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Shaping Rural Settlements: The Early Medieval Inheritance of the English Village

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Abstract

Researchers seeking to establish the origins of medieval villages have typically been divided into two camps. Most scholars argue that villages were founded as part of protracted process which began in the tenth century, but others see them as the product of the seventh or eighth centuries, established as part of a Middle Saxon 'great re-planning'. Advocates of both chronologies have found ostensible support from the results of excavations undertaken within currently occupied rural settlements, although the organisers of England's most extensive test-pitting scheme have suggested that there is little evidence for roots before the tenth century. This paper demonstrates, however, that test pits are not an inappropriate means of detecting ephemeral Middle Saxon remains and that some scholars have overemphasised the ability of such methods to accurately reconstruct early medieval settlement sequences. Occupation sites dating to before the ninth century are only likely to be located through more extensive excavation, and indeed, a quantitative assessment of such interventions illustrates the striking regularity with which evidence for Middle Saxon habitation is found. The distinctive character of historic villages so instantly recognisable to landscape archaeologists and historians were not established between the seventh and ninth centuries, however. Rather, this paper shows that medieval villages often emerged only after a two-stage process of settlement evolution, as Middle Saxon centres were later shifted short distances and restructured into their more lasting historic forms from the tenth century. The seventh to ninth centuries can therefore be seen as a period during which both the physical scaffolding and the identity of many rural settlements was established, as Middle Saxon communities provided a lasting legacy upon the landscape of England.

Introduction

Over the past two decades the study of Middle Saxon settlement has emerged as a distinct discipline thanks both to an increase in the recovered archaeological evidence and, as a consequence, the development of more sophisticated interpretive frameworks. Our comprehension of the way in which people lived during the period *c.* A.D. 650-850 has been transformed, and we have an understanding of settlement chronology and hierarchy which was unimaginable even in the early 1990s. Perhaps the single most significant development for the study of Middle Saxon settlements came with the introduction of more comprehensive heritage protection, named Planning Policy Guidance 16 (PPG16), in November 1990. The establishment of pre-development archaeological intervention led to a rapid proliferation of

recorded data, and crucially meant that archaeological material which had previously rarely drawn interest on the basis of its perceived research value alone was now bestowed with equal weighting in policy guidance. Mitigation for the historic environment has been fundamental in providing a fast growing body of archaeology from all periods but, as this paper will show, has had a particularly significant impact upon our understanding of early medieval settlement evolution.

Policies which promote the value of the historic environment have been especially important in stimulating regular archaeological excavation within rural settlements that are occupied today, a process which provides a unique insight into the development of the historic settlement landscape. Taking five counties in central and eastern England as a case study, this article for the first time gives an indication of the frequency with which evidence for Middle Saxon habitation is found via currently occupied village excavation. It will be revealed that programmes of test-pitting are inappropriate for tracing habitation from the earliest medieval centuries and that more comprehensive investigation within villages, typically undertaken by commercial archaeological units, provides a far more accurate picture of pre-Conquest settlement change. Crucially, the evidence presented by this study suggests that at least a significant minority of rural settlements across the five counties can trace their origins to the Middle Saxon centuries, during a period when communities began to create habitation sites of unprecedented permanence and organisation. This is not to suggest that the distinctive character of historic villages, so widely recognisable to landscape archaeologists and others, was established between the seventh and ninth centuries, however. Rather, research illustrates that medieval villages often emerged only after a two-stage process of settlement evolution, as Middle Saxon foci were shifted short distances and restructured from the Late Saxon period onwards into their more lasting historic forms. The seventh to ninth centuries can thus be shown to be a period in which both the identity but also the physical scaffolding of many rural settlements was established — processes which left a lasting and conspicuous legacy upon the medieval and later landscape of southern England.

Middle Saxon settlement: divergent narratives

In spite of the progress both in scholarly interest and the archaeological data now available for study, uncertainties continue to surround key aspects of Middle Saxon settlement and landscape archaeology. Without doubt the most significant ongoing debate centres on the

chronology and character of early medieval settlement change, with the views of researchers broadly divisible into two distinct camps (cf. Jones 2010). Both viewpoints on the timing and nature of early settlement change are ultimately derived from the evidence first yielded following the inception of fieldwalking in the midland counties of England during the late 1970s. From their first implementation, fieldwalking surveys began to detect concentrations of early medieval ceramics in the countryside around currently occupied villages. These corpuses consisted almost exclusively of organic-tempered wares, datable only to a very broad 'Early-Middle Saxon' phase or between the mid-fifth and mid-ninth centuries (e.g. Foard 1978). That such ceramic collections represented the sites of former settlements was often demonstrated through subsequent excavation, which frequently identified *grubenhäuser* or earth-fast timber structures. Comparable to the evidence from more comprehensively excavated settlement sites such as Mucking in Essex, habitation located through fieldwalking appeared to be relatively short-lived (Hamerow 1991; Ford 1995). Indeed, the quantity of discrete pottery scatters located by fieldwalking also indicated that, akin to places like Mucking, these settlements were typically dispersed with a tendency to shift across the landscape over time (Ford 1995). Such 'wandering settlements' or *wandersiedlung* had already been identified on the continent, but now were also known to have characterised habitation during the earliest medieval centuries in England as well (Hamerow 1991, 13).

The most significant contribution of these combined schemes of fieldwalking and targeted excavation was to demonstrate that the dispersed and mobile settlements of the earliest medieval centuries were of vastly different character to later medieval villages, many of which continue to be occupied into the present day. The traditional model of village origins, which held that they were the product of fifth and sixth-century Germanic migrants who cleared the dense forests of post-Roman Britain (e.g. Gray 1915), was thus no longer tenable. This conclusion led to the development of two new frameworks of early medieval settlement evolution, which fundamentally differ over the central issue of chronology. By far the most popular view that emerged contended that permanent settlements were established through a protracted 'village moment' process which began around the mid-ninth century and perhaps continued as late as the thirteenth century. This 'late' model continues to be the prevailing one in current discourse, as the majority of scholars see a rapid reordering of the landscape only from the Late Saxon period onward (Lewis *et al.* 1997; Jones and Page 2006). Despite its continued popularity the 'late' chronology has not been wholly accepted by early medieval settlement experts, and from the same pioneering surveys a minority of scholars

forwarded an alternative model for change. Some advocated instead an ‘early’ view, suggesting that medieval settlements were established perhaps from the seventh century, and pointed as evidence to the almost complete lack of Late Saxon material from fieldwalked ‘Early-Middle Saxon’ ceramic concentrations (e.g. Foard 1978; Hall 1981). Such juxtaposition implies the replacement of transient, scattered farmsteads at a period when ‘Early-Middle Saxon’ ceramics were in use, but before the introduction of ‘Late Saxon’ wares.

The significance of this phenomenon was recognised at an early stage by some innovators of fieldwalking such as David Hall (1981, 37), so it is therefore slightly puzzling that the ‘late’ model for village development has remained so widely and continuously popular. Supporters of the late chronology have emphasised in particular the evidence from deserted medieval settlements sites in support of their case, whose ceramic sequences invariably date from the Late Saxon period (e.g. Chapman 2010). In contrast, those seeking to demonstrate a more complex picture before the ninth century are inhibited by a lack of chronological precision, chiefly the result of undiagnostic ceramics. Such circumstances frequently lead to the amalgamation of Early Saxon (c.450-650) and Middle Saxon (c.650-850) evidence, restricting attempts to trace settlement change before the Late Saxon period. Overwhelmingly popular from its inception, the ‘late’ model has benefited from some recent research which continues to suggest that villages emerged only from the Late Saxon period onwards (e.g. Lewis *et al.* 1997, 79-81; Dyer 2003, 21). Yet, the corpus of voices dissenting to this prevailing view have been loudening for some time, and together with an increasing unease amongst some researchers about its blanket application is an ever-growing body of data backing an earlier chronology for settlement transformation. Confidence in the ‘early’ model has particularly grown through the results of currently occupied settlement excavation as a steady stream of research, mostly derived from development-led intervention, continues to identify seventh to ninth-century habitation in modern villages (e.g. Thomas 2008, 49). While proponents of the ‘late’ school point towards the many circumstances where early activity is not found, the corpus of Middle Saxon archaeology from currently occupied settlements is becoming progressively more difficult to explain. This paper will illustrate, however, that the long standing divergence in ‘early’ and ‘late’ narratives can partly be reconciled, but only if a more nuanced approach to the archaeological evidence is adopted. Central to the continued lack of consensus is the inconsistent methodologies employed by

researchers and in particular the interpretation of results from test-pitting projects, which until recently have been the primary means of investigating village origins.

The problem of pits: excavations in currently occupied rural settlements

The research potential of excavating currently occupied rural settlement has been recognised for several decades, after initially being demonstrated by schemes such as the Shapwick Project (Gerrard and Aston 2013). Small test pits sunk into the back gardens of the Somerset village were found in particular to represent a useful guide for locating and dating underlying medieval stratigraphy (Gerrard 2000, 36), and the technique has since been applied to numerous other development-led and research orientated investigations. Test-pitting has emerged as a favoured means of evaluating modern settlements largely due to its speed, but also due to the non-destructive character of excavation compared to machine trenching (Champion *et al.* 1995, 38-9). The longest running and perhaps best known scheme of currently occupied settlement excavation is that undertaken as part of the Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA), organised by the University of Cambridge. Led by Carenza Lewis as part of Access Cambridge Archaeology, the HEFA was piloted in 2005 with the aim of giving participants the chance to take part in a project of meaningful university research (Lewis 2014, 322). Endeavouring to involve secondary school pupils in particular, test pits have been excavated in over fifty villages across nine counties in south-eastern England (Lewis 2010, 103).

Having completed a tenth consecutive season of test-pitting in 2015 it is clear that the HEFA continues to achieve its aim of developing skills and academic aspirations of young people, and has proved a resounding success among those who take part. The findings of the project are published regularly by *Medieval Settlement Research*, facilitating rapid and continuous dissemination of ongoing results (e.g. Lewis 2012). The results from the HEFA also provide an ostensibly valuable dataset for scholars seeking to characterise early medieval settlement development, especially regarding the origins of currently occupied villages. Indeed, on the basis of test pits dug up to 2010 it was concluded that, with the exception of some sites in Essex and Suffolk, there seems to be ‘little evidence for any co-location between sites of the “Early-Middle Saxon” period and later-occupied villages’ (Lewis 2010, 103). When the duration of HEFA’s investigations is considered such a synopsis could be taken as relatively trustworthy, providing significant support for the ‘late’ model of early

medieval settlement development. Such a sweeping assessment clearly sits at odds with the findings from other projects, however, as alternative excavations within currently occupied settlements have increasingly identified evidence for occupation dating to the Middle Saxon period in particular (e.g. Pine 2001; see also Wright 2010). We are therefore left with the obvious question — why is so much Middle Saxon archaeology found in currently occupied villages, but not those that are investigated as part of projects such as the HEFA?

Two issues concerning the method by which archaeologists recover data from currently occupied settlements are key to understanding the contradiction, and helps to explain why there is continued disagreement amongst scholars regarding the chronology of early medieval settlement change. The first aspect of methodology which deserves serious thought is the way in which investigators have defined ‘currently occupied’ in their analyses, and how this designation has sometimes been deployed uncritically in order to support or refute views on settlement evolution. Unfortunately, some scholars have apparently taken at face value the premise that currently occupied settlements were inhabited in a similar way throughout the historic period and, as a consequence, contend that their excavations provide a picture of habitation from a site’s earliest inception up to the present day. Locating excavations on largely practical considerations, for example, the HEFA follows many other test-pitting projects by digging unoccupied plots or areas where permission has been granted. Although this approach provides a useful haphazard sampling strategy, considerable quantities of examined test pits are located in areas outside of what can be reasonably considered historic village centres, such as modern housing developments. Projecting the location of HEFA test-pits in villages such as Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire onto the 1885 Ordnance Survey First Edition map provides a useful illustration of the problem, as it is immediately clear that the majority of excavations are located in areas that were not occupied even in the middle of the nineteenth century (Figure 1). As the locations of many test-pits therefore do not lie within historic village cores, their results cannot be used as a true indicator of historic settlement evolution as has been claimed. When the moderate size of a typical Middle Saxon rural settlement is also considered, it is clear that test-pitting schemes are more likely to investigate the landscape surrounding a historic settlement than the occupied area itself. In contrast, development-led excavations which have found significant Middle Saxon occupation have tended to be situated in close proximity to identifiable historic settlement cores (e.g. Pine 2001). Researchers stressing the ‘currently occupied’ location of excavations must therefore be aware that interventions may not necessarily correlate with

historic settlement cores, and a more balanced impression of settlement chronology will only be achieved if studies provide a historic landscape context for their results.

The second issue regarding the method by which archaeologists investigate currently occupied villages, which somewhat explains the divergent opinions of scholars, is the matter of scale. When examined in detail, it is immediately clear that Middle Saxon settlement archaeology is invariably found when more extensive areas are opened up for excavation than the limited areas examined by standard test-pitting projects. Typical test pits measure only 1m x 1m, and the excavation of such restricted areas is not well-suited to the identification of ephemeral Middle Saxon settlement deposits, which commentators widely observe yield only very limited quantities of finds (e.g. Foreman *et al.* 2002). Indeed, barring a handful of exceptions, it is commonly noted that early medieval rural settlements are typically very 'clean' in archaeological terms (Hamerow 2012, 2). While the soil differentiation and prevalence of dumped material characteristic of *Grubenhäuser* make their identification through test-pitting more likely, it is entirely possible that even the most experienced of excavators would fail to locate any features within a 1m square trench dug over the interior of an earth-fast timber building. With depth of excavation on most projects also limited by health and safety regulations, it is equally questionable whether test-pits in many cases reach stratigraphic horizons in which Middle Saxon deposits are likely to be encountered. In contrast, fieldwork which has successfully identified substantial evidence for seventh to ninth-century occupation within currently occupied settlements has usually been the result of excavating more extensive areas, such as the sizeable footprints of future buildings.

It is clear from this albeit brief assessment that currently occupied settlement research encompasses a broad range of methodological approaches, and that the two variables of location and scale are crucial to understanding the conclusions drawn by researchers from their excavations. Many interventions within villages are located in areas that are occupied today, but in fact lay outside of what may realistically be deemed historic cores of settlement. While some studies have not been clear about the historic landscape context of their excavations, paradoxically the investigation of the landscape immediately surrounding historic cores is not an entirely futile research exercise, as many settlements continued to possess a degree of mobility into the ninth century. While not the *Wandersiedlung* of the fifth and sixth-centuries, most Middle Saxon settlements only appear to have been fixed into more lasting arrangements from the ninth and tenth centuries, following a shift in their earlier

focus. The areas surrounding historic settlement cores are therefore of high archaeological potential, and indeed it will be demonstrated shortly that the remains of Middle Saxon occupation is often found in these immediately adjacent zones. Such archaeology is unlikely to be identified, however, through the excavation of small test pits whose limited coverage is not an adequate means of locating ephemeral settlements remains. A true gauge of the presence of Middle Saxon settlement within currently occupied villages is instead only likely to be gained from larger interventions, achieved through digging of evaluation trenches or more preferably via open area excavation.

Assessing Middle Saxon potential

With the above considerations in mind, an analysis was undertaken with the aim of assessing the frequency with which currently occupied settlement excavations identify evidence for Middle Saxon activity. For this purpose, a study of the Archaeological Investigations Project (AIP) was carried out. The AIP was established as a joint venture between English Heritage and Bournemouth University, with the intention of providing a national database of archaeological fieldwork. The AIP holds records for archaeological investigations undertaken between 1990 and 2009 and while it cannot be claimed that it represents an entirely comprehensive database, its analysis nevertheless provides a valuable guide with which to define the co-location of Middle Saxon settlement archaeology and historic villages. Using the data provided by the AIP, a database of currently occupied settlement excavations was made of five counties in central and eastern England: Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire (Wright 2015). Particular attention was paid to both the scale and the location of excavations to be assessed. In terms of scale, assessment was only made of interventions classified as ‘evaluations’ or ‘excavations’, because the restricted scale of ‘test-pits’ and ‘watching briefs’ render them an unreliable indicator of Middle Saxon activity, as has been demonstrated. With regard to setting location parameters, it was decided that due to the high archaeological potential of the immediate periphery of historic settlement, both the historic core and its immediate environs should be included—defined here as the landscape falling within a 100m curtilage of nineteenth-century occupation as drawn on OS First Edition mapping. Interventions recorded by the AIP as falling into this geographical curtilage were included in the assessment, and the results analysed for the presence or absence of Middle Saxon activity. Where present, Middle Saxon

activity was divided between the presence of artefacts, and evidence for structural features (Table 1).

The AIP assessment provides some intriguing results, suggesting that Middle Saxon evidence has on average been recovered from over a third of currently occupied settlement excavations which successfully located archaeological deposits. There is clearly some variation across the five counties, with Wiltshire featuring a very limited number of currently occupied interventions. The few investigations that have been carried out in Wiltshire, however, detected Middle Saxon archaeology half of the time, a frequency only bettered by the results from Northamptonshire. The counties of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk present similarly high rates of Middle Saxon settlement detection and of the five counties studied identification of less than 40 per cent only occurs in Oxfordshire. Indeed, if the results from Oxfordshire were to be omitted from the assessment, detection of Middle Saxon settlement from currently occupied village excavation in the remaining counties averages almost 50 per cent. While the inclusion of an ‘artefact only’ classification may overstate the case slightly, analysis of the AIP still provides a useful approximation of the frequency with which seventh to ninth-century activity is found by excavation, and suggests that there is co-location of Middle Saxon and later settlement in around one third of cases. It could be argued that this simply reflects the well-settled character of the Middle Saxon countryside across the five counties, and that the presence of earlier activity within historic settlements is purely the result of geographical juxtaposition. Closer examination of comprehensively excavated examples, however, suggests that the presence of Middle Saxon archaeology within currently occupied settlements is not the product of pure chance. On the contrary, a significant number of well-excavated sequences indicate that seventh to ninth-century settlement was crucial to later developments, as earlier foci can be seen to have undergone modification that resulted in the establishment of recognisable medieval villages.

Middle Saxon settlements and the two stage village formation process

Perhaps the most important difference in excavating more extensive areas within currently occupied settlement is that far more detailed sequences can be revealed than via test-pitting schemes, such as the interventions undertaken at Fordham, on the fen-edge of Cambridgeshire. Excavations in 1998 of approximately one hectare of land at Hillside Meadow identified four distinct settlement phases at Fordham, probably originating in the

sixth century (Figure 2) (Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 101). A sequence of enclosure systems were utilised throughout the lifespan of the site until the Late Saxon period when artefact densities from the excavated area suggest the focus shifted northward toward the main thoroughfare and the proximity of the parish church. Indeed, an archaeological excavation at the site of the village school, north-east of the Hillside Meadow site, confirms that from the tenth century settlement was focussed near the parish church around the crossroads formed by the historic street plan (Figure 3) (Connor 2001). While it seems that only following this Late Saxon shift and reordering was the historic village plan created, some of the Middle Saxon features at Hillside Meadow continued in use into the medieval period and later; remarkably some ditches were still being used to define property arrangements well into the nineteenth century (Patrick and Rátkai 2011, 101–5).

Also located on the fen edge of Cambridgeshire, excavations in the village of Cottenham have revealed a closely comparable sequence of early medieval settlement development to that seen at Fordham. Situated in the watershed between the rivers Ouse and Cam, Cottenham is thought to have been one of the largest villages in Cambridgeshire since at least the eleventh century, the historic form of which is characterised by an elongated, dog-legged High Street (Ravensdale 1974, 123). Excavations of over two hectares of land at Lordship Lane, situated in the historic core of Cottenham, identified five phases of activity extending from the Middle Saxon into the post-medieval period (Mortimer 2000). The earliest activity on the site (Phase I), dated by the excavators to the seventh century, consisted of a large enclosure with a maximum diameter of 170m east to west. This arrangement underwent a substantial modification during the late eighth or early ninth century (Phase II), however, when a network of four enclosures forming a radial pattern was established (Mortimer 2000, 5-7). Significantly, it appears that each of the excavated enclosures possessed two buildings (a primary residence together with an outbuilding), suggesting that the system defined the extent of property boundaries in a toft-like arrangement (Figure 4). While this type of Middle Saxon occupation is no doubt ‘village-like’, an observation noted also by the excavators, it is important to consider that the Lordship Lane site was abandoned during the Late Saxon period (Mortimer 2000, 10-12). In the same process as that documented at Fordham, the historic form of Cottenham was only established following a shift of the existing settlement focus, coupled with a restructuring of tenements to front onto the High Street, in the tenth century.

A strikingly similar two-stage pattern of evolution is observable too at the village of Warmington in Northamptonshire, where open area excavations uncovered part of a settlement consisting of several phases of ditched enclosures, as well as numerous post-holes and pits (Figures 5 and 6) (Meadows 2002). The earliest medieval occupation on the site consisted of a square enclosure and two parallel ditches seemingly forming a routeway, both elements probably in use during the eighth century. The identification of several collections of post holes suggests that earth-fast timber buildings were also being utilised on the site during the Middle Saxon period. From the tenth century, however, the enclosure system began to be modified in order to accentuate the droveway (Phase 2) and the site underwent further change a century later when it was given over to a new form of stock management and domestic habitation was apparently abandoned (Phase 3). The focus of settlement during the Late Saxon period instead seems to have shifted a short distance towards the historic road network, represented by Chapel Street, Peterborough Road, and Buntings Lane (Meadows 2002, 59-60).

The three examples of Fordham, Cottenham and Warmington serve to illustrate that the identification of Middle Saxon activity within currently occupied villages is not the product of geographical juxtaposition. Rather, an irrefutable relationship between Middle Saxon occupation and later settlement is in each case apparent, as historic villages are shown to have been formed through a two stage process. It is noteworthy that Middle Saxon occupation at all three sites is characterised by a significant degree of permanence and internal organisation, and at Cottenham the enclosures even formed a system comparable to an arrangement of later medieval tofts. Yet, the medieval village forms of each site were only reached following a short range shift and restructuring of pre-existing Middle Saxon occupation, although in places like Fordham some of the earlier features continued to be utilised into subsequent periods. The prevalence of this two stage phenomenon is being increasingly demonstrated through currently occupied settlement excavation across the country, and while there can be little doubt that the clearest examples have been found in the east of England, this is partially the result of the enhanced ceramic sequence of the region. In Leicestershire and Rutland, for example, the work of John Thomas (2015) has yielded tantalising evidence of Middle Saxon and earlier activity within both currently occupied, but also deserted medieval villages. Excavations at the deserted tenth and eleventh-century site of Eye Kettleby, for example, has located part of an extensive earlier settlement, probably dated to the sixth century (Figure 7) (Thomas 2015). Researchers are not currently able to

demonstrate a direct relationship between the two phases of activity at Eye Kettleby, but given the propensity for mobility displayed by early medieval occupation it is a distinct possibility that a Middle Saxon phase in the area has yet to be located.

The two stage process of settlement evolution does not appear to be the preserve of eastern England, however, and has also been identified at places as far west as Lechlade in Gloucestershire, as well as on a number of sites across Oxfordshire and Wiltshire (Reynolds 2006; Wright 2015). Identification and phasing of early medieval sites is problematic outside of eastern England, though, as illustrated by investigations undertaken at Brent Knoll, Somerset. The medieval settlement of the area was situated around the eleventh-century parish church of St Michael, on the western side of a hill which was previously used as an Iron Age hillfort (Figure 8). Between December 2006 and January 2007 Avon Archaeological Unit Limited excavated a footprint of a 385m² area, 25m south-west of the church (Young 2009). The earliest features located by the excavation were a series of gullies, dated by radiocarbon to between the seventh and tenth centuries. It is difficult to determine whether the features represent evidence of agriculture or rather a domestic focus, but in an analogous pattern to the sites presented from eastern England, Middle Saxon activity at Brent Knoll shifted in the Late Saxon period (Young 2009, 132). It is particularly significant that the Middle Saxon activity at Brent Knoll would not have been recognised through its artefactual assemblage alone, and only through radiocarbon dating was an early medieval presence identified. Such a situation is part of a broader problem, given the south-west was predominantly aceramic before the tenth century, save for a handful of high status sites which used imported pottery (see for example Reed *et al.* 2001). Archaeologists working in the region are thus instead reliant on alternative techniques such as radiocarbon dating both to locate and to interpret early medieval settlement, which due to constraints of cost and time are far from regularly employed. In this regard, it is significant that investigators at Shapwick propose that the village may have emerged in two stages, although this conclusion was only reached following a detailed and diverse scheme of investigation (Gerrard and Aston 2013, 176). It is therefore entirely possible that the same process of village formation was an equally prevalent phenomenon in the south-west as this paper has shown it was in the counties of central and eastern England, but that early medieval settlement activity is simply not recognised by the approaches currently employed by commercial archaeology units.

Recognition of the two stage sequence of village formation is not novel to this research, but instead was first convincingly posited over fifteen years ago by Tony Brown and Glen Foard on the basis of excavations in and around the village of Raunds, Northamptonshire (Brown and Foard 1998). Forwarding the same pattern of change as proposed by this study, the pair suggested that an initial coalescence of settlement occurred at Raunds in the seventh or eighth century, which was succeeded by a restructuring which created the medieval village in the Late Saxon period. In an important departure from then-current thinking, Brown and Foard also argued that villages and common fields were not developed contemporaneously, but instead suggested that shared agricultural arrangements were only established when settlements were reorganised around the tenth century (Brown and Foard 1998, 80-92). Deviating slightly from this hypothesis, Susan Oosthuizen has argued that in some instances fields were held in common before the foundation of historic villages (Oosthuizen 2010, 131). Utilising retrogressive map analysis of the Bourn Valley in Cambridgeshire, Oosthuizen has suggested the operation of 'proto-common fields' during the eighth and ninth centuries and that only from the Late Saxon period were existing arrangements extended to incorporate the full extends of medieval villis (Oosthuizen 2006, 140-4).

Structure and identity: the Middle Saxon inheritance

It is hoped that the results presented by this paper will provide something of a corrective to the existing scholarly dialogue regarding the origins of medieval villages and the role played by the Middle Saxon period in shaping the historic landscape of southern England. A divergence of opinion has emerged amongst scholars excavating within currently occupied settlements, with the majority suggesting that villages emerged from the Late Saxon period onwards. Other investigators, however, have suggested that the seventh to ninth centuries was more formative than the 'late' model indicates and have pointed to the regular recovery of Middle Saxon deposits from currently occupied settlements as proof of their arguments. Key to understanding this divergence of opinion amongst academics, it has been shown, is the methodologies that alternative projects adopt when investigating currently occupied settlements. Although there is no set method of selecting a test-pit size, investigators must be aware of the archaeological visibility of the material they are attempting to identify and the significant implications that scale of investigation has upon assessing potential (Chapman *et al.* 1995, 40). Unfortunately, it is clear that some researchers have failed to take such

considerations into account and overemphasised the suitability of small test pit schemes for locating Middle Saxon occupation deposits. Instead, this paper has revealed that a more useful barometer of early settlement is provided only when more extensive areas within villages are opened up for excavation. Investigators have also often been guilty of failing to provide a historic landscape context for their research, and the extent to which test-pitting within currently occupied rural settlements have truly investigated historic village cores is questionable. To counter these difficulties, a more nuanced approach has been adopted, and assessment of larger scale excavations undertaken within historic settlement environs has shown the remarkable frequency with which Middle Saxon archaeology is recovered: as much as a third of the time. Explaining precisely why settlements underwent such widespread stabilisation in the Middle Saxon period is less straightforward, but the changes appear to be related to more wholesale transformation of the landscape of southern England which included intensification of agricultural production and a greater emphasis on farming specialisation. While such processes could have been stimulated ‘from below’ by peasant communities themselves, it is more tempting to see the hand of the increasingly powerful social institutions of the period at work. The increased planning and stability of settlement layouts is thus probably the result of the changing face of Middle Saxon lordship, as ever more powerful social institutions sought to root their authority in the agricultural economy (Reynolds 2003, 131-3; Wright forthcoming).

The changes visible in the Middle Saxon settlement record did not therefore occur in isolation, but instead represent one part of a more comprehensive transformation of the English countryside, and indeed English society. This research has, for the first time, demonstrated something of the frequency with which Middle Saxon material is recovered from currently occupied villages which itself perhaps hints at the incidence and geographical coverage of the two stage process of early medieval settlement evolution. This research has not attempted to explain the origins of ‘nucleated’ and ‘dispersed’ medieval settlement patterns which has attracted so much scholarly attention, and has deliberately avoided assigning Middle Saxon phases terms such as ‘initial nucleation’ or ‘proto nucleation’ as others have previously (Jones and Page 2006; Rippon 2008). Such terminology is likely to be anachronistic, as there can be little doubt that the same two stage process of settlement evolution occurred across areas in southern England later characterised by both dispersed and nucleated medieval types (Roberts and Wrathmell 2000; Wright 2015, 182). As Tom Williamson (2013, 164) has suggested, it is perhaps better to consider the changing character

of settlement in the Middle Saxon period as evidence of settlement *stabilisation* rather than nucleation, forming a basis from which some later villages developed. The results from analysis of the AIP presented here indicate that up to a third of currently occupied settlement excavations have located some form of Middle Saxon archaeology. Even if a conservative view of these results is taken, the balance of evidence still suggests that a significant minority of currently occupied settlements can trace origins of some sort to these stabilising sites of the pre-ninth century. Indeed, that such sequences are only likely to be revealed through excavation of a reasonable size suggests that the one in three approximation may even underestimate the true frequency with which Middle Saxon settlements are found. While many villages were undoubtedly founded *de novo* during the Late Saxon and subsequent periods, the case studies presented here indicate that the correlation between Middle Saxon evidence and later medieval villages is not the product of simple geographical juxtaposition between two well-settled landscapes.

It has not been claimed that the seventh to ninth century habitation found in currently occupied rural settlements represent medieval villages as we generally recognise them. On the contrary, even when Middle Saxon material is found, it has been demonstrated that historic settlement forms only usually emerged following a process of short-range settlement shift and restructuring which can typically be dated to between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Again, identifying the dynamics behind the overhaul of settlement arrangements in the Late Saxon period is somewhat problematic — most scholars would probably suggest that it is part of the same process which saw the establishment of many villages by a new thegny class taking advantage of the fragmentation of large multiple estates (e.g. Jones 1976; but cf. Williamson 2013, 124; 165). While the two stage process of settlement evolution can be seen to have occurred across southern England, the best excavated examples so far come from the east of England and the counties of Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire in particular. The fact that stabilising settlements underwent a slight shift and restructuring from a pre-existing focus to reach their historic form should not detract from their lasting legacy, however, but instead suggests that Middle Saxon communities often provided vital scaffolding for later developments. In the case of Fordham, for example, features of the eighth-century settlement remained in use not only during the Late Saxon period but continued to be utilised even into the nineteenth century. Given that settlements assumed more permanent forms throughout the seventh, but particularly the eighth century, communities in this period are likely to have rapidly assumed a greater sense of attachment to the landscape. The naming of more stable

communities was a crucial part of this identity building process, and was precipitated as settlements that individuals inhabited became more closely associated with a specific topographic or natural feature. This process of ‘making place from space’ through the naming of settlements has been recognised by geographers for some time, but is increasingly being recognised by archaeologists (e.g. Jones and Semple eds. 2012). That many settlements in the countryside had assumed an identity signified by a name by the Middle Saxon period is reflected to an extent in documentary sources of the period—even within the earliest Anglo-Saxon charters dating from the seventh century, many of the names of rural settlements referenced are recognisable as villages which continue to be occupied today. While the character of the dwellings and property plots may have undergone comprehensive change, we can therefore say with some confidence that Middle Saxon communities established something of both the physical structure and the identity of later settlement. Further research is likely only to underline the importance of the seventh to ninth centuries in shaping the character of the medieval landscape, as Middle Saxon communities will be seen to have provided a significant and lasting legacy upon the development of the English countryside.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: 1885 OS First Edition and modern 1:10,000 OS maps of Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire with the locations of HEFA test pits superimposed (red dots). The parish church, around which medieval settlement was focussed, is marked by a blue cross. Although in the modern landscape all of the test pits are located in 'currently-occupied' areas, when plotted against nineteenth-century mapping it is clear that most are not located in the historic core of settlement. © Crown Copyright and Database Right 2015. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence).

Figure 2: The sequence of enclosures excavated at Hillside Meadow, Fordham. Phase 1 is dated c. 500–725; Phase 2 (early) to c.750-850 and Phase 2 (late) to c.850-1150. The focus at Fordham appears to have shifted to form the historic settlement pattern during the Late Saxon period (see Figure 3) (Patrick and Rátkai 2011 Figure 3.2, page 43). Reproduced with kind permission of the authors and Birmingham Archaeology.

Figure 3: Archaeological interventions at Fordham (stippled), where excavations at two separate locations provide a valuable illustration of early medieval settlement development. The Middle Saxon settlement at Hillside Meadow underwent a short-range shift and restructuring from the ninth century which created the historic village form. Excavation at the village school shows that Late Saxon settlement was instead focussed around the medieval church and street system © Crown Copyright and Database Right 2015. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence).

Figure 4: Reconstruction of the late eighth-century settlement arrangement at Lordship Lane, Cottenham. Although Middle Saxon settlement was highly ordered and occupied for a century or more, it is clear that it was only after Late Saxon modification that the historic village plan of Cottenham was created. Reproduced with kind permission of Richard Mortimer and CAU.

Figure 5: The location of the excavated area at Warmington (stippled), Northamptonshire set against the OS First Edition published in 1886. Reflecting an increasingly prevalent two-stage process of settlement evolution, the Middle Saxon phase at Warmington shifted to form the medieval settlement pattern in the tenth or eleventh century. © Crown Copyright and Database Right 2015. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence).

Figure 6: Excavated phases of the Peterborough Road settlement at Warmington. The domestic use of the site, which during the Middle Saxon period (Phases 1 and 2) may have acted as part of a driveway towards a fording point across the River Nene, was abandoned in the tenth century with occupation in the area instead fronting onto the historic streets. Reproduced with the kind permission of MOLA Northampton.

Figure 7: Juxtaposition of early medieval settlement features at Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire, where a sixth-century settlement has been excavated adjacent to the earthworks of a deserted Late Saxon village (Thomas 2008, Figure 3). Reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

Figure 8: View of Brent Knoll, Somerset looking north. The parish church of St Michael, around which the medieval village of Brent Knoll was clustered, is visible slightly left of centre. It seems that a Middle Saxon community was located on the western edge of the Knoll, which in the eighth century would have formed an island.

Table Captions

Table 1: Results of the assessment of the AIP from the five counties in central and eastern England. This analysis convincingly shows that Middle Saxon material is frequently identified in currently occupied villages when appropriate excavation techniques are undertaken.