

David Platt, *Roman enclosure and early Anglo-Saxon occupation at Top Road, Kempsford, Gloucestershire* Thames Valley Archaeological Services Monograph 28 (Reading, TVAS 2017). vii + 130pp., 34 figs., 26 pl., 27 tabs., 6 charts. Cardcovers, no price stated [ISBN: 9781911228219] **Reviewed 11.2017**

The landscape of the Upper Thames Valley in which Kempsford is situated is important archaeologically because of the incidence of late Iron Age, Roman and Saxon settlements and their possible continuity. This was certainly the case at Kempsford, where the site examined lay on the edge of the village. The excavation took place in 2015 and was the result of a planning application for housing, together with a sports field and social facilities. Crop-marks, geophysics and evaluation trenches suggested a typical Iron Age/Early Roman landscape on the second terrace of gravels of the Thames Valley. As frequent with developer-led excavations, there were restrictions on where trenches could be opened. There was no need to excavate the playing field area and the site of the carpark needed uncovering only down to the top of the archaeological features, so the stratification will be preserved *in situ*. These factors resulted in a small area to explore with all the frustrations that this involves in tracing features over even short distances.

As predicted, there was late Iron Age and Roman activity comparable with that of other sites excavated in the Upper Thames Valley such as Kempsford Quarry, Stubbs Farm and, further afield, Claydon Pike. The Top Road site seems to have changed over time with the disuse of enclosures as the agricultural regime developed and with the pastoral dominance of cattle and, later, sheep. A possible roundhouse was detected, but being only 5 m in diameter and represented by a grouping of undated postholes cut by a later ditch, this is not a likely candidate for a settlement during this period. Interestingly, the Top Road assemblages of cereals included malt waste in the Roman period, so workers in the fields might have been drinking spelt beer at harvest time! Three sets of Roman burials were recovered, possibly in family groups, although others may remain under the unexcavated parts of the site.

The most significant feature of the site was the presence of an Anglo-Saxon hall and six sunken-featured buildings (SFB), a valuable addition to the growing number of Thames Valley examples of settlements of this period. What was seen as of major significance were the radiocarbon dates, especially that from a food residue on a fragment of a pottery from one of the SFBs. This produced a date range from AD 377–476, with a 66.5% probability, although the excavator comments that this was ‘less than ideal’. However, he suggests a distribution from AD 377–430 ‘may be the best fit’. He gives as examples several radiocarbon dates from a number of Thames valley sites, although they also have wide ranges. His preferred earlier range would put the Anglo-Saxon occupation on the Top Road site very early in the pattern of settlement, and the author suggests that there is a ‘distinct possibility that this took place well before the “official” end of Roman Britain in AD 410’. Enthusiastically, the author supports his hypothesis with ‘certainly the early Anglo-Saxon leaders Hengist and Horsa were settled in Kent few decades later, and this need not have been the earliest example.’ However, the interpretation placed here on a single radiocarbon date is unfortunate! The range goes up to AD 476, so the pot in question is more likely to be towards the end of that range. To argue that there are any grounds for placing it before the end of Roman occupation is stretching the statistical evidence. We also need to get away from the

'grand narrative', especially of much later written sources (and certainly from the mythical figures of Hengest and Horsa), and focus on the predictably ambiguous situation suggested by the archaeology.

Anglo-Saxon settlement had clearly been established in Dorchester (Oxon.) by soon after AD 400, so it is not hugely surprising that small groups, possibly extended families, should find their way up the Thames. In the context of other early Anglo-Saxon settlements that have recently been excavated and published in south-east Gloucestershire and the uppermost Thames zone, such as South Cerney and Horcott, the Top Road site doesn't look especially anomalous, and also like this one, they end around AD 600. The author of the report adopts the now outdated position that the Britons kept the Anglo-Saxons out and the Upper Thames became a frontier zone. Whether or not anyone would have been able, or would have wanted, to keep them out would have depended on political and military circumstances of which we have no knowledge.

Excavating a small site can be frustrating, so the reviewer's exploration of this report was challenging. The plans are a particular problem, mainly because instead of 'Plan One, Plan Two etc', we are presented with 'Figure 4. Detailed plan (1)', 'Figure 5. Detailed plan (2)', etc. This scheme clearly confused the drafts person as there are two 'Figure 8s' illustrating different areas of the site, although there is a 'Figure 9. Detailed Plan (6) in the text! It is difficult to identify the area where only the top-soil was stripped down to the archaeology. The only way this reviewer could make sense of the overall plan of the site was to photocopy the aerial image on the front cover taken from the north and rotate it through 180 degrees to have north at the top! On this overall plan some features have blue numerals and some red/bold red and yet appear in blue in detailed plans i.e. the Anglo-Saxon hall. It is not clear why this distinction is necessary. Similarly with the human remains, of which some twelve skeletons were recovered. On the detailed plans just six of these are identified by a red skeleton icon, three have the prefix SK, and the others are only identified by grave cut numbers. There is no obvious key as to why these are differentiated. In the text some tables have numbered features assigned to the wrong figure, and similarly the contents of tables refer to the wrong illustration. Some of the paragraphs in text are repeated on the same page, and the grammar might be improved in places.

It is good to see archaeological excavations published promptly so that recent evidence can be compared with other sites of the same period, and not end up as 'grey literature' held in a museum or commercial archive. There are also the pressures of ensuring that the developer has a research report for which it has already paid. However, this publication shows signs of undue haste and an awkward structure (though it has to be said that the finds reports are up to the high standards expected of those commissioned to undertake them) and does not do justice to those individuals who excavated the site so professionally.

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