

# *Early medieval great hall complexes in England: temporality and site biographies*

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## Early Medieval Great Hall Complexes in England: Temporality and Site Biographies

By Christopher Scull<sup>1</sup> and Gabor Thomas<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*This paper offers a critical reconsideration of the social, spatial and temporal dynamics of 6th- to 8th-century great hall complexes in England. The major interpretative issues and constraints imposed by the data are considered, and the sites are then subject to comparative analysis across long-term and short-term temporal scales. The former highlights persistence of antecedent activity and centrality, the latter the ways in which the built environment was perceived in the past, structured social action, and was a medium for the construction and consolidation of elite identity and authority. Within the broad similarity that defines the site-type there is evidence for considerable diversity and complexity of site history and afterlife.*

### BACKGROUND AND CRITICAL ISSUES

Great hall complexes are one of the most emphatic archaeological manifestations of social complexity in 6th- to 8th-century England and are fundamental to current understandings of how regional rulership and territorial authority were constructed and enacted.<sup>3</sup> Recent models have encouraged the view that they were short-lived phenomena ‘with lives to be measured in decades, not centuries’, invoking transience as one of their defining attributes and, by extension, characterising structures of secular elite authority in early England as similarly impermanent.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the early medieval re-use of prehistoric monuments at these places, most strikingly at the type-site Yeavinger, has been used to help explain their location.<sup>5</sup> Temporality, at both short- and long-term scales, has thus been a key measure by which these sites and the places they inhabit have been conceptualised and discussed.

Recent fieldwork has enhanced understanding of site chronologies and dynamics in significant and unexpected ways, prompting a reconsideration in the light of this larger and

finer-grained body of archaeological evidence. This is not, of course, an end in itself but a point of departure for interpreting the wider meanings and significances of these places. Interdisciplinary perspectives on time and social memory in the early medieval past,<sup>6</sup> and on the transcendental qualities of early medieval places of power as theatres of memory that ‘bridged distances of space and time’,<sup>7</sup> have particular potential to situate the archaeology of great hall complexes more fully within frameworks of interpretation — for example, genealogical and biographical readings of early medieval landscapes — that until now have more commonly been deployed in mortuary studies.<sup>8</sup> We acknowledge, though, that interpretation within such a fast-developing field must necessarily be provisional and that some of our conclusions may be contested, especially given the entangled inter-dependence of temporal perspectives on these sites and broader models of social and political development in early England.

Several serious issues of data and terminology constrain the study and interpretation of English great hall complexes. In the first place, we must resist the temptation to equate this archaeological phenomenon with the term “royal vill” unless there are compelling reasons to do so. Yeavering, Milfield (Northumberland) and Rendlesham (Suffolk) are all identified by Bede as royal places in the seventh century,<sup>9</sup> and a charter of AD 689 identifies Lyminge as a *cors* (royal vill),<sup>10</sup> but historical evidence for the status of the other sites ranges from the circumstantial to the non-existent.<sup>11</sup> Settlements with major halls or hall complexes clearly represent the apex of a settlement hierarchy, with all that this implies, but it does not follow that all were necessarily or exclusively royal, or royal throughout their lifetime, and we should be open to the possibility that some are magnate or aristocratic centres representing levels of lordship below that of regional kingship.<sup>12</sup> While presenting problems of interpretation, the historical nomenclature for elite places in 7th- and 8th-century England suggests a degree of diversity.<sup>13</sup> It would be naïve to insist on a simple correlation between these labels and archaeology, especially in the face of mounting evidence from survey and excavation for the diversity and complexity of 7th- to 9th-century settlement in England.<sup>14</sup>

A second issue is patchy and inadequate chronological understanding, both of individual sites and the settlements as a group. Only three of the known great hall complexes have

been excavated on any scale, and those known only from aerial reconnaissance can only be broadly dated by the plan-form similarity of their major buildings to those on excavated sites. The difficulties of attaining fine chronological resolution in early medieval settlement archaeology are well-rehearsed,<sup>15</sup> and the two most extensively-excavated great hall complexes – Yeavinger and Cowdery’s Down – present considerable challenges in this respect because they have produced few datable artefacts and limited opportunities for scientific dating.<sup>16</sup> Lyminge is the only site for which there is a robust archaeological chronology (based on material culture and radiocarbon dating) for both the great hall complex and antecedent activity, although at Rendlesham the metalwork assemblage from the ploughsoil allows judgements about the longevity and character of the settlement.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, modelling the development of hall complexes and – where evident – their wider zones of associated settlement and activity has involved a high degree of conjecture. Thus at Yeavinger it is possible, on the basis of the archaeological stratigraphy and dating evidence, to propose credible alternatives to the historically-derived narrative phasing offered by the excavator, especially in its primary phases.<sup>18</sup> Uncertainties over dating also weaken our ability to define the overall chronological range of the tradition. Although conventionally assigned to the later 6th and 7th centuries, the extent to which establishments of this type may have been renewed, built and used into the 8th century remains an open and legitimate question. If we accept the identification of the cropmark complex at Milfield with *Maelmin*, which Bede identifies as the successor to Yeavinger,<sup>19</sup> then there is an *a priori* case for extending the chronology of the tradition in Bernicia into the 8th century. The suggestion that the site at Cowage Farm, Bremilham (Wiltshire) belongs to a monastic rather than elite secular context would imply an 8th-century *floruit*,<sup>20</sup> and in the absence of any other evidence this cannot be ruled out for cropmark sites such as Atcham (Shropshire), and Hatton Rock and Long Itchington (Warwickshire).<sup>21</sup> Similarly, there is evidence for activity into the 8th century at Rendlesham and Sutton Courtenay which need not have been accompanied by change in the use, status or character of the site.

Finally, there are the issues arising from the focus of field investigation and the scales at which it has been undertaken. Most of the sites classified as great hall complexes have been recognised through aerial reconnaissance and consequently the characteristic hall arrays identified from the air have been the main targets of interest and investigation. This focus,

while entirely understandable, has tended to emphasise the hall arrays as discrete phenomena, divorcing them from their immediate physical and temporal contexts with significant implications for interpretation. While there is strong awareness of how their location in the wider landscape might be intended to materialise rulership and cement its ideological foundations,<sup>22</sup> less weight has been given to the implications of wider cropmark spreads for appreciating the spatial and temporal complexity of great hall complexes. Milfield and Hatton Rock are two obvious cases where this evidence points towards a central hall array existing within a wider zone of settlement with antecedent phases. The archaeology at Rendlesham and Lyminge indicates that the halls were components of polyfocal settlements, characterised by a diversity of activities and functions, and accommodating a social range. We should therefore expect a corresponding spectrum of temporalities to be manifested more widely, from the transitory through to semi-permanent and permanent. These were, after all, the centres of farming, extractive and administrative hinterlands, whose periodic function as elite residences depended upon their capacity to feed and service from time to time a royal or magnate household and its retinue. They would have been worked and maintained by a permanent population, with the necessary range of skills, under administrative oversight.<sup>23</sup> Evidence for these activities and their infrastructure is likely to lie beyond the halls and their associated enclosures. At Lyminge there is tantalising evidence for associated occupation at the end of Rectory Lane, some 200m from the great hall complex.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, at Sutton Courtenay some of the *Grubenhäuser* associated with the great hall complex have been dated to the seventh century and represent contemporaneous elements of a wider, perhaps spatially zoned, settlement.<sup>25</sup> At Rendlesham excavation has confirmed an extensive area of settlement to the north-east of the hall site, and the wider scatter of metalwork is consistent with periodic gatherings and other activity.<sup>26</sup> At Yeavinger, structural evidence and metalworking traces have been excavated 200m east and south of the main hall array in an area where smaller buildings are known from aerial reconnaissance.<sup>27</sup>

## LONG-TERM TEMPOS

Great hall complexes are frequently sited at places where archaeological palimpsests show long-term persistence of human activity.<sup>28</sup> The prehistoric monuments that form part of the

physical setting of several great hall complexes are perhaps the most striking testimony to this. Of course, neither great hall complexes nor early medieval sites are unique in this respect: it is in the nature of things that the use of favoured locations for settlement or burial over the long term will leave an accretion of monuments and other physical traces which, as elements of the inherited landscape, may influence subsequent behaviour. The attraction of persistently-used places is heavily conditioned by the physical terrain and resources but it social and cultural factors that determine how the inherited landscape is used as a resource for mediating social and political relations. It is not surprising, then, that a range of responses and symbolic strategies is apparent across the corpus of great hall complexes, ranging from deliberate destruction at one end of the spectrum to selective and subtle re-modelling at the other.

Considerable emphasis has been placed on the remote prehistoric pasts of places where great hall complexes were established and when their early medieval antecedents are discussed there is a focus on tracking persistence of cult and assembly – an emphasis strongly predicated on the type-site Yeavinger as a documented focus of Christian conversion.<sup>29</sup> It is increasingly apparent, however, that some great hall complexes were preceded by early medieval settlements that were substantial, long-lived and multi-faceted in function and role. In such cases there are compelling grounds for viewing the economic and social gravity of the precursor settlement, not prehistoric or other ritual legacy, as the prime determinant for the location and monumental elaboration of these sites.

Shifting the temporal perspective on the antecedent life of great hall complexes in this way has important implications not only for an understanding of these sites as places of political theatre, but also for the wider social, political and economic trajectories of which they formed part. This can be explored through a comparison of the sites of Rendlesham, Lyminge and Sutton Courtenay, all characterised by lengthy and complex developmental sequences representing centuries of investment, occupation and use. Their ‘micro-histories’ emphatically counter the view that English focal places in the period before AD 750 were short-lived and ephemeral. They require that we consider a multiplicity of roles and significances — social, political, economic, religious and jurisdictional — when modelling the antecedent circumstance and contexts of the great hall complexes and strongly indicate that



the origins of social and political complexity (and with it settlement hierarchy) in parts of early medieval England may be considerably earlier than current models allow.<sup>30</sup>

#### COMPARISONS: RENDLESHAM, LYMINGE AND SUTTON COURTENAY

Comparing the recently investigated settlements at Rendlesham and Lyminge allows the climactic phases of two 7th-century elite residences to be situated within longer-term trajectories of development and change. As noted above, both are documented royal sites. Rendlesham is mentioned by Bede as the East Anglian *vicus regius* (royal vill) where King Swithhelm of the East Saxons was baptised in AD 655x663; Lyminge first enters the historical record as a *cors* (royal vill) in a charter of King Oswine (AD 689) before assuming the monastic guise by which it is more familiarly known and studied.<sup>31</sup>

Rendlesham, uniquely in England, provides a landscape-scale perspective on the long-term dynamics of a pre-Viking royal centre, based upon the results of systematic metal-detecting, geophysical survey, aerial reconnaissance and targeted excavation. Early medieval occupation and activity has been traced over an area of some 50 ha, within a survey area of 150 ha, comparable in extent to some of the 'central place complexes' known from early medieval Scandinavia.<sup>32</sup> Lyminge, in contrast, has mainly been investigated by open-area excavation targeting available open spaces within the built-up core of the modern village and the picture is accordingly more fragmented than for Rendlesham. Nonetheless, it has been possible to build a picture of Lyminge's spatio-temporal development over the early medieval period from multiple excavated sequences, a large corpus of datable artefacts, and a suite of over 40 radiocarbon dates, augmented by assessment of early medieval discoveries within the environs of the village, including two nearby cemeteries.<sup>33</sup>

The landscape context of the two sites deserves some initial consideration before their life histories are examined in greater detail. Both occupy strategic and topographically commanding positions within river valleys that would have constituted major communication arteries during the early medieval period: in the case of Rendlesham a point slightly upstream from the estuary of the River Deben, and in the case of Lyminge at the head of the valley of the River Nailbourne forming one of the main lines of access and

communication across the North Downs of south-east Kent. Although neither site shows association with or re-use of prehistoric monuments in their climactic phases, both are in 'places of persistence' which exhibit concentrations of settlement and activity from prehistory to the present within a limited spatial area, albeit with changes in intensity, spatial organisation and locational focus. There is thus good reason to believe that these places grew to prominence as the focal points of 'river-estates', a form of micro-territory that has been recognised widely across early medieval England and which seems to have been highly influential in shaping expressions of authority, community and identity at a localised level.<sup>34</sup>

The elite site at Rendlesham, which is preceded by changing configurations of small farming settlements from the late Iron Age through much of the Roman period, has evidence for continuous activity from the late 4th century AD. The character of the late Roman artefact assemblage, which is unusual for south-east Suffolk, suggests a military or official establishment and it is possible that the importance of the early medieval central place was rooted at least in part in the circumstances of its Late Roman background. The material culture assemblage and coin-loss profile suggests that the major central place flourished until the second quarter of the 8th century. After this there appears to have been a contraction of the settlement area, and a change in character and status with the material culture signature appearing unremarkable when compared with other contemporary rural sites. At Lyminge no Roman-period structures or stratigraphy were encountered during excavation, and what Romano-British material culture was recovered suggests early medieval curation rather than derivation from an as yet undiscovered Romano-period focus. All the indications point towards a 5th-century inception for the settlement as suggested by the earliest datable buildings and occupation deposits. Whether there was Iron Age or Romano-British occupation in the immediate vicinity can only be addressed by more extensive survey and remains an open question. The site of the great hall complex appears to have been abandoned around the end of the 7th century with subsequent 8th- and 9th-century occupation being focused on higher ground to the south west where the parish church and its early medieval precursor are located.<sup>35</sup>

Clearer convergences between the two sites are apparent during the course of the 6th and 7th centuries. Although expressed at different spatial scales – the area of settlement and activity at Rendlesham is an order of magnitude greater than at Lyminge – both places can be characterised as extensive polyfocal complexes composed of settlement and activity zones accompanied by multiple, spatially distinct, cemeteries. At Rendlesham, a high-status residential area has been identified on a hanging promontory in the southern part of the complex, indicated by concentrations of gold and silver coinage and elite metalwork, including precious metal jewellery and weapon fittings, a major boundary ditch, rubbish dumps and a probable monumental-scale timber hall. Metalworking debris and unfinished items attesting production in copper-alloy and precious metal have been recovered across the settlement, but a concentration on the southern edge of the high-status residential zone may indicate the location of a workshop and suggest elite patronage of specialist craft workers. Animal bone indicates lavish consumption of meat from young animals and is consistent with a degree of provisioning from a wider hinterland. A similar spatial arrangement may be indicated at Lyminge by the 6th- to 7th-century activity revealed by excavation on Tayne Field – a plateau directly overlooking the source of the River Nailbourne and the site of the great-hall complex. This is again characterised by the juxtaposition of an elite settlement focus – at least one timber building displaying elaborate architectural investment and midden deposits exhibiting a lavish level of consumption – with specialist craftworking which includes iron smelting, non-ferrous metalworking and possibly the production of glass vessels. As with Rendlesham, the Tayne Field focus existed alongside other settlement and activity areas, known from interventions elsewhere in the village.

While there are similarities between Rendlesham and Lyminge in aspects of spatial organisation and activity during the 6th and 7th centuries there are also significant divergences beyond the previously noted difference in scale. Whereas at Rendlesham the elite residential focus and the artisan activity seem to be broadly contemporary, at Lyminge the latter belongs to the embryonic phase of the site before it had reached its seventh-century monumental apogee. There are also notable differences in the material culture profiles of the two sites. The settlement assemblage from Lyminge lacks the opulent wealth and elite material culture (gold bracteates, precious-metal dress accessories, weapon

fittings) that are a feature of Rendlesham from the 5th century, although such items are present in the nearby cemeteries.<sup>36</sup> Also lacking are the early gold coinage and related exchange signatures seen at Rendlesham from the later 6th century, and although Lyminge has a few finds of the later 7th-/early 8th-century sceatta coinage the numbers are small when set beside Rendlesham. This must in part be due to the differences to be expected between metal-detected and excavated assemblages: for example, the material from Rendlesham includes items from ploughed-out burials as well as settlement activity, and if grave goods from the nearby cemeteries are added to the Lyminge assemblage then the two are in some ways more closely comparable. Lyminge is materially rich by the standards of excavated contemporary settlements, and could be identified convincingly as a site of elite activity on the basis of its non-ferrous metalwork alone, and so although the differences may be exaggerated and skewed by the respective recovery strategies they probably reflect an underlying reality. If Lyminge were in another part of the country then this might be explained by regional differences in coin use and expressions of wealth but East Kent was one of the most economically precocious and earliest monetised areas of pre-Viking England.<sup>37</sup> The conclusion to be drawn is that although both spatial organisation and activity profiles at Rendlesham and Lyminge exhibit striking similarities, and both were royal centres in the 7th century, there were also real, significant and long-term differences in the character and functions of the two places.

This comparison can be extended to include the great hall complex at Sutton Courtenay, part of a wider early medieval settlement landscape subject to episodes of investigation since the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> Here the halls, probably first established in the late 6th or early 7th centuries, were preceded by a phase of settlement whose *Grubenhäuser* have been recorded over an area of more than 10 ha. The settlement may represent activity from the 5th century: the material culture derived from settlement contexts includes objects — a silver-gilt equal-arm brooch of Dösemoor Type<sup>39</sup> and a bone comb of elongated triangular form with crested edges<sup>40</sup> — which are consistent with this early date. There was certainly occupation during the 6th century and this continued into the 7th. There is a crucible fragment, smithing debris and fragments of hearth lining from *Grubenhäuser* excavated in the 1920s, and cut gold sheet and gold droplets found by metal-detecting suggest production geared towards and operating under elite patronage.<sup>41</sup> Other metal-detector

finds indicate burials of the 6th and 7th centuries. As at Lyminge, one of the halls cut through an earlier *Grubenhaus* of the 6th century. Sutton Courtenay has been characterised as ‘a composite site where a range of functions – political, cultic, commercial and craft – were carried out across a relatively wide area, with a great hall complex at its core’.<sup>42</sup> As at Rendlesham and Lyminge, however, the great hall complex is an episode in a longer sequence of settlement and activity whose earlier phases already show evidence for degrees of social differentiation and economic complexity.

The settlement at Sutton Courtenay shares space with a concentration of prehistoric monuments and it has been argued that some – most notably a cluster of Bronze Age barrows – had a strong influence on the siting and configuration of the halls. More recent elements of the inherited landscape, however, such as the Roman field system, may have had equal influence on settlement location and configuration especially if, as seems likely, there was a significant continuity of local population across the 4th to 7th centuries AD. The Roman Villa located 300 m north of the early medieval settlement appears to have been occupied into the early 5th century.<sup>43</sup> A trackway that had originally serviced a nearby Romano-British settlement was part of a routeway that connected Sutton Courtenay with the site of another great hall complex at Long Wittenham, c 5 km to the east, and then continued eastwards to Dorchester-on-Thames, connecting three important 7th-century centres.<sup>44</sup>

The settlements at Rendlesham, Lyminge and Sutton Courtenay had complex and extended histories of which the great climactic hall complexes were a late and spatially restricted element. The picture that emerges is not one of transience and a rootless shifting across the landscape but of a long-term persistence of settlement and locational stability. It is possible that other great hall complexes for which our chronological and spatial understanding is currently more limited were also founded at established settlements. The broader cropmark landscapes at Milfield, Atcham Rock and Itchington are highly suggestive in this respect and there are also indications that the great hall complex at Yeavinger, the type-site that has conditioned interpretation of other places, was laid out at or over the site of an existing settlement.<sup>45</sup> Yeavinger’s location was very probably linked to control and oversight of a key route connecting the agricultural heartland of the Milfield basin with upland pastures to the

west, critical in a society where livestock may have been a major index of wealth and status.<sup>46</sup>

The best explanation for the establishment of monumental hall complexes at pre-existing settlements is that these were already important places which may also have had a dynastic or ancestral significance for royal and elite agents: places of authority and jurisdiction that encompassed a spectrum of central-place functions extending beyond assembly and cult, grounded in the fundamentals of controlling, consuming and mobilising resources.

Rendlesham, Lyminge and Sutton Courtenay in the 7th century can all be considered to fall within the territorial heartlands of early kingdoms,<sup>47</sup> and both Rendlesham and Lyminge may, as argued above, have had an earlier significance as the focal places of 'river-estates'. It has been argued that such 'core zones' had enduring significance for royal power and authority.<sup>48</sup> The act of monumentalising key places within them would have formed a powerful strategy for legitimating and reifying royal authority, and a call on resources, in a period when kings were attempting to consolidate and extend their power at increasing geographic scales. It therefore appears unlikely that the presence of upstanding prehistoric monuments was a primary factor in determining where great hall complexes were established but referencing, appropriating or re-using them, where the opportunity presented itself, would have reinforced the messages that building great halls were designed to convey.

## SHORT-TERM TEMPOS

Excavated great hall complexes provide the earliest manifestation of the practice of sequential rebuilding – the total or partial rebuilding of timber structures on the same or narrowly overlapping footprints – in early medieval England.<sup>49</sup> Such investment was clearly intended to prolong the life of individual structures and in some cases to perpetuate their location on the same site over multiple generations. Different manifestations of this phenomenon have been recognised at Yeavering, including the re-use of foundation trenches over successive constructional phases (eg Buildings A1 and A3) and, in the case of Building D2, the encasement of earlier by a later structure.<sup>50</sup> The same practice can be observed at great hall complexes in southern England. Two of the buildings within the hall

array at Lyminge passed through three structural iterations, and comparable halls at Dover display a similarly complex constructional history.<sup>51</sup> In both these cases sequential rebuilding was accompanied by changes in constructional techniques in walling and doorways, suggesting adaptations in design and the assimilation of new architectural influences. A similar trajectory can be seen at Cowdery's Down where post-hole structures dating from the first phase of the settlement were replaced by more solid and structurally sophisticated buildings with post-in-trench foundations.<sup>52</sup> Episodes of conflagration are also a recurrent feature of these structural palimpsests and it is clear from cropmark sites (eg Hatton Rock and Sprouston) that the replacement of buildings was sometimes tied into broader schemes of reconfiguration reflected in changes in site axis.<sup>53</sup>

In his recent review of the subject, John Blair has likened the frequent rebuilding of Anglo-Saxon great hall complexes in broadly recurring spatial configurations to the sites of fairs and circuses, reiterating the supposed transience and mutability of pre-Viking secular elite centres when compared with early medieval ecclesiastical or monastic establishments.<sup>54</sup> This is an interesting analogy, especially given the likelihood that when magnate or royal proprietors were in residence, or these places hosted assemblies or other gatherings, some the transient population was accommodated in tents or temporary structures, but it conflates short-term periodic arrangements with renewal over a cycle of decades. Drawing this distinction serves to make the point that these buildings – the foci around which temporary structures would have been pitched – would not have been perceived by contemporaries as ephemeral or short-lived. They were multi-generational residential complexes, revolutionary both in their scale and constructional solidity, and intended to convey permanence.

This point may be developed further through consideration of the architectural flourishes associated with excavated great halls. The white wall renderings known from a number of relevant sites, including Yeavinger, Sutton Courtenay and Eynsford (Kent), and the *opus signinum* floors recognised at Lyminge and Dover, appear to draw inspiration from, and perhaps directly imitate, masonry traditions.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the Kentish sites, the inspiration may well have come from the early masonry churches of the Augustinian mission,<sup>56</sup> but for Yeavinger and Sutton Courtenay, where such rendering is associated with

building phases that may be earlier than missionary activity in these regions, it is at least arguable that it relates to a broader awareness of how elite identities were materialised in the Continental and Mediterranean worlds, in much the same way as the material signature of elite burial at the same time emphasises such contacts.<sup>57</sup> While exploiting the symbolic capital of *Romanitas*, embellishments such as these must also have helped these architectural settings convey an impression of durability and permanence.

Viewed from a modern vantage, with the long-term hindsight denied the social actors of the 7th century, it *might* be legitimate to characterise the life history of great hall complexes as short and unstable when compared to early medieval monasteries, but such a perspective overlooks the psychological and emotive impact that these sites would have had on contemporaries. It is not clear, in any case, that the archaeological record supports this characterisation. The 7th- to 9th-century phases of historically-attested monastic sites such as Jarrow and Hartlepool may display general locational stability but they also encompass significant levels of change and alteration in spatial organisation and the configuration of buildings.<sup>58</sup> The same is true of Whitby, where the monastic foundation was almost certainly an element of a more extensive settlement complex with an antecedent history, suggesting that it may have been founded at this place for reasons similar to those governing where great hall complexes were established.<sup>59</sup> In these cases, as at Glastonbury,<sup>60</sup> it is arguable that a modern sense of long-term stability is a retrospective anachronism, based as much on re-foundation and monumental re-configuration after the Norman conquest, and the value accorded them as romantic ruins from the 18th century and as heritage assets today, as on dispassionate assessment of the evidence for their early phases. If we accept the contested identification as minsters of the sites at Brandon (Suffolk) and Flixborough (North Lincolnshire), both of which show complex phases of change and reconfiguration over the 7th- to 9th centuries, then the argument that monastic places necessarily show greater longevity and stability of plan-form than secular elite sites becomes even harder to sustain. Where 'mythic' time was invoked to link great hall complexes to timeless tradition, as seems likely in respect to the practice of prehistoric monument re-use, this would suggest that they were not seen as transient, and the re-building and renewal of the monumental is every bit as much an investment in the long-term in a secular as in a monastic context.



Why were halls replaced with such regularity, frequently on the same footprints? And how might these short-term rhythms and tempos of change inform understanding of the sites as theatres of elite authority? The practical need to renew timber structural components of limited lifespan must have been a factor but does not in itself explain the patterns of replacement. One explanation, central to Brian Hope Taylor's dating of the Yeavering sequence, is that hall building was triggered by the inauguration of kings, with episodes of rebuilding and aggrandizement synchronising with the ebb and flow of dynastic succession.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, long sequences of rebuilding and replacement characterising early medieval magnate residences in Scandinavia has been linked to the life cycles of households in successive generations. However, the chronological precision available for excavated hall sequences in England, even for comparatively well dated sites such as Lyminge, does not allow calibration against known royal accession dates.

There is an equally strong likelihood that physical renewal was linked to commemorative and retrospective practices. Drawing upon studies in prehistory which have stressed the social significance of house building as a way of evoking links with ancestors, Helena Hamerow has related the cyclical rebuilding of great hall complexes with the growing importance of landholding and inheritance in 7th-century England, a theory that resonates with the conceptualisation of extended sequences of hall renewal on Scandinavian sites as a form of 'spatial remembrance'.<sup>62</sup> The possibility that such practices may have had specific genealogical connotations is certainly worth consideration in the English context. After all, amongst their various significances, great hall complexes were theatrical settings for the performance of panegyric and heroic poetry as the prime medium through which royal genealogies evolved, mutated and accreted within the conventions of oral tradition.<sup>63</sup> This observation takes on additional resonance when it is remembered that the age of the great hall complex marked a decisive point in the development of early English royal genealogies when the descent of known and remembered rulers came to be conjoined with mythic and semi-mythic ancestors.<sup>64</sup> It is therefore likely that the lavish investment made in renewing great halls at regular intervals was tied into a broader array of commemorative strategies whereby the valorisation of dynastic forebears (whether real and fictitious) came to be engrained into the physical and temporal contours of particular, ancestrally-charged, nodes within the landscape.<sup>65</sup>

The physical personalities of the halls would have served to reinforce these genealogical meanings and associations. The practice of recycling structural timbers from one phase of building to the next, directly adducible at Yeavinger and certainly inferable for other sites displaying cyclical programmes of hall reconstruction, would have contributed to the sense that these structures connected the present with the past as a living embodiment of the flow and regeneration of dynastic power.<sup>66</sup> As prized possessions of dynastic inheritance, such agency can also be attributed to the elaborative furnishings deployed in the internal adornment of halls when elite households were in residence.<sup>67</sup>

In all this, however, we should not lose sight of the diurnal, seasonal and annual rhythms to which the range of other activities and behaviours enacted at these places were played out, however difficult it is to discriminate these tempos in the archaeological record. The faunal assemblages from the middens at Lyminster and Rendlesham may be made up largely from the aggregate residues of cyclical episodes of intensified consumption associated with periods of elite residence.<sup>68</sup> Behind this lie the annual cycles of livestock farming and agriculture, glimpsed at both sites in the remains of cattle used for traction and, additionally in the case of Lyminster, in the discovery of objects denoting the use of unusually sophisticated ploughing technology.<sup>69</sup> Elements of the metalwork assemblage recovered from both sites and at Sutton Courtenay, including harness and weapon fittings, suggests the aggregate loss from periodic gatherings over decades or centuries.<sup>70</sup> Elaborate harness fittings and the remains of horses, birds of prey and hounds represented in the faunal assemblages of Lyminster and Rendlesham, speak of elite equestrian culture, and of hunting and hawking: episodic activities that required a specialist infrastructure of skills and installations.

## THE AFTERLIVES OF GREAT HALL COMPLEXES

The afterlives of great hall complexes unfolded in a range of ways and the evidence from each site must be evaluated independently before attempting to draw any more general conclusions. At Lyminster the documented foundation of a monastic establishment near the site of the earlier elite residence offers one example of a specific developmental pathway.

Bede's mention of the sequential relationship between Yeavinger and *Maelmin* suggests that like was sometimes replaced by like, and the possibility that the status of places was mutable, and that some roles were transferred between places without them necessarily being physically abandoned and replaced, might explain the cluster of great hall sites in the Upper Thames valley at Sunningwell, Sutton Courtenay, Long Wittenham and, perhaps, also Benson.<sup>71</sup>

The archaeological sequence at Lyminge provides a detailed insight into the establishment of a monastic institution at a royal vill. The later 7th century saw major reconfigurations in the organisation of space and changes in cultural practices such as diet.<sup>72</sup> However, the physical evidence suggests more complex and negotiated processes of change than the threads of information gleaned from the documentary sources might suggest. The transition from royal vill to royal nunnery might be considered as much a transfer of landed resource within the ruling dynasty as a donation to the church, and it is entirely possible that the decision to locate the community here was motivated by such considerations as the protection that direct royal interest would afford. It is uncertain whether there was a chronological overlap between the great hall complex and the monastic focus or, indeed, whether the former was eventually superseded by a similar entity elsewhere in the vicinity of Lyminge. The origins and chronology of the Anglo-Saxon church uncovered in the present-day graveyard are poorly understood. It may have started life as an adjunct to the royal hall complex before becoming subsumed in the monastic identity by which Lyminge is documented.<sup>73</sup> There are clear continuities of economic activity and centrality from royal vill to monastic establishment across the 6th to 9th centuries with the archaeology attesting continuing consumption of a wide range of resources, concentrated wealth and centralised production. It is safe to assume that the monastery continued to offer hospitality to royal guests, whether on an *ad hoc* basis or as a staging post in formal itineraries.

Bede notes that the royal vill at Yeavinger was left deserted in the time of the kings who followed Edwin (*tempore sequentem regem*) and was replaced by another at *Maelmin*.<sup>74</sup> This would place abandonment after Edwin's death in AD 633 and before the time when Bede was writing in the 720s, and suggests an earlier rather than a later date. Bede's language may imply that he did not know in whose reign the royal vill was abandoned,

and/or that this was a drawn-out process rather than a single event. Equally, however, his formulation *tempore sequentem regem* might refer to AD 633–634 when Bernicia and Deira were briefly ruled by Eanfrith and Osric, who were subsequently excluded from official king lists, before Oswald acceded to rulership of the combined kingdom.<sup>75</sup> This would conflict with the excavator's dating and phasing but, as noted above, that depends heavily upon selective identification of activity horizons with historically-recorded events and the published stratigraphy will accommodate alternative readings.<sup>76</sup> At Yeavinger, as at Lyminge, the archaeology in fact suggests a more complex sequence than conventional historical readings have allowed. For example, the number and density of graves in the excavated area of the eastern cemetery, and their association with the possible church, indicate a burial place used for a considerable time by a substantial population very likely dispersed across dependent farms and holdings as well as living at the site.<sup>77</sup> These features are late in the site's overall stratigraphic sequence and so suggest something rather different from the diminished settlement activity dwindling to an end within the 7th century that Brian Hope-Taylor envisaged.<sup>78</sup> One explanation might be that Bede's bald statement refers to the transfer of the royal status and functions, involving abandonment of elements of the settlement complex, but that the site retained some central place function, perhaps as an estate centre and parochial focus, for some continuing time. Resolving such questions will require a comprehensive re-evaluation of Brian Hope-Taylor's archive and publication against more recently excavated and recorded evidence from the vicinity of his excavations, and further investigation to define the true extent and chronology of the settlement complex.

At Rendlesham, the elite complex of the 5th to 8th centuries was an episode in a much longer-term sequence of settlement and activity at a favoured location in the landscape. The settlement declined in size and status around the second quarter of the 8th century, and after this the material culture signature appears unremarkable. There is, though, no evidence for a break in occupation: there were changes in character and configuration, but settlement continued in the immediate vicinity to the 11th century, and thereafter to the present day. There is evidence from geophysics, cropmarks and excavation that settlement began to cluster around a small green, which survived to be recorded in 18th-century estate maps, in the 10th or 11th centuries. There is no evidence for a monastic or ecclesiastical

successor but the fact that it was the setting for a royal baptism in the mid-7th century may suggest that there was a church or chapel attached to the *vicus regius*; the proximity of the medieval parish church of St Gregory to the elite focus, and its unusual dedication, may suggest that it is on or near the site of an early medieval predecessor.<sup>79</sup> The marked fall-off in coin use at Rendlesham in the earlier 8th century, also seen at the elite centre at Coddensham in the valley of the River Gipping north of Ipswich, coincides with the major expansion of Ipswich as manufacturing place and international trading centre. It may be, therefore, that the import of high-value low-volume luxuries and prestige items, directed at elite centres in the 6th and 7th centuries, was from the beginning of the 8th century increasingly subsumed within the expanding volume of international commerce around the North Sea and handled at coastal ports.<sup>80</sup> However, although this might account for the changing economic signature at Rendlesham it would not in itself explain why other long-lived central-place functions and aspects of elite status should also disappear; this is more plausibly explained by some broader reconfiguration of landholding and territorial jurisdiction in the middle years of the 8th century.<sup>81</sup>

The latest material from Sutton Courtenay is a group of fourteen sceattas, dated to the first third of the 8th century, recovered by metal-detecting, which represent an unusual focus of early coin use in the upper Thames valley. They have been taken to indicate the continuing use of the site as a market and place of assembly,<sup>82</sup> but there is no reason why such activities, and jurisdictional functions involving monetary transactions, should not have been linked to continuing use of the great hall complex itself, especially as such elite centres could act as early centres and drivers of monetisation and coin use.<sup>83</sup> Sutton Courtenay was functioning as the centre of a royal estate in the 9th century,<sup>84</sup> and was still in royal hands at the time of the Domesday survey, but whether the great hall complex and associated settlement can be seen as direct precursors is an open question.<sup>85</sup> It has been argued that the great hall complex at Sutton Courtenay was replaced and eclipsed by the nearby monastic centre of Abingdon,<sup>86</sup> but prior to its refoundation in the 10th century Abingdon's status and identity was arguably more royal and secular than monastic and religious.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, although it is possible to point to some similarities between individual sites no single trajectory can be identified that will adequately characterise and explain how the places

that had been great hall complexes were subsequently used. This should not be surprising given the dynamic range of functions and activities that they embodied, and regional variations in economic, social and cultural conditions. That great hall complexes seemingly became redundant after the 8th century need not mean, of course, that there was no subsequent requirement for royal residences, places of administration, or centres for the collection and deployment of renders and taxation. Rather, these functions and roles were met in different ways and different places, configured in different geographies of residence and rulership that reflected the transition from extensive to increasingly fragmented and locally-distributed systems of lordship.<sup>88</sup> The incorporation of secular magnate centres and monastic houses into formal itineraries, as suggested above for Lyminge, is one way in which this might have been achieved. This would have served to transfer some of the economic burden of itinerant rulership to the secular and ecclesiastical aristocracy while asserting in symbolic and practical terms both their subordination to kingly authority and the reciprocal relationships between royal, ecclesiastical and magnate power.<sup>89</sup> The observation that it is difficult to identify royal or elite secular centres in the archaeology of 8th- and 9th-century England, but that ecclesiastical or monastic sites are readily recognisable where large-scale structures are known,<sup>90</sup> can be argued to stem at least in part from a circularity of argument that would see all major buildings of this period as necessarily monastic or ecclesiastical. Confirmation bias aside, seeking to draw a hard-and-fast differentiation would be anachronistic if kings had rights in monastic and ecclesiastical centres and if royal places had monastic or ecclesiastical functions attached. The question of whether the physical installations of monasteries and the church were more stable and longer lived in the later 7th to 9th centuries than the specific materialisation of secular rulership seen in the great hall complexes of the later 6th to 8th centuries is thus something of a red herring. It is perhaps safest to conclude as a general observation that great hall complexes as the foci of extensive regions, and as places of royal residence, eventually became redundant as the ways in which power was expressed and wielded, territory was administered, and surplus was extracted and deployed, changed under the impetus of a multiplicity of forces.

## CONCLUSIONS

Much like the closely contemporary practice of princely burial, epitomized by Sutton Hoo, the great hall complex marks a shift in the later 6th century towards extravagant modes of monumental display as an expression of kingship and elite authority. These sites represent a distinct historical phenomenon, displaying shared characteristics and tendencies, but the detailed comparisons discussed above demonstrate that the ways in which ideology, authority and socio-economic relationships were materialised, and played out through the life-histories of sites, were diverse and specific to place and context.

The great hall complex was a new phenomenon of the later 6th century but the evidence that some were established at extensive and functionally complex settlements with long histories indicates that the tradition was rooted in longer term developments and dynamics. Their foundation as places of elite residence and theatres of rulership at long-established settlements in the core areas of early kingdoms in the years around AD 600 was prompted by the strategic and political requirements imposed by new levels of regional lordship and social distance, and grounded in conceptions of lineage and dynastic inheritance. We argue that there were continuities in the life history of these sites as enduring political, religious, economic and jurisdictional centres that were adapted and repurposed to meet the changing needs and aspirations of elite society as it developed over the 6th to 8th centuries. One implication of this is that there were settlements in earlier 6th-century England that have some claim to be considered developed central places or, to borrow the term used in Scandinavian contexts, ‘central-place complexes’. If we are correct to view the antecedent phases of Sutton Courtenay, and of other less well understood great hall complexes, in ways similar to Rendlesham and Lyminge, then such phenomena may have existed in several regions of England, not just the economically advanced eastern seaboard and adjacent zones. There is no evidence in the archaeology of the 5th and 6th centuries in England for a settlement hierarchy materialised in clear distinctions of building size, scale and planning before the emergence of the great hall complexes,<sup>91</sup> but it is clear from the material signature of the activities transacted at Lyminge and Rendlesham that there were antecedent – and perhaps more fluid – centralities and hierarchies of place that were expressed and recognised in different ways.

The great hall complex was a time-limited phenomenon but we would resist characterising it as short-lived given that the tradition may have endured for as long as a century and a half. We stress the need to evaluate these structural complexes, as far as possible, in the context of their own time in ways which allow us to consider their impact on contemporaries. To the modern observer the climactic phases of these sites – characterised by regular episodes of rebuilding and reconfiguration – may look mutable and transient, shaped by the temporal rhythms and exigencies imposed by organic building materials, but we would argue that their cyclical renewal should be understood as a technology of memory intended to evoke links with the past and convey a sense of timelessness and permanence. Such perceptions would have been accentuated by the imposing physicality of the halls, especially where *opus signinum* floors and other Classicizing features were incorporated, and through the material metaphors of dynastic identity and elite ideology embodied in their internal furnishings.

The afterlives of great hall complexes followed varied trajectories. The monasticization of royal vills, inferred from documentary sources and now attested in the archaeological record at Lyminge, was one such path. The range of material perspectives seen at Lyminge has helped to shed light on the detailed mechanics and subtleties of this process, which involved both continuity and change in the deployment of landscape, built environment and cultural practice in the expression of elite ideology and identity. Other sites were replaced and superseded in other ways. As we have argued for Yeavinger, such successions may have been more gradual and negotiated than might first appear, with scope for periods of interplay and a phased transfer of roles where sites existed in geographic proximity. At Rendlesham there was a marked change in character, status and extent in the early to middle 8th century but settlement persisted down to the present day.

What caused the final demise of the great hall complex is the kind of question which attracts simplistic generalisation, all the more so because our archaeological understanding of secular elite residences of the 8th and 9th centuries is practically non-existent. The spread of monastic culture, and with it a new vocabulary of elite buildings and settings that could be pressed into service for kingly display and political theatre, clearly forms part of the answer. We would argue, however, that fundamental and deep-seated transformations in



the way that royal authority was exercised and resource administered over the course of the 8th and 9th centuries — of which monastic franchises were only one element — played the major role in sealing the fate of this erstwhile monumental tradition.

#### ABBREVIATION

HE = Colgrave, B. and Mynors, R. A. B. (eds) 1969. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Distribution map of known great hall complexes in England and other places mentioned in the text. *Illustration by Sarah-Lambert Gates, Dept Archaeology, University of Reading*

Figure 2. Excavated early medieval features at Tayne Field, Lyminge. *Illustration by ???*

Figure 3. Magnetometry on the site of the elite centre at Rendlesham, showing the cropmark plot of the probable timber hall in green. *Copyright Suffolk County Council*

Figure 4. Gilded copper-alloy harness mount of the 6th century from Lyminge (scale 1:1). *Photograph by*

Figure 5. Elite metalwork of the 7th century from Rendlesham: gold-and-garnet bead, gold bead and gold-and-garnet scabbard mount (scale 1:1). *Copyright Suffolk County Council*

Figure 6. Comparative spatial models for the great hall sites of Sutton Courtenay, Rendlesham and Lyminge. *Illustration by Sarah-Lambert Gates, Dept Archaeology, University of Reading*

## END NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977; Hamerow 2012, 102–09; Blair 2018, 103–38; McBride 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Blair 2005, 276; 2018, 123–4.
- <sup>5</sup> Bradley 1987; Hamerow 2010; Crewe 2012; Semple 2013
- <sup>6</sup> eg Geary 1994; Effros 2001; Williams 2006; Semple 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> Arlie 2000; De Jong and Theuvs 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> Williams 2001; Williams 2006; Semple 2007; Reynolds 2018.
- <sup>9</sup> Bede *HE* II.14; iii.22.
- <sup>10</sup> S 12; Kelly 2006, 105, no 8.
- <sup>11</sup> cf Blair 2018, 114–124.
- <sup>12</sup> Welch 1993, 50; Scull 2019a.
- <sup>13</sup> Campbell 1986.
- <sup>14</sup> Ulmscheider 2011; Hamerow 2012; Blair 2018, 139–153.
- <sup>15</sup> eg Hamerow 2012, 3–4; Scull 2013.
- <sup>16</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977; Millett and James 1983.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas 2017; Scull et al. 2016.
- <sup>18</sup> Scull 1991; cf Blair 2018, fig 30.
- <sup>19</sup> Bede *HE* II.14.
- <sup>20</sup> Blair 2005, 213–15; Wright 2015, 39–42.
- <sup>21</sup> St Joseph 1975; Rahtz 1970; Hirst and Rahtz 1972; Blair 2018, 118–9.
- <sup>22</sup> eg Semple 2013, 207–12.
- <sup>23</sup> Hope Taylor 1977, 278–82; Lucy 2005, 143; Scull 2019a
- <sup>24</sup> Thomas 2013, 120–23, figs 3–4.
- <sup>25</sup> Hamerow et al 2007, 187.
- <sup>26</sup> Scull et al 2016.
- <sup>27</sup> Tinniswood and Harding 1991.
- <sup>28</sup> For the relevance of this term to early medieval settlement studies see Daubney 2016.
- <sup>29</sup> Bradley 1987; Hamerow 2010; Crewe 2012, 00–00; Semple 2013, 207–13; Blair 2005, 111–13; 2018, 124–25; McBride 2019, 66–7; 99–100.
- <sup>30</sup> cf Scull et al 2016; Thomas 2017, 111–13.
- <sup>31</sup> Bede *HE* II.14; Kelly 2006, 105, no 8; Brookes and Kelly 2013, 28–4.
- <sup>32</sup> Hardh and Larsson 2002; Stidsing et al 2014; Carstens 2015.
- <sup>33</sup> For the recently excavated settlement remains at Lyminge see Thomas 2013 and 2017. The cemetery evidence is covered by Warhurst 1955 and Richardson 2005, vol. 2, 48–9.
- <sup>34</sup> Everitt 1986; Williams 2006, 185–87; Williamson 2013; Semple 2013, 22; Scull 2019b.
- <sup>35</sup> Thomas 2017.
- <sup>36</sup> Scull et al 2016; Thomas 2017, 111–13.
- <sup>37</sup> Huggett 1988; Brookes 2007.
- <sup>38</sup> Leeds 1923; 1927; 1947; Crewe 2012, 145–52; Hamerow et al 2007; Hamerow and Brennan 2015.
- <sup>39</sup> Leeds 1923, fig 11; Inker 2006, 41–2.
- <sup>40</sup> Leeds 1927, fig 2; Hills and Lucy 2013, 115–18, 141.
- <sup>41</sup> Hamerow et al 2007, 184–86.
- <sup>42</sup> Hamerow and Brennan 2015, 347.
- <sup>43</sup> Hamerow et al 2007, 115.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 154; Hamerow et al 2013.

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- <sup>45</sup> Scull 1991.
- <sup>46</sup> Semple et al 2017.
- <sup>47</sup> Scull 2019b; Everitt 1986, 75–6; Hamerow et al. 2007.
- <sup>48</sup> Wood 2008; Lavelle 2007; Blair 2018, 125–31.
- <sup>49</sup> Hamerow 2012, 33–5.
- <sup>50</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977, 96–8; 277–78.
- <sup>51</sup> Thomas 2018.
- <sup>52</sup> Millett and James 1983, 205–12.
- <sup>53</sup> Rahtz 1970; Smith 1991.
- <sup>54</sup> Blair 2018, 123–24.
- <sup>55</sup> The archaeological evidence is considered in Thomas 2018.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>57</sup> Blackmore et al 2019, 334–35
- <sup>58</sup> Cramp 2005; Daniels 2007.
- <sup>59</sup> Wilmott 2017.
- <sup>60</sup> Gilchrist and Green 2015.
- <sup>61</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977, 276–324.
- <sup>62</sup> Hamerow 2010, 64; 2012, 33–7; for related perspectives on Scandinavian sites see Stenholm 2004, and Eriksen 2016.
- <sup>63</sup> Brooks 1989, 74; Yorke 2008.
- <sup>64</sup> Dumville 1977; Yorke 1990.
- <sup>65</sup> Semple 2013.
- <sup>66</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977, 39–43.
- <sup>67</sup> Dodwell 1982, 132–41.
- <sup>68</sup> Knapp 2017.
- <sup>69</sup> Thomas et al 2016.
- <sup>70</sup> Thomas 2013, 126, fig 8; Scull et al 2016, 1605; Hamerow et al 2007, 170–80, figs 30, 35–8.
- <sup>71</sup> Hamerow and Brennan 2015; Blair 2018, 125–6.
- <sup>72</sup> Thomas 2013.
- <sup>73</sup> Kelly 2006, 104–5.
- <sup>74</sup> Bede *HE* II.14.
- <sup>75</sup> Bede *HE* III.1; York 1990, 78.
- <sup>76</sup> Scull 1991; Alcock 2003, 242–54; Driscoll 2009, 164–6.
- <sup>77</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977, 70–7; Lucy 2005.
- <sup>78</sup> Hope-Taylor 1977, 313.
- <sup>79</sup> Warner 1996, 115; Scull et al 2016, 1608.
- <sup>80</sup> Scull et al 2016, 1606–07.
- <sup>81</sup> cf Scull 2009, 312–13.
- <sup>82</sup> Hamerow et al 2007, 189–90.
- <sup>83</sup> Scull et al 2016, 1604–05
- <sup>84</sup> King Aethelred issued a charter here in AD 868: S 338a; Kelly 2000, 00–00, no. 16.
- <sup>85</sup> Munby 2007, 118; Shapland 2015.
- <sup>86</sup> Blair 2018, 133.
- <sup>87</sup> Munby 2007, 118.
- <sup>88</sup> Faith 1997, 153–64; Hooke 1997, 76–81; Lavelle 2007.
- <sup>89</sup> Roach 2011.
- <sup>90</sup> Blair 2018, 131–6.
- <sup>91</sup> Hamerow 2012, 70–2; Ulmschneider 2011, 159; Loveluck 2013, 105–8.