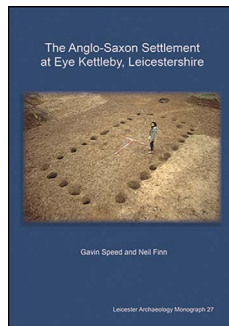




Book Review

GAVIN SPEED & NEIL FINN. 2024. *The Anglo-Saxon settlement at Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire*. Leicester: University of Leicester Archaeological Services; 978-0-9574792-8-9 hardback £25.



The strikingly homogeneous settlement and material culture ‘package’ of early Anglo-Saxon eastern England is now well-known to specialists (Blair 2018). The site described here conforms to that norm in almost every possible way, though its location on the western fringe of the zone of visible settlement raises further issues. Eye Kettleby was found and excavated in the 1990s, at a time when extremely few early medieval sites were known from Leicestershire. One benefit of the quarter-century delay in producing the final report is that it can take advantage of the great increase in understanding of the period and its culture that has been achieved since then. This exemplary and very user-friendly report is clearly presented and well illustrated.

Occupation spanned the late fifth to mid-seventh centuries AD, perhaps continuing somewhat later. On a pattern familiar from Vicky Crewe’s work (Crewe 2012), parts of the settlement were fitted into an inherited landscape of Bronze Age enclosures and, to a limited extent, structured around them. As usual the settlement combined post-built ground-level buildings with sunken-featured ones, individual structures were replaced in an evolutionary fashion in a series of overlapping phases. There were two distinct nuclei, with hints of a possible move from west to east: in the eastern zone the sunken-featured buildings tended to be larger and more regular shapes, and two wall-trench buildings hint at the advent of more complex construction. However, the report fails to notice one significant aspect: on the extreme western edge, three post-built structures (1, 7 & 15), plus an associated fence-line, are laid out using the short-perch grid system now recognised as widely used in the seventh- and eighth-century settlements of eastern England (Blair *et al.* 2020). These probably belonged to a post-650 planned phase extending westwards outside the excavated area: if that had been excavated, it might have thrown more light on the last phases of the settlement. Even so, the gap in visible activity during *c.* 700–1100, until the (now deserted) medieval village emerged further east, remains an abiding problem here as elsewhere.

The food economy conformed closely to the type-site at West Stow (Suffolk): a self-sufficient community specialising in cattle, but with some pork and occasionally other meat obtained by hunting. Barley dominated the cereal crops. The limited small-finds and pottery assemblages raise general problems about non-visible forms of material culture. That applies especially to the pottery, where the difficulty of tracing industries through the two centuries after 650 might suggest a culture that was aceramic apart from limited regional imports of Ipswich and Maxey Wares. As observed, the apparent fading-out of the dominant local Charnwood industry seems especially odd. Perhaps the main lesson to draw is that changes in fashion can have a profound impact on archaeological visibility. In this period,

pottery was not a luxury and nor was it a necessity. As with virtually all decorated textiles, the whole range of kitchenware and tableware in metal, turned wood and stave-built wood escapes us. To infer that material culture declined through the seventh century, because buildings and their contents become less visible to us, could be profoundly misleading. It is equally possible that the opposite was happening, but that new, more diverse and perhaps more luxurious possessions were of kinds that leave no trace in the archaeological record.

A major strength of the report is Gavin Speed's broader survey in the two final chapters, situating Eye Kettleby in its regional and national contexts. The accumulation of raw data in Historic Environment Records and 'grey literature' typically runs far ahead of synthesis. This report is a welcome exception and it will be a real help to have so much information digested in these well-focused analyses and informative maps, which highlight the importance of the East Midland river valleys for settlement formation. Speed notes that the zone of visible 'Anglo-Saxon style' settlement can now be seen to extend slightly further west than I suggested (Blair 2018, pp.24–35), along the Wreake valley to the Soar and the Fosse Way north of Leicester. This is a valuable refinement of the picture and illustrates how meticulous local work can enhance broad-brush surveys with fine detail.

A typical site, as ably reported as this one is, contributes just as much to broader understanding as an exceptional site. Eye Kettleby will now be one of the classic illustrations of the early Anglo-Saxon 'package', in the company of Mucking, West Stow and others. Speed's regional and national surveys will be key resources for a long time to come.

References

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