

THE BUTTERMARKET CEMETERY AND THE ORIGINS OF IPSWICH IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY AD

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IPSWICH IS ONE of the major craft production and trading settlements – the so-called *wics* or *emporia* – of the seventh to ninth centuries in England for which there is good archaeological evidence, and has been seen as the main port-of-entry for the East Anglian kingdom through which exchange with the continent was channelled.¹ These major *emporia* have assumed a central place in debates over the nature of urbanism and urban origins in post-Roman Britain and are accorded an important role in the developing socio-economic complexity that governed the rise of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom structure.² Understanding the origins and development of the Middle Saxon settlement at Ipswich is therefore a research objective of national and international importance.

At its greatest extent the pre-Viking settlement at Ipswich covered around 50ha. Rescue excavations since 1974 have allowed detailed examination of some 3–4 per cent of this area. The crucial excavation for our understanding of the development of the Ipswich settlement in the seventh and eighth centuries was undertaken in 1987 and 1988 on the site of the Buttermarket in the centre of the modern town (Fig. 22).³ This revealed a sequence of activity

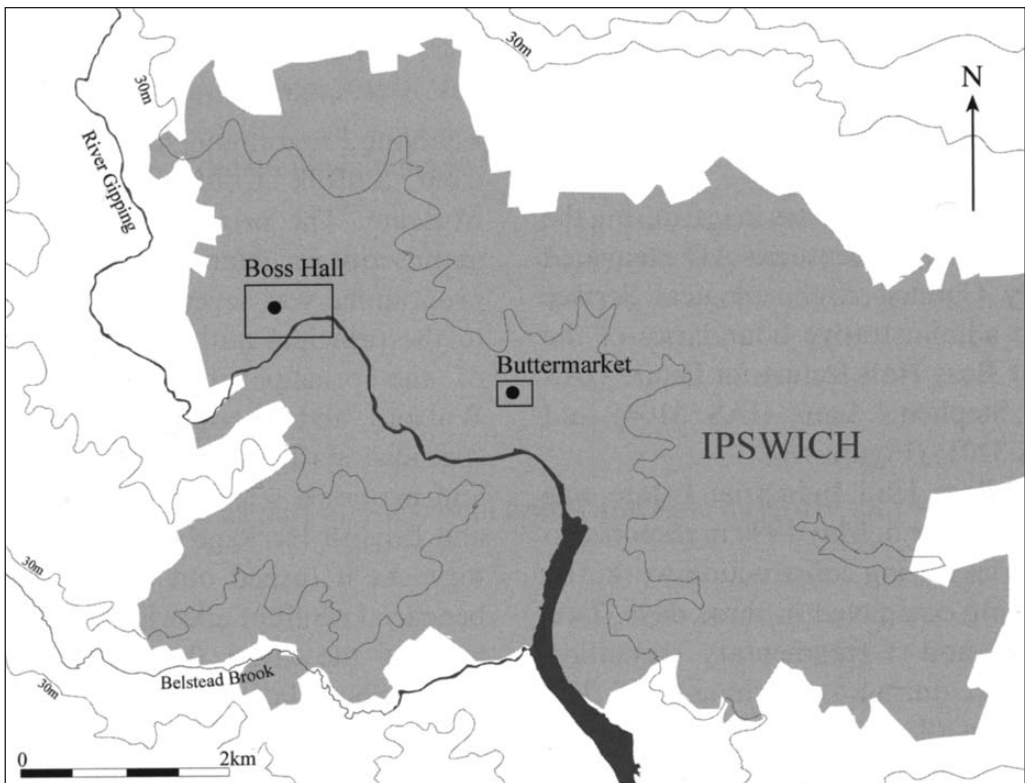


FIG. 22 – Ipswich, location of the cemeteries at Boss Hall and Buttermarket.

from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, of which the earliest phase was a cemetery in use during the seventh century. A detailed analysis of the cemetery has now been published which revises some previous thinking about Ipswich's early history and development.⁴ This short paper summarises some main conclusions set out in that publication which should be consulted for full data, detailed analysis, and supporting references.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IPSWICH IN THE SEVENTH TO NINTH CENTURIES

The best direct evidence for the earliest (seventh-century) settlement at Ipswich comes from excavations at St Peter's St/Greyfriars Road which revealed settlement features (*Grubenhäuser* and pits) associated with ceramic assemblages of local handmade wares and imported continental pottery. Taken with the distribution of early handmade pottery and other material culture items of the seventh and early eighth centuries which have been recovered as residual in later contexts, this suggests a settlement area of between 6ha and 30ha on the north bank of the River Orwell (Fig. 23).

Immediately north of this settlement was the Buttermarket cemetery. It was very probably the main cemetery serving the settlement although there is some evidence for other smaller burial groups on the settlement margins. The full cemetery area was not excavated, and within the excavated area there was much damage from later activity. It is however possible to estimate the minimum burial area and the original density of burial. This suggests that there were originally at least 400–450 graves (of which 71 certain graves and a further 7 possible graves were recorded).

The material culture assemblage from the early settlement does not allow close dating. It belongs to a pre-Ipswich-ware ceramic phase (before AD 700/720) and to the seventh century. The cemetery, however, is dated both by grave goods and by radiocarbon,⁵ which agree well. This gives us dates by which a community had started to bury here and so by extension the time by which a settlement with a permanent population had been established. Grave goods suggest that this was AD 610/20–640/50. The radiocarbon model gives *cal AD 595-640 (at 95 per cent probability)* and *cal AD 610-635 (at 68 per cent probability)*.

The Buttermarket cemetery was abandoned by the end of the seventh century and it may have gone out of use as early as AD 680 (the radiocarbon model gives an *81.5 per cent probability* that no burial on site was interred after this date). The area was then given over to occupation and craft activity as part of a rapid expansion of the settlement with streets laid out to an orthogonal pattern to the north of the original settlement nucleus and south of the River Orwell. During this time the production of Ipswich ware began to the north-east of the original settlement area.

BURIAL AND COMMUNITY IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY

There is evidence for craft production and for overseas contacts from the earliest phases of the settlement. The ceramic assemblage is unique among East Anglian sites of the seventh century for the high proportion (14 per cent) of imported wares. In the cemetery, the earliest graves include burials with material culture assemblages which suggest individuals from the Continent.

The area of seventh-century settlement activity at Ipswich is larger than contemporary rural settlements in Suffolk and the evidence suggests a larger population and a higher population density. Because there is a radiocarbon model for the length of time the Buttermarket cemetery was in use, it is possible to calculate (with due caution) the likely contributing population, which was probably in the low hundreds. At a minimum estimate the Buttermarket

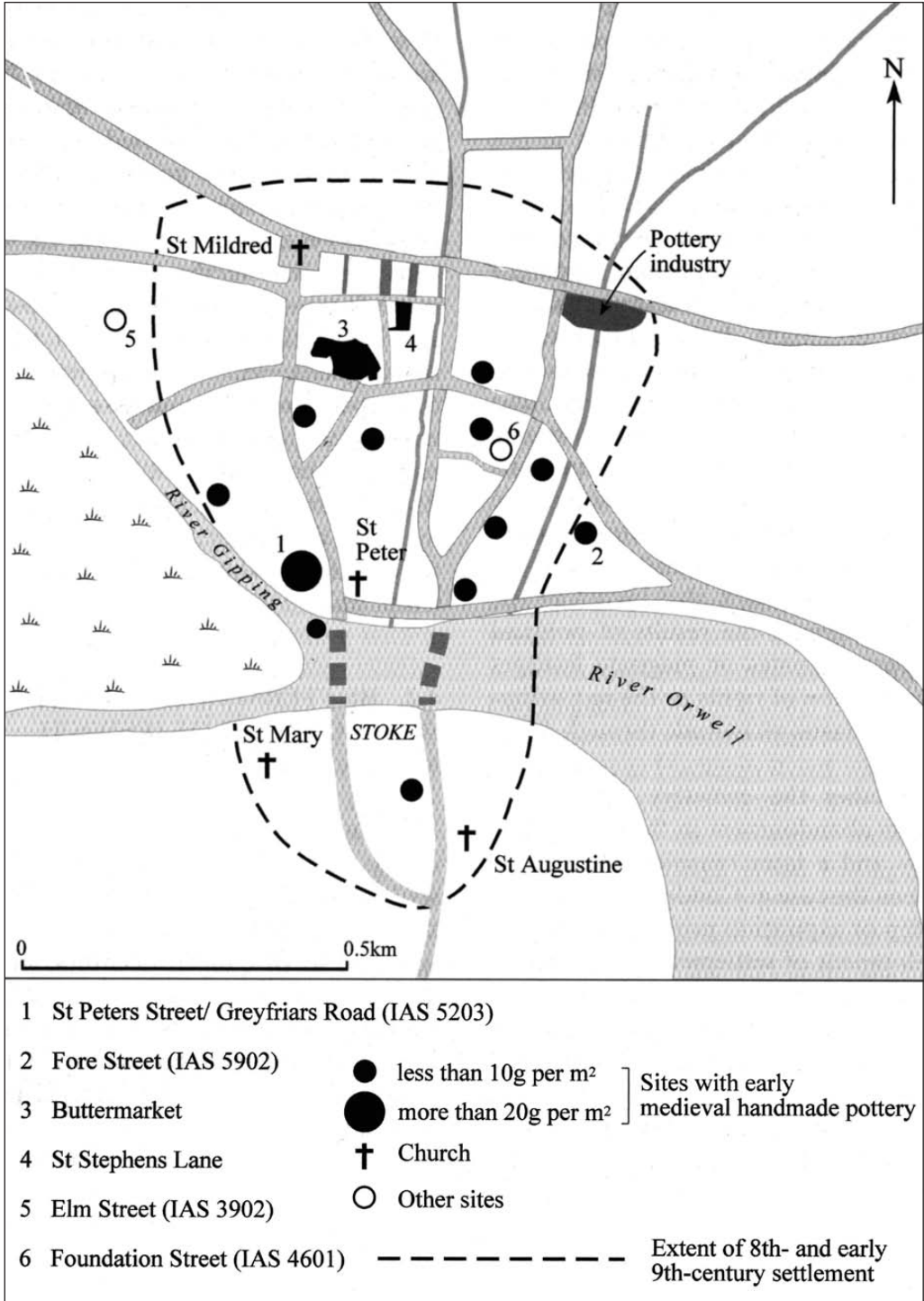


FIG. 23 – Map of Ipswich, showing the development of the settlement in the 7th to 9th centuries.

population was seven to eleven times greater than that at Bloodmoor Hill, Carlton Colville, Suffolk where the cemetery is interpreted as representing a single household or the population of a single high-status establishment of the middle to later seventh century.⁶

Men, women and children were all buried at the Buttermarket cemetery. Where it is possible to judge biological sex or the expression of gender through the provision of grave goods the ratio is 2:1 men : women, but this can be determined only in a small minority of cases and so no broader demographic conclusion can be drawn.

Investment in burial suggests marked degrees of social differentiation. This is expressed in the provision of grave goods, and in the provision of structures, mounds and burial containers. Interestingly, though, some of these aspects of burial practice tend to be mutually exclusive, and there appears to be some spatial (though not chronological) distinction. The evidence suggests two competing, or at least distinctive, funerary languages, one which emphasised social identity through the provision of grave goods, the other funerary investment through the provision of specific types of burial container and the construction of mounds over the graves.

Although there are some higher-status burials there is nothing outstanding. The status of the richer families burying at Buttermarket was not, on the evidence of the female graves, equal to those of the aristocratic women buried, for example, at Swallowcliffe Down or Desborough, or elsewhere in East Anglia at Boss Hall or Harford Farm. The single outstanding burial (grave 1306) is male, and continental, but it looks more impressive in England than it would on the Continent. The conclusion is that these are families of a local rather than a wider importance.

There is some evidence for burial plots. It is commonly argued that these represent households, and they may well do so here. The best evidence at Buttermarket, though, comes from an area used and maintained over two or perhaps three generations. This suggests that lineage (descent identity) was as important a structuring feature of the cemetery, and the communities that used it, as household (contemporary) identity.

There is strong evidence for the presence of individuals from the Continent, or groups that chose to express a strong continental affiliation in burial practice. This is seen most clearly in grave 1306, a coffined inhumation with spear, seax and belt-suite of continental type, and also in graves 2297 and 3871 which also contained continental belt-suites.⁷ One of the richer female burials, grave 2962, has chatelaine elements which are of continental inspiration if not manufacture.⁸ A number of graves have elaborate linings or structure which may suggest emulation of contemporary burial practices across the North Sea.⁹

There are a few so-called deviant burials within the cemetery, including a possible execution victim (grave 4926). Following Andrew Reynolds,¹⁰ we might see this as indicating a community where customary sanction rather than formal judicial authority operated. This is interesting in the light of the role claimed for emporia in the rise of kingdoms and state structures, perhaps suggesting that royal interest in the earliest settlement at Ipswich did not impinge on community prerogatives.

The cemetery probably served a pagan population initially, but it is unlikely that the local population burying here in mid-late seventh century did not profess Christianity at some level. There is however nothing in burial practice which might be considered specifically pagan or Christian, nor any threshold of change in burial practice that might mark the adoption of Christianity. Although the cemetery spans the Conversion Period, the conversion is archaeologically unrecognisable here.

This was not a community which lay outside the constraints of kinship, rank and custom at a time when social, political and economic hierarchies were becoming more marked. There is evidence for social differentiation both within and between households and lineages or

families, and for a balance between community-identity and the autonomy of lineage or household. The suggestion of some competition between lineages reinforces the impression of autonomy, and suggests that this place had a permanence and integrity which made it the appropriate arena, and its inhabitants the appropriate audience, for such discourse.

The seventh-century settlement at Ipswich is best interpreted as a new foundation which was primarily intended to channel exchange with the continent and allow some control of the benefits – in revenue, prestige and authority – accruing from this. It must have functioned under paramount (royal) oversight and taxation, but immediate property and economic interests were more likely vested in magnates or magnate lineages. Both socially and physically, therefore, the community burying at Buttermarket may be seen as an agglomeration of establishments and households, each a part of, or linked to, a discrete network of estates through which the surplus from extensive or multiple holdings could be redistributed or redeployed. Possible examples of such estate centres in the hinterland of Ipswich have been identified archaeologically at Coddtenham and Barham.¹¹

Ipswich was a new foundation but it was established in a settled and populated landscape. Equally, the exchange contacts which it existed to channel did not spring up fully formed, but were an amplified development of socially- and politically-embedded exchange already attested in the archaeology of the sixth century. In the immediate vicinity of Ipswich itself is the cemetery at Hadleigh Road.¹² This was in use from late fifth or earlier sixth century until the middle of the seventh century and has evidence for Kentish and continental links from later sixth century. It is a possible candidate for a community with inter-regional exchange contacts immediately before the establishment of the Ipswich settlement and the Buttermarket cemetery. One possibility is that Kentish dynastic patronage of the East Anglian kings may have involved some mediation of long-distance exchange-contacts and possibly even some direct oversight or protection of activity in the Ipswich area around the turn of the seventh century.¹³

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS

Control of long-distance exchange is widely proposed as one of the primary mechanisms governing the development of social and political stratification in sixth- and seventh-century England, underpinning the dynastic power which established the regional kingdom-structure of the seventh and eighth centuries.¹⁴ Sutton Hoo is the most famous feature of the seventh-century cultural landscape in south-east Suffolk. Given the postulated link between Anglo-Saxon kingship and emporia it is tempting to see the foundation of Ipswich as an initiative of the Wuffing dynasty and to view south-east Suffolk in the early seventh century as the core of a proto-state in which we can detect evidence for some emergent integration of political, economic and ideological central place functions in the same general locality.¹⁵

Before accepting a simple link between Ipswich and the expressions of a regional dynastic authority at Sutton Hoo, however, it is worth exploring some of the possible contexts for the establishment of a trading site under royal authority. It is possible to envisage a number of possibilities, and although these depend upon a handful of problematic documentary sources, and may all be over-simplistic or plain wrong, they do serve to illustrate the likely complexity and dynamism of agencies and events that lie behind generalising models linking long-distance exchange, the development of royal power, and state-formation.

The radiocarbon model for the Buttermarket cemetery allows the possibility that it came into use as early as AD 595. It is more probable, though, that it came into use no earlier than the second or third decade of the seventh century (there is a 21.8 *per cent* probability that burial began before AD 610). Our knowledge of the regnal chronology of the East Anglian

kings during these years is not entirely secure. This was a period of fluctuating dynastic fortunes, which encompassed both some claim to supreme hegemony by Redwald and apparent subordination to Penda of Mercia under Aethelhere, and as many as six individuals may be identified as holding power singly or jointly during the two decades to AD 640 (Redwald, Eorpwald, Eorpwald's successor or successors who may have included Ricbert, Sigebert, Ecgric, and Anna).¹⁶

It may be tempting to see the foundation of Ipswich (especially if it was intended to suppress earlier arrangements outside the full control of the East Anglian kings) as an act of assertion by Redwald, linked to a claim to paramount status following the death of Aethelbert of Kent in AD 616. One possible model might be that an antecedent site, served by the Hadleigh Road cemetery, enjoyed some Kentish patronage or protection during the reign of Aethelbert. Under these circumstances the establishment of an East Anglian emporium at Ipswich, imposing royal prerogative and full control of the benefits accruing from trade, might be seen both as a strong practical assertion of authority and a powerful statement of the shifting balance of dynastic power in southern England. If this scenario is correct, and if Redwald was the man buried in the Mound One ship burial at Sutton Hoo, then Ipswich and the climax of princely burial at Sutton Hoo would indeed be expressions of the same dynastic aspirations.

An alternative model, though, might be that the Ipswich settlement was established under the auspices of Sigebert in the early 630s. Sigebert had escaped the enmity of Redwald through exile in Frankia, where he had converted to Christianity; he inaugurated the conversion of the East Angles, and with his sanction and support the Burgundian, Felix, was established as their first bishop. Encouraging trade contacts with the Christian, Merovingian, Continent, under formal royal oversight, would therefore appear to be a plausible component of the bundle of symbolic and practical measures that one might expect to be deployed in the course of Sigebert's regnal project. Under this scenario (and depending upon how one reads the possible alternative sequences of burial at Sutton Hoo) Ipswich may be represented as belonging to a world in which the mortuary symbolism of princely burial epitomized by Sutton Hoo had been decisively abandoned by Christian royalty in favour of church-burial, part of an ideological and political re-alignment with the Frankish world.

Both of these readings assume that indigenous paramount authority was the moving factor, but the possibility that external authority may also have played a part should be considered. Some Kentish involvement in the Ipswich area at the turn of the seventh century has already been posited. A further possibility is that there may have been some direct assertion of authority by continental elites. The Buttermarket cemetery includes graves which are almost certainly those of individuals from the Continent. The evidence of date and identity would be consistent with continental initiative being as important as insular authority in the establishment of the trading settlement, perhaps even to the extent that a continental presence and claim to authority may have been one of the factors prompting the assertion of indigenous royal control. This would chime with suggestions about Frankish claims to hegemony in southern and eastern England and with the axis of any core-periphery relationship between Merovingian and English kingdoms.¹⁷

Imported pottery and the coinage of the eighth and ninth centuries indicate that Ipswich's overseas trade was with the Rhineland, Flanders and northern France. The clearest expressions in burial of a foreign cultural identity at Buttermarket also point to links with these areas. Any contacts with northern France and Flanders will have been with territories under Frankish authority. The situation on the lower Rhine was more complex, but evidence for the balance of power here, and of the early history of the vicus that was to become the major emporium of Dorestad, suggests a Frankish political context until the middle of the seventh century. This would support the view that Frankish territory and Frankish elites were

the initial foci of the links channelled through Ipswich.

It would be unrealistic, though, to assume that this pattern remained unchanging through the seventh century. Both the seventh-century settlement at Ipswich and its associated cemetery at Buttermarket may appear relatively short-lived to the modern archaeological perspective, but they endured for at least the span of a human lifetime and must have been fixed elements of the physical and cognitive landscape for at least two or three generations of adults – foreign, as well as indigenous. During this time the political fortunes of the East Anglian dynasty fluctuated. It may also be presumed that the nature and focus of contacts channelled through the settlement were subject to change, and that those of the eighth and ninth centuries differed in character and emphasis from those of the seventh century. It is possible, for example, to envisage a development from initial contacts, embedded in social and political links, directed towards northern France and Flanders, to increasingly commercial contact on a larger scale with the Rhineland via the Rhine mouths and the emporia at Domburg and then Dorestad.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS AND SOME CONCLUSIONS

The increase in area and population at Ipswich from *c.* AD 700 was accompanied by an intensification and diversification of craft-production and economic activity, including the large-scale production and distribution of Ipswich Ware. By the middle of the eighth century it is realistic to suggest that the greatly expanded settlement was linked to its hinterland through markets with a significant element of monetary exchange.

The scale of expansion and the comprehensive reconfiguration of social and physical space at Ipswich argues that this was planned and instigated by a central authority and so it seems highly likely that this was a royal initiative, intended to promote and to regulate commercial activity on a new scale. The scale and nature of change also implies some social and economic realignment within the settlement-population, and we may infer a change in the social character and make-up of the settlement, with a greater number directly and primarily involved in exchange and manufacture and a lessening of magnate presence or influence under stronger royal control.

The Buttermarket cemetery went out of use in the reign of Aldwulf (AD 663–713) and the remodelling of Ipswich may be attributed to him or (possibly) to his successor Aelfwald (AD 713–49). Interestingly, at around this time there appears to be a shift in the balance of importance between Coddanham and Barham, and the wealthy female burial at Boss Hall (grave 93), which may be dated to *c.* AD 690/700, provides evidence for an elite establishment close to Ipswich that might be a candidate for the seat of elite authority or control.¹⁸

Two major thresholds of change and development can be identified in the archaeological record for Ipswich in the seventh century: the establishment of the settlement and its associated cemetery, and the expansion and reconfiguration of the settlement and abandonment of the Buttermarket cemetery. The settlement of AD 750 was likely very different from that of AD 650 in its social and proprietorial structures as well as in size and degrees of economic specialisation and diversity, and in the nature of its broader contacts. It would be a mistake, too, to assume that two episodes of accelerated change punctuated periods of stasis. Human behaviour is dynamic; ideology and practice are constantly reinvented; large-scale and long-term social changes are the results of the aggregates of human actions – albeit at varying scales and degrees. When looking at such dramatic change as we see at Ipswich over a period of a century we must always therefore bear in mind human agency and the timescales of human action.

NOTES

- 1 Hodges 1982a; Ambrosiani and Clarke 1995; Scull 1997; Hill and Cowie 2001.
- 2 Hodges 1982b; Hodges 1989; Scull 1997; Hill and Cowie 2001.
- 3 Wade 1993; Scull 2002.
- 4 Scull 2009a.
- 5 Scull 2009a, 261–67.
- 6 Scull 2009b.
- 7 Scull 2009a, 293–94.
- 8 Scull 2009a, 243–44.
- 9 Scull 2009a, 294.
- 10 Reynolds 2009.
- 11 Newman 2003; Penn 2011.
- 12 Layard 1907; West 1998, 52–67.
- 13 Scull 2002; 2009a, 317.
- 14 Hodges 1982b; Arnold 1988; Carver 2005, 498.
- 15 Scull 2002; Carver 2005, 495–502.
- 16 Yorke 1990, 58–71.
- 17 Wood 1983; Scull 2002, 314.
- 18 Scull 2009a, 16–18, 114, 313.

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