axial linearity and also often – for example at Hexham and Lyminge – the same grid of 15 feet being used.

IAN WOOD (Leeds) stressed the influence of Merovingian monasticism on England by comparing the much higher numbers of monasteries in Francia – there were about 550 around 700 AD, but also their gained wealth and surviving documentation with that of Italy and Spain. In his view this well exceeded the contribution of Roman or Irish traditions which have been in the focus so far. BARBARA YORKE (Winchester) explored the Frankish origins of Anglo-Saxon family nunneries: Queen Balthild of Francia (626-680) – herself of Anglo-Saxon origin – played a major role in stimulating interest among the Anglo-Saxon royal houses in female monasticism as a way to bolster political positions. According to Yorke there are no nunneries in southern England including Lyminge that can be certainly said to have been founded before the 670s. The date of 633 – often cited for the foundation of Lyminge by St Ethelburga – is not supported by contemporary texts, and is seen by Yorke as the result of 12th and 19th centuries' local desires to push back its origins as early as possible. Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon royal houses*, London 2003.

Some of these earliest Frankish houses from the Schelde and Meuse valleys – like Hamage, Thier d'Olne, or the Abbeys in Ghent – were presented by DRIES TYS (Brussels) including an archaeological perspective. JOHN-HENRY CLAY (Durham) saw the influences going rather from Britain to the Continent when he looked at Saint Boniface's pastoral strategy in Central Germany where a mixture of cultures and religious traditions prevailed. A native of Wessex, Boniface based his episcopal authority on Roman orthodoxy and a belief in his Germanic origins. Boniface's keen appreciation for order and regularity made him unable to compromise and at one point he went as far as to 'tell off' the Pope in one of his letters. Still – or because of that rigidity – his Saxon mission turned out to be a failure and fatal for him. John-Henry Clay, *In the shadow of death*, Turnhout 2010.

ROSEMARY CRAMP (Durham) – the pioneer woman of Anglo-Saxon monastic archaeology – addressed the key question of the next session: how to discriminate

a monastic settlement from another ecclesiastical or lay settlement between 600 and 900 AD? Cramp doubts the function of a settlement can be made out from the characteristics of the outer physical remains alone. There is the scarcity of historical sources for the pre-10th century sites on the one hand but also a mutual influence of lay and monastic settlement right from the beginning: the first layout of the Benedictine monastery San Vincenzo al Volturno in southern Italy for example is influenced by the preceding Roman villa. It is the internal fittings and the accompanying finds that Cramp identified as much more telling than the general layout of the architecture. Finally Cramp challenged the audience by putting forward the hypothesis of Hope-Taylor's Royal centre at Yeavering to have been a monastery in its final phase.

Over the years, ELISABETH LORANS (Tours) and her team at Marmoutier were able to unearth facts that tell another story as the *Vita Sancti Martini* by Sulpicius Severus: the hagiographer describes the hermitage of St Martin of Tours as a remote spot on the northern bank of the Loire river while the excavations show an early Roman settlement being reused by the bishop and his companions without any chronological gap. Elisabeth Lorans / Thomas Creissen (ed.), *Marmoutier: un grand monastère ligérien. Patrimoine protégé* no2, Orleans 2014. Online : (27.7.2015)

An example of an early insular monastic site from mid- to late 7th century AD was presented by TOMÁS Á CARRAGÁIN (Cork). According to the historical sources, Toureen Peakaun seems to have enjoyed the patronage of the kings of Cashel. But apart from some stone sculpture, a high cross, early medieval burial and possible traces of wooden churches there is nothing to rival Frankish or Anglo-Saxon opulence in finds and features. Highly unusual though is a small domestic enclosure with a water filled ditch. The ecclesiastical enclosure with 170 m in diameter is a feature still easy to recognize in the field with the bare eye. Here the Irish example's good preservation stood in sharp contrast to the English sites that were presented by DAVID PETTS (Durham) or TONY WILMOTT (Historic England). Petts's analysis of the spatial organisation of the monastic sites of Whithorn, Hartlepool, Monkwearmouth and Jarrow as well as Wilmott's search for the boundary ditch at Whitby had to and will have to use a variety of methods to better recognise boundaries and inner structures. This of course is also due to the landscape's 're-conversion' by subsequent human land use like agriculture, road construction and other activities remodelling the topography.

While the previous talks had focussed on the archaeological features the last three papers turned to the object evidence and to material, technological and biological aspects. JUSTINE BAYLEY (London) with her comprehensive report on fine metalwork and glass objects stayed clear of the 10th century as before that time Anglo-Saxon metalworking seems to be dominated by the reuse of antique material. Also, between 400 and 650 the percentage of gunmetal objects is significantly high. While we think of ingot moulds to be made of stone and ceramic, there were also moulds from antler used to cast lead and pewter objects. Similarly with glass there is no evidence for production from the raw materials, but only for re-melting. There seems to be fine metal and glass working activity at all sites, but the bulk of material comes from major urban sites. The only exception seem to be gold working which can only be proven so far in sites like Southampton, London, Ipswich or York.

In the archaeobotanical assemblage MARK MCKER-RACHER (Oxford) saw growing evidence at Lyminge and other contemporary high status sites for an unusual diversity of plant remains. The density of grain remains is shooting up in the mid-Saxon period which he explained with an increase of crop handling on higher status sites.

The zoological remains from Lyminge are presented by ZOE KNAPP (Reading) and additionally show a clear difference between the pre-Christian phase and the monastic settlement. Beyond patterns of subsistence concepts of the agency of animals and changing human-animal relationships seem to have played a role. There is evidence for the introduction of monastic dietary rules that reflect wider changing world-views that come into effect even before the introduction of the Benedictine rule. Knapp has found for example a high percentage of pigs in the early phase, while their fraction decreases significantly by 20 per cent towards the later phase. However, the later phases boast with a colossal assemblage of fish of which more than 80 per cent is of marine origin; cod and whiting being most frequent. Knapp thinks that the Kentish port of Sandtun could have supplied the Lyminge monastery with marine fish.

While summarizing the two days, HELEN GITTOS (Canterbury) reminded us that many royal villas were donated to become monastic foundations. This may explain why we often find them so close together, if not on top of one other or cannot discriminate between them in their early phases. She pointed out, that many of the papers had agreed that there was a decline during the 9th century. Gittos

then introduced a discussion by involving the audience amongst which were many experts so far unheard in a much more active way than usual: she encouraged everyone to gather in small groups of about six and to discuss aspects which would be used for the final discussion, but also as the basis for future research.

While Lyminge is entering a phase of screening the collected evidence and making it available in print, there is evidently still the need for much field work on Early Medieval sites. In this period, the labels of minster and royal vill are extremely difficult to apply, while the term monastery and palace are even more problematic. The time is marked by a mobile nobility and changing functions of sites with very similar basic layout, but potentially quite different use. The situation in England and increasingly so towards the North is rural and liquid when for example compared with Merovingian Francia. There bishops live in the towns of the Roman civitates and play a much more important role. But in this early period they rather formed personal networks than acted as rulers of territories as has recently been discussed at a conference in Rennes from which a French colleague was able to report. Florian Mazel (ed.), *L'Éspace du diocèse. Genèse d'un territoire dans l'Occident médiéval*, Rennes 2011.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Field Trip to Lyminge with Gabor Thomas*

John Blair (University of Oxford), Great hall complexes and minsters in seventh-century England

Gabor Thomas (University of Reading), Welcome and Introduction to the Lyminge excavations

##### *SESSION 1: Power and Place: the Politics of Monastic Foundation*

Ian Wood (University of Leeds), Merovingian Monasticism and England

Barbara Yorke (University of Winchester), Queen Balthild's monastic policy and the origins of female religious houses in Southern England

Dries Tys (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), Monastic Houses in the Frankish lowlands and Northern France between the 8th and the 10th centuries: their setting and relation to aristocratic power strategies

John-Henry Clay (Durham University), Saint Boniface's pastoral strategy in Central Germany

*SESSION 2: What did Monasteries Look Like? Architecture and Layout*

Rosemary Cramp (Durham University), *New Perspectives on monastic buildings and their uses*

Elisabeth Lorans (Université de Tours), *Marmoutier (Tours): a late Roman and Early Medieval monastery in the Loire Valley (4th-11th centuries)*

Tomás Carragáin (University College Cork), *Toureen Peak: insular monasticism and royal patronage in the Glen of Aherlow, Ireland*

David Petts (Durham University), *Places and spaces: some reflections on reconstructing the spatial organisation of Northumbrian monasteries*

Tony Wilmott (Historic England), *The Anglian Abbey of Whitby: new perspectives on topography and layout*

*Round Table Discussion*

*SESSION 3: Production, Consumption and Surplus: Monasteries as Economic Central Places*

Justine Bayley (University College London), *The production of fine metalwork and glass objects in Middle Saxon England*

Mark McKerracher (University of Oxford), *Seeds and status: the archaeobotany of a monastery*

Zoe Knapp (University of Reading), *Changing tastes: investigating feasting and fasting in Anglo-Saxon Lyminge*

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