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## **6. Eavesdropping on short lives: Eaves-drip burial and the differential treatment of children one year of age and under in early Christian cemeteries**

Elizabeth Craig-Atkins

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, funerary rites were utilised in a variety of ways to express aspects of the identity of the deceased (e.g. Stoodley 1999; Buckberry 2007). This chapter deals exclusively with one pattern identified in previous studies concerning the funerary treatment of the youngest individuals: the clustering of the burials of babies and young children in proximity to structures in some early Christian cemeteries. The following discussion draws together the evidence for this funerary rite, which has become known as eaves-drip burial, drawing on published examples and also presenting examples from unpublished sites, in order to characterise this practice in detail, provide a critical evaluation of the theories concerning its meaning and explore the reasons why it was deemed necessary to differentiate the youngest individuals in death in this way. The presence of a small number of graves of adult females, some of whom were buried with foetuses or new born babies, amongst eaves-drip burials is also highlighted and evaluated, and it is hypothesised that these women were those who died during pregnancy, childbirth and early motherhood, at a time when their identities were inextricably linked to those of infants.

The practice of burying young children in close proximity to buildings was first identified and described in detail at Raunds Furnells (Northamptonshire) (Boddington 1996, 53-5). At this tenth- and eleventh- century churchyard cemetery, the small graves of infants cluster close to the foundations of the church (Boddington 1996, 54). Here, and at other early Christian sites, the practice of interring babies close to churches has become known as eaves-drip burial (Boddington 1996, 55; Crawford 1999, 85-9; Hadley 2010, 109). The substantial cemetery at Raunds comprised 363 inhumations surrounding a two-celled stone church on all four sides (Boddington 1996, 28). Originally constructed as a single cell in the mid-tenth century, the church at Raunds became a focus for burials after the addition of a chancel in the later tenth century, with burial ceasing towards the end of the eleventh and beginning of the twelfth century, when a new, larger church was constructed (Boddington 1996, 7). A burial zone within 1.5 m of the church walls is particularly notable for its concentration of densely packed small graves which housed the remains of neonates (from forty weeks post-conception

to one month) and infants (from two months to one year) (fig. 6.1). Of the thirty interments within 1.5 m of the walls, twenty-five were assigned an age at death and could be located on the published site plan by the author: fifteen were under one month at death and five were aged between one month and one year, thus 80% (20/25) of individuals assigned an age at death in this zone were neonates or infants (Boddington 1996, 55; Craig 2005). The remainder comprised three older children (two aged under three years and one aged three to four years) and two adults, one male and one of indeterminate sex. There is also one intramural burial of an infant at the boundary between the nave and chancel. Across the entire cemetery at Raunds, children under one year comprise only 18.1% (66/363) of the total population (Boddington 1996, 30), indicating a strong bias towards younger individuals in the demographic profile of the so-called 'eaves-drip' zone. By no means all neonates and infants are interred in closest proximity to the church at Raunds, in fact those within 1.5 m of the walls comprise only 30.3% (20/66) of the total population under one year at death. Andy Boddington (1996, 54) considered the burials in the eaves-drip zone to have occupied an area of ground intentionally left empty of graves during the earliest phases of burial, therefore, it seems that neonates and infants were only spatially segregated towards the end of the burial sequence at Raunds, probably from the latter half of the eleventh century.

A cluster of neonate and infant burials has also been identified at Tanners Row, Pontefract (West Yorkshire) (Wilmott in prep.). The excavators divide activity in this part of the cemetery at Pontefract into three distinct phases. Phase one and two burials produced radiocarbon dates spanning the sixth to eighth and ninth to thirteenth centuries respectively (Phase one: sk. 267 – AD 591-771 and sk. 519 – AD 550-710; phase two: sk. 548 – AD 830-1220 all to two sigma) (Wilmott in prep.). The last phase of burial (phase three) stratigraphically post-dated phase two and is argued by the excavators to pre-date alterations made to Pontefract castle defences in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but has not been subject to radiocarbon dating (Wilmott in prep.). This final phase of interment is characterised by a distinct cluster of neonates and infants located along the westernmost wall of a newly-constructed stone building, thought to have been a church (fig. 6.2). As at Raunds, the majority of these interments are within 1.5 m of the wall. The cluster of juveniles comprises eleven neonates and seven infants under two years, and there were also two individuals that were not assigned age at death and only two adults. Thus, 81.8% (18/22) of the interments in this zone are individuals under two years at death, and two thirds (18/27) of the excavated remains of children under two years from phase 3 are buried in this zone. The high prevalence of young children extends up to 2 m from the church at Pontefract, but predominantly in the

area to the west of the church. There is, however, also a mixed cluster of an infant, a young child, an adolescent and two adults within 2 m of the southern wall. At Pontefract, children over one year are more widely spread throughout the cemetery, serving to emphasise further that burial by the church was afforded primarily to the youngest. The absence of any clustering of children in phases one and two, prior to construction of the building in the cemetery, also supports the hypothesis developed at Raunds, that the presence of a building played a significant part in the decision to locate the burials of neonates and infants in specific places.

At Cherry Hinton (Cambridgeshire) burials were associated with a wooden building which is considered to have represented the first and second phases of a Saxo-Norman church dating from, potentially, the eighth to the twelfth century (McDonald and Doel 2000). Although no radiocarbon dates were obtained, stratigraphic relationships suggest that a substantial number of burials are contemporary with the second phase of this building, including a reported thirty-three neonates and infants buried 'beneath the church eaves', cutting structural features associated with the earliest church building (McDonald and Doel 2000, 5.5.26). Concordance of skeletal records and site plans from the unpublished Cherry Hinton report confirms that at least twenty-eight children under the age of two years were interred in close proximity to the relatively ephemeral remains of the church's foundations (fig. 6.3). A further seven small graves are represented on the site plan, but an age at death is not recorded for these individuals in the osteological report. If, once again, we designate the eaves-drip zone as 1.5 m from the church walls, a strong pattern emerges at Cherry Hinton: fifty-four burials lie within this zone, of which 51.9% (28/54) were under the age of two years at death. This contrasts with an overall proportion of neonates and infants in the population of only 6.3% (43/683) (di Ruffano and Waldron 2000, table 5). Put another way, at least 65.1% (28/43) of all children under two years buried at Cherry Hinton were interred within 1.5 m of the church. Young children were also particularly predominant in some areas of this eaves-drip zone. A string of graves abutting short end to short end containing at least nine individuals, all of whom are neonates and infants, ran directly alongside the southern-most foundation of the building. One further neonate to the west (sk. 3077) was also on the same alignment, but separated from the other graves by just under 2 m. In fact it appears that the eaves-drip zone at Cherry Hinton was more circumscribed than at Pontefract or Raunds, particularly on the north and south sides of the western end of the church, where the majority of infant interments were positioned directly alongside the foundation trenches of the building, with adults and older children slightly further away.

Clustering of neonates and infants was also encountered at Thwing (East Yorkshire). An Anglo-Saxon cemetery on Paddock Hill, Thwing sits within an extensive multi-period earthwork complex with a long occupation sequence including late Neolithic, Bronze Age and early medieval phases (Harding and Lee 1987, 171; Manby 1980, 231-2). The cemetery comprised the interments of 132 individuals in sixty-eight distinct grave cuts (Manby n. d.). The post-in-trench footings of a small, single-celled building 3 m by 4 m in plan were located in the northwest corner of the cemetery and a series of five substantial postholes, c. 50 cm in diameter, were also located to the west of the main burial zone: two were positioned at the west and east sides of the building, and three ran north to south along the western boundary of burial (fig. 6.4). As at Raunds, Pontefract and Cherry Hinton, at Thwing a large proportion of neonates and infants were preferentially buried in proximity to the building. However, unlike these other sites, where a single focal point was used, at Thwing the line of postholes also formed a focus for the burial of young children. Amongst the western-most row of graves 70.0% (16/23) of individuals were under two years, including seven neonates and nine infants. If the next row to the east is included, the population comprises twenty-five individuals one year and under, which in total represents 83.3% (25/30) of the neonates and infants in the entire population. The use of multiple foci for the burial of neonates and infants seen at Thwing has yet to be identified at any other site where eaves-drip burials have been identified. The individuals buried close to the building and along the line of postholes are distinct: infants dominated the area alongside the building while neonates were more numerous by the posts. Only five children under two years were buried outside these two western-most rows, four of which were interred in the same grave group. That the vast majority of the neonates and infants at Thwing were buried in a cluster indicates that the practice of selective burial was adopted throughout the cemetery's usage. Eight radiocarbon dates were obtained soon after excavation of this site in the late 1980s. The majority of these dates centre around the seventh to ninth centuries, however it is possible that burial began in the sixth century or earlier, suggested by two extremely broad dates of AD 228-880 and AD 376-680 obtained from skeletons 89 and 54 respectively (Manby n. d.). Thus, Thwing may represent one of the earliest examples of the eaves-drip form of burial, although there is no direct evidence that the eaves drip phenomenon began so early.

Another site at which the eaves-drip phenomenon has been identified, but which has yet to be discussed in print, is Spofforth (North Yorkshire) (Craig 2008; 2010; Northern Archaeological Associates 2002). This seventh- to ninth-century burial ground had a substantial structure – again likely a church – which was located towards the north and west

of the burial zone. Disturbance to the site makes interpretation of the size of the church difficult, and there were various features identified in excavation that may represent further structures on the site contemporary with the burials. Here, there were only eleven neonates in the entire cemetery population, and nine of those were buried along the line of the building's southern wall with one more located close to the north of the building (fig. 6.5). Children over one month at death are few, but appear to have been buried more widely across the cemetery. Unfortunately, there were too few young individuals and too much post-depositional disturbance at Spofforth to provide more detailed interpretation of the clustering of neonates and infants.

The differential burial of neonates and infants in spatial zones in proximity to buildings has been described at a range of other early Christian cemetery sites, hinting that eaves-drip burial was a widespread practice. Excavations on Castle Green, Hereford conducted in 1960 and 1973 identified a cluster of largely children's burials to the north of the walls of a contemporary stone church, which are thought to predate the mid-twelfth century (Shoesmith 1980, 17). These burials comprised thirteen children under two years, three children aged between five and ten years, and seven children under the age of seven years as well as seven adults (groups 5c, 6 and 7) (Shoesmith 1980, 30, 46, 51). Unfortunately, there is only a published plan provided for the 1973 excavations, but importantly this reveals that the youngest individuals (four neonates and two infants under nine months) had been afforded burial locations closest to the building, within approximately one metre of its foundations (Shoesmith 1980, 20). At the site of Whithorn (Dumfries and Galloway), a cluster of children were buried to the east of a stone-footed building located to the north of the Northumbrian minster complex (Hill *et al.* 1997, 134-82). Detailed analysis of site phasing indicates that the earliest phase of this 'children's cemetery', lasted for a period of maybe only ten to fifteen years during the second quarter of the eighth century (Hill *et al.* 1997, 136, 171). During this time nine children under two years and one four to seven year old were interred just beyond a boundary wall located c. 1 m east of the stone-footed building (Hill *et al.* 1997, 145, 170; Cardy 1997, 558). This area of the site continued in use as a children's cemetery for a period of approximately forty years, but in later phases children of all ages up to twelve years were interred here. Peter Hill (1997, 171) argues that the infant cluster likely formed part of a larger cemetery, but also that the infants at the minster site might reflect the presence of a transient workforce and their more dependant younger children in the area at that time. Whilst this theory may explain the presence of a significant number of children at an ecclesiastical site, it does not provide any reasons for the spatial zoning of children's burials.

An unusually high proportion of interments of foetuses was encountered at Norwich castle (Norfolk) (13, 11.6%). The excavators note that these pre-term babies were associated with two phases of a building dating to the eleventh century, and were interred both within and directly north of the structure (Ayers 1985, 58). Five of these foetal skeletons can be clearly associated with distinct graves on the published site plan, all of which are within 1 m of the remains of the building and, thus, consistent with other eaves-drip burials discussed here. The site report for Winwick (Cheshire) notes that the cemetery included an area with ‘a higher proportion of child burials in the north’ in close proximity to a structure c. 4 m by 8 m in plan (Freke and Thacker 1987/8, 33). The site is characteristic of an early medieval western British cemetery, in that interments are unfurnished inhumations arranged in rows, but the interments were not dated any more accurately. Nor is there any more detail provided to elucidate whether these so-called child burials represent infants, as is the case in the other examples highlighted here.

In some cases the presence of eaves-drip burials is suggested, but a paucity of archaeological evidence makes their evaluation problematic. At Nunnaminster, Winchester (Hampshire) a cluster of four infants was located directly north of a stone church of tenth- to eleventh-century date. Only two further burials were excavated, both located to the west of the minster – an adult and an eight to ten year old child (Annia Cherryson pers. comm.; Scobie and Qualman 1993). Only three burials in total, all infants, were excavated in Compton Bassett (Wiltshire) alongside the eleventh- to thirteenth-century church of St Swithun (Hawkes and Adam 2001). In both these cases the lack of information concerning the rest of the burial community means that it cannot be determined whether the identified burials represent part of distinct clusters of neonates and infants. In sum, despite the variability in the detail and extent of evidence available in some cases, it is now possible to identify the clustering of infant burials in proximity to churches at a number of early medieval cemeteries in addition to the well-known example at Raunds Furnells.

### **Interpretations of eaves-drip burial**

The most consistently favoured explanation for eaves-drip burial is that rain falling onto the church roof would have become sanctified by contact with a holy building, and then have fallen directly onto the zones of neonate and infant burials providing some form of posthumous reinforcement of the baptismal ritual (Boddington 1996, 55; Crawford 1999, 85-9; Hadley 2010, 109). This interpretation draws upon a folk myth of unknown antiquity, recorded during the nineteenth century, whereby the remains of an unbaptised infant were

secreted away under the eaves of a church sanctuary roof in the hope that water running from the building's eaves, over the body, would afford posthumous baptism (Wilson 2000, 216). It has been argued, therefore, that eaves-drip burial reflects uncertainty within early Christian communities over the efficacy of baptism (Boddington 1996, 55; Crawford 1999, 85-9; Hadley 2010, 109) and that ameliorative funerary practices were sought to ease this fear. The unbaptised infant can be seen to occupy an ambivalent role and, for example, there appears to have been a long-held fear throughout European history that children who died before baptism could be performed were never at rest and could easily return as a revenant to haunt their family (Barber 1988; Wilson 2000, 216).

This eaves-drip model suggests an explanation for differential burial of infants relating to the role of baptismal ritual in Christian communities. However, the relevance of baptism amongst the general population prior to the ninth century is debated (Morris 1991). At the beginning of the fifth century St Augustine argued that a child who died unbaptised would be condemned to Hell (Crawford 1999, 85), thus beginning a period of Christian doctrine that placed the unbaptised in a precarious position. Yet evaluating the extent to which Augustinian attitudes influenced Christian communities from the seventh century is problematic, and, moreover, there is a notable absence from any of the sources of any reference to specific burial rites as an ameliorative practice for the unbaptised. Documentary evidence does suggest that baptism was growing in popularity during the seventh century. For example, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* of c. 730 recounts mass baptisms by Gregorian missionary Paulinus in the north of England at York, Yeavinger (Northumberland) and along the River Swale in 627, but even if, to cite Bede, 'crowds flocked to him from every village and district' these events could not have affected more than a small minority of the populace (*Historia Ecclesiastica* ii, 14; Colgrave, McClure and Collins 1999, 98). The first reference to baptism in lawcodes also appears at about the same time. For example, the laws of Ine of Wessex, dated to c. 694, stated that an infant must be baptised within thirty days of birth or a fine – albeit a relatively small one – was imposed on its parents (Ine 2; Crawford 1999, 85; Whitelock 1955, 364). The extent to which these directives permeated everyday life is unknown, nor can we be sure that similar prescriptions to those enumerated in Ine's code were in place beyond Wessex at this early date. Indeed, in his review of evidence for places of baptism in Anglo-Saxon England, Richard Morris (1991, 16) has argued that, in the centuries directly after the conversion, particularly during the seventh and eighth centuries, the need to find someone to perform the rite and the requirement to travel to an appropriate location on a suitable holy day could combine to dissuade parents from seeking baptism for their infants at all.



A further issue with the applicability of the eaves-drip model is raised by the pattern of burial at Thwing, where neonates were interred in close proximity to a line of three postholes and infants clustered around the building. The postholes have been reconstructed by the excavator as a line of three free-standing posts (Manby n. d.), but could also potentially have been some form of screen or barrier. Either way, a literal interpretation of the eaves-drip effect does not fit here – there could not have been water washing from the eaves of a series of posts – but the pattern of infant burial at Thwing shares many features with more stereotypical eaves-drip sites: the demographic pattern of the infants is the same, and a group of young children at this site was, indeed, buried around a small building in a similar way to all other examples of eaves-drip burial. The cemetery at Thwing is one of the earliest eaves-drip burial sites, with burial commencing in the seventh century, if not earlier. It is plausible that variation might be seen in the rite amongst its early adopters, but as with the issue of the relevance of baptism discussed previously, this also has implications for the interpretation of other seventh- to eighth-century examples of the eaves drip burial phenomenon.

The uncertainty surrounding the significance of baptism in the earliest Christian cemeteries, combined with the apparent use of structures that could not create ‘eaves-drip’ as foci for infant burial clusters, suggests that we should be cautious in our interpretations of seventh- to eighth-century clusters of infant burials as directly comparable to the eaves-drip burial phenomenon more clearly identified in later centuries. Whilst it might be entirely valid to use groups of infant burials to infer the position of a church, even where there is no supporting structural evidence, in examples of confirmed ninth-century date and later (Buckberry 2007, 125), such an approach is clearly problematic for earlier cemeteries. Thus, the suggestion that a cluster of infant burials in the south-east corner of the Church Walk cemetery (Hartlepool), which may date to as early as the mid-seventh century, indicates a contemporary church lay just outside the area of archaeological investigation (Daniels 1999, 112; Daniels and Loveluck 2007, 82-93) and that these infants were ‘probably unbaptised’ may not be entirely secure.

It is possible to reflect on alternative explanations for the patterns of infant clustering identified in early Christian cemeteries. Broader cultural distinctions between the very young child, who could not speak and was completely dependant on others, and older children are implicit in the vocabulary of Old English written sources (Crawford 1999, 54; 2007, 84). This suggests an inherent and enduring difference in the conceptualisation of infancy in Anglo-Saxon society that goes beyond whether or not baptism had taken place. This may have been a long-lived distinction, as the burial of infants in the eaves is mentioned in various Roman

texts, but in these cases it is not explicitly linked to baptism. In her review of funerary practices afforded to infants in Romano-British Christian contexts, Dorothy Watts (1989, 372) cites several sources that suggest infants' burials were made in the eaves (*in subgrundariis*). Roman polymath Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, published around AD 77-79, specifically notes the exclusion of infants who died before teething from the cremation rite, and their burial under the eaves. Fulgentius, a fifth-century Carthaginian bishop, develops on this some 400 years later with the suggestion that infants who had not lived forty days would receive this form of burial (Watts 1989, 372). As with the undated folk myth highlighted above, the practice described here links the burials of the very young with the eaves of buildings, but implies that chronological age or rites of passage, such as teething, might have defined the age groups to which it was afforded.

Simon Mays (2007, 93-4) has tentatively linked another rite of passage – weaning age – with differential burial treatment. At Wharram Percy (North Yorkshire), infants under the age of one year, whose nitrogen isotope ratios indicated that they were still being breast-fed, tended to be buried immediately north of the church. It is not clear, however, whether cessation of breast feeding was the stimulus for the provision of more normative burial, or whether it was another rite of passage which coincided with weaning, such as speech development, walking, teething, or, indeed, even baptism.

There is also evidence for the differential treatment of children immediately prior to the conversion to Christianity. Some clustering of individuals under twelve years has been noted at Westgarth Gardens (Suffolk), Sewerby (East Yorkshire) and West Heslerton (North Yorkshire) (Crawford in press; Lucy 1998, 69-70, 74), although the age groups represented in these clusters are much wider than amongst the later cemeteries described above and there was no apparent differential treatment of infants as a group. In fact, it has been widely acknowledged that infants and children are generally underrepresented in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries across England (Buckberry 2000; Crawford 1993, 84; Evison 1987, 146; Lucy 1994, 26-7; Molleson and Cox 1993, 16). Unlikely to be purely the result of differential decomposition, recovery bias or shallow burial, this paucity of interments of the youngest individuals appears to reflect active exclusion of children from community cemeteries (Buckberry 2000; Crawford 1993, 84-5; see also Squires this volume). The discovery of infant burials in several early and middle Anglo-Saxon settlement contexts, particularly in sunken-featured buildings at sites such as West Stow (Suffolk) and Wharram Percy, confirms that the youngest individuals could, indeed, receive burial away from the main cemetery focus (Crawford 1999; 2008; Hamerow 2006, 13-14; Milne and Richards 1992, 84; West 1985).

The differential treatment of infants seems, then, to be a consistent, but far from universal, feature of funerary practices during the Anglo-Saxon period, albeit with some significant differences between pre- and post-Christian periods in the means by which the youngest members of the burial community were distinguished (Crawford 1999; 2008).

A series of pragmatic hypotheses have also been offered to explain the spatial clustering of groups of infants in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, and these, therefore, require exploration as potential explanations for eaves-drip burial. It has, for example, been suggested that proximity to church foundations would have prevented the digging of deep graves, such as would be required for adult burials, and, thus, this location became most appropriate for the smaller, shallower graves of infants (Anderson 2007, 98). However, there is no intrinsic reason why the foundations of some of the small buildings from the cemeteries highlighted here should have interfered with the depth of burial. Indeed, a few adult graves are interspersed with the infants in several cases, suggesting that there was no physical barrier to the digging of adult graves in those areas dominated by infant burials. Alternatively, it has been hypothesised that an epidemic illness or famine might necessitate the rapid, successive burial of abnormally large numbers of young children, and that this might reasonably manifest in the archaeological record as spatially distinct clusters of juveniles (Wilmott in prep.). Whilst this remains an entirely viable reason for the presence of large numbers of young children in single phases of burial, it is not an entirely convincing explanation for eaves-drip burial for several reasons. It fails to explain satisfactorily the spatial patterning seen in the placement of neonate and infant burials without also drawing on the other arguments presented above. It is also problematic for this interpretation that the intercutting of distinct juvenile burials is seen frequently, making it unlikely that clusters of infant burials represent either a single catastrophic event, or even a relatively short period of high infant mortality. It is also unclear why the victims of such epidemics would be interred separately in distinct graves rather than multiple or communal graves as is seen in other examples of mass fatality in the archaeological record (e.g. Antoine and Hillson 2004/5, 26-8). Evidence from palaeopathological analysis is unable to make a useful contribution to this debate, as many of the causes of infant mortality do not leave evidence on the bones and, in particular, epidemic illnesses that lead to rapid death in children do not effect the body for long enough for bone tissue to develop characteristic indications of disease.

### **A hypothesis to explain the occurrence and distribution of eaves-drip burials**

It must be emphasised that eaves-drip burial is not universally encountered in early Christian cemeteries, and some sites contemporary with those described above provide convincing evidence that neonates and infants were not interred in spatially distinct zones. At St Nicholas Shambles, in London, where it is suggested that burials were made from the date of construction of a church in the eleventh century until about the mid-thirteenth century, density of interments varied across the site (White 1988, 9-10). Infants were present in small numbers in all clusters of burial, as were older children. Nor was there any apparent relationship between the age at death of an individual and proximity to the church walls. At Wearmouth (County Durham), Anglo-Saxon burials were located to the south of the minster, which was constructed c. 673 (Cramp 2005). Seventeen infants were widely spread throughout the cemetery area, with no evidence of age-specific zoning (Cramp 2005, 84, 89). Not only are there some sites where neonates and infants are not afforded differential treatment, but it has been noted above that at some sites – such as Raunds and Pontefract – eaves-drip burials are only found in one phase of burial, with the burials of young children being more widely spread during other phases. This emphasises that the practice of eaves-drip burial was not adopted in all early Christian cemeteries, nor was it always a consistent feature of funerary practices across the lifetime of cemeteries where it is found. Several potential reasons for the adoption of eaves-drip burial that draw on the desire to afford special protection to those who died in infancy have already been highlighted, but why should some communities adopt this practice, others not adopt it at all, and others adopt it for a specific period only? The answer may lie at the root of the debate over the relevance of baptism presented by Morris (1991), in that our understanding of how directives concerning new doctrine and new burial rites disseminated within the early Christian milieu is extremely limited (Geake 2003). Whilst we know something of funerary doctrine and law documented from the seventh century, we are much less clear of its direct impact on local practice. If eaves-drip burial were to have been one of a range of funerary practices that could be adopted on a local level, the patterns observed in its appearance might be rationalised. The extent to which baptism was accepted and desired, developing concepts of sacred space, the degree to which use of burial grounds (and the practices permitted within them) were controlled and the strength of belief in the potential for funerary rites to affect post-mortem fate would all serve to increase or decrease the attractiveness of eaves-drip burial at different times and in different locations.

It is apparent that the early Christian period saw an increasing emphasis on the active exclusion of certain individuals from consecrated ground (Gittos 2002, 202-4; Hadley 2007, 196; Halsall 1995, 246-7; Reynolds 2009, 96-179). Yet if baptism were a pre-requisite for

burial in consecrated ground, where were those who had not received it interred? Andrew Reynolds (2009) has provided a detailed review of those cemeteries that he argues were provided for those prohibited burial in churchyards, but this has revealed only a single example of a very young child – a foetus or infant interred at Bran Ditch (Cambridgeshire) (Reynolds 2009, 108). Nevertheless, the denial of burial in churchyard cemeteries to the unbaptised may help to explain the appearance of eaves-drip burials in the final phases of interment at Raunds, Pontefract and Hereford, where it is suggested that infants were buried after the remainder of the community had moved its burial ground elsewhere (Shoosmith 1980, 30, 51). If people were forced to find alternative places for the burial of infants, an old cemetery would no doubt have seemed an acceptable, if not preferable, alternative to those sites Reynolds has highlighted. The eaves-drip pattern of burial may, thus, reflect the increasing regulation of cemetery space and enforcement of doctrine regarding the denial of burial in consecrated ground to certain people. A similar development has recently been identified in early medieval Wales, where it has been argued that clusters of infant burials in the later stages of the cemeteries at Caer (Pembrokeshire), Capel Eithin (Gwynedd) and Llandough (Glamorgan) may reflect the use of cemeteries that had been abandoned or were going out of use for the burial of infants, perhaps those who were unbaptised (Page 2011, 108). In discussing the evidence of the cluster of infant and child burials from Whithorn, Sally Crawford (2008, 202) has seen in the emergence of eaves-drip burial at churches that were in decline or had been abandoned a practice similar to that reflected by the *cillini* of Ireland, which were burial places for stillborn and unbaptised infants who were excluded from burial in consecrated ground as a consequence. The present chapter suggests that this practice of using churchyards that had been abandoned or were going out of use may have been more widespread than has previously been recognised.

### **Adult burials in eaves-drip zones**

Eaves-drip burial zones were not exclusively occupied by the graves of neonates and infants. Adult graves were encountered intermittently amongst juvenile clusters at the majority of sites. In some cases, as at Raunds, it appears that adult graves in eaves-drip zones derive from earlier phases of burial, and are therefore consistent with the use of a completely segregated area for the burial of infants for only a certain period of the cemetery's duration. However, at other sites, adult burials amongst clusters of neonates and infants appear to be roughly contemporary with them, and tend to be females more frequently than males. At Pontefract, the two adult graves incorporated with the infant cluster during phase three/four were both for

thirty-five to forty-five year old females, one of whom was buried in a chest with a lock (skeletons 567a and 589). At Thwing, there was a concentration of female graves in the western-most row of graves where the highest numbers of neonate and infant burials are located. These individuals comprise three females aged between twenty-five and thirty-five (skeletons 26a, 39a, 48c) and another aged between thirty-five and forty-five (sk. 28). At Cherry Hinton, two graves of adults from within the eaves-drip zone are particularly notable. Skeleton 3747, a female aged over fifty, was buried with neonate 3729 in the same grave, and an unsexed adult skeleton (sk. 4214) was interred with a pre-term baby (sk. 4202) between their legs. Both examples have been argued to represent cases of death during or soon after childbirth, and in the case of the former, advanced maternal age is hypothesised to have been a contributing factor (McDonald and Doel 2000, 15). Archaeologically identifiable examples of peripartum mortalities are not common, however two further examples have been proposed at Norwich castle and St Nicholas Shambles. At the former, a burial of another adult female (sk. 120) and a pre-term baby was encountered directly north of the church walls, in a zone dominated by the burials of children (Ayers 1985, 18-19). Again, it is argued that these were a mother and baby who both died in childbirth (Ayers 1985, 58). At St Nicholas Shambles the remains of a full-term foetus were encountered in the abdomen of a female with masculine pelvic characteristics that may have contributed to difficulties during childbirth (White 1988, 71-3). This grave is not located notably close to the church, however there is also no evidence for eaves-drip burial at St Nicholas Shambles. Perhaps the use of a special cemetery zone for infants is a prerequisite for the differential treatment of women who may have died in childbirth?

An alternative suggestion for the association of the burials of adult females with those of children is presented by Christina Lee (2008, 31), who has drawn attention to examples of proximity between clusters of children's graves and the burials of adults with skeletal evidence of physical impairment. She focuses predominantly on evidence pre-dating the seventh century, and only two examples cited are from Christian cemeteries: a leper close to the eaves-drip zone at Raunds and the burial of a child and a woman with 'terminal illness' at Flixborough (North Lincolnshire), dating to the eighth century. In the case of the former, the diagnosis of leprosy in the adult male in question (sk. 5256) remains debatable and, in fact, a more securely diagnosed case of leprosy at Raunds exists (sk. 5046), but is interred at the furthest south-east edge of the cemetery, nowhere near the eave-drip zone (Craig 2005, 77, 83). Moreover, if we follow Boddington's site stratigraphy, the adult burial (and indeed many other adult interments without osteologically identifiable diseases in the same area)

substantially pre-dates any of the eaves-drip interments, making it unlikely that the location of the potentially leprous adult affected the placement of the child burials, and visa versa. In the case of the example from Flixborough, the ‘terminal illness’ in question is possible tuberculosis (identified on the basis of a possible calcified lymph node, but no further skeletal changes) (Geake *et al.* 2007, 114). This disease could have resulted in the death of the female, but it is also plausible that the proximity of her grave to that of an infant may indicate another case of obstetric fatality where a mother is interred in a ‘children’s zone’, similar to those highlighted in this chapter.

Thus, it appears that the suggestion that females, some of whom were buried with neonates, and therefore may have died in childbirth, were the group most frequently afforded burial amongst clusters of neonates and infants is better suited to the evidence than that presented by Lee (2008). It is not possible to clarify whether all of the females associated with eaves-drip clusters, including those not buried with babies, were those who died in childbirth, although it must be noted that the available evidence does not rule out this hypothesis. The placement of women who may have died in childbirth in eaves-drip zones does suggest that they held some form of shared identity with the babies. Women who died during the early stages of pregnancy, or had experienced miscarriages with fatal complications, may also be included in this group. Female and infant deaths during pregnancy and birth must have occurred but there would be little osteological evidence for death in this manner. Indeed, the remains of younger foetuses would be scanty given that bones begin early embryonic development as cartilaginous templates that would not survive in the soil (Scheuer and Black 2004, 23).

Anglo-Saxon sources tell us very little about childbirth, however pre-Christian Irish sources (including the *Colloquy of Ancients*, thought to have been compiled from oral accounts around 1200) indicate that women who died in childbirth could be afforded special status and honour in their burials (Crawford in press; Leigh Fry 1999, 182-3). In England, it is not until the thirteenth century that Christian sources begin to link childbirth with contamination, some time after the eaves drip burial practice had disappeared. The Irish model seems to fit the scenario presented here better than the much later Christian ideals (Gilchrist 2008, 43). Indeed, the burial close to churches of females who may have died as a result of pregnancy and childbirth, and their proximity to the burials of infants and neonates, serves to emphasise they were given special treatment. If infants who died young needed some special help provided by burial in proximity to buildings, it follows that their mothers, and unborn children still in the womb, might need similar protection. Alternatively, although

the large groups of neonates and infants accompanied by only small numbers of female burials are unlikely to be conventional family units, it might have been hoped that a small number of adult female ‘mother figures’ could have protected large groups of children after death. The gendered role of women as care-givers including mothers, midwives and undertakers has recently been reviewed in later medieval contexts (Gilchrist 2008) and it seems that a similar identity may be traced amongst the women considered here.

## **Conclusions**

Infants around the age of one year or younger were preferentially interred in graves positioned in close proximity to standing structures at a number of early medieval Christian cemeteries. The suggestion that water running from the eaves of church buildings onto the graves of babies might provide posthumous baptism has its origins in folk myth, but provides a compelling explanation for much of the evidence. The eaves-drip hypothesis itself, however, does not always fit the available evidence: whilst the majority of clusters of young children are found under the eaves of buildings, in one case, at Thwing, interments of neonates clustered around a post arrangement. The evidence from Thwing serves to caution researchers from assuming that groups of infant burials can be used to infer the position of a church, particularly amongst seventh- and eighth-century sites. Moreover, there remains debate about the ubiquity of baptism in the seventh and eighth century that could undermine the widespread applicability of the eaves-drip model.

Eaves-drip burials are not encountered at all early Christian cemeteries, and where they do occur, the rite does not necessarily persist for the entire period of burial. In several cases eaves-drip burials are only found in the final phases of cemetery use. This raises the possibility that, in these cases, infants were buried in old, disused cemeteries after a newer site had been adopted by the remainder of the population. Broadly, it seems that decisions as to whether babies should be buried interspersed with older children and adults, or even in the same cemetery, were being made inconsistently across the country and across time. The existence of local level interpretations of baptismal ritual and the ameliorative power of burial rites for the unbaptised helps to explain the variations observed in the form of the eaves-drip rite over time and space. It is also notable that some adult burials are found in eaves-drip zones. These comprise adult females of child-bearing age and three apparent examples of death in childbirth, where it appears mother and child are interred together. It has been hypothesised that a few adult females might be afforded a funerary rite otherwise reserved for



newborn babies where they died during pregnancy, childbirth or early motherhood, thus reflecting the linked identities of mother and child.

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Section of the cemetery at Raunds Furnells showing interments of individuals aged one year or under at death (grey dots). (Illustration: E Craig-Atkins and I Atkins).

Figure 2: Section of the cemetery at Pontefract showing interments of individuals aged one year or under at death (grey dots). (Illustration: E Craig-Atkins and I Atkins).

Figure 3: Section of the cemetery at Cherry Hinton showing interments of individuals aged one year or under at death (grey dots). (Illustration: E Craig-Atkins and I Atkins).

Figure 4: Section of the cemetery at Thwing showing interments of individuals aged one year or under at death (grey dots). (Illustration: E Craig-Atkins and I Atkins).

Figure 5: Section of the cemetery at Spofforth showing interments of individuals aged one year or under at death (grey dots). (Illustration: E Craig-Atkins and I Atkins).