

V. THE ROLE OF WEAPONS AND WEAPONRY IN POLITICAL AND MILITARY LEADERSHIP

FIT FOR A KING? REGALIA AND WEAPONRY IN EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ROYAL GRAVES

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Abstract

The excavation of a princely grave of the early seventh century at Prittlewell, Essex, in 2003, is the starting point for a review of the development of kingship in early Anglo-Saxon England. Emphasis is placed upon the equally important contributions of history and archaeology. It is also argued that it is essential to balance the attention given to the immediate contexts in England with the long-term development of kingship amongst the Germanic peoples. Valuable supplementary evidence is found in the terminology of kingship and lordship in Germanic philology, as well as the comparative study of Continental *Fürstengräber* of the Roman Iron Age.

Key words: Anglo-Saxon, archaeology, burial, kingship, Prittlewell, Sutton Hoo.

Early-medieval kingship

In our many efforts to understand how the organization of society developed amongst the Germanic-speaking peoples over the two thousand years from the Iron Age, before the birth of Christ, to the High Middle Ages, the history of kingship remains one of the most fundamental challenges for archaeological and historical scholarship. The term that survives as the English word *king*, German *König*, Scandinavian *konge* etc, came to denote the monarchic ruler and leader of a hierarchically stratified community: a society which, in the Middle Ages, also had a powerful aristocracy of noble but non-royal status. In the Early Middle Ages, however, from the earliest, distant historical sources at our disposal, we know that kingship could be shared, and was not necessarily monarchic, however much kings may always have sought to maximize their personal power (Wallace-Hadrill 1971; Wolfram 1970; James 1989).

The overall structure of those early-medieval communities could also be very different from the large kingdoms and early nation-states of the later Middle Ages. The smaller scale of polities in the Germanic homelands seems to coincide with a shallower and less sharply stratified hierarchy, as expressed in overt (archaeological) symbols of wealth and power (eg Asmus

1938; Genrich 1954; Wegewitz 1977). It has proved rather easy to lose sight of that situation when Germanic kingship in the middle of the first millennium AD is considered principally in the light of the different scope for political leadership in the context of the great war-bands, such as those of the Goths, which invaded and conquered the more southerly parts of the Roman Empire in Europe, and are therefore better illuminated in Late Roman historical sources. And yet all of these groups, great and small, apparently had kings. Kingship, it seems, was fixed at the very core of the idea of society and community, a model that was preserved through sequences of extensive social change. What kingship actually involved must have varied greatly from context to context. This paper offers some reflections upon the particular insights into a dramatic formative phase of English kingship that archaeology may provide, reconsidered in the light of the discovery of a further princely burial, at Prittlewell, Essex, late in 2003.

Historically, England emerged from the formerly Roman province of Britannia between c. AD 400 and 700. In the period 408 to 411, most if not all Roman troops were withdrawn from Britain to support the usurper Emperor Constantine III in his unsuccessful challenge to Honorius; in 411 Honorius suspended Roman rule

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in Britain by telling the *civitates* there, the local authorities, to organize their own defence, not to look for the protection of the Imperial army (Salway 1981, esp. pp.415-445). Britain then plunges into a very obscure period, although we do know that there were raids, and apparently the conquest and settlement of some areas, by Scotti from Ireland, Picti from the north, and Germanic peoples, mostly Saxones (Saxons) over the sea from the east. Archaeologically, there is a complete demise of Roman towns, villas and military camps by the early fifth century; and by the mid-fifth century a new series of settlement and burial sites is starting to appear in the east and south whose features and material culture have obvious sources in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia (Hines 1990). Writing in the eighth century, the English monk Bede said that this part of Britain had been settled by three *gentes*, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. His account is over-simplified but appears essentially factual (*HE*, Book I, chapter 15). In the 590s, Pope Gregory in Rome sent a mission to establish Roman Christianity in England, starting in the kingdom of Kent under its King Æthelberht. With the gradual establishment of the Church in England, historical records came to be kept, as a result of which we can now see the later sixth and seventh centuries as a period of consolidation and strong development for kingship and kingdoms in England.

What has long been a dominant view of how Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and thus Anglo-Saxon kingship, developed was rather light-heartedly described by Steven Bassett (1989, p.26ff.) in terms of a knock-out football tournament. This view postulates that the competition between kingdoms for success and survival began with a huge number of small, local teams, of which defeated competitors are steadily eliminated, especially when the biggest and most powerful teams appear in the later rounds of the contest. Eventually there is just one winner, the unified kingdom of England. In this model, of course, the minor losers are absorbed into their successful conquerors. It postulates a starting-point with a form of social organization that is uniformly one of small, local polities, out of which larger kingdoms, in effect, evolve (cf Scull 1993). The process is indeed well illustrated for us historically by the one area of central England where a large number of tiny “provinces” or principalities survived long enough, to the mid-seventh century, when they were merged, in a sequence of events that is historically recorded, into a short-lived kingdom of Middle Anglia, itself very soon absorbed into the West Midland kingdom of Mercia (Dumville 1989a, 1989b; Hines 1999). It is likewise the case that all of the three major kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England, Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria, were demonstrably formed by amalgamating sub-kingships, and

thus implicitly sub-kingdoms, into one (Yorke 1990; Kirby 1991). In the case of the very early anglicized areas around the east and south coasts, however, it is not so clear that Sussex, Essex, Surrey and Lindsey had to be constructed in this way. In Kent, the annexation of the area west of the River Medway is likely to represent the same process, but it is by no means certain that the “North-folk” and “South-folk” of Norfolk and Suffolk in East Anglia were component parts that preceded the definition of that kingdom itself (Fig. 1).

Some kingdoms in very early Anglo-Saxon England, then, may have covered areas and population groups of a size commensurate with those in northern Germany of the late Roman Iron Age. However, there is no evidence for the mere transferral of existing Continental Germanic kingships into England by the conquest and colonization of substantial tracts of territory, unlike in the northwest of England, where a kingdom of Dal Riata in Ulster does seem to have reproduced itself in western Scotland in such a way (Laing 2006, pp.324-329). As political units, all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were created anew; how far this was done to a template, social, territorial, or both, familiar in the Continent or in Scandinavia is the issue to be investigated. The individual leaders in this process may well have entered Britain with a special status and identity. Linguistic analysis of the word “king” suggests that at its very heart lies the concept of a man, or a few men, who somehow represent a genetically related group, or clan: the “kin” (Greene 1998, pp.121-140 and esp. pp.130-134). But kinship, as we know well, can be constructed as well as inherited; so too could such kingship. There is no significant correspondence between the ethnic identities Bede records, Anglian, Saxon and Jutish, and political identity. All of these ethnic groups were subdivided into several provinces or kingdoms, and their populations, even their leaders, were undoubtedly of mixed origin. Three early kingdoms, the West, South and East Saxons (Wessex, Sussex and Essex), largely defined the extent of the territory and population claimed to be the product of settlement of the Continental Saxons (together with what was probably a later Mercian sub-kingdom of the Middle Saxons/Middlesex). Anglian England was much more deeply divided, with only the East Angles identifying themselves by this ethnic term, a named group of which we have no secure historical attestation before Bede, although it is likely to have existed alongside Middle Anglia in the 650s. Archaeologically, it is possible to distinguish material suites of characteristically Anglian, Saxon and Jutish character, and the distribution of these in fifth- and earlier sixth-century Anglo-Saxon England has some congruency with Bede’s account of where those peoples were settled (Hines 1994; Høilund Nielsen 1997). The little

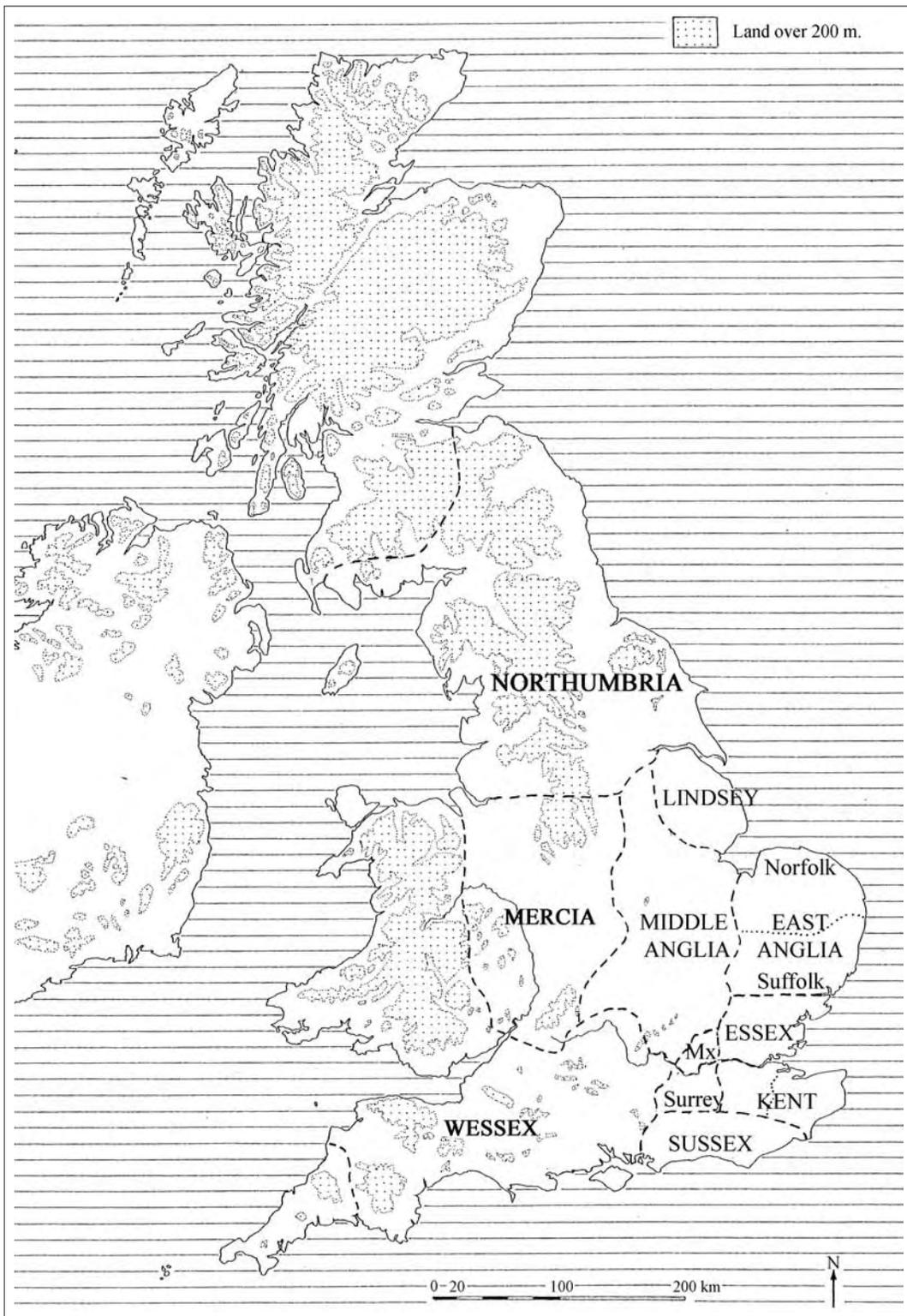


Fig. 1. Early Anglo-Saxon England, indicating the location and extent of the political territories of the mid- to late seventh century mentioned in the text. Mx = Middlesex.

Jutish material is concentrated mostly in Kent; distinctly Saxon material is found predominantly in the south; the Anglian cruciform brooch, by contrast, is found mostly in the Midlands and northeast. But there are broad border zones of great overlap, interchange and hybridization. The process of the transmission and inheritance of the ethnic identities concerned was, as

we should expect, itself one of constant selective restructuring and redefinition.

A persistent and important idea attaching to early Germanic kings is that of “sacral kingship”: the idea that kings mediated between the people and the gods. It was obviously a matter of practical politics for Christian missionaries to target kings and their courts in Eng-

land, but it was an uncontested fact of deep historical origins that the religion of the king was the religion of the people. We must not underestimate the significance of the fact that all known Anglo-Saxon royal families claimed descent from Germanic gods: often Woden, but also less well-recorded figures such as Bældæg and Seaxneat. As is so widely the case with Germanic cultures, we are frustratingly dependent upon Christian sources for accounts of and references to detail of the traditional pre-Christian, “pagan” practices of these peoples; but in the case of seventh-century England there is at least sufficient here to allow us to conclude that there was a close connection between those kings and the rites and priesthood of a communal religion (Bede, *HE*, II.5 and II.13; Clanchy 1970). The most convincing example of a pre-Christian cult building from England is the “temple”, Building D2 at the royal palace site of Yeavering, Northumberland (Hope-Taylor 1977, pp.154-169; Hines 1997, pp.388-389).

But what most historians regard as the one factor above all others that made a man a successful king was military leadership (eg Wolfram 1988; James 1989; Yorke 1990, p.16). Interestingly, and as is widely recognized, of course, this is quite at variance with what Tacitus wrote in his ethnographic account of Germania at the end of the first century AD, where he identified the *rex* as a man of noble birth with predominantly religious and juridical functions as systematically distinct from the *dux* of the army who was elected for his military prowess: “*Reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt*” (They accept kings for nobility, leaders for prowess) (Tacitus, *Germania*, 7).

Alongside their role in the conversion of England to Christianity, we have surviving seventh-century law-codes, three from Kent and one from Wessex, which show us that early Anglo-Saxon kings were well aware of their juridical role and very keen to assert it (Liebermann 1903-16; Wormald 1999). They were, however, very much military leaders too. Our historical records of Anglo-Saxon kingship right through to the reign of Alfred the Great at the end of the ninth century are dominated by records of their battles. Succession to the kingship commonly took the form of one king being killed in battle to be replaced by his victor. The main issue for future research identified by this short review starts from the point that, if we compare the contents and distribution of what are known as the *Fürstengräber* of the first to fourth centuries AD in Germany and Denmark with the kingly and princely burials of seventh-century England, we may indeed be able to see a subtle shift in the nature of kingship in this direction: a closer association of kingship itself with the distinctly military role, as Tacitus called it, of *dux*. It should be stressed, though, that while Tacitus was very clear on

the distinctly religious and juridical role of kingship, he tends to use the catch-all term *principes*, “leading men”, to accommodate the inevitably close connexion of these two aspects of leadership. Such a change may have made particular sense in the practical circumstances of the establishment of the first English kingdoms following the colonization of Britain, although those circumstances, and the development itself, were certainly not unique to Anglo-Saxon England. What remains much harder for us to determine is whether we should therefore talk of a persistent and strong tradition of Germanic kingship continuing in England, or if that kingship was largely re-invented, or re-introduced, primarily because of the immediate conditions that developed in England in the fifth and sixth centuries.

The Anglo-Saxon “princely” graves

Representing the English royal graves, there are really just four sites to consider: the famous Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, Broomfield in Essex and Taplow in Buckinghamshire, both excavated in the 19th century, and now Prittlewell in Essex, found quite unexpectedly just four years ago (Bruce-Mitford 1975-83; Read 1895; MoLAS 2004). Early Anglo-Saxon custom was to bury the dead with grave goods, but these graves stand out both because of the exceptional quality, quantity and range of the material buried within them, and for the special structure of the burials, as chamber burials, in one case with a ship. In terms of wealth, they stand quite apart; not merely at the top of a scale of increasing opulence. There are other burials we may suspect were of this kind but of which too little survives: for instance at Asthall Leigh and Cuddesdon in Oxfordshire; at Caenby in Lincolnshire; and at Coombe in Kent (Dickinson, and Speake 1992; Dickinson 1974; Jarvis 1850; Davidson, Webster 1969). In fact, apart from the miraculously intact burial under Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, all but one of the other graves in this royal necropolis had been robbed, and this site too would remain in that doubtful category. We are, therefore, undertaking the risky business of drawing inferences from only a fraction of the original evidence.

The exceptional quantity of skilfully crafted artefacts of course attracts attention to these burials. However, the most significant common factor between them is the special provision for hospitality amongst the grave goods (Plate III: 2). All four burials have great cauldrons for feeding a large assembly, and all contained the symbolically laden drinking-horns too. Accessory vessels include iron-bound wooden buckets, sometimes great tubs, bronze bowls of various forms, turned wooden cups or glass vessels. Sutton Hoo, Taplow and Prittlewell all had both a lyre and gaming pieces rep-

resenting entertainment; Sutton Hoo, Broomfield and Prittlewell also a lamp to light the chamber. Relatively little of this particular range of material appears to have been imported rather than to be locally made. Overall, this is clear evidence that the social role of the dead man was the most fundamental element to be commemorated in his burial: his ability to provide for a very privileged household indeed.

All of the dead men also had fittings from a costume they may have worn that would have displayed their special rank. Only at Sutton Hoo and Taplow, however, does this really amount to more than one conspicuously expensive and well-crafted buckle: the only dress accessory Anglo-Saxon men usually wore. Taplow and Sutton Hoo had special sets of clasps. We can infer from this that the buckle was a central item of display for a man. This makes it extremely significant that the famous Sutton Hoo great gold buckle comprised an amount of gold equal to 300 contemporary coins, the *tremissis* – apparently the 300-shilling *wergild* or life-price of an Anglo-Saxon nobleman. A man who could display, in a noble assembly, the price of the life of any nobleman there on his belt, can surely only have been a king. The attention paid to equipment in terms of weaponry and armour is at much the same level. The men buried at Prittlewell and Broomfield went into the grave with the quite standard noble warrior's equipment of a shield, a sword, and one or two spears. Heinrich Härke's overview of weapon-assemblages in Anglo-Saxon graves shows even this "full weapon-set" to be relatively rare, but it is at the top end of a common range of weapons in graves, not beyond it (Härke 1992, pp.97-124). Taplow has extra in the provision of a second, possibly a third shield, and three spears. Sutton Hoo too had just one sword and shield, although they were very specially crafted. However, Sutton Hoo also had a helmet and a mailcoat, and no less than nine spears, three of them barbed throwing-spears (Bruce-Mitford 1975–83, Vol. 2).

Further excavations were carried out at Sutton Hoo from 1986 to 1992 under the direction of Martin Carver (Carver 2005). No one then really expected another treasure hoard like the Mound 1 ship-burial to be found, but it could be assumed that whatever did emerge would be appropriate to a royal cemetery. One undisturbed grave was discovered, in Mound 17: the grave of a richly equipped man, buried with a horse. The real surprise here came when a larger, slightly earlier cemetery was found as a new visitor centre was being built at Tranmer House, about half a kilometre north of the barrowfield. Quite the inverse was the complete surprise in Prittlewell Park, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, late in 2003, when roadworks close to the site of a known, not unusual cemetery of the seventh

century revealed a perfectly intact chamber grave that had barely even collapsed. A fact of particular interest in the present context is that the man who was buried in the chamber grave of Prittlewell was not armed in any way different from the occupants of at least six of the 19 other weapon-graves known here: not only in being equipped with a sword, shield and two spears, but even in the very types of the weaponry (Tyler 1988).

The princely graves of Taplow, Broomfield, Prittlewell and Sutton Hoo apparently date from the span of a single generation: the period c. AD 600 to 630. The burials at Tranmer House/Sutton Hoo and the other graves at Prittlewell bring us face to face with the proximity between the kings or princes in these graves and a population that supported them. Similarly, when we look back in time across the sixth century, we can find significant predecessors of this type of elite burial. At Spong Hill, Norfolk, for instance, a large cremation cemetery serving several surrounding village communities was established around the middle of the fifth century. For three or four generations from the beginning of the sixth century, however, a small population was inhuming its dead on the northeast corner of the cremation burial zone. The inhumation graves include a few barrows, and two chamber graves (31 and 40). We have an interesting archaeological sequence here in that the shield-boss from grave 40 is of a later type than those in graves 31 and 41, so graves 31 and 41 may be the earliest, one in a chamber, the other under a small barrow, followed by grave 40 with a large barrow and then grave 32 alongside grave 31 and perhaps, then, the raising of a second large barrow over them both. This seems to be an unusually dramatic and dynamic illustration of a small elite emerging alongside a larger, undifferentiated population, expressing at least its ambitions to be of a special, higher status through burial practice (Hills *et al.* 1984: unfortunately the published stratigraphical data do not show conclusive evidence for the order of the barrows around graves 31, 32 and 40 respectively, although that is confidently stated in the text).

Another important site for tracing hierarchy back across the sixth century is also newly excavated, and as yet unpublished: on the Royal Air Force base at Lakenheath, Suffolk. Here, as in Sutton Hoo Mound 17, we have two men with horse graves, one of them fully equipped with sword, shield and spear, and rich horse-harness. A new chronology of weaponry produced primarily by Karen Højlund Nielsen together with myself dates this grave to the early sixth century, maybe even the late fifth (Hines ed. forthcoming). It is as yet too early to draw firm conclusions, but again this conspicuously rich weapon-burial is at least amongst the very earliest in this burial zone: it *could* therefore

be a founder grave. The one point I would emphasize as a result of this, is that we need to be very careful in looking at these burials in a diachronic perspective and jumping to conclusions about a process of evolution, by which hierarchical social structures, and particularly aristocracy and kingship, grew increasingly strong, rich and apart from the rest of the population over time. There were indeed changes, but hierarchy and power were, in significant measure, always there. Kingship cannot be studied as a subject on its own; it can only be understood as a phenomenon within a relationship with its context. Even this very brief overview should be sufficient to show how plausible it is that changing circumstances made kingship more visible in Anglo-Saxon England, rather than that there must have been some internally or externally driven “growth of kingship” itself.

A wider perspective

As an interpretation of what have been summarized here as the critical points of the history and archaeology of kingship in Early Anglo-Saxon England, therefore, it is suggested that the social hierarchy materially expressed in burial archaeology between the beginning of the sixth and the mid-seventh centuries in fact emphasizes a continuum between *cyning* and *folc* (king and people) at the same time as it manifests the special status of the former in relation to the latter. This has to be a general proposition, maintained as a valid basis for further consideration despite the differences between and uncertainties concerning the few principal princely/royal burials discussed herein. In the case of our two Essex graves, Prittlewell and Broomfield, we have a man armed in essentially the same way as other fully armed warriors; at Taplow the man had a superabundance of the same type of weaponry; at Sutton Hoo, however, he had a very fine sword and exceptional shield, special body armour, and an unparalleled number of spears. The cemeteries of Spong Hill and Eriswell, in different parts of East Anglia to Sutton Hoo, show that the relationship between a well-armed, dominant elite, burying its dead in a conspicuous and distinctive way, and the more ordinary mass of the population can be traced back to the beginning of the sixth century at least. The case for identifying the early seventh-century graves as specifically royal, princely, even kingly, – rests first and foremost upon the exceptional scope of evidence for the social relationship of hospitality represented in the grave assemblages, and specially, too, on the material quantification of social power embodied in the Sutton Hoo great gold buckle. It is quite reasonable, then, to argue that, with due adjustments for the real differences of scale, the aspect

of the archaeology of Early Anglo-Saxon kingships implies the achievement of power and status by individuals who succeeded in essentially the same role as the great Frankish and Gothic *Heerkönige*: effective, practical, leaders and protectors.

It is equally reasonable, in the most general terms, to draw attention to the contrast in respect of the inclusion of weapons in the graves of the high social elite of relevant Germanic communities, between the Lüssow-type *Fürstengräber* of the first to fourth centuries, with their predominant emphasis on hospitality and bodily display and virtual absence of weaponry (Eggers 1950; Gebühr 1974), and a range of different finds of the Late Roman Iron Age, Migration Period and beyond, such as the burials of the Leuna-Haßleben group in central Germany (Schulz 1933, 1953; Steuer 1982, esp. pp.181-308); the fifth-century grave of Childeric at Tournai (Böhner 1981); and in due course the Scandinavian burials such as Snartemo in southwestern Norway and the Vendel/Valsgärde graves in central Sweden (Rolfsen, Stylegar 2003; Lamm, Nordström 1983). We cannot refuse to acknowledge that this real contrast and change in Germanic social leadership is consistent with a development away from the character of kingship as Tacitus described it in the first century, when he imputed to kings, as such, juridical functions and religious roles and mystique, and separated them from the army-leaders. The biggest challenge for us here, in fact, is rather to understand how far those roles could have been separated in the first place. Nevertheless, it seems clear that by the end of the Roman Period, the Migration Period and the establishment of a new and powerful series of Germanic kingdoms saw military leaders increasingly appropriating the position of kingship, without losing its traditional, practical associations as summarized above.

As was stressed at the beginning of this discussion, however, although kingship thus developed radically in pragmatic terms, the immaterial concept of kingship, and the ancient terminology, seem to have held their fundamental place in the idea of community passed from generation to generation: the notion of the *folc*. It will help us greatly to understand the profound changes in southern and eastern Britain after the demise of Roman rule to be able to measure what ideas of society and identity of this kind the incoming Germanic elements brought with them. This paper introduces the proposition that kingship may indeed have been utterly primary: ideologically, another truly Germanic element brought into Britain, alongside the much more easily identifiable pottery, metalwork and building-types of material culture. And the necessary corollary of kingship was the concept of the people (*folc*), which elsewhere I have argued was intensely

associated with cultural conformity in the intrusive Germanic cultures of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia at this time (Hines 1996). No such insistence on the antiquity and durability of the Germanic concept of kingship and folk will deny that those same traditional elements then had actively to be manipulated in Early Anglo-Saxon cultural history, as kingship and kingdoms were absolutely reconstructed (as noted); nor that, as the foreign objects in the Prittlewell and Sutton Hoo Mound 1 graves show us particularly clearly, such a reconstruction of kingship was directly influenced at the key stage of its history by connections with overseas powers and models. But the congruency of the development of Anglo-Saxon kingship with the cultural features of Germanic kingship in such a long-term, comparative perspective as that outlined here may further help us to grasp how ready the Anglo-Saxon kings eventually were to reclaim that version of the sacral aura of kingship that Christianity offered them. Most importantly of all, though, we can appreciate the principle that the inheritance of a determinative tradition of this kind need not result in sheer inertia in cultural practice. Rather, it can be a rich source of material and motivation for creative and adaptive development.

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DERA KARALIUI? ANKSTYVŪJŲ ANGLOSAKSŲ KARALIŠKŲ KAPŲ REGALIJOS IR GINKLUOTĖ

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Santrauka

VII a. pradžios karališkojo kapo Prittlewell, Essexe, tyrinėjimai 2003 metais paskatino peržiūrėti Anglijos ankstyvųjų anglosaksų laikų karaliaus valdžios raidą (1 pav., III: 2 iliustr.). Karaliaus valdžios institucijos išryškėjimas yra vienodai lygiai pagrįstas istoriniais ir archeologiniais šaltiniais. Straipsnyje argumentuojama, kad būtina subalansuoti požiūrį tarp artimiausio, Anglijos, konteksto ir ilgalaikės karaliaus valdžios raidos tarp kitų germanų. Terminologija: karaliaus valdžia ar kilmingųjų valdžia, vertingas požiūris į šią problemą papildymas, kuriam atsakymas yra rastas germanų filologijoje ir taip pat lyginamosiose romėniškojo laikotarpio kontinento kunigaikščių kapų (*Fürstengräber*) studijose.