Historiography and Archaeology, the *Adventus Saxonum*, and the Politics of the Early Middle Ages

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In Memoriam Stefan Donecker. Ein unvergleichlich scharfsinniger Genosse.

In this interview, the editors and the interviewee discuss contemporary approaches to the study of ethnic identity in the context of the end of Roman Britain and migration to Britain from across the North Sea. A discussion of the interviewee's attempt to problematise this issue in relation to the cremation cemetery of Spong Hill, Norfolk, is used to open up a wider discussion, which covers issues such as issues of empiricism and interpretation, misconceptions about what it means to correctly draw upon archaeological and historical source material in unison, and the mis/utilisation of the study of the early medieval past in its various forms in relation to contemporary political discourse in Britain around issues such as migration, ethnicity and identity.

Ethnic identity; Spong Hill; historiography; politics and archaeology; aduentus Saxonum

Introduction

Femke Lippok: The first question is, could you introduce yourself and your work relating to early medieval cremation burials in the context of your other work?

James Harland: I would begin up front by saying that I'm very much not a cremation burial specialist, I would hesitate also to describe myself as an archaeologist. I am, first and foremost, a historian who is interested in the transition from late Roman Britain to post-Roman Britain and how that process affects the transformation of cultural and ethnic identity. My work to date has been mostly concerned with how archaeologists and historians in the present day, have attempted to study that set of processes. So, what were their methodological queries? What were their interpretative assumptions, both conscious and unconscious, and what were the forms of evidence they draw on? What questions do they pose to the archaeological material? That's what my recent book (Harland 2021) was all about. Cremation fits into that because a new form of cremation burial is among the key pieces of evidence for this period of transition and is one of the core pieces of evidence drawn upon by people to assert as evidence for large-scale migration from northern Germany and Scandinavia. Spong Hill, in particular, evidences a distinct form

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of cremation urn that otherwise appeared mainly in southern Jutland, which has been used to study questions about the role of migration from that region and the effect it had on the late-to-post -Roman transition for as long as that link has been recognised. My interest in cremation lay in its study by other archaeologists in order to answer these questions. Beyond that, in terms of the empirical study of the material, the understanding of its typology, the sorts of things that we can infer from the items buried with the deceased, I am entirely reliant upon the expertise of other specialists. I have not performed that kind of work myself, though my book does try to show that we can use that empirical work to try and answer different questions. In that, I've actually been immensely helped by Femke's work (Lippok 2020), because it addresses the problematic perceived divide in scholarship between cremation and furnished inhumation (see also Perry, this volume). As you show, we need to treat them together as a set of related practices. And that's especially important when interpretations of Germanic mass migration or Germanic ethnicity narratives hinge upon particular interpretations relating to furnished inhumation. If cremations, as you argue, Femke, have much more to do with inhumations, perhaps new narratives around inhumation which reject those interpretations (e.g. Halsall 1995; 2010, see below) can be extended to cremation. Your work helped me immensely in trying to make a case for that in my book.

Reinterpreting cremation

FL: Which site in your research area featuring cremation burials deserves more attention and why?

JH: I'm going to answer this somewhat counterintuitively. Because I'm going to answer this with Spong Hill, which is possibly the most studied early medieval cremation cemetery in eastern Britain (Hills 1977; Hills and Lucy 2013). It's a relatively famous site in Norfolk, and consists of several thousand cremation urns. It's been known since the early eighteenth century and there have been repeated campaigns of excavation. It has been the foundation of the careers of many early Anglo-Saxon archaeologists with whom we are all incredibly familiar. This might sound like an odd suggestion, given, as other interviewees have pointed out, that it's a site that almost produces a tunnel vision for our interpretative options (see Squires, this volume). Nevertheless, it is a site that deserves further attention for a reason. I would posit that this relates to our framing of questions with regard to this period and how we approach the framing of those questions, which is that much of the debate about the *adventus Saxonum* and how we approach our material, in my view, has been framed too much within a set of binary polarities between either continuity or collapse, mass migration, or absence of migration or trade, or what have you. Sites like Spong Hill have been the sites around which these questions have been framed. The precise problem I've just been alluding to connects to the importance of seeing inhumation and cremation in dialectic with each other as technologies of remembrance is something that you, Howard, have addressed quite extensively in relation to Spong Hill (Williams 2014), not least given how, as you have highlighted, approaches to this issue with regard to sites like Spong Hill has also been driven by earlier scholarly approaches to furnished inhumation burial (Williams 2014: 101–106).

Many publications about Spong Hill, including those by the main scholars involved in its excavation, frame their questioning around the scale of migration from northern Germany in East Anglia, as if this were the major issue that still requires addressing (e.g. Hills 2014a). When we (and they) look at such cemeteries, we do see that it is impossible to dispute, at least in these regions, some significant scale of migration. We know that lots of people came from northern Germany. OK, good, the question is answered. But I'm not convinced that this is a question that needs answering. If I'm honest, I don't think that anyone could reasonably dispute that migration took place. It is pretty clear that a large body of people moved from northern Germany and Scandinavia in the fifth and sixth centuries (and though there's much else in Gretzinger *et al.* 2022 to be debated, on which see below, this comes out in that publication quite clearly). This is actually where I depart from a body of thinking which seeks to downplay that phenomenon as an explanatory factor in the changes we see in Britain in this period (see e.g. Arnold 1984; Hodges 1989). Susan Oosthuizen's recent book (2019) is a good example of this, because I think that it posed a lot of useful questions in many ways about our interpretative approaches to material questions about how we identify ethnic identity from the material record, which is my main concern. But it too, at least sometimes, follows a broader trend towards binary polarity whereby the key question seems to be regarded as the relative presence or absence of migration, and whether that was the cause of the large set of changes, the shift in orientation and identity that we witness in eastern Britain. This is not about apportioning blame, but this suggests that we are stuck within a set of frameworks that don't help us. And because this sort of framing is unhelpful, we become caught in solutions that also can't get us out of this set of binary polarities; and those solutions are usually empirical. You constantly see it claimed, for example, that more evidence is what will answer our question about whether this migration was the cause of this change in identity orientation from Romano-British or Roman (or whatever), towards what you often see described as a 'Germanic' ideology in publication. I think that is unhelpful. Which is where my work comes in.

The reliance on what we understand about our ability to infer ethnic identity from material culture in this period, and the answer, frankly, is that we know very little.

So, there is an enormous body of literature dedicated to examining this set of questions, but it very rarely pauses to query their legitimacy, and I'm kind of caricaturing here, since there are people who have paused to ask these sorts of questions. But so much of the literature examining these questions to date operates on the assumption that there is this thing called 'Germanic' identity that exists out there in the world, that we can isolate through the material, and the question is just which particular bodies of material we can demonstrate it from, and through which it is constructed in opposition to Roman-ness. However, advances in our understanding of the ethnographic literature of the late Roman world which describes these people, or at least putatively describes these people has posed a serious challenge to our ability to identify some kind of coherent Germanic identity that existed in the late Roman world. We have no idea whether such a thing existed (on this point see the contributions in Friedrich and Harland (eds.) 2021). I'm personally convinced it didn't.

There are also major barriers purely in terms of what we can demonstrate from material culture. We can advance hypotheses. Toby Martin's study on the cruciform brooch (2015) is a fine example, as I think it's a wonderful body of work. It's an important typology, but I don't agree with the arguments Martin advances about the apogee of late fifth/early sixth-century cruciform brooches and the appearance of Style I having something to do with the emergence of an Anglian ethnic identity. Martin's work here represents a particularly sophisticated development of a broader set of ideas which became quite popular in the 2000s, namely that what has to date been called 'Anglo-Saxon' ethnic identity in Britain was situationally constructed through material culture. You see this idea diffused across a wide body of literature from that period (e.g. Ravn 2003; Hakenbeck 2007; Hines 2013). But what I argued in the book is that it is, ultimately, purely an interpretative leap. We have no empirical way of demonstrating that such a thing occurred, especially, not least because we don't have any literature that confirms that there was any kind of Anglian identity like this in circulation with any real purchase in that period. You can try to argue for a back projection for its existence via complicated linguistic analysis, such as we see from scholars like John Hines (e.g. 1984; 1994), but that's about the extent of what's possible, and it's very open to dispute (see, e.g., the critiques of this in Harland 2021: 117–125). My work has been concerned with saying: 'look all of these things that we think we can demonstrate from this material, maybe we actually can't.' Which isn't to say that the idea that these processes are taking place is impossible. But let's just suppose, for a moment, that all of these are things we can't know. Let's just put those questions to one side, and see what happens if we try asking different questions of some of the evidence that is available to us. Does that make sense?

FL: I completely recognise this! What really struck me when reading about early medieval cremations as a student was that some scholars have this tendency to put graves in boxes according to a set of characteristics. And then stick one homogenous explanation on that box: ethnicity, religion or status. And if you encounter a grave that doesn't fit these categories, it's somewhere in between; it must be a hybrid, and there must have been intermarriage or other forms of contact between these groups. We see this in early twentieth-century publications and it somehow hasn't changed. It's almost created this rift where younger scholars can't be bothered because all answers are seemingly given; you just need to fill it in between the set of given parameters. It's this huge thing that doesn't go away because plenty of people still, even though this has been disputed so many times, frequently fall back on those old explanations.

JH: The typological impulse is really interesting because, and to take it back specifically to Spong Hill, one of the things that's quite interesting in the very final publication of the cemetery (Hills and Lucy 2013), is that there's almost this constant tension in the volume. Because my work was really about analysing the kinds of literary and rhetorical movements that this kind of writing perform rather than analysing its methodology in terms of, 'is the typology correct?' I operate on the assumption that all of the typological arguments are sound and correct, because I don't have the expertise to challenge those. But with respect to the literary analysis of the interpretations advanced from this, there's a tension in the volume. The tension lies in the authors constantly taking pains to suggest that ethnic identity is a fluid situational construct, and that Germanic identity was not this stable thing that we can demonstrate in a person's bones or genes [or so on]. But, the categories into which the volume is constantly trying to place artefact types (and by implication the cultures and peoples which they represent) are always some sort of a hybrid mishmash, of things that are sort of Roman, are sort of Germanic, or something in between. There is never a querying of that framing of the two categories which make up this hybridity in the first place (on this point see also Effros 2015).

In a recent review of my book, Hills (2023) has disputed this, suggesting a concern with issues such as migration and ethnicity 'characterise[s] [my] own text more than [theirs],' suggesting instead that it is public perception which forces scholars to engage with questions that are otherwise not their primary concern. I'm not convinced that this is a fair claim. To give one example, in 2014, Hills framed the ongoing debate in the field as follows:

> The key question is the extent to which there was migration by Germanic people from northern Europe to Britain, and whether that took place on such a scale that the migrants replaced the native British population in what became England. (Hills 2014a: 34)

These are not the sorts of words one uses if they are referring to a public concern that would otherwise be of little interest to scholars. This is currently the basic premise in relation to which current scholarship is framed. It's not just an issue driven by the interests of the general public.

An example of why this discursive framing creates problems can be found in that the same review, which objects to a section of the book where I suggest that isotopic evidence at Berinsfield for a lack of an intrinsic tie between being a migrant and using 'Germanic' material culture suggests we should challenge the meanings signalled by such culture (Harland 2021: 178–179). Hills highlights the possibility that such material culture could, of course, be used by the children of migrants (Hills 2023: 327). That's perfectly possible, of course, but I was responding to suggestions that isotopic evidence for a local upbringing coupled with the use of 'Germanic' material culture is indicative of acculturation to ethnicity. My point was not about confirming this in the positive or the negative, but rather to point out that answering such questions in either the positive or the negative is impossible. If ethnic identity is situational and constructed, we should assume neither an intrinsic link *nor indeed an intrinsic lack thereof* between the local upbringing of the person and their identity. And we also should not assume that its association with material culture demonstrates this either.

That's why I think we should return to Spong Hill, to get beyond asking such questions, and instead look at the kinds of questions people like Williams or Effros or Halsall ask, about the complex interrelation of mortuary symbolism and ritual with broader cosmological questions (e.g. Halsall 1995; 2010; Effros 2003; Williams 2006; 2014; Squires, 2012; 2013; Squires, this volume).

Historical contexts and perspectives on early medieval ethnicity

FL: So, coming at this from a different perspective than full-blooded archaeologists, what historical sources have played a role in the interpretation of cremation burials in your area?

JH: Well, it's Bede, isn't it? There's this monk writing in Monkwearmouth Jarrow in the early eighth century, who tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (I.15–16, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 1969) that the Saxons migrate in three tribes: the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes. He contradicts himself later and throws a whole other bunch of tribal names in there (*Historia Ecclesiastica* V.9), but ultimately, that is rarely seen to matter. This is what he tells us. He tells us (as far as scholars have long been concerned) that the Angles came from Angeln, that the Saxons came from what is now Niedersachsen in northern Germany. This was very useful for the archaeologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because it gave them a clear set of typological boxes and a set of links to categories with which they could construct seemingly clear cultural zones with their artefacts. Bede offered a very obvious, overarching interpretative framework for scholars like Wylie and Kemble and Charles Roach Smith and so on, which is something Williams (e.g. Williams 2007; 2008) and others (e.g. Lucy, 1998; 2000; Ellard 2019) have written a great deal on.

The difficulty with historians in Bede's day, of course, is that they had very different rhetorical goals to modern scholars. Bede was not writing a history of the English people in order to demonstrate culture-historical, archaeological movement patterns. He was interested in demonstrating the history of the English as a people who are bound to divine Christian history in the process of their conversion. And in doing that, he was also drawing upon rhetorical and literary tropes derived from Gildas (*De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, ed. Mommsen 1898), from whom he basically directly copied and then turned on his head. In that, he was drawing upon late Roman assumptions about barbarian peoples, which believed them to be organised into these clear distinct groups. But these boxes don't necessarily fit what we can know about the reality of the people who lived beyond the Rhine frontier. We're drawing upon an imperialist, colonisers' framework of descriptions for what people in society beyond the Rhine looked like (on that framework see e.g. Halsall 2007: 35–61). But we have very little way of knowing whether or not it matched the reality on the ground of what those people were like in the ancient world. I very rarely trust what a nineteenth-century Victorian colonisers' depiction of what contemporary society in Western Africa looked like, so why should we trust an eighth-century Northumbrian, drawing upon Roman colonial frameworks, when he describes what society looked like 300 years before the date at which he was writing?

Howard Williams: So, what you're saying is that your cynicism towards what we can infer from the archaeological record is not contradicted by a glowing acceptance of the historical record. It's that these are an amalgam, that they have fed off each other, and you're critical of both.

JH: I appreciate you saying that, actually, because I have encountered responses to this kind of commentary before, where people have said: 'are you denying the power of archaeology to explain this material?' No, on the contrary. It is absolutely not about denying the analytical power of

archaeology. It is about opposing the notion that, in order to give archaeology the power to explain, we have to directly import a set of historiographical assumptions that are actually a very poor reading of the historical evidence, and take that the historical evidence at its own word.

HW: I don't think a lot of people get that, and I want to make sure that this isn't overlooked.

FL: We all know that there's been so much criticism of this old paradigm, yet as we've spoken about already, it continues to be rehearsed and adhered to by so many people, and so the question is: how do you explain why this is still a thing in early medieval archaeology. The follow up question would be: are the alternative explanations not accessible or too difficult? Why are people not jumping on these new clearer, better explanations?

JH: This is really a question about the dominance of ethnic paradigms in society more widely. I'm not a sociologist, and I do not claim expertise there, but my answer would be: because these kinds of paradigms are dominant in society. We operate on the default assumption that ethnic groups are organised in these very straightforward, simplistic ways. This is what sociologists like Andreas Wimmer (2013) or Rogers Brubaker (2004) identify and analyse as a serious problem in sociological scholarship, and although they conflict with the Brubakerian approach in other ways, Critical Race Theorists would also agree that this analytical approach is untenable – race and ethnicity are historically contingent phenomena. We've long since, in history and archaeology and anthropology and sociology, come to the conclusion that ethnic identity is a situational construct. Fine, whether the general public has caught up with that question is another matter. You would hope so, given that this has been a paradigm for fifty years now. But you can hardly blame the public for not quite having caught up, because even in academia this constructivist turn is usually quite inconsistent in its application. That's what Rogers Brubaker highlights in his book, *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004). He identifies the presence of this constant reflex towards trying to analyse 'ethnicities', as a default category. Ethnicity, at least as far as he's concerned, is processual. It's a sort of set of motions and identifications that is always about a kind of constant categorisation. It's a process. It's never a fixed state. Similar points are made across much of the *oeuvre* of Critical Race theorists and their precursors (see e.g. Hall, ed. Morley, 2019). The implication of that is that the things which people try and identify as representing a consistent ethnic group don't always necessarily align with what those who had placed themselves and others within the group actually manifest as in practice. So, the classic example Michael Moerman's studies of the Lue in Thailand in the 1960s (Moerman 1968). He surveyed members of that group on the characteristics that made one 'Lue', and, found that the stated characteristics of particular members were frequently contradictory, no consistent set of criteria could be found. That might be an extreme example but it's one that demonstrated an important point about taking emic assumptions about the characteristics that make up a given identity at face value. We've accepted that theoretically. The point which Brubaker makes is that we all too often still assume that the ethnic group is the primary framework of questioning that we should apply to our evidence. He uses the example of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s: a horrific civil war, Bosnian Serbs and Croats at loggerheads, awful genocidal activities committed by Serbia against Bosnians, especially. There was a base assumption in commentators' analysis that they'd been killing each other simply because they were Bosnian, Serbs or Croats. That was never queried, and that was partly never queried because there were nationalist political parties in whose interest it was to say: 'this is the reason we are killing each other'. But when Brubaker went and performed ethnographic research in discussion with the individual people participating in this violence, they would respond that they'd been doing it for a whole host of complex reasons. Why does anybody fight in a war? You'll find the same range of complex explanations. So, we are mistaking one particular opinion which has been offered by certain members of our subject of study for a representative explanation, and that is a poor thing to do as a social scientist, to take one such opinion and then frame it as the explanation for the phenomenon you're studying. But we do it because it's easy. It's 'common sense': that's my short answer. There is over 200 years of ideologically established common sense that tells us: this is how human beings are organised. And we, therefore, find it very difficult to break out of that set of frameworks. Even when we're trying very hard to, and I'm just as guilty of this as anybody else.

FL: What can we do better? What can we do differently? Because what you're saying suggests that we need to change the framework of our whole approach to both past and present?

JH: That would be my answer, yes, but that's easier said than done. I'm a firmly committed anti-nationalist. Nationalism and the sort of horror it can produce frightens me a great deal. It stems from deep societal roots. Nation-states are often very interested in bolstering nationalist frameworks, because this helps them achieve very useful things in terms of their division and organisation of populations. And I agree that this poses difficulties for historians and archaeologists. We can try and pose counter-narratives, but until you dismantle these frameworks at a more structural, societal level, you'll always struggle to overcome this.

Alternative narratives for cremation

HW: In terms of answering the section of the question about: what is the alternative? Are the alternative narratives more difficult?

JH: At face value: no, you can say things like… I suppose there's very popular examples, such as the importation of jeans or Coca Cola bottles from the United States of America to Japan. Nobody assumes that there was a mass migration of people from America as a consequence of the appearance of jeans in Europe or Japan, right? Equally, there's no assumption that there was a mass migration of Japanese people to the United States because of the increasing popularity of the Toyota car. That kind of analogy oversimplifies things, though, because we now live in a very different world, where commercial capitalism and the consequent interconnectivity of the global economy produce very different mechanisms of economic exchange, so you can brush away the explanation that way. Nevertheless, that kind of analogical reasoning prompts the opportunity to recognise: 'okay, maybe, the relationship between migration and identity is complicated, and requires a more complex consideration of the specific processes related to how this functions in a given instance', rather than accepting what we unthinkingly see as a common sense explanation.

FL: In an effort not to use ethnic labels in labelling cremations, some scholars (like Wamers 2015) use geographical terms to indicate where they think the cremation practice originated. Do you think these changes in terminology are helpful, or do they just obscure what is, in fact, a similar logic to ethnic thinking: that burial practices are geographically bound?

JH: On the face of it, a simple replacement of terminology doesn't have to mean that. But the question then becomes, what do you do with this change in terminology? And this is where I'll take the opportunity to comment on a broader set of conversations that are taking place in the field right now. Changing terminology, though important, is no substitute for a change in epistemic assumptions. Because if you just say, 'they're not Germanic people, they're northern' people', the focus is still on assuming a material culture's users are paying homage to their own origins. We still make the same set of assumptions about what we can infer from this material. You're not escaping from the same kind of interpretative assumptions and therefore we're stuck in the same paradigmatic argument.

First of all, if this is material that has links to 'the North,' that's all that we can say about it. Returning to the example of our evidence from East Anglia, it is probably fair to say that at some point, migration played a role in the set of processes that produced those links to 'the North' (or, to be more precise, the North Sea). That is very difficult to dispute on the basis of the sheer amount of that material alone, when read alongside the other source materials we have that are written about these events. We know that there was a migration of people from this region, so fine. But that's about the extent of what we can say. Going purely from the material on its own, on the face of it, the rest of it, about ethnicity, identity, whatever, is a set of interpretative assumptions. It's a set of interpretative leaps. All we really have, is a stylistic link between some types of material and others alongside awareness that some movement (indeed of sometimes considerable scale) that took place at some point. That's all we can say. We can then begin to advance interpretations, but they don't have to be the ones you've just proposed. They could be something else.

My answer then would be that the very making of that point is important, specifically, that there is a whole other set of processes by which these links could have possibly emerged. And that enables us to get out of the trap of assuming that the only option available to us for interpretation is to assume that these people were constructing coherent cultural identities, which produces historical narratives which could then underpin those more frightening nationalist projects.

FL: So, for example, in England, for East Anglia, I'm not saying that migration didn't happen, but I'm thinking of the framework of Loveluck and Tys (2006), who talk about a North Sea cultural region where lots of things were continuously exchanged. So, do we have to think of it as one migration event, or is it a continuous migration and exchange of stuff and people?

JH: This is a key point: migration across the North Sea was always in some way continuous in pre-modern Britain, in prehistoric Britain, in Roman Britain and then post-Roman Britain. The question is not (and this is where I've departed from other sets of interpretations) 'did a migration occur?' The question is, why did this particular moment of migration produce, or at least coincide, with a major change in cultural identification? And that's where I think that turning to the narrative of Gildas and Bede does actually give us insight. But not in the simplistic sense that 'Saxons migrated and they conquered everything'. More, that there were clearly people involved in those movements across the North Sea that had something to offer as a form of political allegiance outside of the traditional civic Roman model of identification. Because people who identified with the civic Roman norm of identification identified those people as in some way deviant from legitimate Romanness. Whether those people would have agreed, I don't know. The cultural transformation this led to would have been a continuous process over several hundred years, but I do certainly think (and I'd be silly

not to) that at some point, some soldiers from northern Germany showed up in Britain at the invite of the British authorities and some of them probably did so, as Gildas says, to fight off Pictish and Irish raiders. But this is really no different than the Empire's many other examples of the recruitment of barbarians. Before the fifth century, many such barbarian recruits would have become integrated into imperial society. Something like this set of events must have happened. But connections between Roman Britain and *northern barbaricum* had already long existed. So, alright, that migration can in some way be tied to a change in cultural identification and orientation. But this was a long-term process rather than a single migration event or act of invasion. It wasn't like these marvellous nineteenth-century paintings of Hengist and Horsa washing up on the shore and leading an army. I'm convinced that the people that the late Roman authorities called 'Saxons' would have thought of themselves as Roman soldiers. I am utterly convinced that that's how they would have thought of themselves, and have offered reasons to believe this in print, not least because this would well resemble what we see in other post-Roman 'barbarian' successor states in this period (Harland 2017; 2021). But you can't prove this in any directly straightforward way through reference to the material culture. All one can do is note that all of these phenomena (militarisation, migration, the use of material culture drawing upon late Roman military motifs but with direct ties to the world across the North Sea, and so on) coincide with one another. After this, our argument becomes about offering narrative interpretation of what those intersecting phenomena mean, which is what historians and archaeologists ultimately do. Let's take the example of Spong 'Man' (or 'person'"), a rather famous cremation urn lid from Spong Hill (Figure 13.1). This is one of only very few figural representations of a person, which we have from a post-Roman funerary context in Britain, and Hills (2014b) has persuasively shown it to have an early fifth-century context. Scholars frequently suggest that the hat the figure is wearing resembles a Pannonian cap (Walton Rogers 2007: 209; Brandenburgh 2013: 45; Hills 2014b), This was an item of military costume which we find across the entire late Roman world (e.g. Figures 13.2 and 13.3), and indeed might have made it into the Saxon homelands too (Brandenburgh 2013). It's noteworthy, then, that although Spong Man was not found with its pot, Hills (2014b: 82) has highlighted that urns which are a likely candidate for its type had a slight preponderance toward burials of adult men, buried with grave-goods, especially miniatures and combs. At the same time as Spong Man was likely buried, something else very interesting was going on. Namely, the widespread adoption of a form of costume which uses idealised, constructed 'barbarian' aesthetics (on this see especially

Figure 13.1: 'Spong Man', with Pannonian cap, early fifth century (Reproduced by permission of Norwich Castle Museum)

von Rummel 2007; 2013), what Halsall (2007: 110) calls 'barbarian chic'. What we understand to be 'barbarian' costume is inseparable from that trend, and we know that late Roman military styles which evidence this trend had an enormous influence on the early art styles which developed in northern Germany and Scandinavia, and from which the material culture which migrated to Britain descends (see e.g. Haseloff 1973; 1981). Meanwhile, there are known instances where active ethnonationalist suppression of those provincial Roman roots took place in scholarship, in order to bolster the putatively 'Germanic' roots of such material culture (see Fehr 2001: 334–336 on the forced suppression of provincial Roman stylistic roots at Thorsberger Moor in Joachim Werner's Habilitation thesis). This, of course, was precisely the same intellectual context in which many of the stylistic arguments for the putative 'Germanicness' of such metalwork emerged. (Friedrich 2022, chapter 1 offers a rigorous and detailed overview of this and a critique of the failure to overcome it). Given all of these points, might it not make more sense to just see what we can actually prove in the material culture from Spong Hill? Maybe the participants in the funerary ceremony of Spong Hill depicted their dead in Roman military garb because this was a primary point of reference for how they conceived their own self-rep-

Figure 13.2: Soldiers arresting St Peter, dressed in a late antique military uniform including a Pannonian cap, Sarcophagus from Astorga, c. 310 CE, in the Museo Arqueológico Naciónal, Madrid (Photograph by J.M. Harland)

resentation, regardless of where they came from – the possible, indeed likely, origin of the framework of ideas which Spong Man references in northern Germany doesn't refute this possibility. That's an interpretative leap too, but it's one you can just as well advance from the available evidence, without needing any recourse to 'Germanic' identity.

The politics of archaeology today

FL: Another interesting point that you very strongly argue about is the mutual influence of nationalism and early medieval archaeology and the role of ethnicities in this. Do you have examples of those nationalistic movements citing early medieval archaeology or history for their legitimacy? How real is this threat, and what should we, as early medieval scholars, historians or archaeologists, do about it?

JH: The most obvious example, I suppose, would be the Nazis. Under the Third Reich, the Ahnenerbe were involved in a great deal of energetic excavation as a result of (among other things) Heinrich Himmler's support for notions of the Germanic occult (on this, see Arnold 2008; Wood 2013).

If I wanted to offer a more recent British example, there's a rather frightening far-right web forum that's been around for years dedicated to white supremacist

Figure 13.3: Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs, c. 300 CE, originally from the so-called "Philadelphion" in Constantinople. Today St. Mark's Square, Venice (Photograph by Dennis Jarvis, distributed under a CC-BY-SA-2.0 License)

'Anglo-Saxon' or (as they put it) 'Englisc' ethnonationalism. There's a rather well-known article that came out in *Nature* a few years back (Leslie *et al.* 2015) which used analyses of modern genetic haplotypes to study the scale of what it called 'Anglo-Saxon' migration. Just a few days later, members of the aforementioned white supremacist web forum wheeled out the *Daily Telegraph*'s interpretation of that particular study (Knapton 2015) to say, 'well, look, we've proven that British people still lived in pre-modern tribal kingdoms on the basis of their DNA and this justifies our belief that we are English or we are Anglo-Saxons, and we can therefore claim a form of racial superiority now proven through our genes'. So that's actually where most of this is now beginning to turn to: DNA evidence more than material cultural evidence. Mainly because the material cultural debates, despite all of the things I've just been complaining about, have by and large rejected that set of narratives, whereas DNA currently, inadvertently, risks offering a reassertion of the older culture-historical racialist models, which is

something that Susanne Hakenbeck (2019) has recently demonstrated in detail (see also Parmenter 2024).

One example of the importance of addressing this problem might be found in a very famous study from last year (Gretzinger *et al.* 2022). It's also a very important study, not least in that it reveals several very interesting things, such as a confirmation that, when seen across the *longue durée*, on the scale of centuries, people were indeed moving quite a lot. For what it's worth, it's a sign of the lack of conceptual clarity of the discipline that those of us who dispute ethnic interpretations are frequently accused of denying this. Also, quite importantly, the study shows that those who possess ancestry relating to those involved in that movement were statistically more likely to be buried with grave-goods (Gretzinger *et al.* 2022: supplementary note 7). Especially brooches and bracteates. Now this is important, it's the sort of thing which, if one wanted to, one could use to argue in favour of Martin's or Hines' arguments about material culture and constructed ethnicity. What it doesn't do, though, is prove the existence of some form of pan-Germanic consciousness upon which such arguments rely. We still have to make interpretative decisions, and weigh up aspects of arguments for and against such proposals, and recognise that these are interpretative propositions, still not yet empirically proven: to throw out a quick counter-proposal, for example, perhaps women with what the authors call 'Continental Northern Ancestry' were more likely to be buried with grave goods because women with such ancestry could have more often had marriage ties to post-Roman potentates (precisely because of the aforementioned mobility, which very much happened), rendering them more likely to occupy positions of status and thereby more likely to prompt social crises upon their death. That's an interpretation that would accord perfectly well with alternative schools of thought on furnished inhumation I've referred to above (such as those of Halsall 2005; 2010), and also takes into account what this evidence shows us. It's an interpretative leap, but it's one in which it's just as possible to advance from the available evidence.

But that's not how this evidence and other bodies of DNA evidence are presently being used in wider public discourse. These are instead being taken as hard proof, in some circles, for the older narratives of mass migration, invasion, conquest, in ways that interestingly actually directly contradict some of the proposals made by Gretzinger *et al.* 2022's authors. To give one example, at the start of June, the Daily Telegraph published a typical Culture Wars-esque piece alleging that the University of Cambridge is attempting to rewrite history by highlighting that the Anglo-Saxons were never a single, 'distinct ethnic group (Simpson 2023). *The Telegraph*'s tweet first promoting this story, which has over a million views at time of writing, received considerable interaction from accounts which appear to be coming from a far-right perspective. Some wielded modern DNA test results (with varying degrees of historical comprehension; for other references, see Leslie *et al.* 2015). Mere days after Gretzinger *et al.* 2022*'s* publication, a video summarising and analysing the paper was uploaded by one far-right YouTube creator (which I refuse to cite directly on ethical grounds). The antifascist and antiracist Charitable Trust, *Hope not Hate* have documented this creator's presence at major far-right political meetings (Mulhall 2019; Hope Not Hate 2019). This video, which at the date of going to print has over 45,000 views, states that Gretzinger *et al.* 'reveals [anti-racist] scholars to be the charlatans that they are', and likewise claims that the study 'shows that Germanic people are coming into places and they're not just integrating, they're retaining their, you know, Nordic burial practices.' Notice already how many steps removed this interpretation is from what Gretzinger *et al.* actually say. 'Continental Northern Ancestry' is directly conflated with 'Germanic' (or here, 'Nordic') ancestry. North Sea material culture and its use is immediately interpreted as evidence for a lack of integration between distinct ethnic groups, which it axiomatically assumes to exist (note that people making these sorts of ill-informed claims rarely talk about the heavy stylistic references this material culture makes to late Roman military styles). This is quite a number of interpretative steps removed from what the material culture and its relation with the DNA directly empirically proves, but it's important to highlight that far-right activists are using this material to claim that their own arguments are now empirically proven. These are the media in which many people are consuming these studies, not in their scholarly form, often in ways that, to be clear, those publishing their scholarly form are alarmed and appalled by.

HW: Is this a mash-up of 2020s aDNA and modern DNA and 1920s/1930s historians, which has nothing to do with archaeological scholarship whatsoever?

JH: I want to say yes, and no. Obviously, we will as scholars always be reproducing the normative values, paradigms and assumptions of our world. In that sense, we are inevitably reproducing societal structures that are racist and divisive and are harmful, even if we have, on paper, moved on from the historical narratives developed in the early twentieth century. We do have a duty to be constantly querying our own assumptions and trying to challenge where they might be reproducing those structures. It is only if we successfully manage that, and get our own house in order (and that's an ongoing task) that we can say to people making such interpretations of those aDNA studies, 'the study of this material does not justify your worldview'. On the other hand, I do think that you are correct to say that

a good many of the people who are explicitly weaponising and wielding this are often not interested in the reality of what the source materials say. I'm actually very interested in Umberto Eco's writing on ur-Fascism (1995). He mainly notes that fascists are more interested in the notion of constructing your own reality and base of power through force of will, which in some way means the reality of the evidence is actually immaterial, because you construct your own reality, you assert yourself upon reality. But this means that contradictory pieces of evidence are immaterial to fascists. They just take whatever they can and they hammer it together into a narrative that suits them. That said, this broader embedding of ethnic assumptions in the paradigms with which we construct society is very much there. And although that itself is not an assertion of fascist ideology, it provides a sort of surface, upon which that can manifest itself.

FL: Our prime minister Mark Rutte in the Netherlands, made an analogy in the *Financial Times* between modern migration from the Middle East and Central Asia and the Roman Empire's external threats from barbarians (Spiegel 2015). He has a background as an historian, and nobody even blinked an eye at him saying this!

JH: I'm very partisan regarding the end of the Roman Empire and its particular utilisation for political argument in that respect. For me, that example just underlines the importance of detaching the past from the present, in the sense that the past has no power over the present. What power it may have over the present lies solely in people's utilisation of it. There is nothing inherently powerful in particular narratives which assert the role of barbarian mass migration in the destruction of the Roman Empire. These could theoretically be 100% correct (though I don't think they are), and that would have no ramifications whatsoever for the ethical implications of handling migration today, because simply pointing out the occurrence of such events is not an ethical argument. Reality is always more complex than such narratives try to suggest, and our ethical obligations in terms of helping refugees and being a welcoming, inclusive society are a separate question from what happened millennia ago.

HW: Would you have any opinions then on how our stories – going back to Spong Hill and East Anglian cremation – are one manifestation of a migration narrative or can be read in that way? How should that be communicated to a broader public or kind of inclusive integrating story of burial ritual and community?

JH: Showing that immigration has been a constant of British history is important. But the danger in assuming that the solution is solely about showing whether or not migration 'happened' is that the moment at which anybody is able to provide evidence for strong demographic continuity, arguments about the importance of 'indigeneity' also become important, and seen, if these are the terms of our debate, as a refutation of that important observation. In a British historical context, that focus on indigeneity is something of a white supremacist dog whistle (it was quite a popular trope for the BNP, for example). So, my concern is that you risk getting trapped in the same frameworks of debate. I want to separate the actual presence or absence of migration in the past from any implications about what modern Britain should look like.

Heritage interpretation and public archaeology for early medieval cremation

HW: What about heritage interpretation for early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials? The Norwich Castle Museum has a great exhibition in which the Spong Hill urns are joined by an image by a contemporary artist represented in an individual of South Asian heritage with the Union flag in order to contextualise the early Anglo-Saxon migrations in relation to the complex story of immigration affecting these isles (Figure 13.4). Specifically, by making an analogy between the sub-Roman period and Britain today, the Spong Hill pots and the story of 'Anglo-Saxon' origins are articulated as one by which indigenous people and newcomers were integrated. Museum curator Dr Tim Pestell has said to me that the image and its connotations has sparked controversy as a result. For me, this reveals how sensitive and significant it is, and the responsibilities we have, when we talk, write and present about the burial evidence from fifth/sixth century in Britain.

JH: I had no idea about this, and that prompts a few thoughts for me. One thing that interests me, actually, is the way that the Saxons are frequently framed as 'colonisers' in most narratives (for a recent example, 'Anglo-Saxon Colonization' is the title of chapter 8 in Rippon 2018), which I think is actually completely wrong-headed, whatever the Saxons were in all of their complex multiplicity. They have been framed that way, firstly, because of Bede, but mainly because of how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars made use of the Bedan narrative in the creation of their own imperial projects – and that terminology became embedded in the basic language we all use to describe this period. I think a more correct understanding, based on the then most contemporary depictions of who the Saxons were, would be that they were subaltern people. They were people who existed on the peripheries of an empire. They were dominated by a colonial power which homogenised their complexity, and which used them as its soldiers. They moved into this collapsing empire in the context

Figure 13.4: Exhibition display at the Norwich Castle Museum showing 'Anglo-Saxon' urns, other artefacts, and the portrait of an individual of South Asian heritage with the Union flag (Photograph by H. Williams)

of their recruitment as soldiers for that Empire, but they were very much a subaltern people. In that sense, their migration to Britain has far more parallels, I would say, with mid-twentieth century, post-imperial migration to Britain than we often think (and it is precisely because people see, or want to see, the Saxons as conquering colonisers, rather than the subaltern colonised subjects that they were, that we miss that parallel). And just to be very clear on this point, that doesn't mean that stories of a 'Saxon' takeover represent what might happen here in a modern contexts, as far-right fantasists believe. The past doesn't predict the future, and then, just as now, migrants to Britain were not a coherent, discrete group with specific, coherent aims.

In that sense, I would say the Norwich exhibition is actually a very apt parallel and it is all the more apt in that it highlights the need to reject the putative power of the past. In this example, a lot of those objections to that museum display which you mentioned are presumably the result of people being outraged at the suggestion that a non-white person could be emblematic of the *aduentus Saxonum*. But if one understands that whiteness did not really exist in Late Antiquity (certainly not as it is now understood), in that whiteness was not a category which was meaningful for people in the late Roman world, there is no reason, if we work with the terms of understanding for the categorisation of peoples that late antique people had, why such a person could any less be treated as representative of that event than not. Moreover, that narrative is valuable because it offers an understanding of and a connection to British history that is more about recognising parallels and relatable patterns than it is about demanding essentialist categories of exclusion.

HW: My point is simply: how do we make these stories involving these urns, these cremation burials, speak, when we have such vociferous reactions?

JH: It's a really good parallel. Maybe I think that because I, like most British millennials, came of age in a period which can be slotted into a post-imperial narrative paradigm. I'm someone who has grown up in the later aftermath of the collapse of the British Empire and I have inherited one notion which developed from that, of a multicultural Britain, with people who migrated in the collapse of that empire being very much part of the fabric

of our society. That's one of several contesting and conflicting political narratives which modern Britons draw upon–indeed, the New Labour-era narrative of multiculturalism that was probably formative for my experiences in childhood was in its own way quite problematic in its assimilationist and essentialising tendencies and has been criticised by scholars on this basis (see e.g. Hall 2000; Back *et al.* 2002). Other narratives, of course, are yet worse, are far more explicitly exclusionary, and white supremacy plays an enormous role, there. There, I can refer to my own example. One side of my own ancestors migrated to Britain in the late nineteenth century. They were German Jews. And yet it's indicative of current prejudices that fewer members of the British public, other than Nazis sympathisers, I think, would object to my face being used in that museum display, than the face of the aforementioned artist (even if she had been born before me and had ancestral ties to Britain at least as old as mine, both of which, without knowing the person in question, are perfectly possible scenarios). Even though I no more possess 'Anglo-Saxon' heritage, as these critics would falsely understand it, than anyone else does. And the roots of that objection serve to demonstrate just how meaningless that entire concept actually is, in reality. So, I guess we need to keep getting across in more public settings that our categories of race, ethnicity and identity are modern categories, that do not directly overlap with how these categories functioned in the past. That can be very liberating, and it gives people who are often denied a place in narratives about the British past greater access to, agency in, and power over those narratives. Scholars need to make the case that the heritage of early medieval Britain no more belongs to one kind of person than it does anyone else. Precisely because those categories don't have instrinsic meaning or salience now. The only meanings they have are those we create. And so, the task is to offer more potent meanings that are inclusive of people who are so often excluded from, but have just as much of a stake in the interpretation of that past.

HW: The scary thing is that you could ask yourself if it would matter. Would it still stop the ur-fascists dominating that narrative with their own spin? The same newspaper articles are written with categories that aren't even mentioned in an exhibition. This is why I feel so 'rabbit in the headlights' after twenty-five years of dealing with this, you can have this horrible feeling that it's utterly futile at one level.

JH: I suppose a lot of it just has to come down to accepting, that individuals, as individuals, are relatively powerless to effect these mass changes. But what we can do is write, and we can publish, and we can disseminate our ideas, and hope that in the long term, more people will read those ideas and contribute to them and write things themselves. Any kind of paradigm shift in our understanding of complex social forces is a slow long-term process, that requires the gradual transformation of things at the epistemic level. And terminological changes are a part of that. But it's even more vital to gradually chip away at how ideas are constituted, and that's not something one person can achieve. We can't simply flip a switch and expect to see a change. It's a project of decades, right?

FL: So, if it is, as you say, about countering a whole modern conception and sets of values, of course, that is not going to be easy. How do we replace existing, well-known models with new, complex interpretations, when that's perhaps more challenging to convey in the world of rapid social media?

JH: *Are* the newer narratives more complex? The popular perception that the early medieval past was organised into coherent sets of ethnic groups did not emerge innocently, but is actually founded on an incredibly complex set of modern scholarly narratives (see e.g. Geary 2001; Wood 2013; Donecker 2021). Those narratives came into being as part of the impetus toward Romantic nationalism, but today it is widely assumed that these narratives represent some sort of essential truth which wields power over us. This just goes to show: if people are trying to convince you that the past has power over the present, it's usually because they are pushing a particular agenda onto you. But we have the power to interpret the past. We have always had that power.

HW: This is where I disagree with my US and Canadian colleagues who want to constantly combat 'ancient aliens'. It's not that we should concede that ancient aliens are a 'thing' worthy of respect or consideration; it completely denigrates human diversity and creativity and so on. Yet we have a massive science fiction world that synergises with science communication which is a major and powerful engagement mechanism for space exploration, astronomy and astrophysics riddled with colonial tropes but is actually a positive field of popular discourse addressing key questions regarding who we are and where we have come from, and where we are going. While there are fringe and hate groups, most folks who consumed this material are simply fascinated by the big stories of who we are on the grandest scale possible. It's the same with palaeontologists; if all they can do is shout at how Jurassic Park 'got it wrong', then we are missing a trick. The challenge is how we capture this interest and guide it in an informed way.

JH: I guess there are two angles to this: I agree, on the one hand, that we shouldn't just be shouting down

people saying 'you're stupid and wrong. Go away.' On the other hand, one should aim to send signals to groups of people who equally would straightaway recognise their exclusion from this narrative that they are just as welcome to participate in our scholarship and what we're doing, and that's important. I guess for me, the way you signal that would be to offer a better narrative in a way that is straightforward and accessible and which can also be shown to be more satisfying. And I think that this exhibition in Norwich Castle Museum with Tim Pestell is actually a really good example of someone attempting to do that, because it's offering a narrative which says, 'well, actually, maybe the *adventus Saxonum* more closely resembled post-Imperial migration to Britain in the mid-twentieth century than we think.' We hear a lot about the complaints it received, but complainants are often louder. I don't have the figures, but could it well be that for every one person who made a complaint, nine people came away convinced of a slightly better approach to things? I'd be interested to know if that was the case, not least because this is actually a direction of investigation I've been interested in for a while. For my next book, I'm thinking about the imperial periphery in the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman Empire as looking much more like current post-colonies, which remain closely bound to their collapsing empires. It's a far more satisfying narrative, in my view.

HW: Well, I think what you've just done there is really important, because what you said went in response to our earlier question is that you have models that people can understand. There may have very different understandings of positive and good about the end of the Roman Empire. You're not trying to deny migration or counter state collapse. The fifth century was a time of transformation on many scales and characters. Capturing a modern analogue is important. And an analogy does not mean it has to be a direct parallel. It serves to bounce ideas between past and present for various publics. So, I think in museological terms, I think you've captured something really powerful there, and these humble pots, which is what we're talking about, are suddenly placed in the story in a very interesting way, without necessarily buying into those mass migration hypotheses or mass migration denial hypothesis.

JH: Ultimately, any of these narratives will prove, in their broad brushstrokes, dissatisfying, because society is always more complex than the simple narratives we force it into. And that was just as true in the contemporary late Roman world. I'm sure the inhabitants of fifth-century Britain who used these cinerary urns had a whole set of conflicting and competing narratives about how these related to society as they understood it. So why should *our* simple narratives be any better?

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