

An early entente cordiale? Cross-Channel connections in the Anglo-Saxon period

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New research in northern France by an international team, including members of the Institute of Archaeology, is beginning to reveal a pattern of close connections across the Channel between Franks and Anglo-Saxons in the sixth and seventh centuries AD.

In 1998 and 1999 two Institute of Archaeology students and I joined an international team to excavate a cemetery in northern France that dates to the period of Merovingian (Frankish) rule. The site occupies a narrow terrace at the edge of the village of Longroy on the western slope of the Bresle valley in the département of Seine-Maritime (Fig. 1). Downstream from Longroy is the town of Eu, the site of the palace in which the *entente cordiale* was signed by Queen Victoria and King Louis-Philippe in 1843 to mark a new alliance between France and the United Kingdom, which has survived to the present day. Victoria had landed at the nearby fishing port and seaside resort of Le Tréport, and one aim of the Longroy excavation was to search for evidence of much earlier cross-Channel connections in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Our project follows a series of rescue excavations of Frankish cemeteries undertaken in the eastern part of the département of Seine-Maritime between 1987 and 1992. Some investigations of Merovingian cemeteries were also conducted in the nineteenth century by the Abbé Cochet at Envermeu and Londinières, but no further sites had been explored in this region until they came under threat from development encouraged by motorway construction. The modern excavations hinted at a very limited Anglo-Saxon presence or influence in this region, attributable to the late fifth and early sixth centuries AD. This took the form of a pair of Anglo-Saxon brooches known as button brooches from a grave in a cemetery overlooking the Channel itself at Criel-sur-Mer, just a few kilometres west of Le Tréport and Eu (Figs 1, 2). No other Anglo-Saxon material had

been found at the four other cemeteries where rescue excavations were undertaken at Fallencourt, Haudricourt, Longroy and Villy-le-Bas (Fig. 1).¹

French archaeologists had decided to take the opportunity to investigate fully the most completely preserved of these four cemeteries (the one at Longroy) to provide a benchmark excavation for this period and region. Funds were raised to mount a research excavation at Longroy, whose cemetery was in use from the late fourth century to the seventh or even the eighth century.² Local diggers and archaeological students from Paris worked side by side with archaeologists from Moscow, Warsaw and London during the summers of 1998 and 1999, but in the event no Anglo-Saxon material was recovered. Although this might be explained by Merovingian-period grave robbing here, for which there is clear evidence, it seems more probable that this excavation confirms a distribution pattern of Anglo-Saxon material in northern France, which is concentrated in regions to the east and west of Seine-Maritime. In other words, the results of the new excavation can be said to support an argument, admittedly one based on absence of evidence, that there were minimal Anglo-Saxon contacts with the Seine-Maritime area at this period.



Figure 1 Part of northern France and southeastern England, showing the location of the modern towns and archaeological cemetery sites mentioned in the text: (1) Réville, (2) Saint-Martin-de-Fontenay, (3) Frénouville, (4) Giberville, (5) Envermeu, (6) Londinières, (7) Criel-sur-Mer, (8) Villy-le-Bas, (9) Fallencourt, (10) Haudricourt, (11) Longroy, (12) Nouvion-en-Ponthieu, (13) Vron, (14) La Calotterie, (15) Sarre, (16) Chessell Down.

Front view



Side view



Figure 2 One of a pair of Anglo-Saxon button brooches from the Merovingian-period cemetery at Criel-sur-Mer (Seine-Maritime). The brooch is similar in size to a modern coat button and consists of cast copper alloy with gilding on its front surface.

Historical and archaeological background

Anglo-Saxon and Frankish relations in this period are characterized by historical evidence that Merovingian kings claimed overlordship over Anglo-Saxon England in the sixth and seventh centuries. What this meant in practice is not clear, but there is no doubting the archaeological evidence for cross-Channel contacts before and after the arrival of a mission from Rome to convert the king of Kent to Christianity in AD 597. This king's wife was a Christian princess of the Merovingian house who had her own Frankish chaplain.³ The Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Kent have produced more imported Frankish finds than any other region of England. The earliest of them date from the fifth century, but the majority can be attributed to the sixth and seventh centuries. Dress fittings, such as brooches, beads and buckles, are matched by distinctive weapons and there are also imported vessels and containers made of glass, metal and wheel-thrown pottery. It seems likely that almost all trade between England and the Frankish realms of modern France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the German Rhineland was funnelled through Kent between the late fifth and early seventh centuries.

The Isle of Wight, apparently a Kentish colony, seems to have been the only exception to this pattern. Certainly, the cemetery assemblages of the late fifth and sixth centuries at Chessell Down on Wight (Fig. 1), excavated in the nineteenth century, would not look out of place if transported to eastern Kent. This confirms the historian Bede's reference – in the same passage in which he attributes the kingdom of Kent to the Jutes – to the Isle of Wight and that part of the mainland opposite it (most of present-day Hampshire) as belonging to the Jutes.⁴

This trade monopoly controlled by the Franks and the Jutes, if that is what it was, came to an end during the seventh and early eighth centuries. We can trace this archaeologically with the foundation and development of new coastal ports. The best known and most fully excavated is the site of Hamwic, the Anglo-Saxon precursor of Southampton in Hampshire. It was founded around the year 700, following the West Saxon conquest of Jutish Wight in the 680s. Hamwic provided access to continental trade for the West Saxons, and equivalent sites are now known from excavations in the Strand and Covent Garden area of London (Lundenwic) for the East Saxons, at Ipswich (Gipeswic) in Suffolk for the East Angles, and in the Fishergate area of York (Eoforwic) for the Northumbrians.⁵ These sites imply that each of the newly Christianized kingdoms was able to negotiate its own trade agreement with the Merovingian kings during the seventh century. Most of these trading ports and

their Frankish equivalents, such as Quentovic on the River Canche, near Étapes (Fig. 1) and Dorestad on the Rhine delta, were to be abandoned or severely depopulated during the period of Viking raids in the ninth century, but here we are concerned with the preceding period of the Franco-Kentish monopoly.

The distribution of Early Anglo-Saxon finds in northern France

Even today, unfortunately, there is much greater awareness in England of the evidence for Frankish influence on Early Anglo-Saxon material culture than there is of the matching presence of Anglo-Saxon finds in northern France. This is despite the best efforts of French archaeologists, who have been excavating and publishing Frankish cemeteries in northern France since the 1960s. The distribution of older finds is matched by those from modern excavations, and the most recent investigations in the eastern half of Seine-Maritime confirm that these distribution patterns are real and not simply the product of modern patterns of redevelopment. The finds themselves are types of objects, typically decorated brooches, made in southern England and sometimes specifically belonging to types made in Kent. They all date to a period of just 50–60 years extending from the end of the fifth century to the middle of the sixth century.⁶

One major concentration of Early Anglo-Saxon finds occurs in sites between the Pas-de-Calais, around the former Roman port at Boulogne, and the Somme estuary near Abbeville. Modern excavations have taken place at Novion-en-Ponthieu, Vron and most recently at La Calotterie, overlooking the Canche valley (Fig. 1).⁷ As this region is opposite Kent, this concentration is hardly surprising, but it is not clear

whether these finds should be linked to historical references to Saxons settled in the region around Quentovic on the River Canche.

A second concentration of finds is centred around Caen in Lower Normandy, with sites at Giberville, Frénouville, and Saint-Martin-de-Fontenay, and also one cemetery on the Cherbourg peninsula at Réville (Fig. 1).⁸ This group of sites lies opposite Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, and here too there is an historical reference to resident Saxons, living in the territory of Bayeux. By contrast, there is the virtual absence of Early Anglo-Saxon finds in Upper Normandy (the départements of Eure and Seine-Maritime). This is hardly likely to be a coincidence, for here the French coast faces the former South Saxon kingdom (modern Sussex), which was equally excluded from cross-Channel trade under the Kentish monopoly.⁹

The Anglo-French cross-Channel research project

The results of the Longroy excavation helped to confirm this general picture and they represent the first product of a new Anglo-French programme of co-operative research to investigate the nature of cross-Channel contacts in this period (Fig. 3). This is just one area of research and fieldwork being developed, following a recent formal agreement between the Institute of Archaeology and the Musée Nationale des Antiquités at Saint-Germain-en-Laye on the northwestern outskirts of Paris. The intention is to encourage archaeology students at both UCL and l'Université de Paris I to undertake research within the framework of the programme. A French student, Axel Kerep, has begun a comparative study of weapon assemblages from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries with those from



Figure 3 Excavation at Longroy, September 1998; the author (centre) discussing results from the cemetery of La Calotterie with Daniel Piton (right).



Figure 4 An excavated single adult burial accompanied by various grave goods including, beside the feet, wheel-thrown pottery vessels of Merovingian age, Longroy cemetery, 1999.

Frankish cemeteries in northeast France for a master's degree dissertation, under the supervision of Patrick Périn, Director of the Musée Nationale. At the same time, Stuart Brookes is completing his doctoral research at UCL on the archaeological evidence for trade in Anglo-Saxon Kent. He has successfully located by fieldwork a trading port on the River Stour near Fordwich and the settlement associated with an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Sarre (Fig. 1).

In the future, we hope that students from Paris I will undertake surveys of finds of Frankish material in English contexts and that UCL students will do the same for Anglo-Saxon finds from French sites. Much of the material has been catalogued and assessed, but with a steady stream of developer-funded excavations in both countries, there is a constant need to update and expand these surveys.

Pottery and skeletal studies

Handmade pottery, which may be of Anglo-Saxon manufacture, deserves special mention. Such vessels do occur in the same Frankish cemeteries as Anglo-Saxon brooches, but at present we cannot be sure whether these pots were brought there by Anglo-Saxons or by other related peoples from the Netherlands, northwest Germany or even central Germany (Thuringia). Fabric studies using thin-section analysis may allow us to determine the origin of the clays and fillers used in their manufacture and thus the region from which they were imported. Ethnographic parallels suggest that handmade pottery is normally domestically produced by women and, if that was the case here, fabric analysis may provide evidence for the ethnic identity of

the potters, assuming that the women who made the pots tended to move to new communities through marriage, as is suggested by other evidence such as metal costume fittings. Certainly, this handmade pottery stands out from the mass of wheel-thrown pots normally recovered from Merovingian Frankish cemeteries west of the Rhine such as Longroy (Fig. 4). The Roman pottery industry disappeared completely in Britain, but it survived through much of Gaul, producing large quantities of well fired vessels of regular shape that were technically far superior to Germanic handmade pottery. The Institute of Archaeology has the expertise and laboratory facilities to carry out this analysis and we hope to build up a database of thin-section samples to allow us to compare pots from southern England with those found in northern France. Subsequently, this database should be expanded to incorporate handmade pottery from Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

A second area of research that is worth pursuing is the study of human skeletal remains from cemeteries on both sides of the Channel, wherever minority Frankish or Anglo-Saxon finds have been recorded. This may allow us to establish what proportion, if any, of the buried community represents immigrants. We certainly cannot assume that people buried in northern France with Anglo-Saxon brooches were necessarily Anglo-Saxon immigrants themselves. If Anglo-Saxon traders were men, they might well have kept a wife and family in each of their bases, and given their women Anglo-Saxon dress fittings. There is a chance that such men might be buried in the same cemetery as women with Anglo-Saxon brooches and could be detected from genetically significant traits in their bones and teeth or by means of DNA analysis.

The Herpes (Charente) material

In addition to the main project, research links between the British Museum and the Institute of Archaeology may allow us to undertake further research on material excavated at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in a Merovingian cemetery at Herpes near Cognac in southwest France. Some of the finds from Herpes, which include a substantial body of Early Anglo-Saxon metalwork, are now housed and displayed in the British Museum. Doubt has been expressed in the past as to whether all the finds attributed to the Herpes site really came from it, but research for the British Museum by Cathy Haith, an archaeological curator, suggests that most of it does.¹⁰ Overall, the material from Herpes shares the same predominantly southern English, and in particular Kentish, character as the finds from northern French sites; like them, it appears to belong to quite a narrow date range extending from the late fifth to the mid-sixth century.

It is tempting then to see the Herpes "Kentish" material as representing a trade link bringing regional products by river and sea to the Isle of Wight and Kent. Wine transported in barrels would be the most likely produce and perhaps one day we shall locate another cemetery in the Sain-tonge region and find matching "Kentish" assemblages. At present, Herpes is a unique site for its region, and our initial efforts must be concentrated on researching the many northern sites that document the cross-Channel links between northern France and southern England in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Notes

1. These excavations were conducted by the Service Régional de l'Archéologie de Haute-Normandie.
2. The funding was arranged by Dr P. Périn and the excavation was jointly directed by Etienne Mantel and Michel Kazanski.
3. In book 1, chapter 25 of his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, the Venerable Bede names the king as Aethelberht and the queen as Bertha. See *Bede's ecclesiastical history of the English people*, B. Colgrave & R. A. B. Mynors (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
4. See book 1, chapter 15 of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (n. 3); also B. Yorke, "The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the origins of Wessex", in *The origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms*, S. Bassett (ed.), 84–96 (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989) and pp. 13–72 in C. J. Arnold, *The Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of the Isle of Wight* (London: British Museum Press, 1982).
5. C. Scull, "Urban centres in pre-Viking England?", in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the eighth century: an ethnographic perspective*, J. Hines (ed.), 269–310 (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1997).
6. M. Welch, "Contacts across the Channel between the fifth and seventh centuries: a review of the archaeological evidence", *Studien zur Sachsenforschung* 7, 261–9, 1991.
7. For example, D. Piton, *La nécropole de Nouvion-en-Ponthieu* (Berck-sur-Mer: Dossiers archéologiques, historiques et culturels du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais 20, 1985) and *De la Canche à l'Authie: premières restaurations* (Exhibition Catalogue, Musée Municipal de Berck-sur-Mer (no author, no date)).
8. See the following three reports by C. Pilet assisted by many other contributors, *La nécropole de Frénoville* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports International Series 83, 1980), *La nécropole de Giber-ville* (Caen: Musée de Normandie, 1981), *La nécropole de Saint-Martin-de-Fontenay, Calvados* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994); also F. Scuvée, *Le cimetière barbare de Réville (Manche)* (Caen: Caron, 1973).
9. M. G. Welch, *Early Anglo-Saxon Sussex* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports British Series 112, 1983).
10. C. Haith, "Un nouveau regard sur le cimetière d'Herpes (Charente)", *Revue Archéologique de Picardie* 3–4, 71–80, 1988.