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A 'Productive Site' at Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire: salt, communication and trade in Anglo-Saxon England

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Since the recording of portable antiquities by museum curators and archaeologists began about two decades ago, and especially after the instigation of the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) in 1997, thousands of new archaeological sites have been recorded. Virtually all of these have been found through the efforts of metal-detector users and their interpretation is not straightforward. Most assemblages predominantly consist of copper-alloy artefacts, plus precious metals and lead on occasion, as well as coinage. Iron is notably lacking, owing to the bias in recovery against ferrous objects, and little pottery or stonework is generally collected (Naylor 2004: 79-80). The lack of excavation on the vast majority of these 'productive sites' compounds the problem leaving us, essentially, with a scatter of metalwork from which archaeologists must try to interpret a site's nature and function. These problems of interpretation have most affected early medievalists who have traditionally lacked much data regarding domestic rural settlement. They have been keenest to accept and utilise portable antiquities data, especially in socio-economic research (although see Brindle and Moorhead's contributions in this volume for a Roman perspective). Much has been made of the location of early medieval 'productive sites' on communication routes, and finds scatters are often interpreted within the frame of evolving settlement hierarchies and increasing internal trade (Ulmschneider 2000; Pestell and Ulmschneider 2003; Naylor 2004). In general, the finds of large amounts of coinage have been seen as an indicator of economic significance, and precious metals a possible elite presence, often seen as ecclesiastical authority, although this is by no means certain (Ulmschneider 2000: 66-72; cf. Naylor 2004: 131-32).

However, few have attempted to analyse 'productive sites' quantitatively and in relation to both other sites and general finds in the region, although an attempt was previously made by one of the authors (JN) which has proven useful in discussion of the circulation of coinage (Naylor 2007). The work of the AHRC-funded project 'Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy' (VASLE) at the University of York, though, was designed to provide an in-depth exploration of Anglo-Saxon portable antiquities across England and Wales (Naylor and Richards 2006). Briefly, this has shown that, with care, portable antiquities can be confidently used to explore ancient settlement patterns, and that in some

cases at least interpretation of sites is possible so long as a broad, interdisciplinary approach is taken (Richards *et al* 2009). This paper presents a short case study illustrating one method for the interpretation of portable antiquities data, using the middle and late Saxon data for the parish of Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire, where there is a long history of scholarly attention, excavation and metal-detection. In this case, the locations of the 'productive sites' are well-known and have been previously published (Wise and Seaby 1995; Palmer 1999: fig. 2).

The parish of Bidford-on-Avon

Bidford-on-Avon (Fig. 1) lies in the Avon Valley at the crossing point of the River Avon with Ryknild Street, the Roman road running south from Watling Street to the Foss Way and a major medieval saltway (*Sealt Stræt*) which runs east from Droitwich through Bidford towards the Chilterns (Margary 1973: 15; Maddicott 2005: 46-47; WSMR 8217). Finds dating from the neolithic onwards are known from across the parish, and Iron Age settlement at Bidford-on-Avon village is attested (Booth and Hodgson 1990). To date, about 1,400 portable antiquities have been recorded within the parish by the PAS, two-thirds of Roman date, with the Anglo-Saxon period accounting for three-percent of all finds (Angie Bolton, pers. comm.). These Anglo-Saxon finds dot the parish (Fig 2), with the main concentration to be found to the east of Bidford village and north of the river. This site covers an area of about 1000m x 400m (Seaby and Wise 1995: 57; WSMR 4027; Palmer 1999).

Early medieval activity is well known within the village's immediate surroundings (Fig. 2). In the village itself, excavations have revealed a 6th to 7th-century mixed rite cemetery containing *c.* 320 burials (200 inhumations and *c.* 120 cremations), the largest known early Anglo-Saxon cemetery in the Avon Valley (Humphries *et al* 1923). Middle and/or late Saxon occupation is evidenced by possible enclosures cut by a later ditch, structural evidence and a pit (Meaney 1964: 258; Booth and Hodgson 1990; Ford 1995: 69; Webster and Cherry 1980: 233). Early Anglo-Saxon material has also been found by metal-detector users and excavations to the south-west of the village, and excavations outside Broom (on the A46) uncovered evidence for early Anglo-Saxon burial and settlement evidence respectively (Palmer 1999: 197-208;

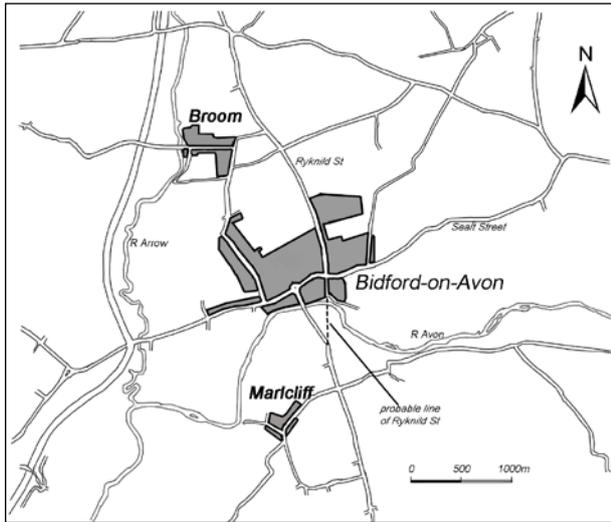


Fig. 1: Bidford-on-Avon village and its environs.

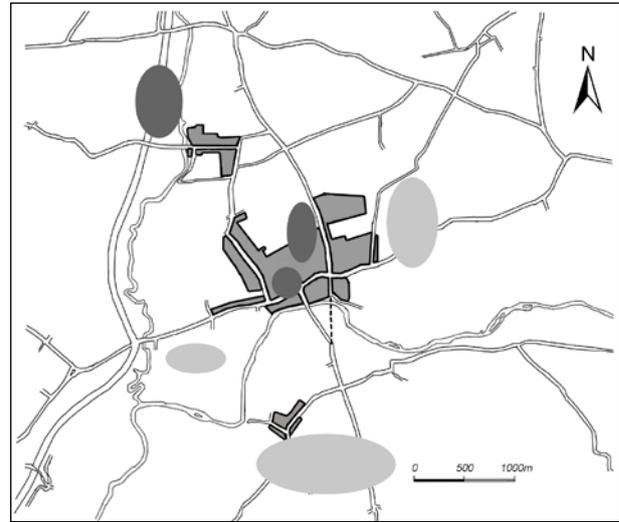


Fig. 2: Approximate locations of the known Anglo-Saxon activity at Bidford-on-Avon (dark grey oval = excavated sites, light grey oval = metal-detected sites).

WSMR 605, 303). At Marlcliff, 1.5km south of Bidford-on-Avon, early and middle Anglo-Saxon finds have been made around Ryknild Street including at least four *sceattas* (Wise and Seaby 1995: 57; WSMR 5687, 5688, 4046, 5101, 4012).

Bidford-on-Avon was clearly of some importance during the Anglo-Saxon period and has received scholarly attention on a number of occasions in connection with the trade in Droitwich salt in the early and middle Anglo-Saxon period. The location of Bidford-on-Avon at the intersection of *Sealt Stræt*, Ryknild Street and the River Avon has led to the convincing argument for the site being a distribution point for salt, and the presence of Continental coinage may be indicative of the presence of foreign traders in the area in the early 8th century (Maddicott 2005: 47; Metcalf 2003: 42). However, no quantitative analysis has been made, especially in comparison to the region around it. Such investigation will help to highlight any differences which, in turn, may be used to provide a more nuanced interpretation of the site.

The 'productive site'

The site lies to the east side of Bidford-on-Avon village on low-lying land which rises up from the River Avon, the current course of which runs c. 500m to the south (Fig. 2). It is unclear if the site extends underneath the modern village. The Roman road, Ryknild Street, runs north-south through the village, c. 500m west of the metal-detected area, and once forded the river immediately east of the church. Detecting on the site began by 1984, when a saucer brooch was discovered and the first coin was found the following year. Finds continued to be made regularly and the site was first published by Wise and Seaby (1995), since when many more have been reported to the PAS and others to the Warwickshire SMR (www.timetrail.warwickshire.gov.uk). No archaeological interventions are known for the site.

The finds assemblage

The dataset is an amalgamation of records from the PAS, the Early Medieval Corpus of Coin Finds, 410-1180 (www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/emc/), the Warwickshire SMR and published material (Wise and Seaby 1995: 58-64). Of these, the PAS data is well located, often with 6 or 8-figure National Grid References, and the published material can be located with reference to the Warwickshire SMR. The location details on the EMC relate to the midpoint of the parish and not particular findspots. The online records from the Warwickshire SMR have provided more accurate grid references for some of these EMC and previously published finds, all of which correspond to concentrations of finds as mapped by Palmer (1999: Fig. 2). By examining the nature of the distribution of finds (Fig. 2), several concentrations of material can be seen, alongside the main areas east and south of Bidford-on-Avon village. A total of 61 metal objects dating c. 650-c. 900 AD have been recorded in the parish, comprising 27 coins and 34 artefacts. The 'productive site' itself has produced 28 artefacts and 19 coins. All coins are of silver, whilst all of the artefacts, with the exception of a gold mount, are predominantly of copper-alloy (Fig. 3). The basic chronology of all of the material (Fig. 4) indicates a broad spread of middle-late Saxon material, but only a single strap-end can be definitely dated to the 10th century or later.

The coinage

The overall coinage assemblage from Bidford-on-Avon parish comprises 17 late 7th- to mid 8th-century *sceattas* and ten pennies dating from Offa of Mercia to Baldred of Kent, c. 765-c. 825 AD. Three Primary phase *sceattas*, including one copy, are the earliest known coins dating c. 680-c. 710 AD. These coins, two Series C and one A/C imitation, are rare finds in the Midlands.

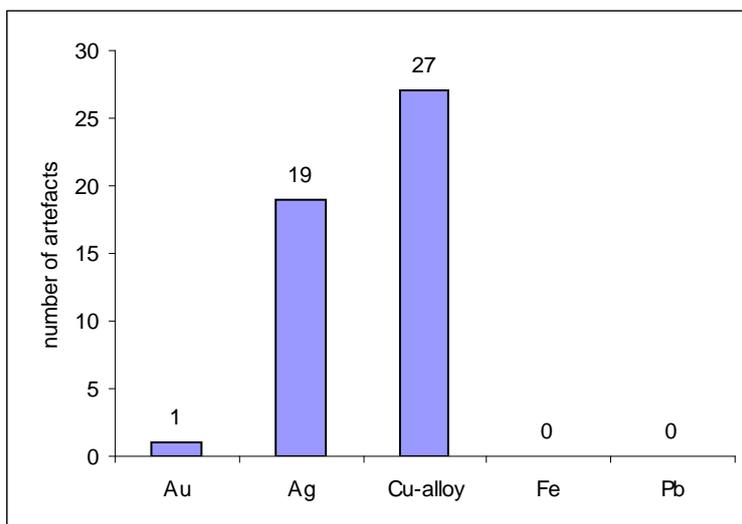


Fig. 3: The finds assemblage by metal type.

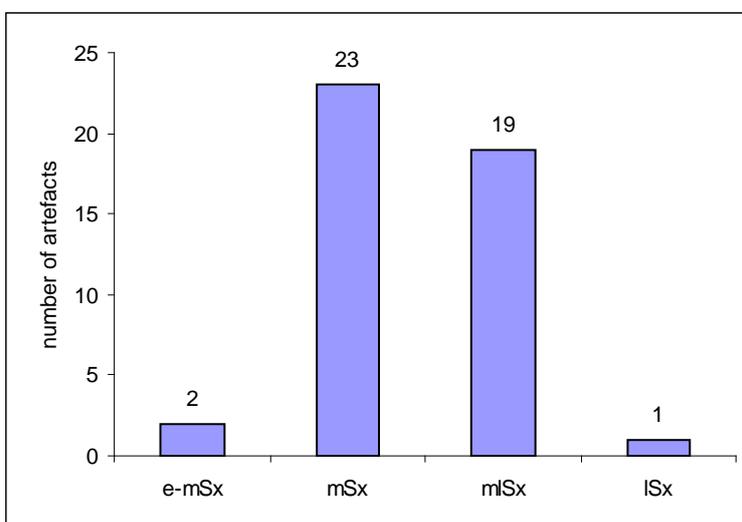


Fig. 4: The outline chronology of the site.

There is a small cluster of eight Primary phase *sceattas* in the region south of Birmingham, which could be seen as a loop around Droitwich, coming out from the main distribution, and there is no reason to suppose that they are not associated with the salt industry. Three of these, however, are at Bidford-on-Avon, and a fourth is c. 2km north at Wixford (EMC1998.2057) attesting to the early importance of the site and the routes around it. There is also a cluster of earlier 7th-century gold coins and Primary phase *sceattas* stretching south along the Ryknild Street from Bidford-on-Avon towards and along the Foss Way through Gloucestershire. Seven *sceattas* are of Continental origin (either Series D or E), as is another a few kilometres south at Bickmarsh (WAW-02E056). This has lead Metcalf (2003: 42) to describe the parish as a 'hot spot' for Continental Series E and interpreted these as most likely being deposited in the area only due to the presence of foreign traders. Of four Series E *sceattas*, three are early types, dated to c. 695-c. 715 AD. The remaining coin belongs to the Secondary phase (c. 710-c. 750 AD), as do four others, a Series J (type 72), possibly of Low Countries origin, a Kentish Series K (type 20/18) and two Series L (type 15a) from London.

The comparatively high numbers of late 8th-century coins, three of Offa, one of Coenwulf with Æthelheard, Archbishop of Canterbury, and three of Eadwald of East Anglia are of interest and attest to the continued wide-ranging contacts at the site. All appear to be stray losses, with the distributions of finds not consistent with a dispersed hoard activity (Wise and Seaby 1995: 60). Two of these pennies are not included in the original publication (EMC1996.5002 and EMC2005.0006) but their location is also only approximately known (in published literature).

The distribution of coinage around the parish sees a line of finds following Ryknild Street from its north at Wixford to its southern boundary around Marlcliff, and further finds are known immediately to the south in Bickmarsh. Given the published accuracy of the finds' locations, it is unclear whether there is any patterning in the distribution of coins at the 'productive site' but those coins found until 1995 were described as 'widely scattered' (Wise and Seaby 1995: 60). This brief assessment of the Anglo-Saxon coin assemblage illustrates that coin finds appear to cluster around the

routes on which Bidford-on-Avon lies, although the main impetus for their presence in the region was most probably the Droitwich salt trade. However, we are limited in what can be interpreted from the distributions alone and a quantified, in-depth analysis of the coin data is required if more is to be understood of Bidford-on-Avon's role in the region: the analysis of patterns of coin loss through time is based on the comparison of coin data quantified by a calculated date group for individual sites against data for an entire region. In this case the region used can be considered the Southern Midlands, using the counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Oxfordshire. This takes account of the changing patterns of coin loss to the north and south of the site. See Naylor (2007) for details of date groups and methodology.

Figure 5a shows the overall nature of coin loss on the parish from the 7th to the 10th centuries. The peak of coin loss comes early in the 8th century (*c.* 680-*c.* 710 AD) dropping off dramatically around *c.* 710-*c.* 740 AD, at a point when coin loss greatly increases around the rest of the region (Fig. 6), and remains at these levels until the end of the 8th century. The period *c.* 790-*c.* 810 AD produced a massive increase in coin loss, the opposite of the calculated regional average. Fewer early 9th-century coins are known, and none dated after *c.* 840 AD, when

settlement may have coalesced in the present village location (Webster and Cherry 1980: 233). The 'productive site' itself (Fig. 5b) shows high activity at an early date, and again *c.* 790-*c.* 810 AD. The early peak around 700 AD is much above average, and the number of late 8th-century pennies vastly exceeds expected losses.

The early peak in coin loss and subsequent decline is interesting when considered against the regional historical background (Fig. 6) and previous interpretations of the site in the remit of the salt trade emanating from Droitwich, *c.* 15km to the north-west. The likely relationship between this and the location of Bidford-on-Avon has been confidently asserted previously (Maddicott 2005: 46-47), but the apparent decline in activity around *c.* 710 AD brings interesting possibilities. During excavations at Upwich, Droitwich's main brine spring, thick alluvium dated to the early 8th century indicated that a large number of major floods may have seriously impeded salt production for a period of time (Hurst and Hemingway 1997: 27-28). If so, it is entirely likely that less salt was distributed via Bidford-on-Avon and its economic significance diminished. Salt production had likely returned to its previous high levels by the time the Offan and East Anglian pennies were lost.

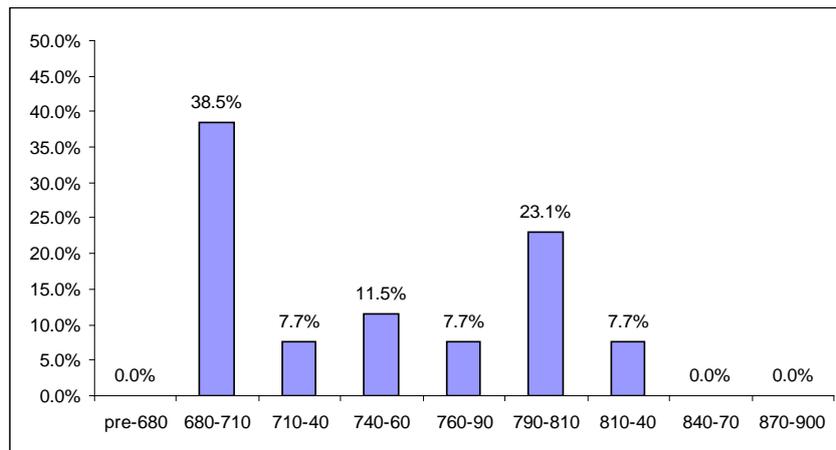


Fig. 5a: The coin assemblage in the parish shown as proportions by date group.

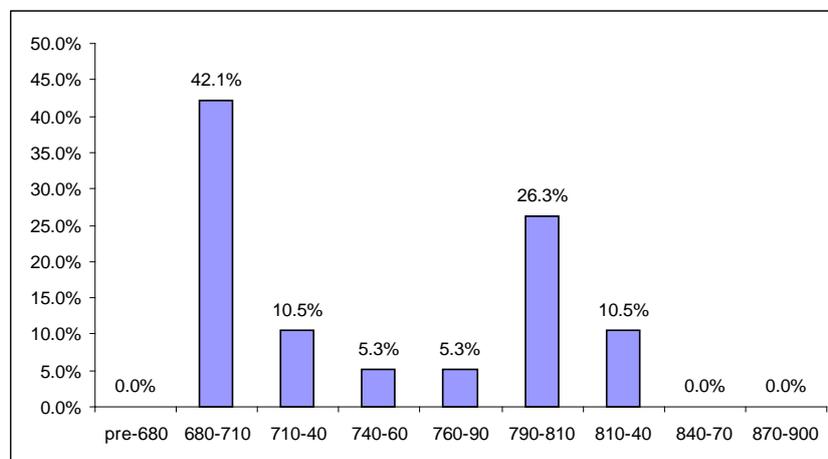


Fig. 5b: The coin assemblage at the 'productive site' shown as proportions by date group.

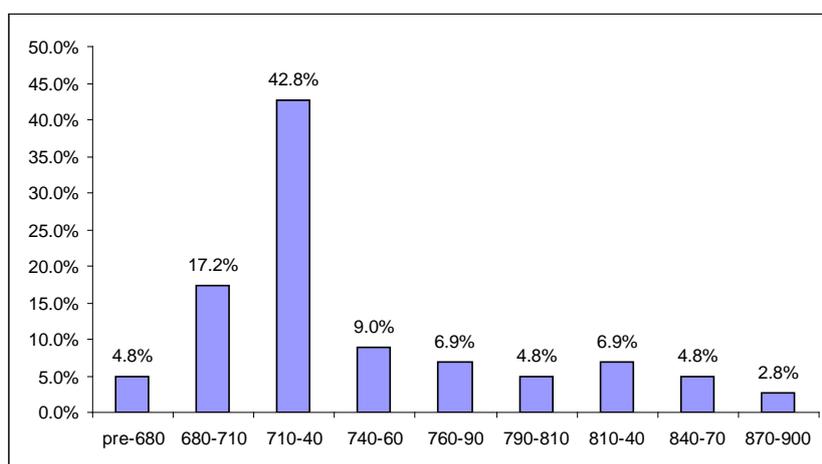


Fig. 6: The regional coin assemblage shown as proportions by date group (this chart is made up from data from Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire).

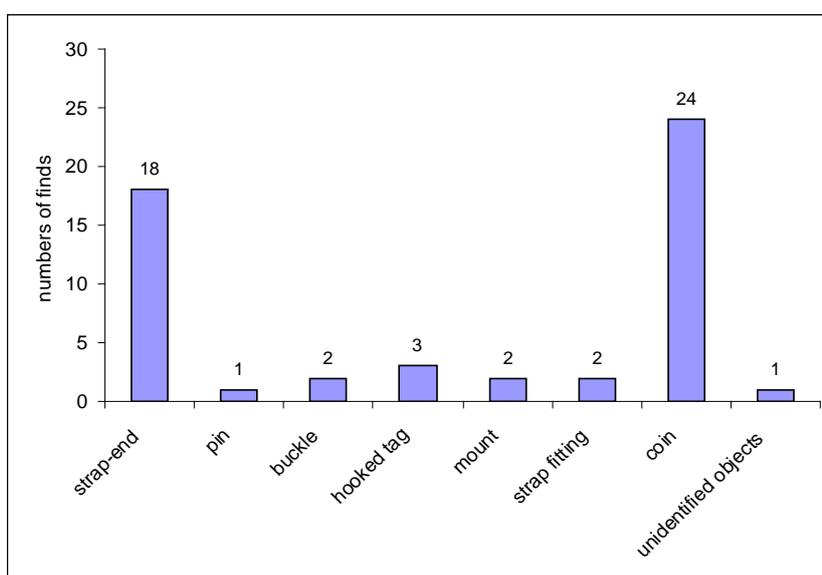


Fig. 7: Chart showing the artefact assemblage at the 'productive site'.

The artefacts

A range of personal-related items have been recovered from the parish, with strap-ends providing by far the largest portion of the assemblage (Fig. 7). No weaponry, horse-related or domestic material has been found, the latter probably owing to the lack of archaeological intervention, although some pottery, described as 'Anglo-Saxon' was seen on fields metal-detected in Marlcliff (WSMR 5101 and 4046). Chronologically, the site is anchored in the middle Anglo-Saxon period (Fig. 8), with only a single definite late Saxon piece, a Thomas Class I strap-end. A single pin, of polyhedral-headed type, is typically middle Anglo-Saxon. Identifiable types from the eighteen strap-ends comprise 11 belonging to Thomas's 9th-century Class A, and three Class B, belonging more broadly to the later 8th to 11th centuries (Thomas 2003: 2-5). The three hooked tags cannot be dated closer than the middle-late Saxon periods at present. However, the fact none of the larger, Carolingian-derived strap-ends of the 10th century are known nor any horse-related items, generally datable from the later 10th through the 11th

century would suggest that abandonment of the site by the later 9th to early 10th century is likely.

The artefacts themselves are within the typical remit of middle-late Saxon types known from across England, including four 9th-century Trewhiddle style strap-ends and the polyhedral-headed pin, which can be readily paralleled across the country. The 8th-century gold mount is the only piece of particularly high quality metalwork from the site and is stylistically comparable to several well-known examples, including the hanging bowl from Witham, Lincolnshire and trefoil brooch from Kirkoswald, North Yorkshire (Wise and Seaby 1995: 59).

The basic patterns of artefacts found in the region (Fig. 9) is reflected at the 'productive site' (Fig. 10), although it is immediately apparent that there is a dearth of later material across the parish. This perhaps indicates a shift of settlement to the present village location, as the archaeological evidence hints at with late Saxon features found within the present village (WSMR 605), and is a situation seemingly typical in the region (Dyer 1995, 121).

The low numbers of finds obviously affects the proportions of material present and, for example, the excessive levels of strap-ends and low numbers of pins may simply reflect recovery patterns with larger objects likely to be found with greater ease (Dave Haldenby, pers. comm.). However, it is interesting to note the presence of

three hooked tags, a rare find in the Midlands, but much more common in eastern counties. Like much of the coinage, it is entirely likely that these reached Bidford-on-Avon from travellers coming west along *Sealt Strat* from the Chilterns and beyond.

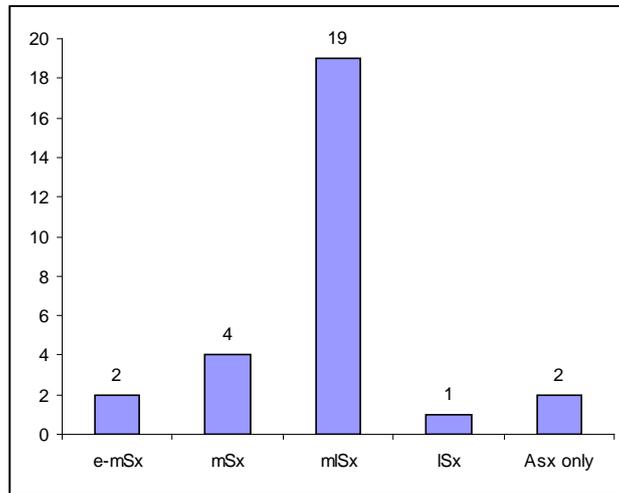


Fig. 8: Chart showing the outline artefact chronology for the 'productive site'.

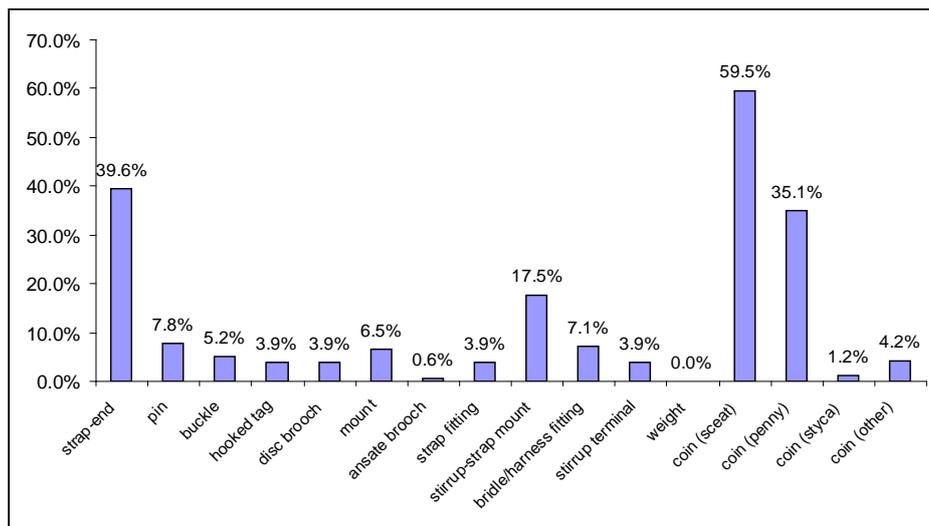


Fig. 9: The regional artefact and coinage 'fingerprint' (this chart is made up from data from Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Worcestershire and Warwickshire).

Fig. 10: The artefact and coinage 'fingerprint' for the 'productive site'.

Discussion

The methods outlined above as an interpretative framework for the archaeology of 'productive sites' has illustrated the usefulness of considered, quantitative analysis for assemblages made up entirely, or predominantly, of portable antiquities. Such sites can only be investigated adequately with reference to the general loss patterns around the region, and an understanding of the nature of portable antiquities in general (Richards *et al.*, 2009). The methodology has confirmed previous work in considering Bidford-on-Avon as an area of undoubted regional importance during the 7th and 8th centuries (Maddicott 2005: 46-47), but has also provided a more nuanced interpretation, providing additional information on the internal chronology of the site and how this may relate to broader issues in the region. From this, the evidence connecting Bidford-on-Avon to the salt trade is strengthened and the fluctuations in the nature of coin loss in the parish can be adequately explained with reference to flooding at Droitwich itself (*ibid.*; Hurst and Hemingway 1992: 27-28).

The coin finds provide a rather restrictive chronology, with issue dates from *c.* 680-*c.* 825 AD, but it is possible that the lifespan of the site can be extended further into the 9th century at least with the Trewiddle style strap-ends and ornamental fragment. The other strap-ends are typical of mid-late Saxon deposits across the country, although the fact that none of the larger, Carolingian-influenced types from the 10th century are known may provide support for the abandonment of the site in the 9th century, probably in favour of the present village location. The lack of horse-related items of later Anglo-Saxon type also suggests pre-Conquest abandonment.

The junction of Ryknild Street and the River Avon as a long-term focus settlement at the must be considered as predominantly strategic given the archaeology of Bidford and its immediate environs. The addition of *Sealt Strat* only adds to this (Fig. 1). The wealth and extensive contacts witnessed in the parish is clear from the finds assemblage indicating lines of communication running to the east of England, although there is little in the assemblages, except the single gold mount, to suggest much of an elite presence at the site. Maddicott's (2005: 47) contention that Bidford may have been some kind of transshipment point for Droitwich salt is sensible and the resulting cosmopolitan assemblage of finds would not be unexpected. Alongside such trade, the lines of communication represented by river and roads make it likely that a range of travellers must also have passed through the village, possibly on royal or ecclesiastical business in London or the south-east. It must be noted, however, that Ryknild Street is only a documented saltway further south, on the Warwickshire/Gloucestershire border (Hooke 1985: fig. 31), and any suggestion that it continued to the north can only be made on archaeological grounds. Extending Ryknild Street as a saltway further north to Alcester at least, though, would make far greater sense in linking routes to Droitwich. Certainly there is a line of early coinage spreading north

and south from Bidford along the Roman road, which must suggest something of the route's importance in early medieval communications. It is interesting to note that the junction of Ryknild Street and the Foss Way at Lower Slaughter, Gloucestershire is also the site of middle Anglo-Saxon settlement with evidence for long-distance contacts, and at Lechlade, Gloucestershire where another saltway met the River Thames, extensive early to middle Anglo-Saxon settlement and a rich cemetery have been excavated (Kenyon and Watts 2006; Bateman *et al.* 2003; Boyle *et al.* 1998). It may be possible that through the integration of portable antiquities and excavation data in this region we are witnessing an early system in the regulation of inland trade in Anglo-Saxon England, with these sites on junctions possibly representing the locations where traders in the later 7th to 9th centuries stopped en route to their destination, or paid toll to the king. It is only by adopting an integrated regional approach that we will ever find an answer.

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