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The Road to Urban Emergence is Paved with Material Negotiations: A New Materialist Analysis of Early Medieval Ipswich

Brandon Fathy

This study applies New Materialist theory to examine early medieval urban emergence at Ipswich (*Gipeswic*), challenging traditional models that privilege elite agency and linear development. Through detailed analysis of 7th–9th century thoroughfares, including Franciscan Way, Market Lane, St Stephen's Lane, and Fore Street, the research reveals urbanism as a complex process of 'distributed agency' involving diverse human actors – from craftspeople and neighbours to enslaved neighbours and officials – and nonhuman actants. The author develops 'material negotiation analysis' as a methodological framework, demonstrating how roads emerged through interactions between rivers, flood channels, trackways, gravel surfaces, and human activities rather than top-down planning. Key findings include the synchronous metalling of roads across late 9th-century Ipswich, differential maintenance patterns encoding social relations, and the active role of materials in creating urban identity. The study demonstrates why New Materialism's focus on material agency proves especially valuable for archaeological contexts where documentary evidence is limited. This approach reframes early medieval towns as dynamic assemblages continuously negotiated through material practices, offering archaeologists a robust alternative to foundational narratives of urban origins and advancing New Materialist applications in medieval urban archaeology.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF URBAN EMERGENCE

Picture a 9th-century traveller entering Ipswich from the west. They would have walked along what is now called Franciscan Way, their feet crunching on carefully laid gravel–one of the few metalled roads in all of East Anglia. More than just a path, it signalled that this place was different, urban, important. How did this gravelled road come to be? The traditional story might invoke a king or bishop's command, but the reality – as archaeology reveals – is arguably far more complex and interesting. This road's origins exemplify the difficulty in understanding the complex processes

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through which early medieval towns developed – difficulties which are exacerbated by persistent theoretical limitations in urban archaeology.

The gravelled road at Ipswich exemplifies broader challenges in urban studies. The very origins of urbanism remain a central theme of contemporary archaeology across periods, and the challenge of understanding how towns came about and evolved has proven especially acute for early medieval northwestern Europe. Sites from this period sit chronologically between dominant urban traditions, Roman and later medieval, while lacking the former's strong state institutions and the latter's documented administrative structures (Biddle 1976, Hodges 1982, Sindbæk 2007). Combined with a greater dependence on material evidence, the 'in-between' character of early medieval urbanism has made theoretical approaches especially critical, but also especially contested.

The story of Ipswich (known in the early Middle Age as *Gipeswic*) offers an excellent case study for reimagining urban emergence in this challenging period. As arguably Britain's oldest continuously inhabited town, its 7th–9th-century development positions it within a wider phenomenon of early medieval urbanism. *Gipeswic* is particularly suitable for an exploration of the process of urban emergence because it is an '*emporium*', a trading site of uncertain categorization in the fuzzy 'town' category (Sindbæk 2007, p. 129). There has been some debate on whether or not certain *emporia* can be treated as 'true towns' (Verhaeghe 2005, pp. 260–261, Sindbæk 2007, Pestell 2011, p. 558, Crabtree 2018, p. 132), with many studies implicitly placing them as a middle phase between 'pre-urban' and 'urban'. Ipswich is unique among these *emporia* in that it unfolded directly from an *emporium* to a medieval port town without apparent interruption or relocation. Yet despite rich archaeological evidence, significant conceptual challenges remain in understanding *how* such urban emergence occurred. To address these, I argue that urban archaeologists would greatly benefit from adopting approaches associated with 'New Materialism' – frameworks that, simply put, recognise objects, landscapes, and material not as passive backdrops, but as active players that shape human societies. This article illustrates exactly how such approaches can help urban archaeologists to produce richer, non-reductionist histories of urban development.

First, I present the archaeological dataset from Ipswich and briefly outline New Materialism. I then illustrate how this perspective applied to Ipswich's Franciscan Way prompts new questions and compelling interpretations. From this, I develop a methodological approach called 'material negotiation analysis' which I apply to three further case studies to reveal urban emergence as a complex and relational process. Finally, I synthesise the findings to offer broader insights into the archaeology of the town's origins. The resulting framework equips archaeologists and urban scholars with a methodologically robust approach to understanding urban development across diverse historical and geographical contexts.

MATERIALS AND APPROACH: NEW MATERIALIST URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Gipeswic is among the best recognised and excavated *emporia*. Comprehensive analyses have been undertaken on *Gipeswic*'s faunal remains (Crabtree 2021), antler/bone carving (Riddler *et al.* 2023), and Ipswich Ware pottery, England's first mass-produced post-Roman ceramic (Blinkhorn 2012). John Newman (2003) and Paul Blinkhorn (2012) have both examined *Gipeswic*'s connections to its hinterlands, noting Ipswich Wares' remarkably wide distribution. However, despite the wealth of archaeological evidence, *Gipeswic* remained one of the least well-published *emporia* until very recently. Keith

Wade's (2025) publication of the Origins of Ipswich Project (1974–1990) excavations has substantially improved this situation, providing detailed analysis of stratigraphy, structures, and material culture from 16 key sites, building on earlier partial publications (Wade 1988, Scull 2009). This research relies extensively on Wade's synthesis alongside unpublished grey literature from the Archaeology Data Service, especially the Ipswich 1974–1990 Archive and Historic Environment Records (SCCAS 2020) (Fig. 1), including earlier reports for stratigraphic detail (Wade 2014a–c). The analysis also draws on more recent developer-led archaeology, including major excavations at Stoke Quay (Brown *et al*. 2020). While Ipswich's fragmented excavations prevent a comprehensive sequence, the larger excavations' stratigraphy allows for a detailed relative chronology (Wade 2025, pp. 10–15) (Table 1). The primary chronology of *Gipeswic* comprises the early middle Saxon (EMS), middle Saxon (MS), and early late Saxon (EMS) phases.

Turning to evidence of thoroughfares, four Ipswich excavations have revealed metalled roads from this time period: Franciscan Way (IAS5003), St Stephen's Lane and Market Lane both at the Buttermarket excavation (IAS3104), Fore Street (IAS4801), and Great Whip Street at Stoke Quay (Brown *et al*. 2020) (Fig. 2). This article examines the development of the first three of these sites in detail and then looks to apparently synchronous metalling or re-metalling of all of

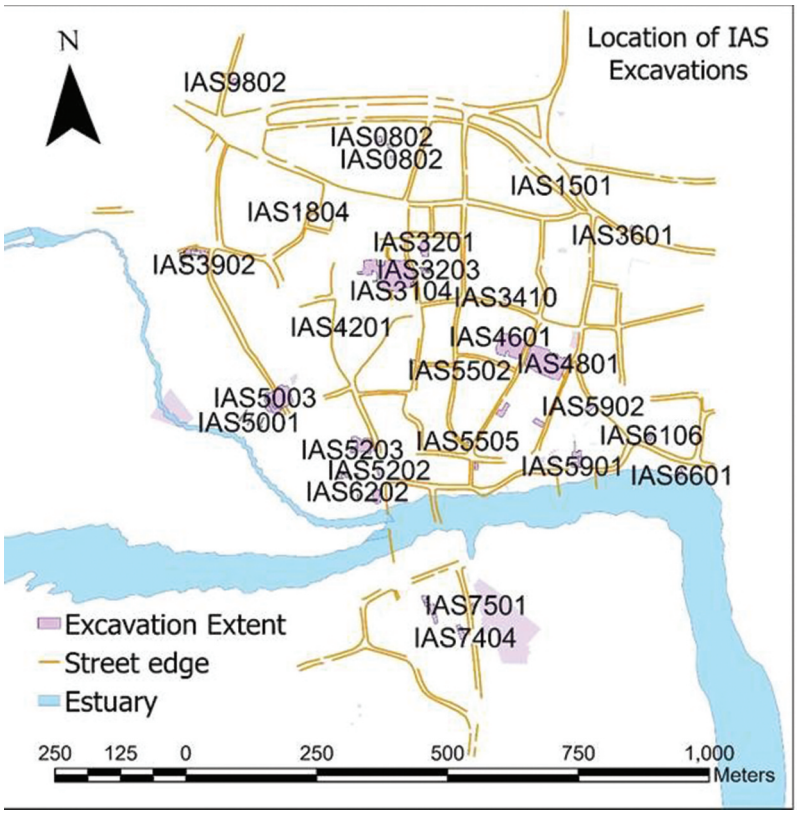

Fig. 1. *Map showing the location of all Ipswich archaeological site (IAS) excavations in Ipswich recorded in the 1974–1990 database with modern street locations. Image by author (from Fathy 2022).*

Table 1. Chronological framework for Ipswich, following Wade (2025, pp. 10–15) with additional stratigraphic justifications from sites examined in this study. This phasing closely parallels independent analysis in Brandon Fathy (2022, pp. 26–31). EMS = Early middle Saxon; MLS = Middle Late Saxon; ELS = Early late Saxon.

Phase	Time span	Justification
EMS	AD 600–690	**Handmade Ware** pottery; tree-ring dated well and radiocarbon-dated cemetery
MS-1	AD 690–720	Tree-ring dated well; probable start of **Ipswich Ware** production
MS-2	AD 720–750	Metalled road at IAS3104; coin-dated plots at IAS4801 and IAS5203; ditches with **Ipswich Ware** at IAS5003
MS-3	AD 750–790	A second phase of ditches with **Ipswich Ware** at IAS5003 (start and end dates are speculative)
MS-4	AD 790–865	Second metalled road at IAS3104; slag at IAS5003 with **Ipswich Ware**
ELS-1	AD 865–900	Features with **Thetford Ware** and **Ipswich Ware** decreasing through time
MLS	AD 900–1000	Features with **Thetford and St Neots Ware**

Gipeswic's roads in the last half of the 9th century.

Ipswich presents an exciting opportunity for studying urban development. Its archaeology is detailed and deep enough to enable investigation of how urban qualities gradually emerged through transformations of earlier activities and spatial arrangements. The 'prime movers' behind Ipswich's early development and the social relations therein remain contested, and reconstructing them from disparate material evidence like roads, plots, and cemeteries with different levels of evidence-based confidence is certainly challenging. I propose that New Materialism offers a promising and so-far underutilised perspective by fundamentally reconceptualising the relationship between material culture and social relations.

THE CONCEPTUAL CRISIS IN MEDIEVAL URBAN STUDIES

Foundational archaeological models of medieval urban development have been constrained by four persistent conceptual hurdles. First, early models privileged elite agency, assuming significant urban development required planning by authorities (Biddle 1976, Hodges 1982, Schofield and Vince 2003, Lilley 2009). *Emporia* in particular were traditionally seen as rational royal projects designed to regulate long-distance trade in prestige goods (Hodges 1982), while later research critical of Hodges swung towards bottom-up explanations (Newman 2003, Loveluck and Tys 2006, Fleming 2009). More recent scholarship recognises this dichotomy as oversimplistic (Moreland 2010, Sindbæk 2017, Jervis 2019), arguing instead for complex interplay between royal power, merchants, local producers, and broader cultural factors. Yet elite-centric assumptions persist: Wade's (2025) work continues to attribute major developments – indeed the outright foundation of a 'new town' at *Gipeswic*–primarily to royal initiative, exemplifying how deeply embedded these narratives remain even in contemporary scholarship. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to acknowledge non-elite actors but to fundamentally reconceptualise urban emergence as a process where elite intentions, when operative at all, were mediated and often circumvented by the material negotiations of diverse urban residents.

The second hurdle is that towns are treated as stable, bounded wholes, analytically separate from their hinterlands. Martin Biddle's (1976) influential '*Kriterienbündel*' approach exemplifies this – towns either

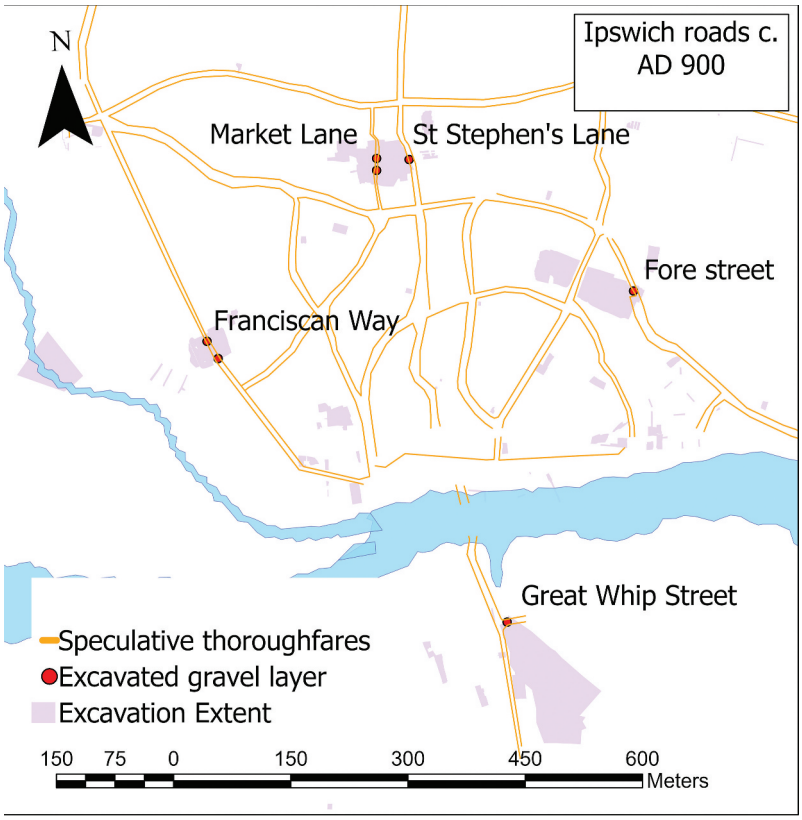

Fig. 2. *Map showing location of excavation extents featuring 9th-century metalled roads in the Ipswich urban core. Image by author.*

meet certain fixed criteria or they do not – missing what Søren Sindbæk (2007) and John Moreland (2010) recognised about *emporia* as places enmeshed in fluid networks of interaction. For instance, when Dagfinn Skre (2007, pp. 458–460) attributed Hedeby's founding to King Godfred, he was searching for the decisive moment when a non-urban space became urban – precisely the kind of foundational thinking that obscures urbanism's gradual and negotiated emergence.

Third, urban development is conceptualised as linear development. Evolutionary frameworks (e.g. Hodges 1982, pp. 25–28, Saunders 2001) treat *emporia* as stepping stones towards modern urbanism or market-based economy, often implicitly based in Service's sequences of human organisation (band→tribe→chiefdom→state). When Frans Verhaeghe (2005) recognised that *emporia* might evolve from seasonal to permanent settlements, he still saw them as moving from one fixed type to another rather than existing in states of fluidity and transformation, obscuring the 'flickering quality' of towns (Jervis 2016, p. 392).

Fourth, scholars rely on fixed categories of urban forms. Even critiques of the '*emporium*' classification often seek to replace it with other rigid definitions (e.g. Samson 1999), while gazetteer approaches, though valuable, reinforce typological thinking (e.g. Hodges 1982, pp. 66–86, Hill 2001). In

reality, towns did not emerge in pre-defined categories, but through accumulations of many smaller changes and negotiations. Differences between urban and rural settlements are treated as logical and essential, when in reality they emerge through historical processes.

NEW MATERIALISM AS RESPONSE: PROMISE AND LIMITATIONS

Such limitations of foundation narratives have prompted urban scholars to develop theoretical frameworks that can better capture the complex, relational processes through which towns actually emerge. Responses have included complexity theory (Batty 2005, Portugali 2011), assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006, 2016, Jervis 2016, 2019), network approaches (Sindbæk 2007, 2017), practice theory (Christophersen 2015), and contemporary urban studies (McFarlane 2011, Dovey 2012). To me, New Materialism (DeLanda 2006, 2016, Barad 2007, Coole and Frost 2010) stands out among these for its concept of 'distributed agency'. Jane Bennett (2010, pp. 21–28), who coined this term, eloquently illustrated this concept with an electrical grid – a complex system emerging through volatile networks of relationships. A power outage results not from a single cause but from local changes in a never-static web of human operators, computer systems, tree branches, weather patterns, and electrical equipment. Trees and storm clouds do not *intend* to cause power outages in the way human operators might deliberately throw a switch, but they all can nonetheless be analytically described as 'agents' in the New Materialist sense because they all *act* on the electrical grid in materially consequential ways. Each element, whether they are human or nonhuman, can be considered an active participant (or 'actant') in the grid's creation, disruption, or continuous transformation (cf. Latour 2005). Medieval towns operated similarly: neither the product of a single founder, but dynamic systems emerging from thousands of contributions by diverse human and non-human actants.

This leads us to the thorny problem of defining 'urban' in early medieval contexts. Here, a New Materialist approach offers a helpful perspective: there are no absolute or universal characteristics of urbanism; instead, towns are defined by their relationships and interactions with surrounding areas. They are dynamic nodes characterised by relatively high intensities of human interaction, emerging through processes of concentration and specialisation while continuously adapting (DeLanda 2016). Afterall, we recognise that modern towns frequently shift and adapt, and non-reductionist histories of urbanism must reflect this messiness and instability. Freed from frameworks of essential urban characteristics or linear development from 'pre-urban' through '*emporium*' to 'true town', we can understand sites like *Gipeswic* as *becoming* urban even while their forms and functions were still developing. We may not identify any one moment when a town comes into *being*, but we can certainly identify the historical process of *becoming*. Accordingly, the core research question guiding this study transforms from 'who founded an *emporium*?' to 'how did an *emporium* emerge?' This shift allows us to examine urban emergence as it actually unfolded – gradually, contingently, and through the interactions of diverse actants.

MATERIALISING URBAN EMERGENCE

FRANCISCAN WAY: FROM DRAINAGE TO MOVEMENT

How might taking such an approach alter the way archaeologists explore early medieval urban evidence? To investigate this, I turn to Franciscan Way (IAS5003), located to the southwest of the modern town centre, at the 9th-century periphery of *Gipeswic*. Initial

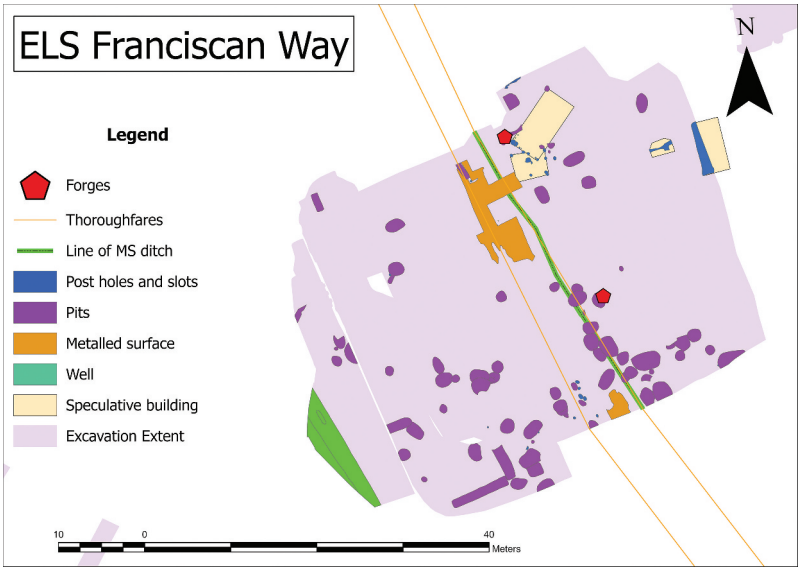

Fig. 3. *Plan of ELS Franciscan Way (IAS5003), Ipswich. Note the ELS metalled road cuts and aligns to the ditches of the previous phases. Image by author.*

excavations in 1990 revealed a gravelled surface dated to the ELS phase (AD 865–900) by ceramics. The surface filled a parallel ditch (Fig. 3), perhaps a forerunner to the modern Franciscan Way (the routes are comparable but do not exactly align).

To understand the road's emergence, it is essential to detail the earliest securely dated features, starting with a timber-lined well, tree-ring dated to AD 585–688 (Hillam 1989) (Fig. 4). Its proximity to the Old River Gipping and the scarcity of other features of the same phase suggest that the area – like much of *Gipeswic* (Fathy 2022, Wade 2025, p. 27) – was not 'built up' in the 7th century. Topographically and historically prone to flooding, this area in particular might have been used by humans for grazing and watering livestock.

The earliest MS feature, a ditch cutting the earlier well (Fig. 4: Phase 2), was the first in a series of intercutting ditches spanning the 8th and 9th centuries that, importantly, all align with the eventual 9th-century road. Their arrangement and subsequent replacements suggest that these constituted a series of flood control channels that were occasionally washed out (Wade 2014c). The first series of ditches, dated by two Series R *sceatta* (c. 740–760), formed a roughly triangular enclosure with a well – perhaps to replace the well from Phase 1–situated within.

By the first half of the 9th century, the ditch system was in its third manifestation (Fig. 4: Phases 3–4). Interestingly, the final ditch in this sequence was considerably smaller (30–40 cm wide, up to 20 cm deep) than its predecessors, perhaps serving as a boundary marker rather than purely for flood control (Wade 2025, p. 65). Overall evidence of activity increased in Phase 4, including a proliferation of pits and evidence of slag (Table 2). Though no MS-era forges were found, it is plausible that early forging occurred just beyond the excavation limit. By the ELS phase (865–900), Franciscan Way certainly became a major blacksmithing area (Fig. 3, Starley 1995), comparable to *emporia* sites like Building B23 at Covent Garden or Dommerhaven 5M74 at Ribe

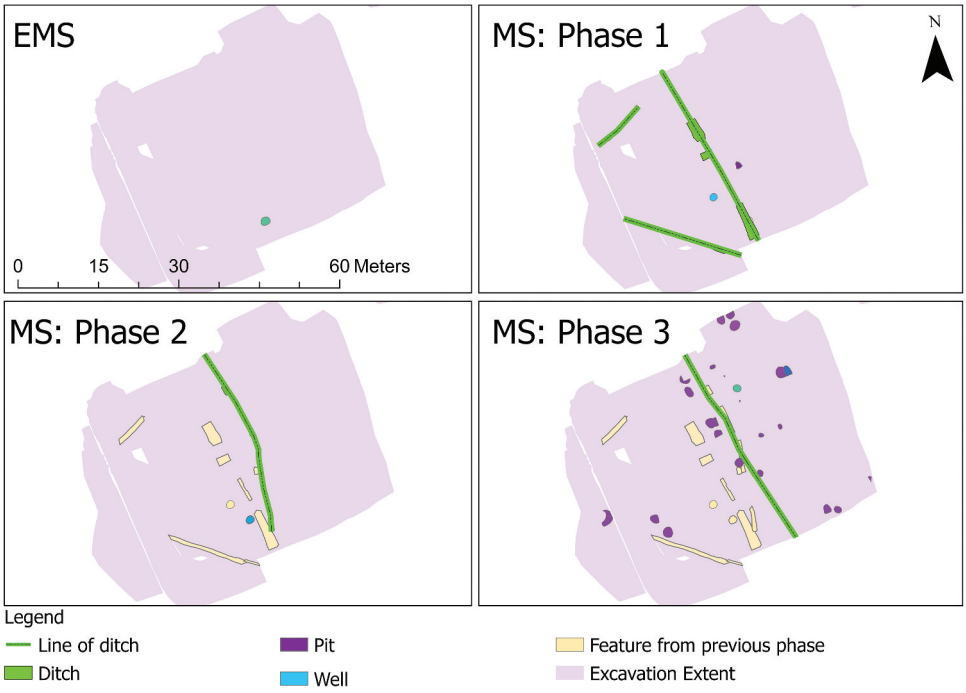

Fig. 4. *Plan of Franciscan Way (IAS5003), Ipswich. Left to right, top to bottom: EMS (640–690); MS phase 1 (700–750); MS phase 2 (760–800); MS phase 3 (800–860). Image by author.*

(Madsen 2004, p. 206, Keys 2003). Plausibly, therefore, blacksmithing activities were already taking place around Franciscan Way between 800 and 865, ahead of its flourishing between 865 and 900, even if the evidence is inconclusive.

By thinking of distributed agency, we can trace one plausible process through which this ELS blacksmithing area, complete with gravel road, appeared by the late 9th century (Fig. 5). First, the river itself was as an actant (i.e. a participant); by flooding its banks it acted on the humans and their livestock who lived and grazed nearby, providing fresh drinking water, but also causing some to dig flood control channels. Those humans, and their supply of tools, were a second actant, acting on the river by redirecting floods. The channels were material manifestations of the negotiation between the river and human communities that lived nearby. Third, the channel itself became an

Table 2. Mass of slag recovered from contexts at IAS5003 (Starley 1995, p. 3, Wade 2025, p. 66).

Phase	Mass of Slag
EMS and MS	11 kg
ELS	141.6 kg
MLS (10th century)	60.2 kg
'High Medieval' (11th and 12th century)	123.8 kg
'Late Medieval' (13th–15th century)	27.2 kg

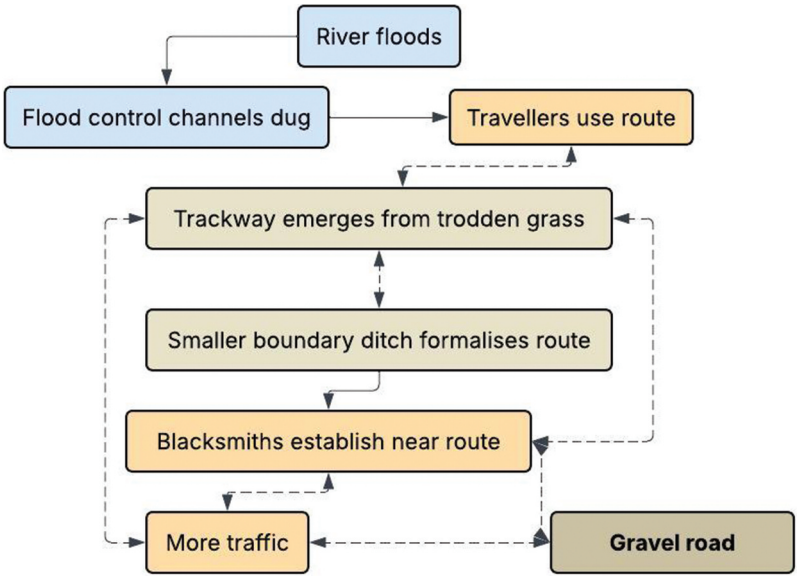

Fig. 5. *Schematic representation of Franciscan Way's (IAS5003) possible emergence, c. 700–900. Solid lines for primary causation and dotted lines for feedback loops. Image by author.*

actant, directing not just floodwaters, but also the direction of terrestrial travellers walking up- or downriver from the estuary. If a human (or, for that matter, a donkey or wolf) at the *Gipeswic* waterfront began to walk upstream, they would have encountered the flood control channels before they encountered the River Gipping. Therefore, many travellers would have used the east side of the channel as a riverside route, even if this use was never intended by the humans who dug it. Such route-taking would have been especially important for visitors – seafarers arriving at the waterfront or farmers bringing produce from the countryside – who were unfamiliar with the local topography.

Fourth, these travellers would likely have acted on the grass by treading it. The trodden grass would in turn have been a fifth actant, encouraging yet more travellers down this route. Travellers and trodden grass would then have acted on each other in a feedback loop: travellers tread the grass, causing a trackway to appear, which in turn caused more travellers to take this route, making the trackway even more visible, and so on (cf. Ur 2009, Bell 2020). Contemporary urban planners would recognise this phenomenon as a desire path'–an informal route emerging through repeated use, typically deviating from officially planned pathways (Jackson 1994, Macfarlane 2012, pp. 17–18). This *circular causality*–described in modern urban theory (Portugali 2011, pp. 66–68)–offers a compelling model of spontaneously emerging urban patterns. By way of comparison, similar processes of informal route formation may explain short and partially surfaced paths around *Hamwic*'s more formal street layout (Morton 1992, p. 38).

Finally, once the trackway emerged, it would have been a sixth actant. As more travellers used the track, the meaning of the ditch transformed through use: from a flood control channel to a boundary and landmark. In the long term, the labourers responsible for digging these channels were prompted to create a smaller boundary ditch, formalising what had already become

a meaningful division in the landscape. This boundary ditch, in turn, would likely have further reinforced the trackway. Meanwhile, with a regular trickle of potential clients, the thoroughfare perhaps inspired blacksmiths to establish a forge near the route, not because of any centralised plan or laws, but at their own initiative to intercept a growing stream of customers. Their presence, in yet another example of circular causality, likely drew even more travellers. At Franciscan Way, nonhuman matter – river, ditches, grass – participated actively in an aspect of urban formation.[1]

MATERIAL NEGOTIATION ANALYSIS: A METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATION

A New Materialist approach to Franciscan Way reveals what it looks like when narratives admit distributed agency. By attending to material interactions, archaeologists can map how various human and nonhuman actants interacted with one another to continually produce and transform a town.

The Franciscan Way analysis demonstrates what I term 'material negotiation analysis': an approach that considers how power and change are forged through everyday material interactions. For New Materialists, archaeological materials are not just expressions of human will, but mediators and constructors of society (Gosden 2005, Olsen 2010). This perspective invites archaeologists to explore how social relations are enacted through ongoing negotiations between human and non-human actants. This approach extends New Materialism's theoretical insights into a methodological framework archaeologists can operationalise. Where New Materialism articulates *why* materials matter and how agency is distributed, material negotiation analysis provides tools for *tracing specific negotiations* through archaeological evidence – identifying feedback loops, mapping transformations, and interpreting differential treatment as traces of power relations like we have seen in the case study above. Like other interpretive frameworks in archaeology – such as landscape archaeology or gender archaeology – material negotiation analysis is not procedural but interpretive. My aim is for it to provide new perspectives on familiar problems.

The above case study from Franciscan Way demonstrates how a New Materialist perspective differs from traditional approaches. An elite-centric narrative might have attributed the road to royal decree, but miss the decades of incremental transformation. A purely economic explanation might focus on blacksmiths' rational location choices, overlooking how the ditch and trackway shaped those choices. A practice theory approach might well capture human routines but reduce the river to 'environmental context' rather than recognising its active role in creating the conditions for urban development. The contribution of material negotiation analysis is that it attends to negotiations between all these actants across multiple timescales, revealing how apparently spontaneous urban features actually emerged through complex interactions.

Where this approach extends current New Materialist work is in its emphasis on *power as material negotiation*. Here, power is not just abstract rules or purely mental phenomena, but something enacted materially through repeated (and sometimes blunt) interactions (Graham and Marvin 2001), such as constructing walls to restrict movement (e.g. protestors' barricades, the Berlin Wall) or erecting benches to legitimate a park as a place of rest. Material negotiation analysis moves beyond Manuel DeLanda's (1997) 'city as hierarchy' model towards something more dynamic, aligning with Colin McFarlane's (2011) treatment of social relations or Axel Christophersen's (2015) attention to everyday practices, while still centring the agency of matter in shaping urban form.

Crucially, material negotiations can vary widely from 'horizontal' discourses between actants of nearly equal power to 'vertical' negotiations of extremely asymmetrical power relations and everything in between. As we saw at Franciscan Way, no single actor – not a king, not a craftsperson, not even a river – determined the outcome. While this approach highlights how power relations are negotiated through spatial practices, it also insists that these practices are embedded in specific historical contexts. In the case of early medieval England, archaeologists can be informed by contemporaneous documentary evidence. For instance, charters demonstrate that landholders were typically obliged to maintain infrastructure on granted land in reciprocal relationships with royal authority (Sawyer number 1186a n.d.), illuminating a range of possible social relationships that might have been experienced in *Gipeswic*, but without predetermining which specific relationships were operative in any given case.

Of course, this approach has both distinctive strengths and inherent limitations. Linking specific archaeological features to particular human actants remains challenging within a materialist framework. While we can reasonably infer that craftspeople, traders, enslaved labourers, neighbours, and officials all participated in creating and maintaining the physical features of *Gipeswic*, the archaeological record rarely allows us to identify which specific social groups were responsible for which specific ditch or house or gravel layer.

The framework's strength lies instead in its emphasis on what material properties *afford* (i.e. what impact they have). It helps us move beyond asking why a feature was made or what its original purpose was and towards what that feature *did* and how it impacted the rest of a site's development. This grounds analysis in concrete physical evidence of change while opening the sphere of meaningful action to as wide a cast of actors as possible. This is precisely why distributed agency proves especially valuable for early medieval contexts: archaeological materials provide richer evidence than limited written sources, and treating them as actants reveals negotiations that documents rarely record. As demonstrated in the case studies below, this analysis distinguishes between strong claims about material relationships and transformations versus weaker inferences about human intentions – a distinction that guards against overstating causality while revealing negotiations other frameworks might miss entirely.

Next, I demonstrate material negotiation analysis through the remaining three case studies of early medieval thoroughfares from *Gipeswic*. At Market Lane and St Stephen's Lane, I explore how two adjacent thoroughfares developed through different material negotiations, and at Fore Street I examine how surface construction overwrote an existing building, demonstrating how asymmetrical power relations could dramatically reshape urban space. Finally, I consider the synchronous metalling of roads across *Gipeswic* in the late 9th century as a coordinated material negotiation that both produced and performed emerging urban identity.

THOROUGHFARES: FROM TRACKWAYS TO URBAN STREETS

MARKET LANE AND St STEPHEN'S WAY: THE EMERGENCE OF INFORMAL ROUTES

The following two metalled surfaces, running north-south roughly in parallel, were identified during excavations ahead of the development of the Buttermarket Centre shopping complex (IAS3104) (Figs 6–7), excavations better known for the large 7th-century cemetery featuring barrows and several furnished graves (Scull 2009). For convenience, the eastern surface will be referred to as 'St Stephen's Lane'

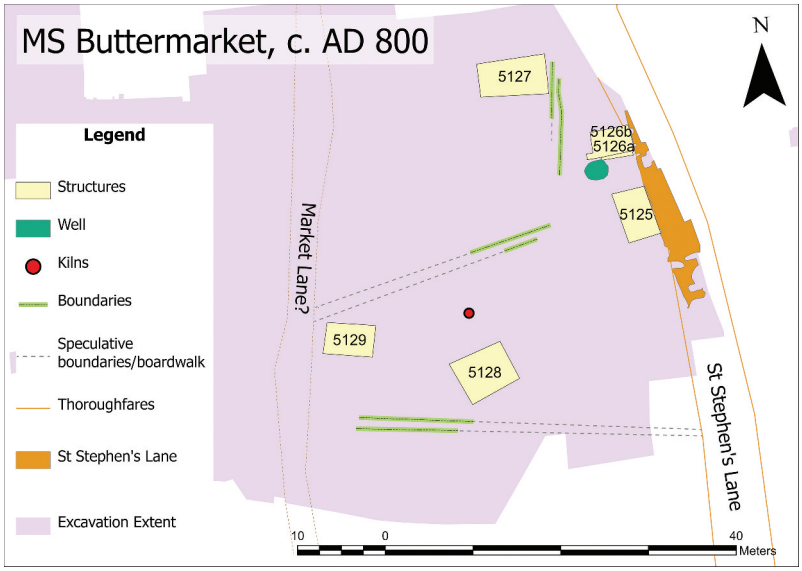

Fig. 6. *Plan of MS (700–860) IAS3014, Ipswich, phase 2 (790–820). Image by author.*

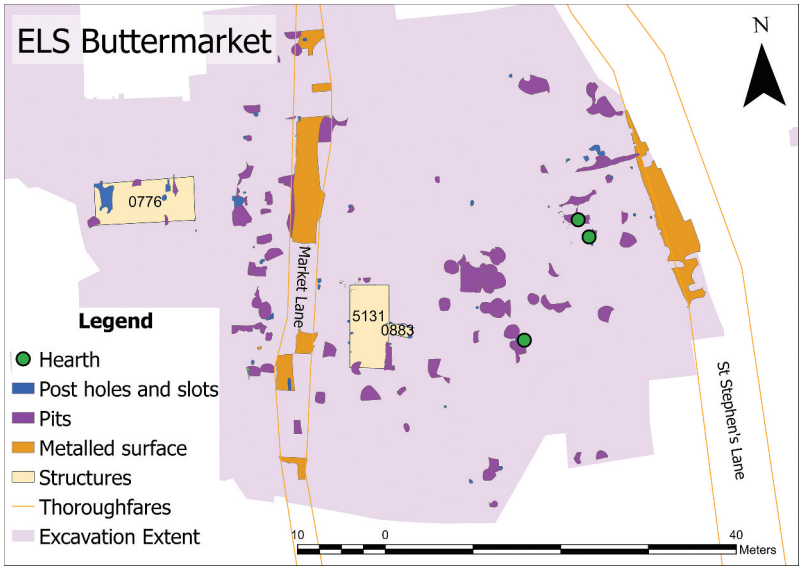

Fig. 7. *Plan of ELS (AD 860–900) IAS3014, Ipswich. By this phase, both thoroughfares ('Market Lane' to the west and St Stephen's Lane to the east) were metalled. Image by author.*

because it ran along the length of the modern lane of the same name, perhaps even demonstrating direct continuity from the Early Middle Ages (Wade 2025, p. 33). The western surface is labelled 'Market Lane' after a 19th-century street that was destroyed during the shopping centre's development.

The initial sand and gravel surface (layer 1825) of St Stephen's Lane, dating to the MS-3 Phase (c. 750–790) at the latest, traversed the Buttermarket Cemetery, and strikingly even cut through a burial mound, fewer than a hundred years after the cemetery's last inhumation (Loader and Scull 2009, p. 133), suggesting the road's significance to urban development. Although an exact stratigraphic relationship between St Stephen's and Market Lanes are missing, the surface (1590) of Market Lane appears to be the younger of the two – sealed by one ELS pit (4096) and cut by another (3291) – it was not evidently metalled until the ELS phase (c. 865–900) around a century later. However, Market Lane may have acted as an unmetalled trackway from at least the MS-4 Phase (c. 790–865), when structures 5129 and 0591 were aligned to its later orientation (Fig. 6). Therefore, in the first half of the 9th century, St Stephen's and Market Lanes may have been contemporaneous, though the former would have been metalled and the latter not.

As with Franciscan Way, we can trace the origin of Market Lane. Tellingly, the route was preceded by a hollow track which may have formed from water flow (Wade 2014a, p. 3) and/or foot traffic (Loader and Scull 2009, p. 133). The impermeable clays of Cornhill, Ipswich's annual rainfall, human feet, the hollow's form, and its north-south orientation all must have acted on the eventual emergence of a north-south route, whether humans intended for this or not. Market Lane may have begun as a desire path, doubling as drain and thoroughfare intermittently, even as wains were already rumbling along the metalled St Stephen's Lane.

Why use this hollow – which perhaps pooled with water after heavy rains – when a parallel metalled road lay adjacent? The thoroughfares and structures around Market Lane in the early 9th century may represent what would today be called 'informal settlement' as inhabitants – perhaps those with fewer economic options for establishing themselves in a nearby 'formal' part of the *emporium*–expanded urban practices ahead of any formal designs. More speculatively, the informal streetmay have been used by visitors and tradespeople to circumvent fees or tolls. Charter S86 reminds us that West Saxon kings could, at least on parchment, levy tolls on ships entering London as early as AD 716/7, and East Anglian kings may have exercised similar authority over land-based trade at *Gipeswic*, though direct evidence of tolls at *Gipeswic* remains absent. Perhaps royal fees applied to workshops along the surfaced road, prompting craftspeople and other inhabitants to engage in informal commerce along the hollow track instead in an effort to contest authority by shaping their own town creatively. In either case, the road's eventual metalling suggests it gained official recognition.

The story of these two roads does not end with their surfacing. Urban development is not just a process of creation and innovation, but also one of maintenance. Upon metalling, roads must have been regularly maintained, especially if frequented by wheeled traffic. Rutting would have made roads susceptible to water erosion, which, if gone unchecked, would have quickly made their surfaces impassable. Such 'disrepair', like Bennett's power outage, demonstrates how negotiations between materials – gravel, wheels, and rain – do not always passively accept human intentions.

Of course, human actions to maintain the road are also part of the material negotiation. Reeves or other officials may have enforced obligations to maintain roads, while

craftspeople and inhabitants might have complied, resisted, or ignored these demands entirely. Road maintenance would also have been involved in more horizontal negotiations. Neighbours may have observed and shared each other's maintenance practices, while household members – and perhaps sometimes enslaved individuals – cleaned debris from roadways.

The realities of Ipswich's archaeology allow us to see some of these specific relationships in action. For instance, Market Lane and St Stephen's Way – though adjacent and contemporaneous – were not maintained equally. By the mid-10th century, Market Lane had accumulated significant debris (layer 0085), corresponding to the raising of the ground to similar levels on either side of the lane, while St Stephen's Lane was kept (or reduced) at its original level and possibly re-metalled during the ELS phase (Fig. 8). Furthermore, numerous small ELS and MLS (AD 900–1000) pits cut Market Lane but no similarly dated pits cut St Stephen's Lane, indicating that nearby households were frequently depositing refuse into Market Lane even after it was metalled. These differences illustrate how maintenance practices contributed to urban diversity, just as contrasts between busy thoroughfares and trashy side streets do in cities today. Indeed, comparable contrasts in road maintenance have been noted at other *emporia* (cf. Morton 1992, p. 38, Cowie and Blackmore 2012, p. 119), suggesting similar processes of spatial development. Such differential treatment reveals how the qualities of metalled surfaces emerge not from their material properties alone, but from ongoing negotiations.

The differential treatment of these roads invites exploration of late 9th-century *Gipeswic* politics. Market Lane was perhaps neglected because it was perceived as a less important road, analogous to a modern back alley. Its fate can be interpreted through two alternative relationships: royal law or etiquette. If the former, the divergence may reveal asymmetrical negotiation (or resistance) between how a king wanted the road to be used on one hand and how inhabitants used it on the other, with the king or *wic-reeves* perhaps seeing Market Lane as an 'informal' route not essential to their imagined plans of *Gipeswic*'s roads. Like matter, humans do not always passively submit to the intentions of others; some craftspeople may have simply defied law by dumping waste into Market Lane. Material negotiations also involved moments of

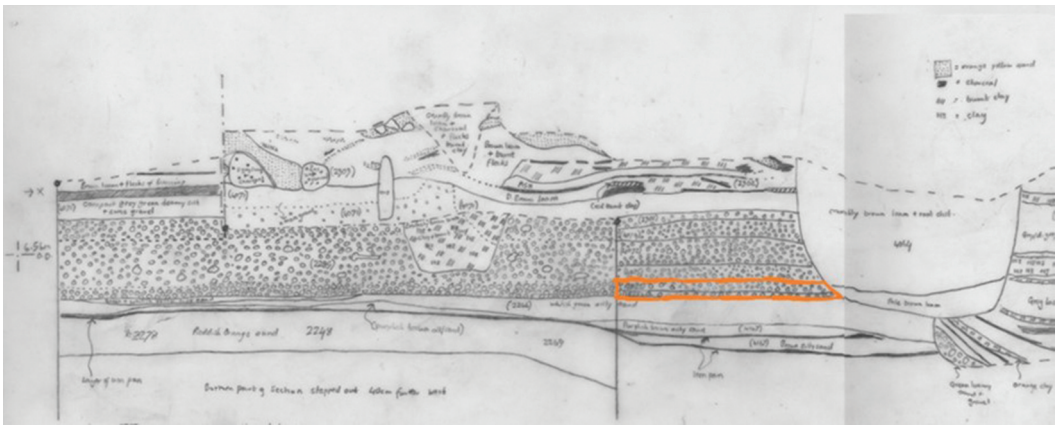

Fig. 8. *Section drawing of IAS3014, Ipswich, including two apparent layers of road 1825, highlighted in orange (Ipswich 1974–1990 archive, sheet 453). Copyright of Suffolk County Council.*

accommodation. The metalling of Market Lane itself – transforming an informal trackway into an 'official' surface – suggests eventual recognition by reeves or kings, just as happened with Franciscan Way. This pattern demonstrates how royal authority could adapt to existing practices rather than always simply imposing predetermined plans.

If etiquette was behind this distinction, it might have been a novel and actively negotiated etiquette that emerged in *Gipeswic* among neighbours without rural precedent (or with some influence from visitors from other *emporia*). Early medieval charters suggest freemen had customary obligations to kings; perhaps such obligations, enforced through etiquette from watchful neighbours, was sufficient motivation for those who tended land adjacent to the road to maintain its surface. Accumulated minor and coincidental actions made by individual inhabitants – say, households on St Stephen's Lane taking better care of their road than their neighbours on Market Lane – could have created feedback loops that eventually became codified as habits, practices, and norms. In this way, spontaneous etiquette could arise through repeated action without any verbal agreement.

FORE STREET? LEGITIMATION THROUGH MATERIAL CHANGE

The third case study concerns the ELS Phases (865–900) of the eastern end of the Rosemary Lane excavation (IAS4810), where a gravel layer sealed pits, a well, a fence, and (apparently) a structure. The layer serves as the stratigraphic boundary between ELS-1 (865–880) and ELS-2 (880–900) (Fig. 9), and is either a yard or possibly a forerunner to modern Fore Street (Wade 2025, p. 119).

Of the first three case studies, this has the most dramatic story. While all of *Gipeswic's* roads cut earlier features, surface 0272 is unique because its gravel fill covered the remains of a pre-existing structure, one that was interpreted as a possible building (Structure 3157) (Wade 2014b, pp. 2–3).[2] In terms of absolute chronology, all that can be said for certain is that both surface 0272 and Structure 3157 date to c. 865–900. The building may have been constructed, used, abandoned, and torn down in a 'natural cycle' of building use, or it may have been deliberately destroyed to make way for the road.

Even within a New Materialist framework, it can be said that Fore Street was established rather than 'just' emerged, because it likely closely followed human intention. This represents what DeLanda (2016, pp. 22–27) calls 'overcoding'–where a legitimate authority imposes a new spatial organisation that fundamentally transforms existing social relations. In this case, those relations are spatially embedded in the landscape.

The implications are significant. The destruction of structure 3157–possibly a domestic space given associated finds including pottery, iron nails, and a bone needle – to make way for a surface suggests a form of urban development where legitimate and/or coercive authorities (perhaps a king, a *wic-reeve*, or a military force like the Great Heathen Army) could fundamentally reshape urban landscapes at the expense of inhabitants or craftspeople. Such transformation was still a negotiation, but an unequal one, with power concentrated in a single dominant actant that dramatically altered the existing material and social arrangements. Even more dramatic examples of overcoding might include *Hamwic*'s Six Dials road system or Dorestad's harbour infrastructure (Verwers 1988, Andrews 1992, pp. 31–32), suggesting a broader

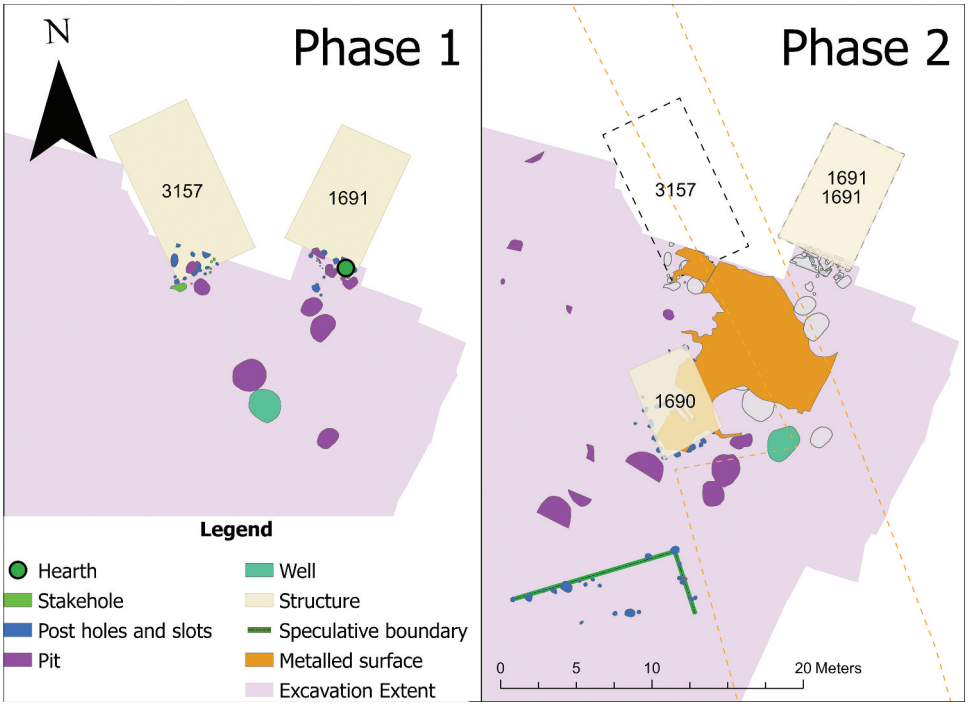

Fig. 9. *Left, features at IAS4801, Fore Street, Ipswich, belonging to ELS phase 1 including features interpreted as structure 3157. Right, features belonging to ELS phase 2. Image by author.*

pattern of asymmetrical negotiations in early medieval urban development.

ROAD MATERIALITY

Looking broadly across *Gipeswic*, it is striking that all excavated roads were metalled (or, in the case of St Stephen's Lane, re-metalled) during the ELS phase (865–900) (Fig. 2). It is compelling that two possible 'informal' routes, Franciscan Way and Market Lane, were metalled around the same time as new surfaces like Fore Street, and it is tempting to view all of this metalling as a coordinated activity.

Tellingly, the timing of this road surfacing corresponds with road metalling projects in West Saxon burhs (Baker and Brookes 2013, pp. 67–68), possibly indicating that gravel roads were, in 9th-century minds, linked to state formation. Indeed, royal authorities may have initiated or mandated road improvement, yet it must be remembered that the actual work of hauling gravel, laying surfaces, and negotiating routes involved diverse human actants: craftspeople whose workshops lined these routes and who benefited from improved access to customers; carts that would have made metalled roads valuable; neighbours who negotiated how maintenance burdens would be shared; and likely enslaved or dependent labourers who performed the heavy work of construction. Meanwhile, visiting traders from burhs or other ports may have created expectations for a certain form of urban road that local craftspeople and authorities alike felt pressure to meet. Rather than assuming royal diktat, archaeologists should consider how this coordination emerged from local nego-

tiations with broader cultural currents – royal initiatives, craft community responses to increased traffic, competitive emulation between settlements, and – importantly – the physical properties of materials themselves.

For example, the material properties of gravel (drainage, durability, the sound it made underfoot) afforded particular urban experiences that would have been common between burhs and *emporia*. Compared to trodden grass, gravel would have been immediately perceptible to anyone walking, riding, or hauling goods along these surfaces. Whether these affordances actually influenced perceptions of urban status is difficult to demonstrate archaeologically, but its materiality may well have offered a promise of permanence, signalling growth and stability. As a product of negotiation, its presence would have validated a place's urban status, especially since gravel roads would have a) needed a greater amount of material and manpower to maintain and b) distinguished urban thoroughfares from their village counterparts (Fathy 2022, pp. 271–273).

On one hand, attempting to command labour and resources may have been an act of material legitimation by a king or other authority, creating a connection between royal power and urbanism (with the unequal maintenance of Market and St Stephen's Lanes illustrating the limits of that power). On the other hand, the maintenance and treatment of gravel roads might have been part of an emergent civic identity, with participation in urban activities contingent on services to the community (cf. Macfarlane 2012, p. 17). If so, communal metalling and upkeep may have been an early example of municipality in post-Roman Britain, exemplify how material itself – in this case gravel – constituted urban community.

INTERPRETING MATERIAL NEGOTIATIONS

Having examined these three case studies, it is worth reflecting on what material negotiation analysis can and cannot reveal. The framework necessarily privileges what we can observe materially – temporal sequences (ditch precedes road precedes slag concentration), spatial relationships (adjacent roads maintained differently), material transformations (hollows becoming surfaces roads), and what materials and spaces *did* (rivers flooded, ditches channelled movement, roads facilitated access). We should be more cautious about *why* humans intended specific outcomes or which particular human actants made individual decisions, especially when evidence comes from a single location or feature. For instance, while archaeological evidence can establish that ditches preceded slag concentrations at Franciscan Way, the specific causal mechanism by which one influenced the other remains interpretive. Blacksmiths may have been drawn to existing foot traffic, or the ditch's drainage properties, or simply something else that we in the 21st century cannot access.

This emphasis on material agency also risks underplaying the structured inequalities that practice theory foregrounds, such as the habitus and dispositions that meant some human actants (kings, reeves) could more readily marshal materials and labour than others (enslaved individuals, dependent craftspeople). However, material negotiation analysis attempts to hold both in view: materials as active participants and humans as differentially empowered negotiators, except with the emphasis on what things and people *did* rather than what they *meant*.

Yet this interpretive openness is itself also productive. By attending to patterns of differential treatment and to evidence of initiative and resistance, the approach reveals negotiations – between rivers and travellers, between ditches and blacksmiths – that other frameworks would miss by privileging documentary-visible actants or treating materials as passive. New Materialism encourages critical conversations about urban emergence's messy complexity that counter elite-centric narratives and help archaeologists access the detailed, small-scale

actants that created these towns 'from below,' often at the everyday scale.

THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN MATERIALITY

The evidence from *Gipeswic*'s thoroughfares – from the emergent trackway at Franciscan Way to the deliberate construction at Fore Street – reveals that urban development cannot be reduced to a single model or mechanism. Instead, multiple forms of material negotiation operated simultaneously. Urbanism contains multitudes. Having examined these specific instances of road emergence, we can now step back to consider what this evidence reveals about broader processes through which urban materiality emerged. The synchronous metalling of roads across late 9th-century *Gipeswic*, with their varied origins and differential maintenance, raises fundamental questions about how archaeologists conceptualise urban emergence.

Even though many (e.g. Farías and Bender 2010, Portugali 2011, DeLanda 2016) have seen towns as the complex system 'par excellence', New Materialist approaches to early urbanism remain surprisingly scarce. Archaeological applications of New Materialism have concentrated primarily in prehistoric studies (Conneller 2011, Fowler 2013, Harris 2017), typically focusing on artefact relationships or remaining largely theoretical (Olsen 2010, Hodder 2012, Hamilakis and Jones 2017). Although gaining ground in later medieval archaeology, New Materialism has yet to be systematically applied to early medieval urban contexts. Ben Jervis's (2016, 2019) pioneering work is the most significant attempt to develop such theories for medieval urbanism, but even Jervis's innovative approach concentrates primarily on artefact patterns and inter-settlement relationships rather than examining how individual towns unfolded. More critically, fundamental aspects of New Materialist urban analysis remain underdeveloped: frameworks that explore matter's role in negotiating power relations, approaches that treat infrastructure as active agents, and methodologies for tracing how everyday material interactions produce emergent urban qualities. This article, through the case studies above, has begun to develop exactly these approaches.

DISTRIBUTED AGENCY IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The evidence from Ipswich can be explained as emerging from 'distributed agency', or what Bennett (2010, pp. 21–23) referred to as an 'agentic assemblage'. A related New Materialist concept is that wholes are more than the sum of their parts, i.e. they are *emergent*. When components interact in the right way, complex entities can *emerge* that have properties and behaviours that their individual parts do not have on their own: a biological cell from organelles, a tornado from a variety of smaller atmospheric conditions, or an ecosystem from various biotic and abiotic factors. However, unlike a classically described organism, towns are *unbounded* wholes, far from equilibrium or stasis, whose parts and inhabitants are constantly changing. These complex but unbounded aggregations of components are what DeLanda (2016) refers to as 'assemblages' – dynamic wholes that maintain their identity while their components constantly change, like a town whose buildings, residents, and functions shift over time while nonetheless remaining recognisably 'the same town'.

Seen in this way, the components that constituted *Gipeswic*—houses and roads, drinking water and shared spaces, tools, and organisms including humans from enslaved people and craftspeople to their domesticates, 'pests', and a profusion of parasites – interacted to

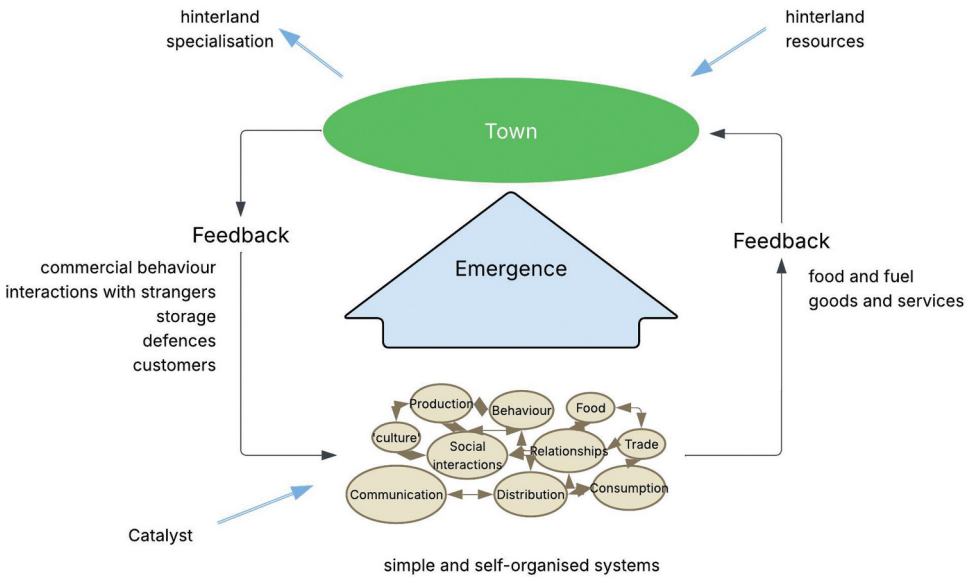

Fig. 10. *A schematic flow diagram depicting how a town might nonlinearly emerge as a complex system from pre-existing components. Image by author.*

produce urban qualities no single component possessed alone (Fig. 10). Thus, 'town-ness' is not a fixed state but a continually negotiated status influenced by both internal dynamics and external relationships.

Crucially, this framework reconceptualises how archaeologists understand power in urban development. The construction of Fore Street over an existing structure was one such material negotiation – a relatively asymmetrical discourse where authorities could dramatically reshape urban space. The gradual emergence of the Franciscan Way trackway represents another – a more horizontal negotiation between various human and non-human actants. Such horizontal relations are precisely what elite-centric models obscure. Various local decisions could lead to the creation of gravelled trackways and blacksmithing sectors while neighbourly expectations might have helped craftspeople maintain St Stephen's Lane. In other words, negotiations need not always be exercised through coercion or authority but also through mutual recognition of shared interests and the gradual concordance of collective practices. Traditional narratives, by focusing on kings and bishops, miss how much of urban life was negotiated horizontally among community members of relatively equal positions of power.

Importantly, even apparently top-down interventions like road construction required ongoing negotiation with material properties and local practices to succeed. As at Market and St Stephen's Lanes: gravel surfaces needed upkeep, route alignments had to work with local topography and existing movement patterns, and road functions evolved through use in ways that planners could not entirely control. This reminds us that even royal power must operate through material networks rather than by mere decree. Emergent towns, especially early on when social norms and etiquette for a new way of life were still being negotiated, were spaces where a multitude of possibilities and desires were still open.

At Franciscan Way, for instance, we observed how a road was not simply

imposed, but emerged from interactions between human and nonhuman actants. While traditional spatial analysis of *Gipeswic*'s infrastructure might emphasise morphological description or chronological sequence, a material negotiation analysis encourages us to go beyond and ask, 'how did roads emerge through ongoing negotiations between multiple actants?'. The key difference is that roads were not merely products of human decision-making, but active participants in shaping very real social relations. This approach has broad applicability across *emporia*. London's polyfocal development or the relationship between Dorestad's riverfront and inland areas (Verwers 1988, Cowie and Blackmore 2012, pp. 200–202), for instance, could be productively examined through attention to how power relations were negotiated through everyday material practices. Similarly, *Hamwic*'s street grid need not be understood as pure top-down planning but as one possible outcome of negotiations between royal authority, topographic constraints, existing trackways, and inhabitants (Andrews 1992, p. 38).

Here, a medievalist might rightly remind us that power relations are always historically specific, affecting which negotiations were possible and which outcomes emerged. It is realistic to accept that an early medieval king was actually more powerful than an enslaved person or the residents of Structure 3157, but their difference in power was not because the men who became kings were superior in some essential sense, but rather because of long historical processes that led to power asymmetries. Similarly, humans currently hold more power than animals or things, not due to essence, but due to contingent evolution and geohistory. There are historical, but not ontological, differences in power.

New Materialism provides a particularly productive framework for the archaeological questions posed here, complementing other frameworks. Practice theory (e.g. Christophersen 2015) excels at revealing how human routines and habits shape space, but tends to position materials as the medium through which human practices operate rather than as active participants. In the Franciscan Way case, this would capture how people created trackways through repeated walking, but might miss how the ditch itself – through its physical form and position – actively shaped where people could walk, or how the river's flooding rhythms influenced human choices. Network approaches (e.g. Sindbæk 2007, 2017) powerfully illuminate connections between sites and the flows of goods and ideas but offer far less on how materials within a single site actively generate urban forms. Assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006, 2016) shares with New Materialism an emphasis on emergence and complexity, and indeed informs the approach taken here; however, New Materialism's distinctive contribution lies in its foregrounding of material agency.

For understanding early urbanism in almost any context, this focus on material agency proves especially valuable. Daily interactions between craftspeople and their tools, or between residents and roads, fundamentally shaped urban development. Archaeological materials, on the other hand, allow us to access these forms of historical agency that practice theory might attribute solely to human habit, or that network theories might miss by focusing on inter-site connections. New Materialism's insistence that materials actively participate in making history opens analytical possibilities uniquely suited to what archaeologists can know. The distributed causation it foregrounds can help explain how urban qualities emerged without requiring us to identify singular 'prime movers', while its attention to

emergent phenomena captures how towns developed properties (intensity of interaction, functional specialization) that no individual component possessed alone.

TEMPORAL COMPLEXITY

Furthermore, this approach allows us to critically study how components operate according to different temporal rhythms. The River Gipping's seasonal flooding, the gradual formation of trackways through repeated use, the episodic maintenance of gravel surfaces, and the cyclical replacement of flood control channels all contributed to urban emergence but at fundamentally different scales and rates. Analytically, episodic floods and moments when 9th-century blacksmiths discarded their slag are historical, but so too are long-term processes like Holocene climate change and river terrace deposits. Geological processes should not be seen as merely the setting for historical action, but as actants alongside humans. The River Gipping's seasonal flooding at Franciscan Way, for instance, was not 'background' to urban development but an active participant whose rhythms shaped where economic activity was organised, how ditches needed to be maintained, and ultimately where trackways emerged. New Materialist approaches encourage us to tell complex narratives that reflect the messiness archaeologists often encounter in our data. The example of roads confirms that there is definitely a place for feedback and spontaneous order in archaeological narratives.

This challenges linear models of urbanisation. Transitioning from non-urban to urban life was not like stepping from one stone to the next, but rather a 'crystallisation' of relationships between many already existing components. The metalling of multiple roads in the late 9th century illustrates this perfectly. It is not that *Gipeswic* was pre-urban before these roads were metalled and urban afterwards. Indeed, *Gipeswic* had a mix of metalled roads and unsurfaced trackways before the 9th century. Apparent synchronicity can mask the varied, asynchronous processes by which urban qualities actually emerge. A multi-temporal approach also aids comparisons between *emporia*, showing how similar urban transformations played out at different rhythms.

As this section has therefore illustrated, New Materialism directly addresses our four conceptual hurdles by: 1) distributing agency across networks of human and non-human actants rather than privileging top-down or bottom-up power, 2) treating towns as dynamic assemblages rather than bounded wholes, 3) understanding urbanism as continuous *becoming* rather than achieved states of *being*, and 4) embracing fluid, relational processes rather than fixed categories. This approach reframes the origins of *Gipeswic* as a transformation, not a genesis, and as a discourse between a multiplicity of actors, not a one-dimensional dialectic.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reframes early medieval urban emergence through the lens of material negotiation analysis, revealing urbanism as continuous *becoming* rather than achieved states. Like Heraclitus's river, one never steps into the same town twice, or, to quote McFarlane (2011, p. 603), 'urbanism does not exist, it occurs'. From this perspective, it is not surprising that previous frameworks remain perplexed by urban origins; they are trying to freeze and categorise something that is inherently fluid. Upon reflection, the 'vexing' quality of early medieval urbanism partly reflects a mismatch between the phenomena themselves (gradual, contingent, multiple) and the analytical frameworks traditionally available to study them (focused on essence, causation, and clear periodisation). By developing theoretical frameworks

appropriate for understanding complex and relational processes, archaeologists can better capture how urbanisation unfolds.

Rather than asking 'who founded *Gipeswic*?', I have asked 'how did *Gipeswic* emerge through the interaction of various material components?' This shift yielded three insights invisible to traditional approaches. First, urban emergence involved multiple concurrent processes operating at different temporal scales – from flooding and trackway formation to episodic maintenance and coordinated 9th-century road metalling. Second, road metalling both produced and performed urban community, creating experiential distinctions between urban and rural communities in which matter played an active role. Third, differential maintenance of adjacent thoroughfares encoded social relations through ongoing material negotiation rather than simple imposition.

Material negotiation analysis offers alternative interpretative frameworks to simplistic developmental models. By treating roads, rivers, and gravel as active participants, archaeologists can gain access to the complex interactions through which urban qualities were produced. The stratigraphy, spatial patterns, and artefact assemblages that archaeologists routinely document are not simply residues of human decisions but traces of the very processes through which towns emerged.

This research also challenges models that privilege royal or ecclesiastical planning. Even in periods of relatively strong royal power, urban development occurred through ongoing negotiations between diverse human actants whose daily decisions about where to work, how to move, and whether to maintain infrastructure fundamentally shaped urban form. The long-standing debate over whether *emporia* were 'true towns' may be mis-framed. Rather than seeking definitional boundaries between urban and pre-urban, archaeologists should examine how sites like *Gipeswic* developed urban qualities through interactions between already existing materials. The late 9th-century synchronised road metalling, for instance, likely created experiential and functional differences that may have constituted urban identity regardless of administrative status.

More broadly, this research advances New Materialist approaches in archaeology by operationalising its concepts in the study of spatial practices. The framework developed here – tracing how thoroughfares, boundaries, and other spatial features emerge through ongoing negotiations between human and non-human actants – could usefully reframe study of other *emporia* or any complex social space. Future research will expand this approach to other components of *Gipeswic*, including cemeteries and plot boundaries (e.g. Fathy 2022, pp. 179–222). Comparative studies across multiple early medieval towns could further illuminate how different material conditions shaped distinct urban trajectories. The material negotiation analysis perspective developed here offers particular promise for re-examining the rich archaeological records of London, *Hamwic*, Dorestad, and York to explore the diverse urban forms of early medieval Northwest Europe. Most importantly, this framework invites archaeologists of any period with limited documentary evidence to rethink what we mean by 'urban origins,' shifting away from founding moments towards the ongoing processes through which urban qualities continuously emerge, transform, and persist.

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NOTES

[1]This interpretation relies on the assumption that an informal trackway predated the gravel road. Two competing timescales are possible: rapid emergence (blacksmithing area and road appearing within 50 years, c. 850–900), or gradual development (trackway and forge predating road metalling by several decades) (Wade 2025, p. 66). While the archaeological evidence cannot definitively distinguish between these scenarios, both support the broader argument for distributed agency in urban formation.

[2]Wade's (2025, p. 120) subsequent publication does not identify these features as a structure, though the post holes and surface remain visible in the published plans. The interpretation of these features as a building remains uncertain.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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