Memories of Migration? So-called “Anglo-Saxon” Burial Costume of the Fifth Century AD

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Abstract

It is often alleged that wearers of the burial kit which began to appear in lowland Britain in the fifth century AD began to construct new forms of ethnic community by doing so. This article considers the empirical basis for this assertion, and assesses it in light of approaches to ethnic constructivism proposed by Rogers Brubaker (2004) and Andreas Wimmer (2013). The article finds the basis for such assertions lacking, and appeals for the development of new interpretative approaches to the study of early medieval mortuary archaeology in Britain.

Introduction

Ethnic identity is a situational construct which fashions communities through real and fictive stories and memories. Studies of early Anglo-Saxon burial archaeology have long recognized this, and scepticism of the putatively “Germanic” culture of graves in England can be found as early as Hills (1979). Early doubts, however, largely depended upon the absence of empirical evidence rather than querying of the categories proposed, and most works pre-2000 simply took a constructivist approach to culture historical interpretation (e.g. Hines 1984; Härke 1990. For an exception, see Pader 1982. For overviews of the discipline’s development see Lucy 2000; Hills 2003; Harland 2017b). Particularly since the important criticisms of Lucy (1998; 2000; 2002), the careful scholar has not been able take a simplistic culture historical approach to the material culture of fifth-century Britain. Subsequent work has vastly revised our knowledge of the mechanisms whereby people came across the North Sea from Germania Magna and Scandinavia to settle in Britain in the fourth to sixth centuries AD, bringing new forms of material culture with them. These studies reject that the new material culture that appeared alongside this migration passively reflected the importation of static ethnic groups. They propose instead that this new material culture was used by the communities of early medieval Britain (and the former Western Roman Empire) to construct new ethnicities using real and imagined memories of migration, and allusions to “Germanic” cultural myths (later recorded by the eighth-century historian Bede, under the names “Angle”, “Saxon” and “Jute”, Historia Ecclesiastica 1.15; Colgrave & Mynors 1969, Hakenbeck 2011; Gerrard 2013; Martin 2015; Hills 2015). Martin (2015), for example, uses his important new typology of the cruciform brooch to argue that the new styles of decoration in the fifth century show that this artefact functioned as tradition-bearing material. The allusions to “Germanic” myth, and memories this material
would have invoked of migration, real or fictive, were then used to construct a new Anglian ethnicity out of the diverse peoples who migrated to what became Northumbria and East Anglia. Martin invokes a classic argument about early medieval ethnic identity as being based around “tradition-bearing” elites, originating from scholars of medieval history based in Vienna (Wenkus 1961; Wolfram 1979. For criticism see Gillett 2002).

We might consider the brief reports thus far published on the recent excavation at Scremby, Lincs., in which the excavators described a buckle as “commonly associated with Jutish communities in Kent,” as indicative of the dominance of this approach (University of Sheffield 2018). But can this reasonably be argued? This is not simply one interpretative option presented among others, but one far more popular than the available empirical evidence reasonably allows. Constructivist approaches to ethnicity raise a considerable epistemological barrier before those who would seek to identify ethnic phenomena, yet this is scarcely heeded by those who espouse constructivist ideals. Ethnic sociology recognizes this as a wider problem. Brubaker, for example, observes that

“it is not that the notion of social construction is wrong; it is rather that it is today too obviously right, too familiar, too readily taken for granted, to generate the friction, force, and freshness needed to push arguments further and generate new insights. One symptom of this intellectual slackness is that one often finds constructivist and groupist language casually conjoined” (2004, 3).

Although patterned phenomena can be identified as ethnic expression in some instances, this cannot be universalised. The construction of ethnic boundaries is highly context dependent, and requires case-by-case analysis. Ethnicity’s only universal characteristic is that it emerges from the coding and framing of acts as ethnic (Brubaker 2004; Wimmer 2013). The etic observer who makes ethnic expression the first weapon in their arsenal when interpreting patterns in material culture therefore reifies ethnic expression, an emic phenomenon, without empirical basis. Similar apparent patterns of phenomena cannot be assumed to represent ethnic expression in all instances without proof (Wimmer 2013). This article demonstrates that we lack such proof for the material usually argued to express ethnicity in early Anglo-Saxon burial costume. This will be shown through considering two elements of this material that are usually held, erroneously, to form the empirical basis for such interpretations. I will first consider artistic styles present on early medieval metalwork, claimed to evidence belief in “Germanic” religious beliefs and origin myths. I will then consider a female-gendered style of dress this metalwork was used to fasten, claimed to represent a form of ethnic “folk costume” (or Tracht). As when Hills proposed her major reassessment in 1979 (304), the arguments for interpreting these phenomena largely derive from studies of “Germanic” material on the
European continent, to which British scholarship sometimes makes unquestioning reference.

**The “Breath of Odin”? Zoomorphic Art Styles**

A series of chip-carved styles from north-western Europe are vital to arguments for the remembrance of a “pan-Germanic” cultural ethos in early Anglo-Saxon burial costume. These are usually known as “Nydam Style”, “Saxon Relief Style” and “Style I”, and originated in Scandinavia and Northern Germany in the late fourth to fifth, mid-fifth, and late fifth centuries respectively (Haseloff 1981; Inker 2006; Webster 2009). They are distributed across Scandinavia, lowland Britain and north-western continental Europe, but with considerably differing chronologies across these regions (Høilund Nielsen 2012).

It has long been known that Style I descends from chip-carved styles of decoration on Roman military metalwork from the Rhine and Danube (fig. 1, fig. 2), and took on new characteristics after their adoption in *Germania* and Scandinavia (Haseloff 1974; 1981). Early attempts to explain the spread of chip-carved styles to *Germania* hypothesised that Roman craftsmen must have been kidnapped by the societies beyond the Rhine (Haseloff 1974). This hypothesis is now, thankfully, met with little credence in scholarship (Inker 2006).

This art is hugely diverse, as is the metalwork, ranging from great square headed brooches (fig. 3), smaller saucer or applied brooches (fig. 4), and the cruciform brooches Martin uses to make his ethnic interpretation (fig. 5). These are usually held to be emblematically “Germanic”, similarly to the art depicted on Scandinavian bracteates descended from imperial *solidi*, to which they bear close relation (Behr 2000; Dickinson 2002; Martin 2015). When attempts are made to problematise the inference of ethnicity from this material, the adoption of this metalwork is still often seen as representing transition towards a “Germanic ideology” (e.g. Gerrard 2013). When such views are not based on culture historical reasoning, this Germanic essence is presumed to come from the metalwork’s role in conveying cosmologies and ideologies that refer to the “Germanic” world, such as pagan myths, or migration narratives preserved in late Roman texts. These allegedly evidence a cultural coherence that lends the styles their “Germanic” quality (Hedeager 2000; 279–300; Behr 2000; Behr & Pestell 2014, 68; Martin 2015, 154–5; Pesch 2017). There are countless examples of this argument, but Lotte Hedeager’s (2000) is fairly typical and often cited. For Hedeager, the methodological bridge for material culture to be interpreted through this textual material hinges upon an understanding that material symbolism is an act of expression, signalling the identity of those using it.

Such a premise is reasonable enough. The difficulty is that there is no evidence for the existence of the body of coherent pagan myths that are the proposed medium by which identity was signalled in the fifth century, or that their coherence was contemporarily recognised. The aspects of the cosmology that would have functioned to express these
identities, if these are even what Animal Art Style conveyed, are unknown and unknowable. Interestingly, Hedeager accepts that her proposal that early animal art may have conveyed mythological content is unverifiable. But this is not extended to the resulting notion, that this art and the metalwork which carried it could be associated with “Germanic” peoples. Moreover, to support such claims, Hedeager argues that continental Germani collectively shared Scandinavian origin myths (2000, 38-45). This assumes that “Germanic peoples on the continent and in England will have had an understanding of the depictions on the bracteates and the brooches” (2000, 43). Something is presumed intrinsic to the “Germanic” ethos that enabled its participants to interpret these brooches where others could not. This, moreover, is entirely derived from empirically non-verifiable assertions that the iconography of these items transmitted the Nordic myths later preserved in high medieval Icelandic eddic literature.

This premise also allows Inker (2006) to ascribe a “Germanic” significance to the Saxon Relief Style. This style is largely found on applied and cast saucer brooches (fig. 6), which originate in regions described by adherents of culture historical interpretations as “Saxon”. This style likewise developed through the adoption and adaptation in Germania of zoomorphic styles originally found on the provincial Roman military frontier. Inker complains about attempts by earlier students of Saxon Relief Style to “play down” its “Germanic” aspects because of these origins. Inker suggests that the style’s creation was an expression of identification of Germanic peoples with the martial prowess of the Roman army. He asserts that this “was set in train by the growth of warrior status of gods and leaders in north European peoples during the Later Roman Iron Age” (2006, 2) For Inker, this “distinctly Germanic” material expression was “bursting with dynamic force and expansion” (2006, 1). This is Inker’s sole basis for claiming the Saxon Relief Style conveyed a “Germanic” cultural ethos, beyond its location in Germania.

What evidence do we really have for the cultural beliefs that the users of this material are purported to share? There is growing dissatisfaction with the “Germanic” as an analytical category, used to describe a putative ideological system that unified the languages, behaviour, cultural products, cosmologies, political formations and social structures of the diverse inhabitants of Germania Magna in Late Antiquity. Rebuttals exist for the full range of material to which the concept is applied, ranging from historiography (Jarnut 2012), literature (Goffart 1995), linguistics (Goering, forthcoming), legal codes (Barnwell 2000) and material culture (Halsall 2007; Von Rummel 2007; 2013). There is almost no evidence that the disparate social groups who existed along the Baltic and the North Sea coasts, in Germany, across the Danube, and in Scandinavia shared a conscious identity in Late Antiquity (Pohl 2004, 50-1; Halsall 2007). Some modern historians label these groups Germani, but Von Rummel (2013) has noted the irony that modern scholars so often accept the artificial categories that Roman ethnographers imposed upon the subjects of their works for the purpose of domination. The inhabitants of Germania Magna far more frequently communicated with the inhabitants of the
Roman Empire than with their proposed ethnic comrades (Lee 1993). This should hardly be surprising, given their frequent location on the imperial frontiers (Shaw 2002, 50-4).

We lack evidence for whether these pagan myths took the same form in the fourth to sixth centuries as those recorded in the High Middle Ages. In some cases, we know that they did not. Shaw (2002) has shown it to be unlikely that the temporally-separated deities, Wodan, and Óðinn, can be associated with one another other beyond etymology, or that Wodan was worshipped in Anglo-Saxon England before the eighth century. This poses difficulties for those who would interpret figural depictions on bracteates (fig. 7) as the “breath of Odin” (Pesch 2017). Hawkes (1997) has highlighted the considerable empirical issues that face the scholar attempting to link material as chronologically distant as Tacitus’ Germania is from the Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson. Arguments about Style I and its putative mythological content are based upon dubious temporal back projection from later source material. Høilund Nielsen’s (2015) recent overview of Animal Art Style scholarship shows that it is starting to recognise this problem, but Høilund Nielsen seems reluctant to abandon the notion that these styles could convey gods and myths, simply asserting that their names and stories are unknowable.

Even accepting that the use of this material culture in northwestern Europe evidences identity boundaries, it is impossible to infer which facets of social identity were being expressed. Von Rummel (2013) highlights that an artificial dichotomy, that between “Germanic” and “Roman” modes of dress and burial, continues to drive interpretation of late antique mortuary evidence. Roman burial is often defined merely by an absence of putatively “Germanic” grave-goods. In Britain, this dichotomy is exacerbated by an artificial chronological divide caused by dating methodology (for criticism of this dichotomy in Anglo-Saxon burial interpretation, see Harland 2017a, 129-137). The date, for example, of the introduction of Style I to Britain is dependent upon integrating typological phases with a series of closed-context coin-dated burials found in continental contexts, due to the collapse of the coin supply to Britain in the early fifth century and difficulties that impede the use of other absolute dating methods. Gerrard (2015) has found that many cemeteries usually identified as predating 400 AD (due to an absence of “Germanic” grave-goods) may in fact date to the fifth or sixth centuries. Rau (2010, 31-123) places Style I’s introduction to Scandinavia about 25 years earlier than previously believed, to c. AD 455-65. The chronological gap between late Roman and “early Anglo-Saxon” material is narrowing, and in all likelihood is an interpretative illusion.

This has substantial implications. Hills and Lucy, for example, in their final volume on Spong Hill (2013), usefully move away from interpretations of that cemetery which rely on a hard chronological binary to date the aduentus saxonum. Yet they propose that the site evidences a “Germanic” cultural system, which though constructed, was ideologically distinct from the Romanness which preceded it. They argue that the sixth century may have been a time of “ethnogenesis” made physically manifest in the selection of components of an “identity-bearing
assemblage developed within England”. Hills and Lucy suggest that it is thus reasonable to identify the region’s identity as “Anglian” (2013, 330). Their basis for this is, for example, interpretations made by such scholars as Martin (Hills and Lucy 2013, 303-7).

It is unclear why this cultural system need be so distinct (see Effros 2015). The only unifying factor that the disparate peoples who lived in Germania Magna in Late Antiquity likely shared was their involvement in the politics and military of the Roman Empire. Halsall (2014a) has therefore claimed that Style I and related styles became popular due to their transformation of late Roman motifs of a stable centre and periphery into motifs of “undecideability,” following the Western Empire’s political demise in the fifth century. Such an interpretative leap derives from empirically verifiable aspects of these styles, not speculative assertions about cosmology. Adams (2015) has highlighted Animal Art Style’s origin specifically in late Roman hunting imagery. It is thus difficult to assume that Style I indicates a firm chronological and cultural boundary, representing the arrival of a “Germanic ideology”.

“Folk” Costume? The Peplos Dress

Another common assertion is that early Anglo-Saxon grave-goods represent traditional folk costume (Tracht) that conveyed an essential “Germanic” character, beneath which were subsumed specific group identities (e.g. Hines 1998, 280-1; Walton Rogers 2007; Owen-Crocker 2004, 42–54, Ravn 2003, 127). This is based upon these grave-goods being worn in a garment known as peplos dress. Peplos, a tubular cloth fastened at the shoulders by a pair of brooches, has historic precedent in numerous ancient societies. Martin (2015) has argued that this garment was an act of ideological expression, through detailed studies of the age, social position, and gender of this garment’s wearers. However, Martin’s assertion that the ideology being expressed was a coherent cultural package we might label “Germanic” is based entirely on the presence of this costume in “classical sculpture of Germanic dress”. For him this proves the “authenticity and practicality” of this mode of dress, implicitly suggesting its traditionally “Germanic” nature (2015, 192). Peplos dress features in depictions of female captives from Germania from the second century (such as on the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome), and is attested in later archaeological finds such as from eighth-century Scandinavia (Owen-Crocker 2004, 43).

How does this reflect the “authenticity” of such costume, rather than it being a simple, effective method of fastening a garment? Much recent work bases such assertions on earlier continental scholarship (e.g. Böhme 1974; 1981, on which see Halsall 2010). Effros (2004) has observed that this scholarship relies upon an assumed passivity of the women wearing such costume, bearing cultural connotations transmitted to them in their role as “soldiers’ wives”.
Martin (2015) makes a case for the active role of women in the formation of Anglian identity by negotiating complex relationships between adornment and position in the lifecycle, but the “Germanic” aspects of Martin’s argument fall foul of Effros’ problem. Another cause for doubt is that peplos modes of dress were known in northern Gaul until the third century. Depictions of the garment then vanished for three centuries before re-appearing in northern Gaul and Germania simultaneously in the early fifth century (Walton Rogers 2007, 150-1). It is thus absurd to argue that peplos dresses functioned as a component of “Germanic” Tracht. On these grounds the same could be said for them forming a component of traditional, “authentic” Roman dress!

It is true that peplos is not widely depicted in Roman artistic representation, but Von Rummel (2007, 277) points out that to thereby see peplos as Germanic is an argument from absence, reliant on heavily context-specific artistic and documentary source material. Knowledge of how fibulae were used in costume in both the Empire and the barbaricum is quite lacking, due to the predominance of the cremation funerary rite. Nevertheless, repeated studies have found that peplos dress was no less common in parts of the Empire, such as Northern Gaul, than in the barbaricum, in fact being quite uncommon in both (Martin 1995, 678; Von Rummel 2007, 281-3).

Appeals to “authenticity” will not do. Alternative explanations of this phenomenon are available: Halsall (2011) interprets peplos in Gaul as a growth in popularity of female bodily adornment in the wake of collapse of other methods of funerary display, tied to the emergence of furnished inhumation burial in response to increased social insecurity, which drew upon a distinctly provincial Roman form of brooch. Von Rummel (2007) has argued similarly for “Vandal” material from North Africa. In Britain’s case, that the brooches used to fasten peplos dress in Britain were imports, with close ties to Germania, is undeniable. There is a substantial concentration of paired shoulder brooches in the northern barbaricum, the so-called “Sîntana de Mureș/Černjachov culture”. Unlike von Rummel’s North African, or Halsall’s Gallic, material, many components in Anglo-Saxon burial costume can be linked decisively to material in northern continental Europe (Böhme 1974; Hines 1984). Eger (2011) has attempted to refute von Rummel’s assertions regarding the peplos dress on this basis, but does so solely upon the basis of Böhme’s explanation of the three-century absence of the Gallic rite (1974), and allegations of a lack of attention to the Danube. Halsall (2009) has dismantled Böhme’s assertions, and von Rummel (2007, 279-282) does actually discuss the Danube, but even if he had not, this is hardly satisfactory for establishing the existence of a continuous Germanic tradition. Eger’s challenge to (2011, 225-226) Von Rummel simply follows Böhme’s assertion that there took place “resurrection” of the Gallic rite in the fifth century, which is pure speculation. The only way that this would demonstrate a continuous, widespread “Germanic” tradition would be if we were to assume that trans-Danubian people, such as those who used the Sîntana de Mureș/Černjachov culture, could likewise be subsumed under a pan-Germanic
ethos. This is not a priori proof that there existed an “authentic” Germanic tradition with a long history. The only way to argue for such an alternative tradition is by linking this material and its distribution to a wider, contemporarily perceived pan-Germanic ethos with no empirical basis. Moreover, those usually associated with the Sîntana de Mureș/Černjachov culture, the Goths, were never considered Germani by Roman ethnography (Kulikowski 2007, 46-7).

Conclusions

Ethnic identity cannot be demonstrated through purely archaeological means (Brather 2004; Halsall 2011). In the fifth-century burial costume of lowland Britain, we find prima facie evidence for neither ethnic expression nor the cultural and social infrastructure which would produce it. The present article has necessarily focused on taking apart current approaches, as it is far from simple to force the reconsideration of dominant disciplinary paradigms (for further discussion see Harland 2017b). Yet alternative interpretative frameworks are available. It is possible, for example, that putatively “Germanic” mortuary material reflects a wider pattern of provincial militarisation (with concomitant shifts in the construction of gender through mortuary costume) which took place all across the Empire in the fifth century (Halsall 2004; Von Rummel 2007). I have recently argued that post-Roman elites grappled with Romanness in diverse ways in Britain, some of which deviated from expected civic norms. The contemporary commentator Gildas may have made allusion to precisely such concerns, using language which admitted that though he might did not regard the stylistic references these elites drew upon as legitimately “Roman”, those elites may have disagreed (Harland 2017a). Perhaps the question we should be asking is not whether a “Germanic” ideology was imported into Britain, but rather why Britain, undergoing a similar transformation of ideological norms to that experienced by the continent, made use of material from the barbaricum? Given Britain’s dramatic dislocation from the Empire’s logistical structures in the fifth century (Gerrard 2013), I would posit that it is hardly surprising that people in Britain turned to material from the North Sea, where power was framed by the same expectations as in the Empire (Halsall 2007, Harland 2017b for fuller discussion). This hypothesis will be explored in a forthcoming monograph (Harland forthcoming). Much of our interpretation proceeds in interpretative leaps from that which can be empirically demonstrated, but through avoiding ethnic narratives, new interpretative questions become plentiful.

Perhaps it is time to cease interpreting the mortuary material culture of lowland Britain via the lens of “Germanic” tradition or myth. In a time of alarming growth of ethno-nationalism, the popularity of such interpretations should prompt reflection, given the origins of Germanische Altertumskunde in an ethnonationalist setting that produced some of the worst crimes of the modern period (Effros 2012; Wood 2013). Scholars of early Anglo-Saxon archaeological material acknowledge this troublesome past, and have devoted considerable effort to opposing the abuse of archaeological material to such abhorrent ends (Williams 2007). Still, until we abandon the baseless notion that the diverse peoples who migrated to Britain in the fourth to
sixth centuries shared a coherent, “Germanic” cultural ethos, we will continue, even unwittingly, to give ammunition to those who would use interpretations of the past to justify oppression in the present.

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References


**Figure Captions**

Fig. 1: Belt buckle from the late Roman cemetery at the Liebfrauenkirche, Worms. An example of provincial Roman chip-carved military metalwork. Photograph: The British Museum.

Fig. 2: Nydam style chip-carved decoration on a brooch from Kent. These brooch types originate in Scandinavia but show clear Roman stylistic influence. Early fifth century. Photograph: The Portable Antiquities Scheme.

Fig. 3: Great square headed brooch with Style I decoration from Chessell Down, Isle of Wight. Late fifth century. Photograph: The British Museum.

Fig. 4: Saucer brooch with Style I decoration from Aston, Berkshire. Photograph: The British Museum.

Fig. 5: Cruciform brooch with a Style I animal head terminal and bird head lappets, Lakenheath, Suffolk. Late fifth/early sixth century. Photograph: The British Museum.

Fig. 6: Pair of saucer brooches with Saxon Relief Style spiral decoration from Park Lane cemetery, Croydon. Photograph: Wessex Archaeology.
Fig. 7: Bracteate from Funen, Denmark. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.