FINAL ACCEPTED PEER REVIEWED MANUSCRIPT:

ABSTRACT

Anglo-Saxon monastic sites were complex places combining religious and economic functions. They were locations where many different communities, secular and ecclesiastical, high and low status, confronted and engaged with each other. They were also caught in a web of local and long-distance religious, political and economic relationships. This paper explores some of the practical and methodological issues involved in identifying the spatial organisation of these sites, both at an inter- and intra-site scale. The practical limitations in reconstructing internal organisation and chronological development will be considered.

INTRODUCTION

There are few parts of Britain that have such a corpus of well excavated early medieval monastic sites as the region between the Humber and the Forth-Clyde line, an area we might term greater Northumbria. Ecclesiastical sites which have seen significant archaeological excavation include Ardwall Island, Auldhame, Dacre, Hartlepool, Hoddom, Inchmarnock, Isle of May, Jarrow, Kirkdale, Monkwearmouth, Ripon, Whitby and Whithorn, in addition to new projects in progress at Aberlady, Coldingham, Old Melrose and Lindisfarne.[1] This body of research certainly provides a solid basis on which to discuss the spatial arrangement of Northumbrian monastic sites. However, this paper attempts to take a step back and explore how much, despite this substantial corpus of excavation evidence, we are able to really understand these sites.

Figure 1 is a fairly coarse-grained exercise in mapping the distribution of sites that have a claim to be pre-Viking ecclesiastical sites in Northumbria – in total numbering 168 sites. This includes sites with early sculpture, early structural evidence, archaeological excavation or that are mentioned in the works of Bede and the Life of St Wilfrid. It does not include potential ecclesiastical place names (such as *eccles* or *stow*) nor does it attempt to map potentially early dedications. Even without these two more problematic sources of evidence, it provides a good sense of the spatial extent of the early church across the region, although it is certainly possible to debate the inclusion or non-inclusion of specific, individual sites. This impressive spread of sites, whilst not as dense as the distribution of churches in some other parts of the country, is a reminder of the extent of the resource we need to consider when trying to characterise the extent and organisation of the early medieval Northumbrian church. Although Northumbria may be well served with excavated sites, this map reminds that these excavated sites are both only a tiny proportion of the overall number of sites identifiable and geographically unevenly spread. The range of sites which have been excavated is selectively biased towards more famous and more important monastic sites for a variety of reasons due to both research bias and the subsequent historic development of these sites. Whereas only 25 out of a total of 168 sites plotted were mentioned by Bede (14%), ten of the seventeen excavated sites mentioned in the introduction to this paper appeared in the works of Bede (58%).

IDENTIFYING SITES

The first and most basic question is: how far is this map representative of the actual distribution of early ecclesiastical sites? It is worth thinking about the different types of evidence used to compile this map.

The bulk of the sites plotted were identified solely on the presence of pre-Viking sculpture, drawing on the comprehensive catalogues available via the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.[2] It is easy to assume that this kind of sculpture acts as a 'barium meal' for the early church, providing an unproblematic proxy for the distribution of ecclesiastical establishments. The spread and number of

sites identifiable through the presence of sculpture does certainly seem to be extensive, however, it is worth boring down into this data. It soon becomes clear that there are a range of sites that are likely to be early church sites that do not produce sculpture. For example, despite the presence of early church buildings at sites such as Ledsham (West Yorkshire), Corbridge (Northumberland) Seaham (County Durham), to pick three sites at random, no early sculpture has been identified.[3]

Textual evidence can also be adduced for ecclesiastical sites such as Gainford and Sockburn (both in County Durham). Higbald is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as being consecrated as Bishop of Lindisfarne in 780,[4] whilst the *Historia Regum* records the burial of an abbot at Gainford in AD 801.[5] Both sites have produced extensive assemblages of sculpture of entirely Anglo-Scandinavian date. Would they have been identified as Anglian church sites in the absence of the documentary evidence? It may simply be that in some cases, this lack of sculpture is due to accidents in discovery and differential recovery levels. There are enough sites, such as Sockburn and Gainford, however, where substantial quantities of later material have been found, to suggest that the lack of Anglian sculpture is a real phenomenon rather than just a factor of survival **(6)**.

We can identify two different ways in which these church sites lacking sculpture are geographically distributed. First, there are entire regions where sculpture is either entirely lacking or very limited. Most of the obvious gaps in this map relate to major upland areas, particularly the Yorkshire Dales and Northern Pennines, the North York Moors, the Cheviots and the upland areas of Southern Scotland. However, there are also other areas where the distribution of sculpture is surprisingly thin. For example, Lancashire south of the sands is almost entirely lack in Anglian sculpture, with no certain sites south of the Ribble.[7] Although this is an area which saw extensive post-medieval urban and industrial sprawl, this is unlikely to have caused the lacuna in sculptural evidence, as industrial areas of West Yorkshire have produced plenty of sculpture (e.g. Birstall, Dewsbury, Mirfield *et multi alii*).[8]

On the other side of the Pennines, there is also a far thinner spread of sites than might be expected in East Yorkshire between the southern edge of Vale of Pickering and the Humber. This contrasts with the dense spread of early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries across the Wolds and its northern and southern scarp edges. These were clearly settled areas with wealthy populations, yet this is not reflected in the evidence for sculpture. The contrast with the dense spread of early material along Ryedale and the northern edge of the Vale of Pickering is noticeable. One explanation for these areas of sculptural absence may simply be that there are no or very few pre-Viking ecclesiastical sites in this area. This seems unlikely given there is evidence for an extensive early medieval population in this area and that several ecclesiastical sites are mentioned by Bede. For example, Watton (E.Yorkshire), mentioned by Bede, has produced no sculpture, whilst Beverley, also mentioned by Bede, has only produced the unornamented stone seat of possible late seventh century date.[9] The lack of good stone is not a satisfactory explanation as there is plenty of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture from this area.

There are a number of reasons why these patterns might exist. As Martin Carver has noted, in the middle Anglo-Saxon period, there was intense regionality in the strategies of monumentalisation used by both church and the secular elites and has termed these different regions 'intellectual communities'.[10] This brings to mind Peter Brown's notion of 'micro-Christendoms' – localised, relatively small-scale, territorial responses to the emerging church.[11]

Carver's intellectual communities can certainly be recognised through stylistic similarities between groups of sculpted monument – such as the different sculptural traditions seemingly focused on centres such as Lindisfarne, Whitby and York.[12] But we should also perhaps see in some regions, in South Lancashire and East Yorkshire for example, the decision not to use sculpture, or just limited quantities of it, as another example of these intellectual strategies for expressing Christian belief in a local form. Are we seeing here microchristendoms in which other materials are turned to as appropriate media for monumentalisation of faith? Scholars are comfortable with the notion that

the choice of church fabric (stone or wood) can be an ideological charged decision.[13] It is important to be conscious that such ideological motivations may inform other decisions about the erection of monuments and memorials and that the absence of stone sculpture may be as significant as its presence.

These intellectual communities may not just be expressed in simple territorial terms but also be in other ways. For example, Eric Cambridge in his important paper on the distribution of early churches in County Durham also drew attention to the evidence for clustering of known sites in some parts of the county, with a lack of sites elsewhere.[14] He suggested that these might reflect a difference between secular minsters which produced little sculpture and retained wooden churches until relatively late, and more monastic sites which produced a higher quantity of stone sculpture (*Ibid.*, 81). He argued that differences in the status and organisational context of a church might be reflected in different patterns of monumentalisation – in essence, sculpture is a feature of only certain forms of ecclesiastical foundation. Whether one accepts Cambridge's particular distinction here, the underlying variability is clear. Thus even in regions where sculpture is liberally distributed, we need to be alive to the fact that within this matrix of archaeologically easily detectable church sites may be a marbling of less visible sites identified through chance textual records, the rare survival of early fabric and fortuitous archaeological discoveries.. The extent of unidentified church sites is of course an unknown, but it is probably higher on the western side of the Pennines, an area which figures less prominently in the limited textual sources, which tend to focus on churches associated with Monkwearmouth and Jarrow or connected to Lindisfarne.

CASE STUDY: THE TWEED VALLEY

Occasionally we have small areas where, for a variety of reasons, a number of church sites without sculpture are identifiable which gives us an opportunity to better understand the complexity of the patterning of church distributions. A good example is the greater Tweed valley. The river gravels of this area produce excellent cropmarks, and as a result, particularly in the Milfield basin, there is an

extensive distribution of good early/middle Anglian settlements identifiable, several of which have produced cropmark evidence for churches.

Yeavering is the best known example, where within a complex high-status site identified by Bede as a royal *vill* used by Edwin, there is evidence for a small wooden building situated within a cemetery.[15] It is not possible to easily date this structure on strictly archaeological grounds, but given Bede's statement that Yeavering was replaced by a new estate at Milfield, the entire use-life of this structure probably fits into a period between 627 and perhaps the early eighth century. Interestingly, the estate centre which seemingly replaced it at Maelmin/Milfield appears to be lacking a church, indeed the entire Milfield basin seems to have lacked a church perhaps until the eleventh century, when there is limited sculptural evidence from Kirk Newton and Wooler.[16] There is a need to better understand the cropmark site at Ford Westfield, where a small possible cemetery and putative church enclosure of uncertain date has been identified.[17] At Sprouston, near Coldstream, a similar cemetery and possible wooden church can be seen integrated into a settlement visible on cropmarks which appears very similar to those at Milfield and Yeavering and can broadly be dated to between the sixth-to-tenth century AD **(Figure 2)**.[18] None of these putative church sites, Sprouston, Philiphaugh, or Ford Westfield (or indeed Yeavering) have produced any sculpture.

Elsewhere in the region, there are ecclesiastical sites which have produced early medieval sculpture, such as Jedburgh, on the Jed Water, a tributary of the River Teviot and Norham.[19] Not all sites that have produced sculpture appear in the documentary record, although there has been a tendency in the past to try and connect isolated sculptural fragments with better-known ecclesiastical sites in the region. For example, Radford suggested that a fragment of Anglian shrine from Ancrum, along the well-known shrine elements from Jedburgh, were both parts of the original shrine of Boisil and had been taken from Old Melrose six miles away.[20] Cramp has, however, queried this, noting the very different techniques used on the fragments implying they were not from the same monument.[21]

Whether they are from the same monument or not, there is no reason to think that either the fragments from Jedburgh or Ancrum came from anywhere but near their places of discovery. It has also been suggested, on the basis of nothing but relative proximity, that the fragment of stone sculpture from Gattonside also originated from Old Melrose.[22] Given that we know that monasteries such as Hexham and Lichfield had several subsidiary or satellite foundations in their immediate hinterland, when it comes to attributing sculpture the gravitational pull of major foundations should be resisted.[23]

These can be supplemented with sites for which there is good documentary evidence but limited or no sculptural evidence, such as Old Melrose, best known through its association with the early church life of Cuthbert[24], and despite clearly being a major monastic establishment has only produced one relatively unimpressive fragment of stone sculpture.[25] In the case of Tillmouth, recorded as one of the northern possessions (*mansions*) of Lindisfarne,[26] nothing survives at all beyond the probable cropmarks of the enclosure and a medieval chapel (heavily restored).

Along the Tweed valley and its tributaries in the Anglian period there are thus developed monastic sites with sculpture (Jedburgh; Norham), developed monastic sites without sculpture (Tilmouth; Old Melrose) and church sites of uncertain function (Yeavering; Sprouston; Philiphaugh) without sculpture **(Figure 3)**. Whilst some of the churches lacking sculpture might be seen as private, secular or proprietary establishments, others, such as Melrose and Tillmouth are clearly not. Within a relatively small area, there are thus a variety of responses and approaches to building and adorning religious space which cannot be reduced to a distinction between monastic and secular foundations, and there are other decisions and strategies at play here.

There is also another important conclusion to draw about the possibility of recognising variability and patterns of influence in the early churches. Whilst Carver is absolutely correct in his identification of zones of monumental variation, we need to remember that ideological affinity in the early medieval church is not simply distributed territorially, with entire zones or landscapes

sharing the same monumental strategies. Influence can be capillary, spreading along networks, intermingling, entwining and co-existing with other approaches. One just has to consider the spread of Ionan/Columban influence into Northumbria and Ireland. There was not a simple bow-wave of advance centred on Iona, but instead a loci of Columban influence appeared mushroom-like overnight, at Lindisfarne and Hartlepool for example, reflecting particular political contingencies. Returning to the distribution map we can thus assume there is an unknown number of additional sites, and we cannot use sculpture, or indeed any other single source of evidence to unproblematically 'read off' the extent and nature of early medieval ecclesiastical provision in the region.

Accepting this, looking at the map the overwhelming impression given by these many sites is the sheer diversity and variety in the material and documentary expressions of these sties – small enclosures, large enclosures, minimal levels of sculpture, large quantities of sculpture, standing fabric, no remaining early fabric, extensive documentary evidence to an absence from the historical sources and every stage in between. This presents a very practical challenge to any attempt to categorise or characterise the material record of the pre-Viking church in Northumbria. The council of despair is to see every site as *sui generis*, a unique, creative attempt to create a focus for devotional practice and accommodate religious specialists. However, it is clear that there are some basic consistencies: the presence of a central church, a burial ground and probably some kind of boundary or enclosure. What I want to do now is address how we start to get to grips with pinning down the evidence from these sites in detail and identify some of these key elements.

DEFINING THE EDGES

One of the basic elements of planning at ecclesiastical sites is the presence of an external boundary feature or *vallum*. One of the most frequently adduced examples is the substantial bank and ditch that surrounds Iona, still comprising a significant landscape feature at the site. However, the identification of such external boundaries is often a challenging one. Even at sites as well excavated

as Monkwearmouth, Jarrow, and Hartlepool have faced challenges in identifying putative external boundaries.[27] In these three cases, the main problem is that there has been a contraction of later activity to a smaller core area around the main church, and the wider area which constitutes the original total area of the site has been heavily redeveloped in the post-medieval period to such an extent that the basic topography of the landscape has been re-sculpted. Even at sites such as Holy Island, there is a surprising lack of certainty about the precise boundaries of the monastery, despite extensive recent geophysical survey **(28)**.

The pattern of the contraction around a core, whether this occurred in the Viking period, the medieval period or was even a result of post-Reformation reorganisation, is one which can be identified at many ecclesiastical sites. The evidence from a number of other sites can be adduced to demonstrate this contraction; three examples should serve to demonstrate the range of evidence that can be found.

Corbridge, standing on the river Tyne, lies outwith the area of the Roman town. Symeon of Durham records the consecration of Aldulf, Bishop of Mayo, there in AD 786.[29] Despite the monastery's importance, and the excellent preservation of important early church fabric, this is another attested Anglian site that lacks early sculpture with the only surviving sculpture belonging to the Saxo-Norman overlap.[30] The church today sits in an irregular shaped enclosure within the heart of the town. However, burials have been observed in chance excavations and limited, more formal archaeological interventions across the town centre (see Fig. 4). It is not possible to relate these convincingly to any other possible medieval burial grounds, and a good case can be made for them being part of either a substantially larger cemetery or perhaps a number of smaller burial areas within a larger early medieval monastic enceinte. However, the surviving street system does not appear to preserve any potential earlier boundaries and is instead typical of a medieval borough with burgage plots and a back lane.[31] Whilst it is not possible to define the full extent of the original

site, a good case can be made for a site that was originally around 5 ha as opposed the modern churchyard of c. 1/3 ha.

A similar situation can be found at Gainford (Co. Durham) attested by Symeon as being the burial place of Abbot Edwin in AD 801.[32] It lacks early sculpture though has produced significant quantities of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture and again sits in a typical riverine location adjacent to a river and a fording point.[33] Here the later churchyard is again around 1/3 ha, but it sits within a potentially larger semi-circular enclosure defined by roads Unlike Corbridge, however, this area remained empty of any development until the sixteenth or seventeenth century and was set apart from the probable core of the associated village which seems to have grown up around the site of Gainford Hall, 200 m to the north. Like Corbridge, burials have been recovered from outside the existing churchyard, on the site of the village green, and some of the Viking sculpture was also recovered from a paddock adjacent to the church. The putative larger enclosure is around 4.5 ha in extent – and is comparable in shape, if not size, with other riverside monastic sides such as Hoddom.

A final example is Seaham on the Durham coast. Here there is a church containing substantial eighth century fabric.[34] A series of Anglo-Saxon burials of seventh-to-tenth century date have been found around 200 m to the north in Flower Field near the lodge to Seaham Hall.[35] Smaller-scale trenching to the south, between the burials and the church, has also produced some evidence of broadly contemporary agricultural and domestic activity.[36] In this case we have a slightly different proposition to Gainford and Corbridge, which were both clearly important, if potentially subsidiary, monastic sites. Seaham is first attested in the tenth century when it was granted to the Community of St Cuthbert, but previously it is likely to have been a possession of Monkwearmouth, which may explain the construction of the church.[37] However, there is no suggestion that the site was ever monastic in the fullest sense of the word. We might question whether here we have evidence for a possible estate centre with a church and a separate cemetery, although presumably the church also

had an associated burial ground, so we need to think about why a small estate centre might have two cemeteries.

If even relatively small and seemingly unimportant sites such as Seaham can be at the centre of a complex of at least perhaps 5 ha, then we need to go back to visit sites such as Escomb. Here, the pleasingly rounded small churchyard has generally been accepted as the authentic boundary of the small early church, however, we need to open up to the idea that it could be part of a potentially significantly larger complex.[38]

Very often, purported reconstructions of ecclesiastical enclosures are based on fairly limited, highly circumstantial evidence, often projecting back from known boundaries often of much later date or extrapolating from very limited archaeological evidence. The use of later boundaries fossilised in road systems is a common strategy. Certainly, in some cases, where there is good early cartographic evidence, combined with fieldwork interventions, such as at Armagh, the later layout of roads does seem to preserve some of the earlier boundaries.[39]

, Road networks, however, can often prove frustratingly intransigent. For example, attempts to map the boundaries associated with Lindisfarne by both Deirdre O'Sullivan and myself have ultimately been unsatisfactory precisely perhaps because we both came at it with the underlying assumption that the road network of the village *would* fossilise some element of the earlier boundary system.[40] Evidence is increasingly demonstrating that much of the surviving village is constructed over a substantial medieval midden, and as such we cannot assume that *any* of the road network is of significant antiquity.

One topic that needs further exploration is the range of factors that may lead to the longer-term preservation of possible boundaries in roads or field boundaries. Two interesting examples are Hoddom, a site that has been extensively excavated and Tilmouth on the River Tweed west of Norham lacking in excavation, but recorded as *mansiones* of Lindisfarne and combining interesting

cropmark evidence with a largely rebuilt chapel dedicated to St Cuthbert.[41] Set in similar riverine contexts, in both cases, the monasteries were defined by broadly semi-circular enclosures recognisable on aerial photographs. Certainly in the case of Hoddom, this boundary appears to have been reasonably substantial.[42] However, in both cases, the boundaries did not survive to be fossilised in the later field systems.[43] Instead, these surviving field boundaries belong entirely to the post-medieval period of field enclosure, which erased any earlier existing field system.

It would be interesting to explore whether there is any regional distinction between areas where earlier boundaries have been entirely removed due to the laying out of open fields and subsequent enclosure, compared with regions dominated by 'ancient' or 'unplanned' landscapes,[44] where the lack of reworking by first later medieval and then post-medieval landscapes may have preserved potential earlier boundaries. The same applies to the preservation of boundaries in urban contexts and the distinction between towns with formally laid out burgage plots and those which have grown more organically. Whilst it may not be possible to identify hard and fast rules of thumb, a better sense of how subsequent landscape development could influence the survival of earlier enclosures would be useful when trying to unpick regional patterns and tendencies in the substantial surviving resource.

A further challenge is that it is clear a wide variety of techniques were used to create external and internal boundaries at ecclesiastical sites. Whilst the influential image of the substantial bank and ditch at Iona, a re-used prehistoric enclosure, encourages us to assume that such external boundaries are monumental in size, this need not always be the case. At Hoddom, the northern boundary comprised a bank, a wooden palisade, a 2m wide berm and a ditch; although on the western side of the site neither the bank nor ditch could be identified.[45] This might seem to confirm the precedent set by Iona. However, the situation is often more complex. At Sockburn, the loop of the river Tees in which the site sits was likely to have partially defined the site, and the common coastal and riverine contexts of Anglian monastic sites mean that topographic features were

regularly incorporated into boundaries, such as the cliff edges at Tynemouth and Whitby and shorelines at Alnmouth.

Deliberately constructed boundaries are also common and a range of other strategies could be used to mark the edge of a monastery. At Whithorn, the evidence for the postulated enclosures is very different. In Period I/1, a short stretch of ditch was certainly uncovered.[46] It only lasts a single phase before disappearing entirely. A second boundary is identified in Period I/2, although this was only 0.15 m deep and again later disappeared,[47] whilst in Period I/11 a further boundary division was identified, consisting first of a simple fence, followed by a small wall-like feature which was replaced by a path.[48] In all cases, an excavated stretch of between only six and ten metres was extrapolated by the excavators to form a putative complete circuit that encompassed the entire site. Throughout the excavation report runs the underlying thread that there *must have been* an identifiable boundary feature that encircled the whole complex, even though the archaeological evidence was ephemeral, short-lived and limited in extent. When some of the putative projected courses of the boundaries were tested in subsequent fieldwork none of the postulated curvilinear boundaries could be recognised at all.[49]

Although in broad terms none of the evidence from subsequent excavations at Whithorn contradicted the original schematic outline of the shifting morphology of the monastic site, the presence of clear boundary features related to it became increasingly tenuous. There is certainly no evidence for substantial banked/ditched features such as those found at Hoddom and Iona. Boundaries at Whithorn were localised, varied and shifting.

Similar evidence for less substantial boundary features were also found at Hartlepool, where the excavators identified three main types of principal boundary features: large timbers set in post-pits (presumably with something less substantial placed in the intervening gaps), palisade trenches, which mainly appear to replace the earlier post-pit alignments, and also a range of smaller ditches. There was no evidence for banks associated with these later ditches; they were only around 0.5 m deep, a little

bigger than some of the Whithorn boundaries but clearly significantly less substantial than the Iona vallum.[50] Literary evidence suggests that hedges could also be used to define monastic enclosures. The Life of Wilfrid refers to the monastery at Oundle being surrounded by a thorn hedge, and there are later references to hedged boundaries surrounding Evesham Minster (Worcester) and Culross (Fife).[51] Whilst there is good evidence that the notion of a boundary or enclosure may have been a highly significant one, the actual way in which monastic boundaries could be materialised clearly varied widely ranging from the monumental to the ephemeral.

UNDERSTANDING CHRONOLOGY

The way in which boundaries at Whithorn shifted brings me to my final concern, the challenges of modelling the use of space across sites. Perhaps more than any other site, excavation here has shown the extent to which use of space could change over time. These can perhaps best be seen in the sequence uncovered in the excavations in Fey Field to the west of Hill's major excavations. Here the area excavated went through a complex sequence of changes of use over the sixth-to-twelfth century, with varying periods of settlement, craft and industry and burial use **(Figure 5)**. Over 600 years, this range of activities was varied and repeated. The area excavated was used as a burial zone on at least three separate periods, with other activities using the area in between.

It is clear that any attempt to model or map clear zones of activity on limited spreads of information is a brave move. Earlier in this paper, we saw plots of distributions of burials around a number of known Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical centres. These are useful to the extent they help plot partially the possible extent of activity at these sites, but it is dangerous to extrapolate this into clear, defined zones of activity that remain unchanging over any lengths of time.

Even where activity shows less variability over time, there are still real practical problems of a type faced in trying to understand the archaeology of any complex site, particularly those that are, relatively speaking, artefactually limited. This can be seen best at Hoddom, where the excavators

identified a series of agricultural structures, including several corn driers.[52] Many of these buildings were rebuilt over a period of a time, resulting in small islands of complex stratigraphy, with good internal relative chronologies. Yet, it is challenging to tie together these complexes of dense stratigraphic relationships, as they share only relatively limited stratigraphic relationships with the main boundary feature. The excavator made a brave stab at trying to create a clear phasing, but in the lack of good quality, fine resolution dating, any such phasing remains highly optimistic[53]. It is interesting to note that the results of the suite of radiocarbon dates from the site suggest that there were no clearly identifiable phases of construction and that building and rebuilding may have taken place on a more ad hoc and contingent timetable.[54] A similar situation occurred at Hartlepool, where a series of small excavations across the built-up modern town, has again resulted in a series of isolated areas of activity or burial – again, the excavator makes a good attempt to try and phase these remains, but is open about the challenges.[55]

This kind of post-excavation challenge is a common one. Precisely the same problems underpin the challenges presented in trying to understand contemporary secular sites, such as Yeavering, where there is exactly the same combination of isolated complex stratigraphy that cannot be easily compared with neighbouring structures.[56] Indeed these basic problems in interpreting stratigraphy across a site can be found in the archaeology of all periods, but along with the complex and shifting nature of boundaries and the problems with changing patterns of use particular areas of the site, these wider issues with synchronising activity across a site are frustrating and limit attempts to compare activity both within individual sites and between sites. This limits our ability to interpret some interesting patterns that appear in the archaeological record. For example, the appearance of stone-founded, wooden buildings during the life of Hartlepool, Hoddom and Whithorn are intriguing, and it is tempting to link this into the spread of a Northumbrian monastic influence across the region.[57] However, we cannot with honesty satisfactorily synchronise their appearance chronologically. There are also interesting differences: Hartlepool shows a sequence of constructional techniques running from post-hole structures, to plank-in-gully to stone founded

wooden structures, whereas at Hoddom, the middle stage is absent.[58] Does this reflect a chronological distinction or something else? The detail remains frustratingly vague.

One of the underlying problems, a very obvious one, is that despite the excellent range of excavations of Northumbrian ecclesiastical sites, there is not one site where there has been anything like total excavation. Even at sites like Whithorn which have seen large-scale excavation, perhaps less than 1/3 of the site has been investigated. The often small-scale and scattered excavations that characterise much of the work on ecclesiastical sites make it extremely challenging to pull together plans and chronologies. Although it is understandably tempting to extrapolate and simplify, the sheer complexity of the sites themselves should warn us against that. Similar problems have been seen at sites such as Iona, which has suffered excavation by a thousand cuts. The words of Richard Reece reporting on some of his excavations on the island should perhaps be a warning: 'the information extracted in a small trench was not commensurate with the information that was destroyed'.[59] It is of course useful to build models. For the sites under discussion, the dominant and complimentary models perhaps can be characterised as *concentric* and *polyfocal*. But it is important to not let the model lead too firmly in interpreting often difficult and fragmented remains.

In conclusion, this paper has tried to go back to first principals and assess, if only in broad brush terms, how much we actually know about the spatial distribution of early medieval ecclesiastical sites in Northumbria, both in terms of geographical spread and also in terms of the immediate extent and internal topography of individual sites. Whilst the presence of stone sculpture may provide a general sense of the extent and intensity of the establishment of early church sites, when we home in on particular areas, such as the Tweed Valley, we can see that the pattern is far more complex and nuanced than a simple mapping of sculpture would allow. Equally, even plotting the basic outline and extent of ecclesiastical sites is surprisingly difficult, whether looking at major, well attested sites, such as Whithorn or Lindisfarne or less clearly understood sites such as Corbridge or Seaham. Finally, our understanding of the spatial organisation and chronological development of

ecclesiastical sites is based on the excavation of relatively small areas of large sites, with the chronological development often far harder to define than often appreciated. Whilst it is tempting to develop overarching models for spatial organisation and development, these are based on a small sample size and limited chronological control. Compared with many areas of early medieval Britain, Northumbria has an excellent corpus of excavated ecclesiastical sites, but it is crucial that this does not allow us to make too many assumptions about the archaeology of a still poorly understood class of sites.

ENDNOTES

(1) Cramp 1976; Cramp 2005-6; Daniels 2007; Hall and Whyman 1996; Hill 1997; James and Yeoman 2008; Leech 1985; Lowe 2008; McOmish and Petts 2008; Peers and Radford 1943; Rahtz and Watts 1997; Thomas 1967; Watts, Grenville and Rahtz 1996

(2) Cramp 1977; Bailey and Cramp 1988; Lang 1991; Lang 2002; Coatsworth 2008; Bailey 2010

(3) Taylor and Taylor 1968, 172-6, 378-84, 534-6

(4) *ASC* sa. 780,

(5) Arnold, *Sym Op.* II, 65

(6) Cramp 1977, 80-90, 135-44

(7) Bailey 2010, 19

(8) Coatsworth 2008, 103-4, 129-48, 214

(9) *HE* 5.2-3; Lang 1991, 224

(10) Carver 2010

(11) Brown 1996, 218; Petts 2011, 27-8

(12) Carver 2011, 190-1; Cramp 1989; Lang 2001, 40; Lang 1991, 18

(13) Cramp 2005, 352; Gem 1983, 1; Ó Carragáin 2006, 15, 64; Stalley 1999, 34

(14) Cambridge 1984

(15) *HE* 2.14

(16) Cramp 1977, 232-3, 251

(17) Passmore and Waddington 2012, 92

(18) Smith 1992

(19) Cramp 1983; Cramp 1977, 208-14

(20) Radford 1955

(21) Cramp 1983, 269, 281-4

(22) Allen and Anderson 1993, 432-3

(23) Blair 2005, 218

(24) e.g. *VCA* 3*; VCB* 6*; HSC* 43-5; *LE* i.3

(25) Allen and Anderson 1993, 435-6

(26) *HR* iii, 89

(27) Turner, Semple and Turner 2013, 113-17; Daniels 2007, 172-3

(28) O'Sullivan 1989; Petts forthcoming

(29) *HR* 53

(30) Taylor and Taylor 1965, 172-7; Cramp 198, 239-41

(31) Finlayson and Har 21; for a wider discussion of the pattern of churchyard shrinkage see

   Zadoro-Rio 2003

(32) Arnold, *Sym Op.* II, 65

(33) Cramp 1977, 80-90

(34) Taylor and Taylor 1965, 534-6

(35) Adamson and Abrams 1998; Parry 2001

(36) Wood and Middleton 2014

(37) *HSC* 26

(38) Pocock and Wheeler 1971

(39) Edwards 1996, 108-11

(40) O'Sullivan 1989; Petts forthcoming

(41) *HSC* 10; Passmore and Waddington 2009, 104, fig. 3.19

(42) Lowe 2006, 34-9

(43) *Ibid.*, 12-18

(44) *sensu* Rackham 2000, 1-5

(45) Lowe 2006, 32-39

(46) Hill 1997, 77, fig.3.5

(47) *Ibid.*, 90-1, fig. 3.13-14

(48) *Ibid.*, 130-31, figs 3.42

(49) McOmish and Petts 2008

(50) Daniels 2007, 157-62

(51) *VW c.*67; *VK c.6*

(52) Lowe 2006, 39-99

(53) Lowe 2006, 169-79

(54) Dalland 2006, 161

(55) Lowe 2006, 169-80

(56) Hope-Taylor 1977

(57) Lowe 2006, 180-84

(58) Daniels 2007, 162-8; Lowe 2006, 180-84

(59) Reece 1981, 56

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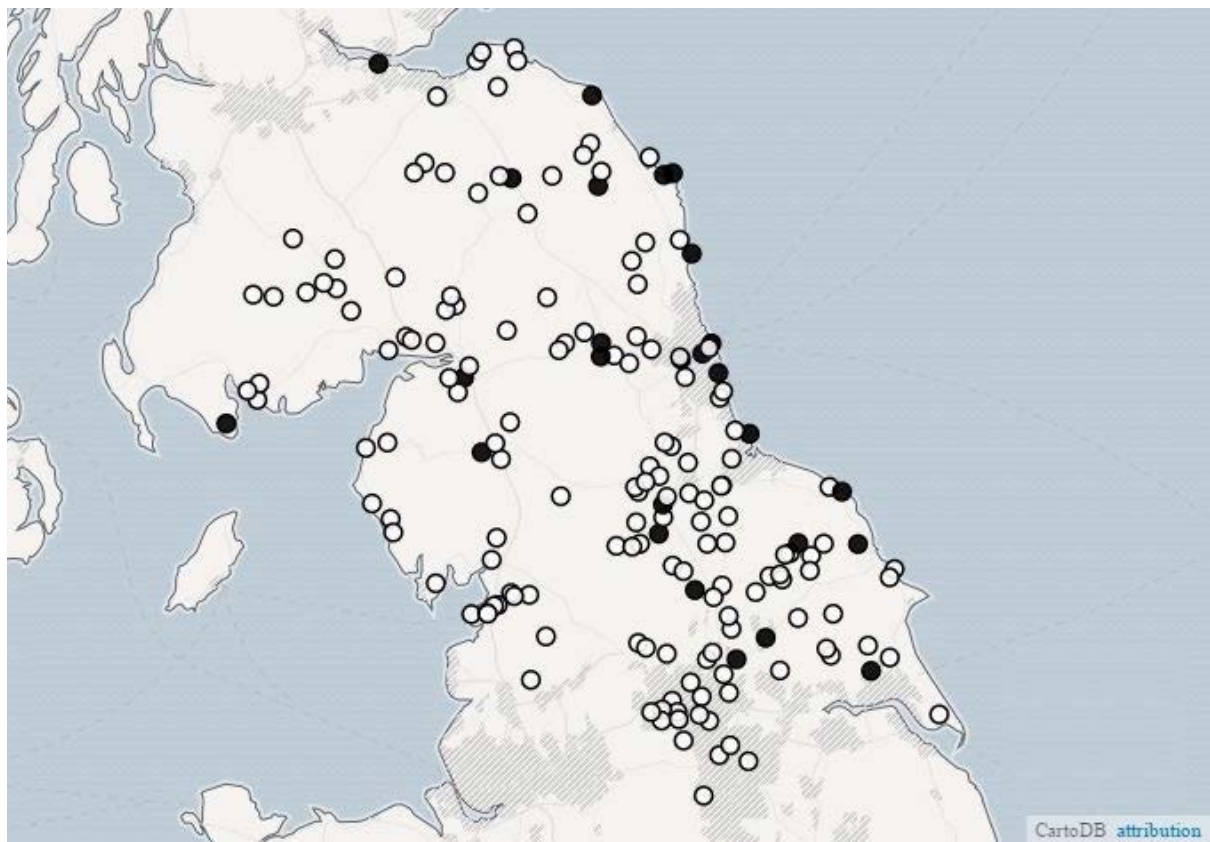
Figure 1. Distribution of probable pre-Viking ecclesiastical sites in Northumberland. Black dots are

sites mentioned in the works of Bede; open dots are sites not mentioned in the works of Bede.

Created using CartoDB.

NOT AVAILABLE

Figure 2. Wooden church and associated cemetery and other wooden structures, plot from cropmarks, Sprouston (Borders). Based on Smith 1992
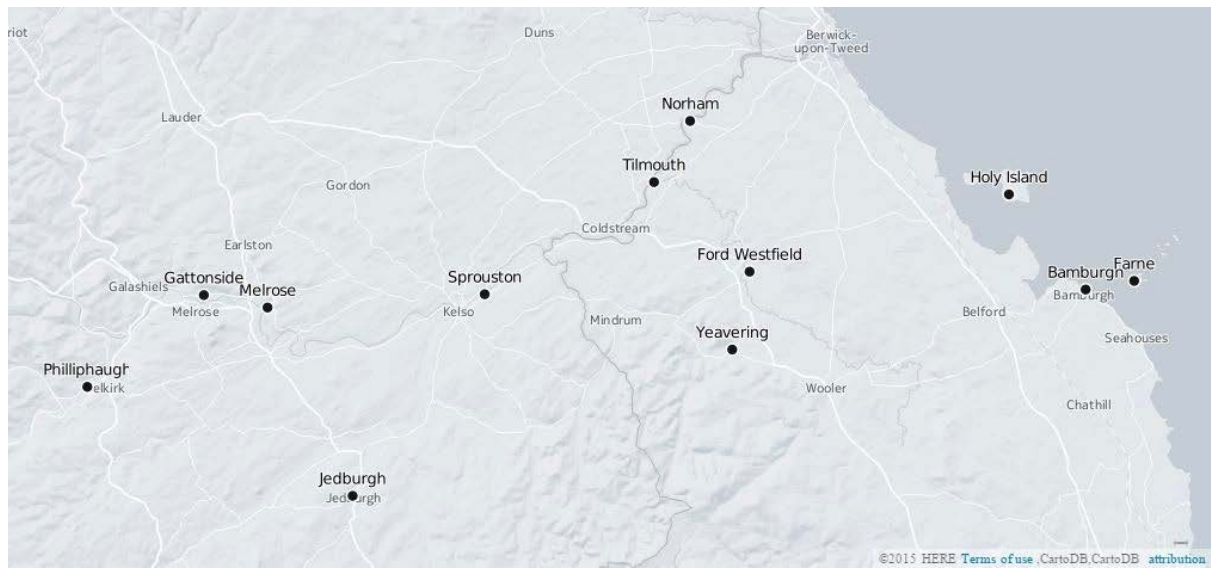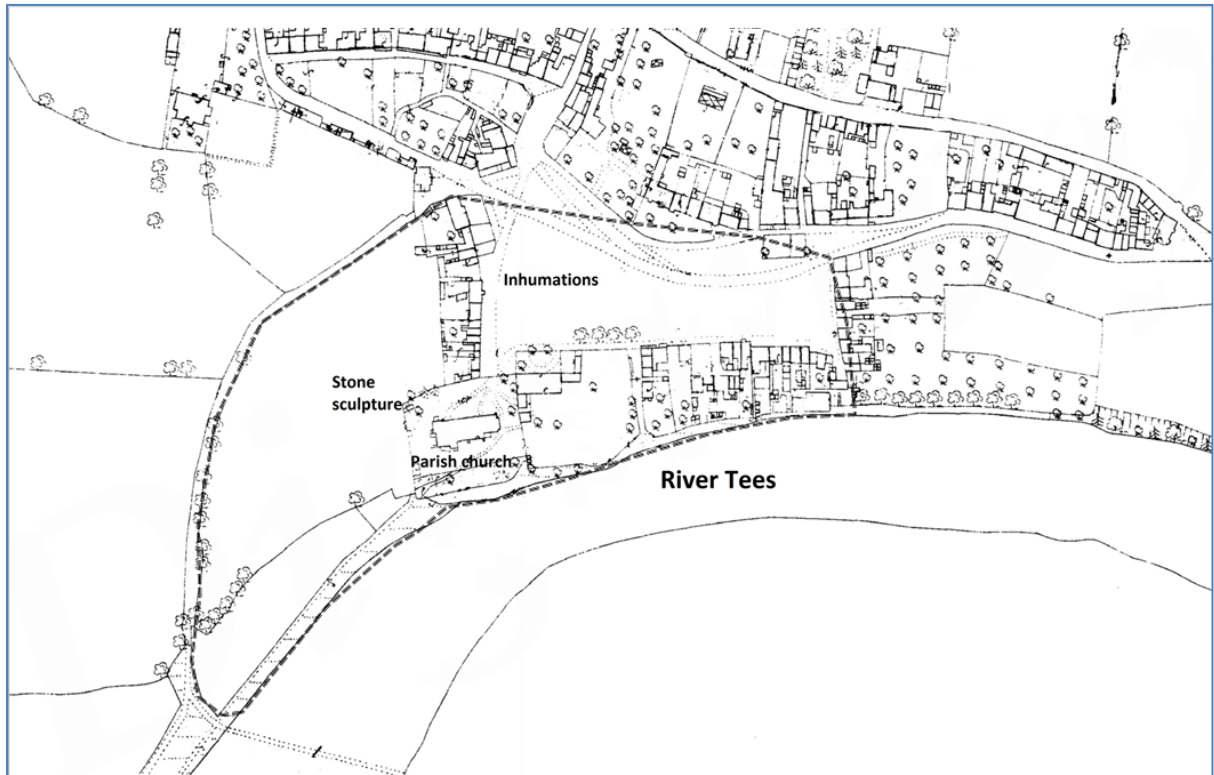
Figure 3. Early ecclesiastical sites in the Tweed Valley. Created using CartoDB.

(a)

(b)

Burials

Occupation evidence

of ordinary spring Tides

Parish church

(c)

Figure 4. Burial and other activity around known early medieval ecclesiastical sites (a) Gainford, County Durham; dashed line shows putative monastic boundary (b) Seaham, County Durham (c) Corbridge, Northumberland.
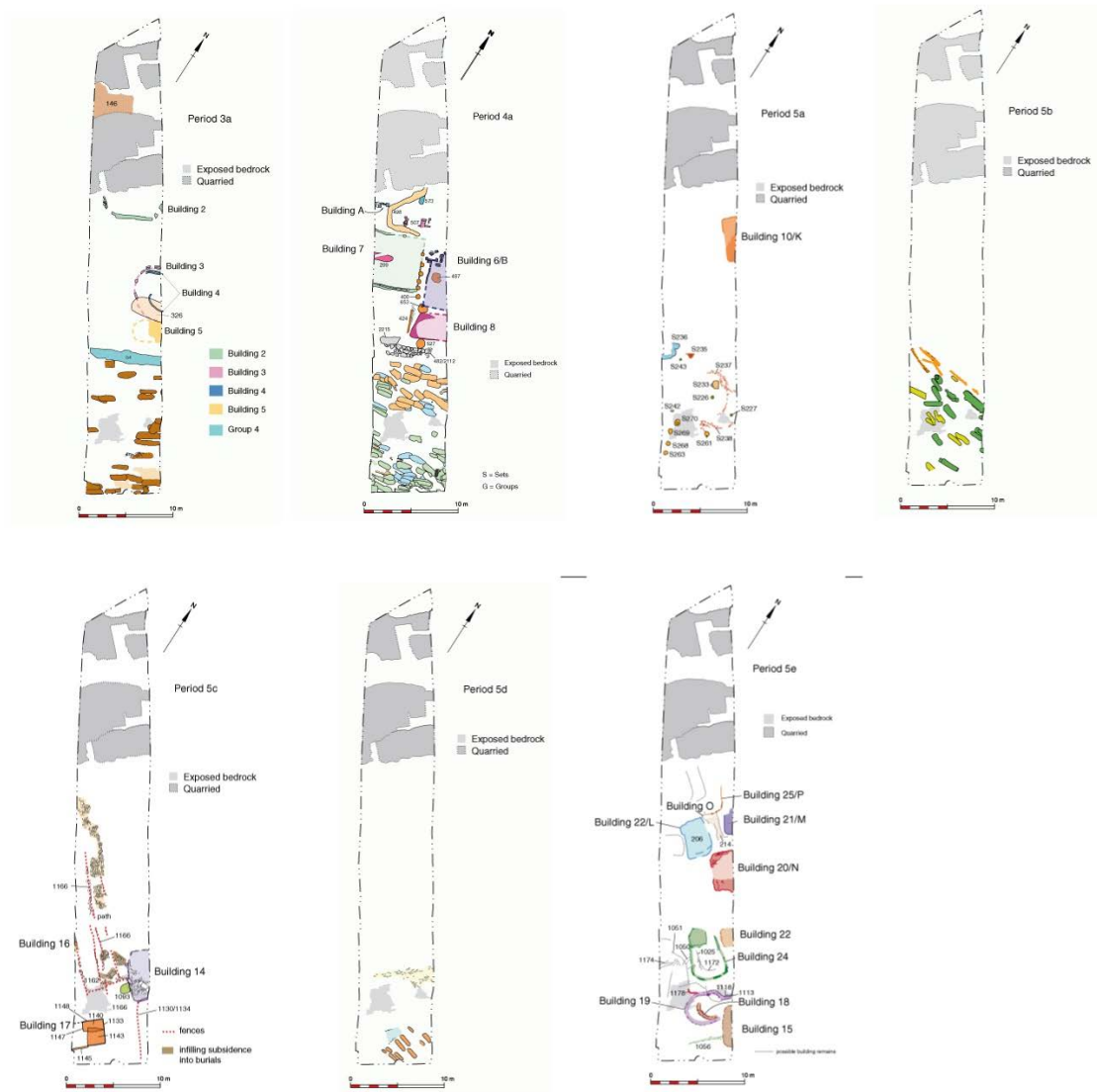
Figure 5. Fey Field, Whithorn: phase plan of trench showing rapidly changing activity patterns within one small area of the ecclesiastical site (from McOmish and Petts 2008) © York Archaeological Trust