Places of Assembly: New Discoveries in Sweden and England

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This paper reviews recent field results from Sweden and England demonstrating that currently held perceptions of assembly-sites as archaic and cultic are only partially accurate. Evidence has emerged for the purposeful creation of assembly locations in the fourth to eleventh centuries AD as one of the many processes of kingdom formation. In common with other modes of expression such as burial, the creation of assembly sites was often undertaken by adopting or reusing ancient locations marked by palimpsests of prehistoric remains. However, as evidence from Sweden demonstrates, meeting-places could also be created *de novo*, and newly monumentalised by the addition of standing stones, inscribed stones and mounds.

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The assembly as a means of early government and social control may have been in place in northern Europe, in "Germania" if not elsewhere, as early as the first century AD (Tacitus, Germania Ch. 11; Church & Brodribb 1877, pp. 87–110). The evocative idea of public assembly as an early arena for political debate has engaged constitutional historians (Loyn 1974; Wormald 1999), place-name specialists (Gelling 1978; Meaney 1995; 1997; Pantos 2002; Brink 2002; 2004a; 2004b), landscape archaeologists, folklorists and historians alike (Wildte 1926; 1931; Turén 1939; Emmelin 1944; Ahlberg 1946; Grinsell 1976; Friðriksson 1994). While the existence of assembly as a means of local and even national govern-ment is not in question in the late prehistoric to early historic eras, the actual locations of the assembly, and the processes that took place there, remain a relatively unexplored aspect of early political history. Before the start of the project presented in this article, some studies of assembly sites had been carried out, e.g. in the British Isles, Sweden and Iceland (e.g. Friðriksson 1994; 2002; Larsson 1997, pp. 18–27, 32–41, 63–69, 89–96; Pantos 2002; Brink 2004a; 2004b; Charles-Edwards 2004; Driscoll 2004; Fitzpatrick 2004; Friðriksson et al. 2004; Semple 2004; Warner 2004). In general, these are all small-scale studies, which focus on a few well-known sites in each region. The results of several of these studies

have been presented in two publications: *Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages* (Barnwell & Mostert 2003) and *Assembly Places and Practices in Medieval Europe* (Pantos & Semple 2004a). These volumes raised awareness of strong similarities in the placing and topographic composition of moot locations across north-west Europe. Most significantly (Pantos & Semple 2004b, pp. 18–19), note

· the common use of pre-existing monuments, particularly barrows, as foci for meetings
· the significance of natural and man-made topographic elements such as trees, stones, roads and rivers, and
· the longevity of activity evident at the assembly-place and its environs, evidenced by the successive palimpsest of monumental remains encountered at some well-known moot locations such as Tynewald Hill (Isle of Man, England), Scone (Perthshire, Scotland), Tara (Co. Meath, Ireland) and Anundshögen (Västmanland, Sweden).

The recognition of a set of apparently shared topographical associations and functions, emergent at a range of locations in Europe, is limited to an extent by the partiality of the geographical spread of projects and research. The work on continental assemblies includes detailed studies of the procedures, officials and development of the Frankish *mallus* and the Germanic *Ding*, but the location and features of the actual meeting-sites remain virtually unexplored (Goessler 1938; Beck 1984; Wenskus 1984; Weitzel 1986). Comparative work with the Continent, which would be a fruitful approach, is currently almost impossible.

It was evident that any further research needed to take a wider European perspective and also that the focus needed to shift from meeting-places serving the highest levels of society, to encompass assembly places serving smaller administrative units at a regional and even local level. A pre-occupation with assembly places and inauguration sites serving the highest levels of society entailed a bias in any over-arching or synthetic conclusions based on the published research to date. The recent edited volumes also

make clear a need for further field investigation in many countries, in particular to date the assembly sites and determine their archaeological characteristics. The usefulness of fieldwork to the study of assembly sites has been demonstrated by small-scale surveys and excavations carried out in Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland and Iceland (Newman 1997; FitzPatrick 2001; 2004; Darvill 2004; Driscoll 2004; Friðriksson 2002; Friðriksson et al. 2004; Vésteinsson et al. 2004), showing the value and success of field investigation at meeting-places involving not just survey, but excavation as well.

Altogether, these studies inspired the current project on assembly sites in England and Sweden and served particularly as a motivator for the fieldwork component of the project. The project aims to test the models presented by previous scholars relating to topographic positioning, the form and layout of sites, the origins and developments of sites and their role within larger administrative systems and relation to other meeting-places. This paper presents the first results of the fieldwork and also offers new perspectives and directions for research on Late Prehistoric to Early Medieval administrative geographies in northern Europe.

It is necessary to clarify the chronological terminology used in this discussion. English assembly places are assumed to have functioned sometime within the period AD 450–1100, broadly referred to here as the Early Medieval or early historic period. The Swedish assembly sites, broadly contemporary with the English examples, are however described using Swedish chronological terminology: as functioning in the Migration Period (AD 400–550), the Vendel Period (AD 550–790), the Viking Period (AD 790–1050) and beyond.

Research and Fieldwork in England and Sweden
In 2004, we began a comparative archaeological programme of investigation centred on Swedish and English assembly sites. The motivations behind this international project were the range of apparent shared themes outlined above, such as the re-use of ancient monuments; the use of mounds or barrows and possible connections with cultic and funerary activity and royal asso-

Fig. 1. Two of the rune stones at Aspa Löt, Södermanland, Sweden. Note the stream in the background.

ciations too. Through comparative fieldwork we hoped that our research in each country would be more informed and less insular, taking account of shared European traits and allowing us to examine evidence within the common framework of Swedish and English societies. During the period of study, the two regions may have differed in religious orientation, but they shared the developing political and social geographies of emerging complex organisation and kingdom formation. Comparative research also provided an opportunity to use theories and approaches prevalent in Scandinavian scholarship, but less accepted within English Early Medieval studies, particularly the acceptance of long-term trajectories for social and ritual practice encompassing the prehistoric to early historic eras. Assembly could thus be examined in terms of its longevity as a social practice, its possible duality with cultic or ritual concerns and its potential as a tool of emerging kingship in early proto-historic and historic societies.

The fieldwork has involved various methods, including field walking, geophysics and excavation, at a number of sites in England and Sweden. In this article particular attention will be paid to two the seasons of fieldwork carried out at Aspa Löt in Södermanland (Sanmark 2004; Sanmark & Semple forthcoming) and Scutchmer Knob in Berkshire (Semple forthcoming) and a geophysical survey at Anundshögen in Västmanland (Turner 2007). These investigations have raised significant questions regarding the reality of cultic/funerary activity at assembly sites in Sweden and conversely the accepted functional and administrative genesis of assembly sites in England. They have also demonstrated, contrary to widespread current archaeological opinion, that geophysics can successfully be employed in Sweden. The geophysical prospection at Anundshögen was particularly successful. Here a combination of gradiometer and resistance surveys was applied, which together were shown to have strong potential for the detection of archaeological remains.

Fig. 2. The "thing mound" at Aspa Löt, Södermanland, Sweden.

Aspa Löt, Sweden

Aspa is documented as the *thing* site of Rönö hundred from 1302 until 1458 (Ahlberg 1946, p. 120). However, the site is marked by a rune stone mentioning the *thing* site, dated to the late tenth or early eleventh centuries, showing that meetings at Aspa date back to an even earlier period (Sö 137; Brate & Wessén 1924–36; Larsson 1997, p. 67). This rune stone stands opposite another (Sö 138; Brate & Wessén 1924–36), while two standing stones are located in the vicinity. C. 150 m north, at the modern bridge crossing the Storån watercourse, two further rune stones are standing (fig. 1). The inscription on one of the latter reads: "Slode and Ragnfrid made this bridge and erected this stone after Igulbjörn, their son" (Sö 141; Brate and Wessén 1924–36, Sö 141). A third rune stone may once have stood by the bridge according the seventeenth-century account *Rannsakningarna* (Sö 136; Brate & Wessén 1924–36; Schnell & Ståhle 1938, p. 38). The rune stones are presumed to be more or less in

their original positions. Approximately 300 m south of the bridge is a flat-topped mound, c. 4 m high and 30 m in diameter marked with a further standing stone (fig. 2).

In *Rannsakningarna*, it is stated that that the mound at Aspa was named *Tingzhögh*, "*Thing* mound", and that an "ancient letter" was then in existence that had been issued at the "*thing* at Aspa mound" (Schnell & Ståhle 1938, p. 39). The same source contains a drawing of eight burial mounds located at *Aspa Löther*. The name *Aspolöt*, "the field with aspen", is found in Medieval documents relating to Aspa (Söderwall 1884–1973). Löten, today, is an area located c. 300–400 m north of the mound. In the period 400–1500 the Löten area may have been considerably larger. The exact location of the *thing* site within this general area is thus uncertain (Larsson 1997, pp. 65–69; Sundqvist 2001, p. 635; Brink 2002; 2004a; 2004b).

In spring 2004, a geophysical survey of the area around the mound was carried out revealing a range of anomalies (Persson 2004). Subsequent-
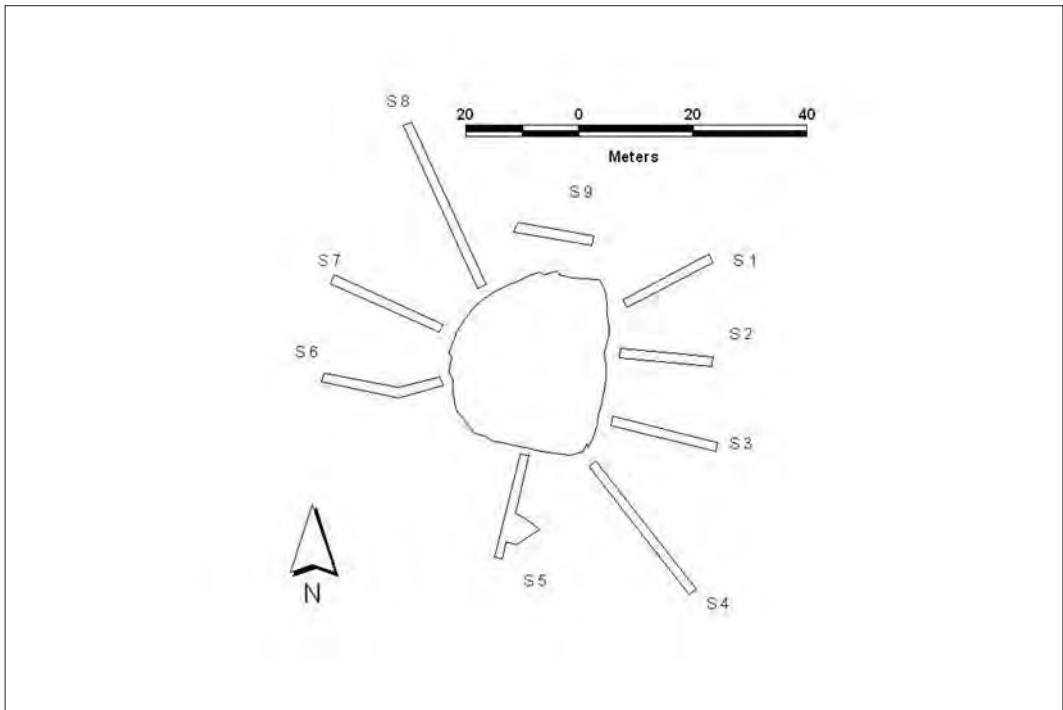
Fig. 3. Aspa Löt, Södermanland, Sweden. Trenches opened around the thing mound in 2004.

ly nine trenches were opened, radiating from the mound (fig. 3). These initial excavations presented limited findings. A road was revealed on the eastern side of the mound, and although undated, a succession of surfaces was apparent, along with evidence for the movement of the road over time. Early maps show a road in this position, immediately next to the mound, as late as the 1930s. Medieval documents confirm the presence of this road to the east of the mound at an earlier period, and identify it as part of the well-known royal road or circuit named the *Eriksgata* (Mannerfelt 1930, pp. 138–139; 1936, p. 67). Roads in Sweden are known to have altered little between the Middle Ages and the late 1920s. The successive road surfaces excavated to the east of the mound may well represent the development of this route over time. Other than this, no further activity was evident in the vicinity of the mound. In 2005, extensive geophysical survey was undertaken to the west of the mound, and west of a natural knoll. Trial trenching was undertaken in

this area too, but no archaeological features were revealed. Extensive field walking was carried out across the site and the surrounding fields with only sparse finds of abraded Prehistoric and Medieval pottery retrieved. Excavations and sampling have not provided any evidence of primary or secondary burials related to the mound, nor any finds or associated features in the vicinity. As the mound itself has not been subject to excavation, it is of course possible that it contains a burial. In terms of its size and shape, by analogy with excavated mounds elsewhere, it could date from the Vendel or Viking Period. As such, the monument arguably represents a newly constructed mound, rather than an ancient barrow adopted and re-used as a focus for assembly.

Overall, the *thing* site at Aspa seems to be a "clean" site, without any long-term cultic or ritual activity, and these results strongly refute the purported long-standing connection between assembly, ancient burial and cult at Aspa Löt (Larsson 1997, pp. 63–64; Brink 2004a; 2004b). The

fieldwork has shown without question that there are no associated satellite burials – indeed no associated structures or deposits. We are left with the mound, the rune stones, the standing stones and the road alone as physical remnants of the meeting-site.

The royal road named the *Eriksgata* was the ceremonial journey that a newly elected Medieval king of Sweden should travel in order to be accepted, his election confirmed by the populace of the various provinces of his kingdom. The earliest reference to this route is found in the Older Law of Västergötland, the oldest Swedish provincial law (Holmbäck & Wessén 1933, Kg 1–2, p. 430; 1940, Kg 1–2, p. 42; 1946, R 1, p. 292). The earliest complete extant manuscript dates from 1280. However, it is generally accepted that this law contains elements from an earlier period (Holbäck & Wessén 1946; Sundqvist 2001, pp. 622–628; cf. Sjöholm 1998). Several scholars have argued that the custom of travelling the *Eriksgata* originated in late prehistoric times (for a comprehensive overview, see Sundqvist 2001). According to the Older Law of Västergötland, a king had to be elected at a place called Mora *thing* or Mora stone, which was located outside Uppsala. After this, the new king needed to travel the *Eriksgata*, which is thought to have passed all local *things* in the kingdom. At these *things*, the populace accepted or rejected the king, and once accepted, he had to swear an oath to uphold the peace and law. The provincial laws also state that bishops should be elected in this manner: this contradicts canon law and has thus been acknowledged as a pre-Christian tradition (Holmbäck & Wessén 1946, R 1, p. 109; 1933, Kg 1–2, p. 430; Vestergaard 1990, p. 121; Sundqvist 2001).

Powerful magnates were present in the region around Aspa during the first millennium. A very large but undated barrow, Uppsa kulle, lies some 5 km to the south and a large number of burials of the Migration, Vendel and Viking Periods can be identified in the surrounding area. It is possible that petty kings passed Aspa on ceremonial journeys from late prehistoric times onwards (Sundqvist 2001). It is however likely that this custom of travelling the *Eriksgata*, if it existed in prehistoric times, would not have taken the same form as that seen in the later pro-

vincial laws. Continental parallels serve to enforce the suggestion that this royal/ritual journey may have had its roots sometime between late prehistory and the Migration Period. The Merovingian rulers travelled through their realms on ceremonial journeys and according to the chronicler Einhard, they travelled in a special chariot, visiting all the local assemblies (Hoffman 1990, p. 138; Hultgård 2001, pp. 439–440; Schmidt 2001, pp. 139–141; Sundqvist 2001, p. 634).

The early road, flanked by rune stones and standing stones at the point it bridged the Storån (which was navigable in the Viking Period), with the *thing* mound in immediate proximity, seems to represent the assembly site at Aspa Löt. In Sweden, although several well known assembly places are in ancient cemeteries, few meeting-mounds have been excavated. Signhilds kulle at Fornsigtuna in Uppland, an Iron Age chieftain's settlement on Lake Mälaren and the predecessor of the town of Sigtuna, is the only Swedish "*thing* mound" that has been subjected to larger-scale excavation. This mound is flat-topped, c. 3 meters high, and excavations reveled that it was built around an unusual stone structure and did not contain a burial. It is thought to have been built sometime between AD 400 and 1100 (Allerstav 1991, pp. 38–34, 124). The partially excavated Tingshögen ("*Thing* Mound") at Gamla Uppsala also seems to be non-sepulchral (Christiansson 1958; Christiansson & Nordahl 1989; Persson & Olofsson 2004). These "clean" mounds reflect the possibility that non-sepulchral structures could be built on ancient sites for the purposes of assembly.

That an entirely new area might be landscaped and created as a meeting site also has parallels. At Bällsta in Uppland, a runic inscription indicates the *thing* site here was constructed by three brothers to the memory of their father Ulf (U 225–226; Jansson & Wessén 1943), presumably in the tenth or eleventh century. It seems the two terraces that constitute the thing site were constructed by Ulf's sons at the same time as they erected a range of stones and pillars referred to in the runic inscriptions (fig. 4). Significantly, there are no reused ancient monuments and no documented first millennium graves on or around the site. The absence of graves, and

Fig. 4. 11th century assembly site at Bällsta, Uppland, Sweden

indeed of any ancient features at the *thing* site, was confirmed by geophysical survey in spring 2005. It appears that Bällsta represents the intentional construction of a *thing* site on a green field location, by aristocratic individuals, in memory of their father.

It seems plausible in the light of such evidence to suggest that the *thing* site at Aspa was also constructed, like Bällsta, *de novo*, as a complex of new monuments. The site location must have been predetermined by its qualities as a suitable river crossing and its significance as a juncture of the royal/ ceremonial route of the *Eriksgata* with a navigable waterway. At least from the Viking Period this site offered easy access for the populace, as well as being on the royal ceremonial or ritual circuit, which although documented later may have been operating earlier. The establishment of new monuments marked the meeting-site and also served to give it credibility. The dedication of the rune stone Sö 118 to a man named Öpir, potentially placing the construction of the

assembly site in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD, commemorated an individual and authored the assembly as a familial construction: a place of meeting under the authority of Öpir's kin. Here then, as at Bällsta, was an assembly-site without long-term ancestral or cultic links, something personally or familially created and maintained. But it was also part of a ceremonial route composed of a series of stopping points, all assembly sites, some of which like Anundshögen had more long-term biographies.

Anundshögen, Sweden

Anundshögen ("Anund's mound") is documented as a *thing* site from 1392 (Emmelin 1944, p. 110). Here in contrast, a large barrow is located in a cemetery dating from at least the sixth century AD. On the site are two large, presumably Viking Period, ship settings (Bratt 1999). The topographic siting of the assembly is strongly reminiscent of Aspa Löt. The stream to the east of the mound appears to have been navigable

during the first millennium. There was also a ford where the *Eriksgata* crossed the water route. The *Eriksgata*, lined by 14 standing stones, then continued across the site. A rune stone dating from AD 1000–1050 (Vs 13) stands in front of the barrow. Its inscription reads "Folkviðr raised all of these stones in memory of his son Heðinn, Önundr's brother", which suggests that the rune stone and the stones flanking the road were erected at the same time (Jansson 1964; Bratt 1999; Brink 2004a, pp. 309–310). A trial geophysical survey of a small part of the site revealed other possible features. Just north of the standing stones a line of circular high-resistance anomalies were identified, possibly representing the stone packing or pads for a row of standing stones or wooden pillars leading into the centre of the site (Turner 2007). Further fieldwork is planned for 2008 and 2009. In contrast to Aspa Löt and Bällsta this is a place with an active biography from the Migration Period onwards, rather like Gamla Uppsala. However, excavations point to the location having an even longer prehistory, with evidence of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age activtity in the area (Bratt 1999; Alström 2005).

Scutchmer Knob, England

Scutchmer Knob is a large and partially destroyed barrow situated on the Berkshire/Oxfordshire border in the parish of East Hendred. It is known with certainty to have functioned as a shire assembly site in the late Anglo-Saxon Period: recorded in AD 990–992 (K 693, S 1454) and in 1006 (ASC E: Swanton 1996, pp. 136–137). The crescent-shaped monument still forms a striking landmark for modern travellers on the prehistoric Ridgeway (fig. 5). It was once conical in shape, with a flat top and a base diameter of c. 43 m (Hewitt 1844, p. 96; Peake 1935, p. 94) but was heavily damaged in the Victorian era. During these early diggings and later archaeological explorations by Peake in the 1930s, nothing more than some horse's teeth, a stone bead, a Late Medieval iron buckle, a few large bones, scattered charred wood and a small collection of very abraded "Iron Age" pottery fragments were found, despite substantial fieldwork (Hewitt 1844, pp. 97–102; Peake 1935, pp. 90–108; Semple forth-

coming). The mound is thus usually considered to be a non-sepulchral, turf-built structure with an encompassing ring-ditch (Peake 1935, pp. 90–108; Adkins & Petchey 1984).

Mounds are well attested in the English place-name record as foci for moots, but how they were used remains uncertain. Meaney (1995, p. 36; cf. Reynolds 1999, p. 100, fig. 34) postulates that they provided a platform for speakers, whilst Williams (2004) and Semple (2004) both point to the potential relationship between the presence of the dead in a burial mound and its usefulness as a place for discussion and decision making. They have linked the English predilection for meeting-mounds with Irish and Icelandic written evidence for a need to meet at places where the dead, the spirits or the ancestors, can also assemble (Ellis 1943, pp. 90–96, 106–111 for an overview of relevant sources; Doherty 1985, p. 52; Warner 2004, p. 39–41). An absence of field research means that English meeting mounds, however, are disputed as funerary locations. Adkins & Petchey (1984) argued to the contrary: based heavily upon the limited evidence from excavations at Scutchmer Knob, they postulated that English assembly mounds are non-sepulchral structures of late Anglo-Saxon date.

Since 2000, survey and excavation by the present authors at Scutchmer Knob has provided a remarkably different biography for the mound. Bronze Age pottery has been recovered from the immediate area around the monument as well as a hammer stone and a bronze bracelet thought to be Roman. Two phases of excavation in 2004 (a result of unscheduled digging in the vicinity of the south side of the mound) allowed the partial exploration of the southern edge of the monument. This confirmed the presence of a ring-ditch and revealed the remains of an external bank. Features were identified in close proximity to the monument, sealed by the eroded material from the mound: a large sub-circular pit or post-hole containing an ashy, charcoal flecked deposit (probably representing the remains of a secondary cremation), and a second sub-rectangular feature, secondary to the ring-ditch, which contained fragments of human bone and charcoal. No features were emptied in this initial exploration.

Fig. 5. Scutchmer Knob, Berkshire, England.

A full geophysical survey of the mound undertaken in 2005 identified the trenches from the 1934 excavations and clearly showed the full extent of the ring-ditch, with no discernable entrances or causeways (Ainslie 2005). The presence of a well-defined square structure (c. 7 x 7 m) beside the mound to the north-east, partially truncated, perhaps by the ring-ditch, indicates some associated archaeology, preserved here from the plough by the woodland cover. On closer inspection the enclosure was visible as a surviving low earthwork (indicated with a dotted line in fig. 6). In 2006 a final season of excavation was carried out. Three trenches were opened (fig. 6) and a test-pitting survey was undertaken. The results are to be published in full, and will only be summarised here. The excavations established without question that Scutchmer Knob is prehistoric in construction and probably dates from the Bronze Age. In trench B, Bronze Age pottery was found embedded within a packed layer of flint nodules that lay sealed beneath the mound. The monument has however been altered and enhanced later in its biography. A section across the ditch (trench A) showed at least three separate phases of ditch-cutting. The final re-cut comprised a deep and narrow slot that broached the chalk. Abraded Roman pottery from the primary ditch-fill of this late re-cut implies a post-Roman phase of ditch cutting on a quite substantial scale, presumably to re-define the monument. This later ditch cut through and joined the terminals of the earlier, enclosing ring ditch.

Trench C was located to sample the square anomaly identified in the geophysical survey. The foundation trench for a square structure was exposed (fig. 7). Two post-holes were identified within the enclosure. The structure postdates the final phase of ditch-cutting, and is thus at the earliest post-Roman in date. The discovery of a Medieval token in the upper fill of the foundation trench indicates that the structure was entirely defunct by the Late Middle Ages.
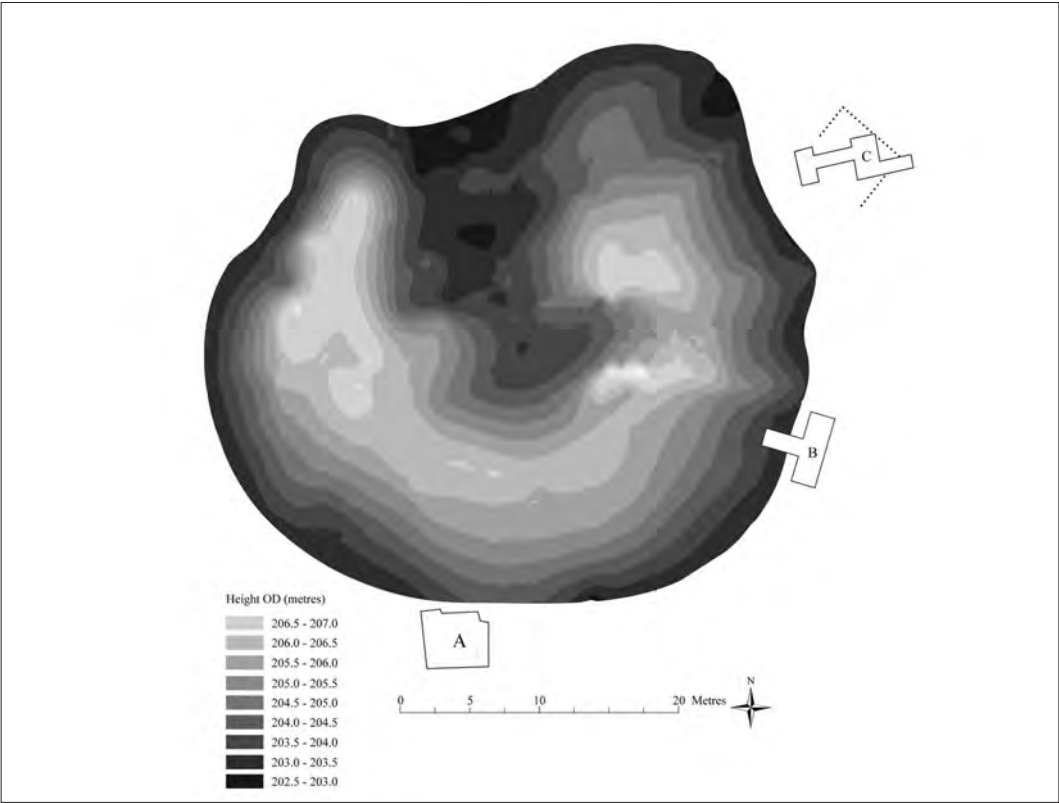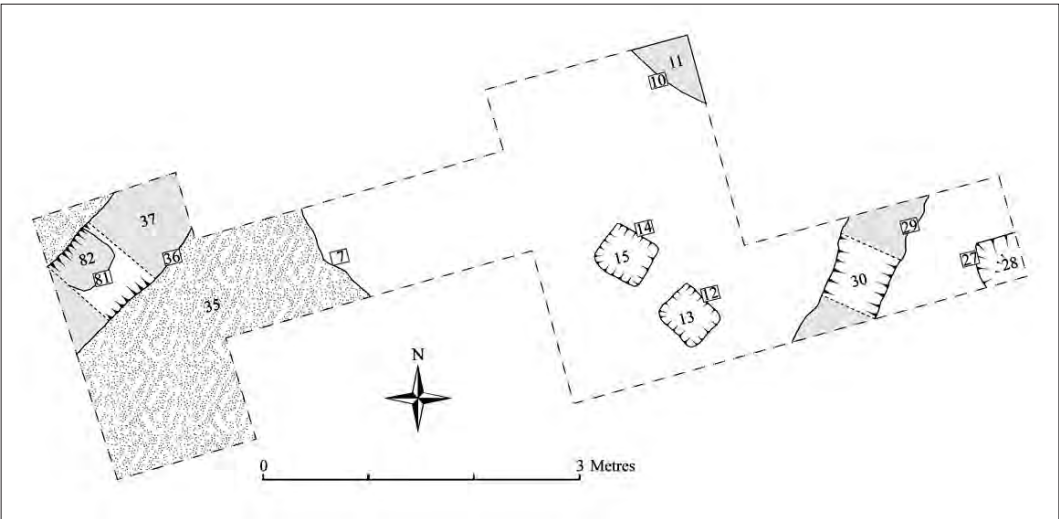
Fig. 6. Scutchmer Knob, Berkshire, England. Contour survey and plan of 2006 trenches.

Fig. 7. Scutchmer Knob, Berkshire, England. Plan of Trench C showing post-Roman structure.

The structure, possibly a small building of c. 6 m x 6 m, may relate to the monument's period of life as a place of assembly.

Thus, in contrast to the current findings in Sweden, the fieldwork at Scutchmer Knob demonstrates the adoption or reuse of a monument with a significantly long biography. It shows what seems to be intentional use of the past in the Early Middle Ages for ideological and political purposes.

Contrasting Meanings

Although preliminary, the results show most effectively that meeting-sites can encompass a range of associated archaeology, reinforcing the idea that field research may indeed substantially assist our understanding of the use or reuse of these monuments as assembly locations, and of the associated structures that were added and used to enhance such locations.

Understanding the longevity of meeting-places has crucial implications for identifying the origins of assembly as a political and administrative structure in European terms. The re-use of ancient remains for assembly – surviving monumental remains of the pre-Medieval era – is an acknowledged theme throughout Northern Europe (Pantos & Semple 2004b, p. 19). The literature frequently emphasises those famous incidences of Early Medieval assembly-sites that lie within heartlands of ancient remains spanning centuries, most dramatically seen at Tara in Ireland and Anundshögen in Sweden. The archaeological biography of some of these famous sites greatly exceeds their documented periods of life as assemblies. These long-lived European centres stand in complete contrast to the recent results from fieldwork in Sweden, but offer some parallels to the new evidence from England. These ancient "archaic" sites seem to indicate a late prehistoric or Migration Period origin perhaps for the emergence of royal/ritual assembly-sites (if not the administrative and judicial structures and arrangements to go with them) in Ireland and Scandinavia, in line with the brief mentions of such emerging systems in first millennium Germania (Tacitus; *Germania* Ch. 11; Church & Brodribb 1877, pp. 87–110).

The English evidence for assembly-sites, which has previously not matched such expectations, can now, through the excavations at Scutchmer Knob, be suggested to encompass similar types of site: prehistoric monuments with long-term biographies. The results from Scutchmer, however, do not attest to the kind of long-term cultic and ritual activities evident at say Navan or Tara. The archaeology instead points to the re-adoption/ re-use of an ancient monument and its re-modelling and re-definition in the post-Roman era. British historians argue for an emergence of the assembly only within the early historic period with the full functioning of meeting-sites within the tenth or eleventh centuries AD (Loyn 1974; Reynolds 1999; Wormald 1999). The use of ancient monuments, both prehistoric and Roman, has been shown to be both ubiquitous and diverse within the period of major restructuring and power sharing in the late sixth, seventh and eighth centuries AD. It is plausible that while administrative systems were fully in operation only in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the re-adoption of sites like Scutchmer Knob for assembly could reflect processes evident in the funerary and settlement arenas in the late sixth, seventh and eighth centuries AD and the creation of assembly sites of central significance within this earlier chronological frame.

The focus to date has tended to be on cultic centres such as Gamla Uppsala, which may represent only exceptional cases of multi-focal, cultic assembly sites that evolved in special circumstances. They need not represent a common model at a regional and local level. Indeed it may be the case in Sweden, as Warner (2004) emphasises for Ireland, that although several great, major archaic centres of inauguration, kingship and assembly existed in the later first millennium, many Medieval assembly places were both later in conception and very different in their topography and status. This argument is indeed supported by a new study of *thing* sites in Södermanland (Sanmark forthcoming).

Potentially at the very least, the new evidence presented here implies a two-phase chronology for the formation of assembly sites. Archaic centres marked by many ancient monuments might begin to function as central places in a political sense as well as perhaps a religious sen-

se in the Roman Iron Age to Migration Periods, and repeated use would have enhanced their status and importance. Some seem to have survived as central places into the early historic period. At a later point, these archaic centres were joined by new assembly locations, some purposely sited in relation to ancient remains such as Scutchmer Knob, others, like Aspa Löt, newly constructed sites without cultic signatures. These new sites either exploited ancient monuments or were sited in functionally accessible and useful places and newly monumentalised, echoing a distant model that demanded a mound and associated markers.

The implications are three-fold. The great assembly sites of Scone, Tara, Anundshög etc. can be considered a unique category and cannot be used as models for subsequent Medieval assembly formation – instead they represent an innovative category of sites relevant to the emerging ideas of landscape organisation, territorial control and social organisation in Roman Iron Age and Migration Period societies. Some were sustained as central places despite the passage of time, lasting into the Early Medieval and later. During the Viking Period, the late Anglo-Saxon Period in England and the Early Historic in Ireland, society in north-west Europe saw the consolidation of kingdoms along with hereditary kingship and developing complex social organisation. In this era, meeting-sites may have been conceived as a necessary tool in governance and administration of the landscape. New sites were established for meetings. Some were newly created. These new meeting-sites were set out according to a topographic plan related more to access, visibility and magnate/royal prestige than ancient cultic and ritual origins and importance. A physical signature – monumentality that drew inspiration from the past – was necessary however to give the site credibility.

Conclusions
By means of broad research and using (albeit preliminary) field results, this paper suggests that the current accepted European models for the emergence of assembly and the establishment of meeting-sites are far from accurate. Assembly sites need not be identical, and indeed the variety of shapes and forms is vast and varied. They can be broadly divided into assembly-sites with a long-biography and those that appear newly constructed in the Migration Period and later. Both types exist across north-west Europe. A much greater level of complexity is thus apparent, with clear evidence for a mixed bag of long-lived cultic/ceremonial assembly sites, surviving within later systems of intentionally created, non-cultic, administrative locations. Monumentality was still central, but may have been more part of a process of marking the site, maintaining its function and demonstrating public or private ownership than augmenting or reinforcing any sacred or religious associations.

Major judicial/royal and sacred locations such as Gamla Uppsala exist, but they are far from ubiquitous; rare survivals perhaps of a first framework of central places generated in the Migration Period. New evidence is instead showing that succeeding meeting-sites – some established as late as the tenth and eleventh centuries AD, were sited with functional considerations in mind: visibility, access etc. The past was drawn upon, however, to legitimise these new places of government. Where the ancient past was not available a "created past" was manufactured by the physical addition of new monuments and markers.

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Summary

This article presents the results of a research project focussing on assembly sites in Sweden and England. It involves mapping of assembly sites in select geographical areas and also geophysics and excavation at sites of specific interest. Previous scholars in this field have identified a number of common traits of assembly sites in areas such as Ireland, Britain, Iceland and Sweden. Most of these studies have however concentrated on meeting-places serving the highest levels of society. The present project instead focuses on local hundred meeting-places. The results of the fieldwork in Sweden have questioned accepted models of the genesis and formation of assembly sites. It seems clear that, contrary to the ideas of many scholars, many Viking Period assembly sites were not located at places with any long-term cultic activity. Instead new sites seem to have been created to fit the changing pattern of administrative organisation at this time. This means that thing sites were not necessarily permanent features in the landscape, but moved according to the needs of the time, seemingly in some instances without regard for old and or sacred sites.

Interestingly, the fieldwork in England yielded somewhat different results. Geophysics and excavations at Scutchmer Knob, Berkshire, demonstrate the reuse or adoption of a monument originally created in the Bronze Age, in what seems to be intentional use of the past in the Early Medieval period for ideological and political purposes.

Comparative studies between different countries, although desirable, are hampered by the varying approaches employed in research to date. This disparity is most evident between Scandinavia/the British Isles and Continental Europe. In the latter area, particularly Germany, France and Spain, research has tended to focus on the procedures and officials of the legal assemblies on the basis of written sources, while the sites themselves remain more or less unexplored in terms of their geography and archaeology.