

Identifying social and religious groups in later medieval funerary sites from Britain

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The application of Geographical Information System software to excavated cemeteries is not entirely a new phenomenon, but it has not previously been applied to inter-site analyses of later medieval cemeteries in Britain. A project conducted at the University of Reading, Berkshire, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board, and supported by the Museum of London has been doing just this (Gilchrist/Sloane, in prep.). Analysis of over 60 different excavated cemetery sites dating to between c 1100 and c 1540, with a total of almost 5000 individual burials, has revealed a wealth of information about modes of grave preparation and burial practice. In particular, evidence for subtle cemetery zoning has been found on a number of sites. Three case studies are presented here, and it is argued that some of this zoning represents differing burial practice based on social or religious status.

Fig. 1: Part of the 11th and early 12th-century cemetery discovered beneath Holy Trinity Priory, Aldgate, London (plan based on Schofield and Lea and data from the Museum of London Archaeological Archive).



Zoning within settlements: wood or stone

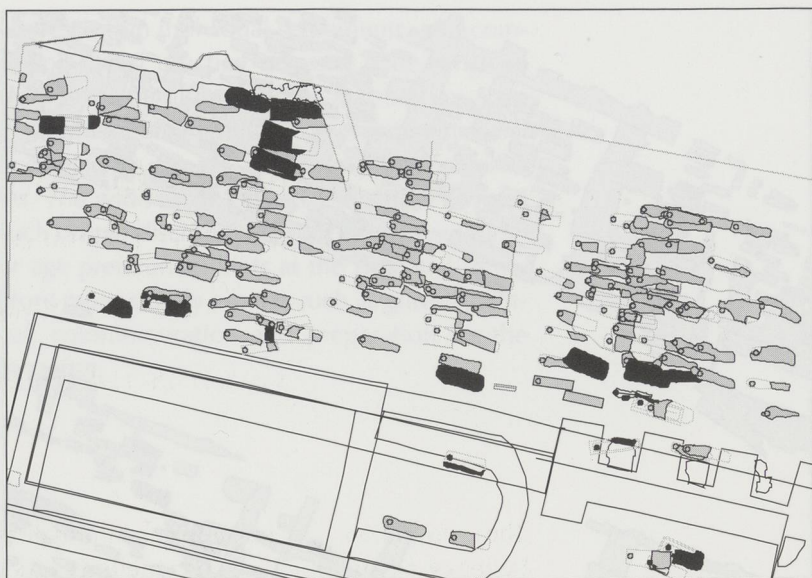
There is emerging evidence that the occupants of different areas of an individual town or city contemporaneously practised different funerary rites. Bateman (1997) reported on the excavations of the mid 11th and 12th century external cemetery at Guildhall in the City of London to this Conference in Brugge. Of the 18 burials identified from the earliest phase (c 1050–1100), 17 lay within wooden, coffin-like boxes. Over one hundred graves dating from almost exactly the same period (c 1040–1100) were excavated from a graveyard in the north-east corner of the City of London near Aldgate (Schofield/Lea, in prep.; fig. 1). Of these, about 80% of the graves had been treated with a variety of mortared or unmortared rubble stone linings, reuse of Roman tile, mortar washes on the sides or bases of the graves and/or supporting stones on either side of the head. Such radically different burial practices cannot be explained simply in terms of availability of raw materials, or regional trends, for the two sites are less than 1 km apart and both lie within the city walls. To reinforce the point, excavations from the parish churchyard at St Nicholas Shambles, just 300 m to the west of the Guildhall site revealed 234 inhumations dated to the 11th and 12th centuries (White 1988). Here, the majority (190) of graves were either simple burials with no lining or container, or in coffins made entirely of wood which had perished. However a significant minority (44) were in graves with some form of stone or mortar lining.

At the Guildhall cemetery, the use of particular forms of wooden lining declined in the 12th cen-

tury, and a second phase of burials was more intensive, involving much intercutting of graves. At the Aldgate intensive use of the cemetery ceased following the foundation of Holy Trinity priory although later burials associated with the priory were found. Bateman (1997, 120) raises the possibility that these changes in burial practice over time at the Guildhall site may have been related to the gradual 'Anglicising' of an essentially Scandinavian tradition of burial. Such a cultural distinction might explain the emphasis on wooden mortuary structures there in contrast to the stone-lined ones used near Aldgate. However, it would appear from other, later cemetery sites such as at Bermondsey (see below) that use of stone-lined graves declined (at least in London) by the later 12th century. This could mean that the Aldgate cemetery also represents a culturally distinct community as at Guildhall. However, it was probably more the norm for London in the later 11th and 12th century as the number of stone-lined graves at St. Nicholas suggests. However, its decline may point at a more general change in the mortuary culture of Londoners, with discrete, local traditions within the City being assimilated into a more widespread, homogeneous mortuary style. It would be tempting to link this to the influence of the Norman arrival, but substantially more excavated data is required to test this.

Zoning within cemeteries: the case of stone-lined graves

Stone-lined graves in outdoor cemeteries (as opposed to within churches) did become rare in the later 12th and 13th centuries in London, but this is not to say that they vanish entirely. They have been recorded from the probable monks' cemetery at the Cluniac priory of St Saviour, Bermondsey (Greater London) where 10 examples dated to between 1090 and 1200 and a further nine to the 13th or early 14th century. At the Augustinian priory of St Mary Merton (Surrey), 17 examples were noted from a total of nearly 700 burials. They dated from the early 12th century through to the 14th century. In both instances, their location is highly significant (figs. 2; 3), as is the demographic profile of those buried within them. The stone-lined graves form clear clusters, dose to and aligned on, the principal religious buildings – the church at Merton and the church and infirmary chapel at Bermondsey. This



is surely not coincidence, and appears to reflect a desire for burial in dose proximity to the holy structures of the monastery coupled with an ability to pay for the additional elaboration of the grave. There is some evidence from wills for a desire to be buried outside churches, but with a specific link to the location of the high altar: John Cok, a draper, willed in 1440 to be buried in the parish churchyard of All Hallows Barking (City of London) outside the east end of the church and opposite the high altar (Harding 1992, n 75), while in 1432 William Ryder of Totnes wanted to be buried in the processional way through the cemetery next to the church and convent of Totnes (Devon), outside and opposite the high altar (*Notes and Queries* magazine, November 30th 1850, 452). Neither mentions any form of lining or tomb in their wills, but the desirability of some spatial link between burial site and the high altar is clear.

At Bermondsey the stone-lined graves occur in the cemetery between the south-eastern part of the church and the infirmary chapel (Steele, in prep.). This cemetery is almost certainly that of the monks (over 90% of identifiable burials were adult males). Those buried within the cists were either male or of unknown sex, so it seems probable that these may have been ranking members of the Cluniac house.

At Merton, the picture is more complex. Of the 17 external cist burials, seven were found in the southern cemetery between the church and the infirmary complex. These were all adult males, and, as at Bermondsey, they were in a cemetery that was almost entirely made up of

Fig. 2: The cemetery at St Saviour Bermondsey, south London. The cist-lined burials are in solid black. The buildings in the lower part of the figure are a succession of infirmary chapels. The south-eastern wall of the church presbytery is at the top left.



Fig. 3: Part of the cemetery at St Mary Merton, Surrey. The solid black graves are external cists. Those that appear to lie inside the church in fact respect earlier phases.

adult males, so they were probably canons (Miller et al., in prep.). The other ten cists were situated in the northern, lay, cemetery and comprised men, women and children. The two children were infants and were tucked right in against east wall of the north transept. Those furthest out from the church walls were identified as probable females. The remainder were adult, either males or of unknown sex. Child burials, both inside and outside churches, were often positioned very close to walls. Christopher Daniell (1997, 128) notes the Anglo-Saxon custom of burying children below the eaves of church roofs and suggests that the rain dripping from the church roof may in some way have sanctified the burials. He suggests, however, that the custom died out after about 1100. Certainly there are later examples. Inside the church of the Carmelite Friars in Aberdeen, Scotland, at least nine infant burials were made directly against the north wall of the nave in the 14th and 15th centuries (Stones/Cameron, in prep.). At Earl's Barton (Northamptonshire), four probably medieval infant burials were excavated in the angle between the church tower and the 14th-century south aisle, near the church porch. One of these was covered with stone slabs (Audouy 1981, 75–76).

The remains contained within stone-lined graves therefore represent a range of social and religious groups. Firstly, the use of linings implies more labour and therefore greater expense, so there is clearly an issue of status in their use. Secondly, all such graves occupy more favoured locations near to the church, again suggesting that the group employing

them had access to money or influence. Within this more influential group, we can with some confidence identify the religious and the lay populations by the nature of the cemetery populations of which they formed part, and so determine that there is nothing obviously distinct between the treatment of the two. Subdividing this again, it would appear that women, while also afforded the linings, were less likely to obtain a burial plot next to the church buildings than men. It would also appear that children received particular attention, and we may suggest that they are children of the same social group who select cist burials for themselves.

Zoning within buildings: discrimination by age

Children and youths received special attention at other sites as well. The most compelling site is the Franciscan friary in Carmarthen, Wales, where excavations revealed part of the cloister, the church, chapter house and cemetery (James 1997; Manning 1998). Here, of 20 burials excavated from the eastern cloister walk, twelve, all centred around the area of the chapter house, or north of it towards the church, were mature or elderly males. A smaller group of eight occupied the area near to the southern alley, and in contrast, these were all either teenagers or in their early twenties. Where gender could be determined, they were all male. There is no documentary evidence, but it does seem very likely that such a division represents a distinction based on age and/or seniority. The chapter house was the province of the master and friars, and on death, it can be suggested that many were laid to rest at its entrance. The novices and younger brethren were buried in a separate part of the cloister further away. A similar division appears at the Dominican friary at Ipswich (Suffolk), where of the seven burials in the south cloister alley, five are either teenagers or in their early twenties, one is of unknown age and one is a mature male. In the north and east cloister walks, only three out of 24 burials are younger than approximately 25 (Mays 1991).

The Augustinian friary at Leicester confirms that friaries of all types may have been apportioning burial sites on an age-related basis, but here a different pattern is adopted. Of twelve burials in the eastern cloister walk and outside the chapter house door, only three are mature (i.e. between

26 and 45 years old). The rest comprise teenagers and young men. The pattern develops here though: of six burials in the chapter house itself, three are children (between 6 and 10 years) and three are youths between 11 and 25.

Conclusion

There is significant potential in the inter-site analysis of medieval cemeteries both in terms of considering separate, but similarly dated, cem-

eteries within individual settlements, and comparing burial practice across a wide range of cemeteries of different dates. A strong case can be made for the identification of different social and religious groups within medieval cemeteries. The wide range of burial practices beyond such simple discriminators such as grave-lining, or age preference, hints at the potential to explore more closely aspects such as graveside ritual, commemoration and preparation for the hereafter.

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