

9. Ageing the Past: Examining Age Identity from Funerary Evidence

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Age can be reduced to the simple passage of time, but lots of things are altered in time. Bodies age, societies change and lives are lived (Fry 1996, 117).

Introduction

Age is an important aspect of social identity and organisation and yet for a long time proved to be a blind spot for the social sciences. Archaeologists, until recently, have regarded the cultural experiences of age and ageing to have been uniform across societies and through time (with some exceptions *e.g.*, Sofaer Derevenski 1997a; Gilchrist ed. 2000). While recent studies of gender and ethnicity within archaeology have examined the socially constructed nature of identity and have challenged the imposition of modern Western social models onto past populations, age identity has remained largely under-theorised. As time passes our bodies undergo the biological processes of growth, maturation and, ultimately, degeneration. In this sense, the physical progression of the ageing process is a universal human experience. However, because individuals grow up and grow old within social contexts (Campbell and Alwin 1996, 34) age cannot be reduced to the 'simple passage of time' (Fry 1996, 117). Ethnographic and historical examples reveal that biological, cultural, and chronological concepts of age are intertwined in the formation of age identity in a way that is complicated to unravel. Cultures do not necessarily relate age identity to biological changes (*e.g.* puberty), instead they are more often linked to the fulfilment of social roles such as marriage and parenthood (Schildkrout 1978). As a result there is a great deal of variation in the way in which cultures divide the life course, in the way that they symbolise these divisions, and the extent and manner in which age identity plays a structuring role in society.

It is only recently that the study of age as an aspect of social identity within the field of archaeology has become

a pivotal topic for discussion (see Sofaer Derevenski 1997a, 2000; Crawford 1999; Gilchrist ed. 2000). This paper examines the current research on age identity and the potentials and limitations of examining age as an aspect of social identity in the past through the study of archaeological funerary evidence. It draws upon evidence from five early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and combines skeletal and cultural evidence in order to identify social age groupings and identities, focusing in particular on the 'adult' members of society.

Defining age

Much of the research on age identity to date has been conducted within the fields of social history (*e.g.* Ariès 1963; Pollock 1983; Shahar 1990, 1997; Rosenthal 1996), anthropology (*e.g.* Schildkrout 1978; Fortes 1984; Panter-Brick 1998) and sociology (*e.g.* Prout and James 1990; Arber and Ginn 1991, 1995; Hockey and James 1993). Working within the field of sociology, Ginn and Arber (1995, 2) discussed the relationship between sex and age and argued that 'a distinction parallel to that between sex and gender needs to be made in relation to age'. Subsequently, several authors have distinguished between different 'types' of age:

1. Physiological/biological age (representing the physical ageing of the body).
2. Chronological age (corresponding to the amount of time that has passed from the moment of birth).
3. Social age (socially constructed norms concerning appropriate behaviour and attitudes for an age group).

It is evident from the majority of cemetery analyses in archaeology that such distinctions remain largely unrecognised within the discipline. For example, the age definitions given for the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Millgate, Nottinghamshire (Harman 1989, 23) are as follows:

Infant (under 2 years)
 Child (2–12 years)
 Adolescent (12–18 years)
 Adult (over 18 years)
 Ageing adult (over 35 years)

These age divisions approximate those reported for many cemetery studies. However, when we deconstruct these categories, it becomes evident that all three definitions of age are being used: the biological age (of the skeleton), which is translated into a chronological age and is then described further by a social age. Because archaeologists tend not to theorise age identity and the way that it operates within society, different definitions of age have been used inter-changeably, as though they mean the same thing. As numerous studies have discussed, terms such as 'child' or 'adolescent' are culturally loaded; they do not simply convey to the reader a chronological age, but a whole schema of appropriate social behaviour and attributes derived from a modern Western context. Imposing these social norms (whether consciously or not) onto the past is a practice that serves not only to perpetuate and validate our current age paradigm, but also to potentially misrepresent the population under study. Crawford (1991, 1999) demonstrated this in her examination of Anglo-Saxon cemetery evidence in conjunction with law codes. She (*ibid.*) found that so-called anomalies in grave good associations (*e.g.* child weapon burials) were actually the result of excavators projecting contemporary age norms onto the past. Clearly, it is necessary for archaeologists to theorise age identity and to consider how it might be accessed in the archaeological record (*cf.* Sofaer-Derevenski 1997a; Gilchrist ed. 2000).

Biology and culture

We cannot deny the biological nature of the ageing process: there is inevitability about this process – interrupted only by fatal illness or accident. However, as Blaikie (1999, 6) states: 'Like every organism the body goes into a state of irreversible decline following maturity. What is contentious is not this physiological fact but how the social frame impinges upon it'. It is well attested, both ethnographically and historically, that age-related social transitions within societies often coincide with physiological parameters (*e.g.* learning to walk or puberty). This biological framework has undoubtedly resulted in a degree of cross-cultural uniformity with respect to particular social age transitions (Schildkrout 1978). There is no absolute universality, however, and a biological milestone viewed as important for age categorisation in one society may be entirely disregarded in another (La Fontaine 1986). For example, menarche is an important stage of physical development for females, often signifying the transition to adulthood. However, this is far from universal; for example, literary evidence relating to the Roman Empire indicates that it had little social significance for females

during this time. The female transition to adulthood was more closely allied with the social event of marriage (Fraschetti 1997, 69; Laurence 2000; Harlow and Laurence 2002).

Archaeologists should also be aware that whether different cultures show synchronicity with respect to their age transitions or not, considerable variation does exist with respect to the *cultural* interpretations of these life stages and the social attributes and responsibilities believed to be held by different age groups within societies (Myerhoff 1984, 307; La Fontaine 1978, 1986). The identity conferred on members of a particular age group is not the naturalised manifestation of their physical development, in the same way that gender roles are not the social expression of biological givens (Moore 1994; Sofaer-Derevenski 1997a).

On a more fundamental level, recent theoretical developments within the social sciences have brought into question the very immutability of the biological transitions that we interpret as important for age grouping. Cultural practices may, in fact, have a profound effect upon the chronological age of attainment of so-called biological goals. For example, walking and talking are viewed as the beginning of personhood in many cultures, both past and present, and yet cultural practices may either significantly delay or advance such abilities (Levine 1998). Biological anthropologists are well aware of the effects that differential cultural practices and the environment may have on factors such as skeletal growth or maturity that are important for age estimation. As the body develops it is, to an extent, taken up and transformed by social factors: biology and culture are largely inter-twined (Shilling 1993; see Sofaer this volume). Through an appreciation of the inter-related nature of biological and cultural aspects of ageing it is hoped that we can examine how the ages that we obtain from skeletal material relate to the social reality of age identity within a particular society and how the changing, ageing body was understood culturally in the past.

Approaches to the study of age identity

Within the sociological literature, the study of age has been broadly divided into two primary approaches: an age differentiated approach that focuses on age grades and cohorts, and the less divisive, life course approach (Marshall 1996). The former perspective has, until recently, dominated much anthropological and sociological research on age. A cohort is defined as a group of people born at approximately the same time that grow up and grow old during a particular period of time. In addition to dividing the lives of individuals into stages, the age cohort approach provides a valuable perspective in that it acknowledges the fact that members of a particular birth cohort will have a unique history and their experience of the ageing process will be correspondingly singular (Uhlenberg and Minor 1996, 208). The

experience of being sixty years old in AD 1900, for example, was a very different one from being sixty in the year AD 2000. As Uhlenberg and Minor (1996, 210) state:

By recognizing that ageing is a dynamic process produced by the collective behaviour of individuals who live within historical and social contexts, this perspective guides attention to the critical factors that change the ageing process over time.

As each cohort ages, considerable continuity in the behaviour of successive age cohorts may exist, however, periods of profound social change can significantly challenge the existing structures and experiences of ageing (Haraven 1995; Uhlenberg and Minor 1996, 208).

Within an archaeological context, while a cemetery may be divided into a series of broad chronological phases, age cohorts are difficult to identify because dating evidence for individual graves is often not specific enough. Although skeletal remains can be grouped according to age categories, it must be recognised that the individuals who comprise them were not all the same age during the same time and this may have impacted upon their experience of ageing. Given that this study draws upon evidence from fifth to sixth centuries AD, a period of rapid social change occurring immediately after the collapse of Roman control, one might expect a certain element of heterogeneity and inconsistency with respect to age-related funerary practice; a factor that may obscure the visibility of age demarcations.

Although the study of age grades and cohorts do provide a useful perspective, there is the tendency in such studies to conceptualise age groupings as homogenous; members of a particular age grade are imbued with particular social norms until their departure into a new age grade. Once categorised, the homogeneity of the age grouping then becomes assumed, without due consideration of the effects of gender, social status and ethnicity (Uhlenberg and Minor 1996, 216; Bradley 1996). It has also been argued within sociology that an emphasis on age grades has tended to focus too much attention on the *differences* between life stages (O'Rand 1996, 189).

One could argue that initial studies concerning age within archaeology were guilty of this also because they focused on specific age categories, most notably childhood (e.g. Lillhammer 1989; Sofaer-Derevenski ed. 1994, 1997b, 2000; Crawford 1991, 2000). However, this work was very important for redressing the balance of academic neglect of archaeologically excluded age groups and for beginning a discourse on age in archaeology.

When discussing age, many authors now find it useful to refer to the life course; the period of time from conception to death (e.g. Harlow and Laurence 2002). An important principle of life course analysis is that one life phase can only be understood in relation to the way that identities are played out over the entire life course. This approach, rather than focusing on a series of demarcated age groups, concentrates instead on 'life pathways' and the entry/exit transitions that occur throughout the

trajectory of life in a more holistic manner (Moen 1996, 180).

Marshall (1996, 22) described the life course perspective as an: 'explicit attempt to view the individual biography within the context of society, and to take a historical perspective on both the individual and society'. A life course approach would seem preferable for archaeological studies of age, in part because it allows for a greater sensitivity towards the fluidity of age related shifts in identity, particularly with respect to gender and status over time (O'Rand 1996, 192–3). When using archaeological funerary evidence we do need to employ age groupings because skeletal ageing techniques are not specific enough, but it is still possible to view these in a more fluid way in accordance with life course analysis. When looking at rites of passage, the crossing of transitions between age boundaries, archaeologists can use this approach to examine the interaction and tensions between age and other aspects of the social persona. Such a study has been undertaken by Sofaer-Derevenski (1997a) who examined the relationship between age, sex and gender in relation to burial practices in Copper Age Hungary, noting that these aspects of identity are almost inextricably intertwined.

In sum, it can be said that the questions that we need to explore with respect to the past include:

- How did past populations conceptualise and structure their life course?
- What particular characteristics were each of these stages imbued with and how were they symbolised?
- How did age interact with other aspects of the social persona such as gender and status?
- How are these age transitions managed?

Funerary evidence

The present study draws upon the analysis of a sample of skeletons from five cemeteries of early Anglo-Saxon date (fifth to sixth centuries AD) located in Oxfordshire and Hampshire (Table 9.1). While this study focuses in more detail on the 'adult' members of the burial societies, it was necessary to analyse the burials of all ages in order to contextualise the treatment of these individuals within that of the entire life course.

Recent studies have made it apparent that archaeology has treated 'adulthood' as the unspoken hegemony, and the past has been viewed in overtly adult terms. It is the paradoxical nature of such dominant discourses, however, that their assumed normality leaves them under-theorised. This was apparent in initial studies of gender, where as part of the feminist reaction against the androcentrism of archaeological narratives, the concept of femininity was explored in depth, while masculinity received little theoretical attention (cf. Hadley ed. 1999). A similar reaction, this time against adult-centric views of the past, contributed to the focus on childhood in archaeological

Region	Site	Period	No. Ind.
Upper Thames	Berinsfield (Boyle <i>et al.</i> 1995)	Early Anglo Saxon	119
Upper Thames	Abingdon (Leeds and Harden 1936)	Early Anglo Saxon	129
Hampshire	Worthy Park (Hawkes and Grainger 2003)	Early Anglo Saxon	109
Hampshire	Portway (Cook and Dacre 1985)	Early Anglo Saxon	71
Hampshire	Alton (Evison 1988)	Early Anglo Saxon	50

Table 9.1. The cemetery sample (NB information on grave goods were obtained from the cited reports).

studies of age. As a result, the social criteria necessary for the attainment of adulthood in the past and the multitude of ways in which societies may perceive adulthood (if at all) are relatively unexplored territory in archaeology. The experience of being an adult within a particular society has tended to be perceived as homogenous, however, sociological studies have demonstrated that it is in fact enormously variable and dependent upon gender, status, ethnicity and age.

Ageing the skeleton

The skeletal remains from all of the cemeteries in the study sample were analysed by the present author in order to estimate age and determine sex. Within the field of biological anthropology, maturational/degenerative information from the skeleton is always related to chronological age by comparing skeletal age indicators to models derived from skeletons of known age (Beall 1984). However, this process of skeletal ageing may be seen to be problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, because skeletal age has a limited ability to act as an indicator of chronological age, particularly once skeletal maturity has been achieved. Secondly, because age in chronological terms may have little relevance for the population being studied, instead age may have been understood in relative terms (*e.g.* age sets) (Fortès 1984). The first problem has dominated research on age within biological anthropology, particularly over the last two decades. It is primarily a result of individual and population level variation in the timing and manifestation of age-related skeletal changes. However, the problem is further compounded by statistical biases associated with current ageing methods and a lack of standardisation in the skeletal age estimation methods used (*e.g.* Bocquet-Appel and Masset 1982, 1985; Aykroyd *et al.* 1997, 1999; Hoppa and Vaupel ed. 2002).

Bocquet-Appel and Masset (1982) demonstrated that the age distributions obtained for archaeological populations were, to some extent, dependent on the age structure of the known age reference sample from which a particular ageing technique was devised. In effect, they argued that the age distributions produced for a given cemetery could depend as much on the ageing method(s) chosen as on the actual age structure of the archaeological sample. This brings into question the validity of comparing age profiles of cemeteries that have used

different age estimation techniques. This is one important reason for the re-analysis of the skeletal remains for the purposes of this study – though in not all instances had a skeletal report been undertaken at all (*e.g.* Abingdon).

This statistical bias has also been shown to be responsible for the under-ageing of older individuals within past populations (Aykroyd *et al.* 1997, 1999). This is partly because many of the current ageing methods are based on known age samples derived from forensic contexts that have age distributions very unlike those that we would expect to find in attritional cemeteries (where individuals died more ‘naturally’ from factors such as infections, old age, *etc.*). The problems associated with statistical bias are currently being addressed by a number of authors, primarily using methods based on Bayes’ Theorem (*e.g.* Hoppa and Vaupel ed. 2002).

For the purposes of this study the ages-at-death of the immature skeletons were derived from observations of dental development and eruption (Moorrees *et al.* 1963a, b), long bone length and skeletal maturity indicators. Different cultural practices and the environment may significantly affect long bone growth and skeletal maturity. In order to account for this, Millard and Gowland (in prep) developed growth profiles specific to the cemetery populations analysed in the present sample and skeletal maturity indicators were studied in relation to dental development.

The ‘adults’ were aged using the pubic symphyses (Brooks and Suchey 1990), auricular surfaces (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985), late fusing epiphyses (Webb and Suchey 1985) and dental attrition. The molar wear of all dentitions present were scored according to a numerical system adapted from Brothwell’s (1981) charts and seriated in a database so that individual dentitions could thus be aged relative to one another.

Sex, gender and the skeleton

Sexing skeletons is considered to be much more straightforward and reliable than estimating age at death. On a basic level, there are a number of morphological and metrical differences between male and female skeletons, particularly in the regions of the pelvis and skull, which form the basis of sex determination techniques. The sex estimation of the adult skeletal material analysed in this study was conducted using methods described in Krogman and Îćcan (1986) and Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994).

Generally, in cemetery studies, biological sex is viewed as static and fixed; we have male and female categories. Gender on the other hand is perceived as distinct from biological sex; it represents the cultural interpretation of these bodily differences (Gilchrist 1999; Sørensen 2000). In funerary archaeology information concerning gender is usually derived from the cultural variables while skeletal information is seen as relevant only in providing a biological basis. While this distinction between sex and gender has been enormously useful and influential in archaeology, numerous authors have suggested that it does not stand up to scrutiny and have challenged this divide (see Sørensen 2000; Sofer this volume for a discussion).

On a basic level, the biology of 'sex' in terms of skeletal morphology is far from 'fixed'. A number of sexing categories are used by biological anthropologists because the extent and nature of sexual dimorphism exhibited by skeletons varies considerably both within and between populations. This was observed in the analysis of the skeletons in this study in terms of both the degree of overlap and characteristics of some of the sexually dimorphic features expressed. As a result, it was often necessary to slightly adjust skeletal sexing criteria accordingly.

In addition to these problems of variability and overlap in sexual dimorphism, studies have demonstrated that the criteria employed when assigning sex to a skeleton are not totally objective. For example, sex assessment based on the skull (which survives much more frequently than the pelvis, albeit often in a fragmentary state) is reliant on features of robusticity. Walrath *et al.* (2004) demonstrated that the lack of clear description/definition concerning the levels of robusticity which constitute a male as oppose to a female skull leads to a considerable amount of inter-observer variability based on individual traits. Previous studies demonstrated that researchers are more likely to sex intermediate specimens as male, presumably because they are less able to accept a robust female (Weiss 1972). Thus, one could argue that current gender paradigms and norms concerning physical sexual aesthetics infiltrate supposedly objective scientific methodologies (see also Stone and Walrath, this volume). Other studies have, however, contradicted these findings (*e.g.* Meindl *et al.* 1985) or have found no such bias (*e.g.* Mollison and Cox 1993), and it would seem that the variability is largely down to the differing degrees of sexual dimorphism.

It is also important to note that sexually dimorphic features do not remain static throughout the life course. It is not possible, for example, to determine the sex of skeletons prior to the completion of skeletal maturity. Even in live infants and young children, material culture plays a big part in allowing us to distinguish boys from girls, when clothed. Ethnographically and historically, children are often seen to have an ambiguous gendered identity, which then alters as they develop and their identity becomes more strongly aligned with adult gender/sexuality.

During adulthood morphological sexual characteristics do not remain static either. For example, it has been shown that adult males on reaching skeletal maturity tend to have less well-defined supraorbital ridges and generally less robust facial features than those of mid-adult males. It has been argued by Walker (1995) that this may be a factor leading to the identification of fewer young males within skeletal populations (instead they are categorised as females, or of indeterminate sex). In very advanced years, some facial characteristics of males again become altered. For example, age-related edentulism leads to resorption of the bone of the mandible giving it a more gracile, or feminine appearance. Conversely, the cranio-facial characteristics of females may become more masculine with advancing age (Meindl *et al.* 1985). Post-menopausal alterations in hormones often lead to a thickened cranial vault (Ortner and Putschar 1985) that may also result in incorrect determinations of sex, particularly when the skull is fragmentary. As well as having palaeodemographic repercussions, these changing characteristics may have more profound implications concerning social identity; the fluidity of physical features with age both contributing to and reinforcing changing perceptions of masculinity and femininity throughout the life course.

Age-related grave good patterns

The above discussion has emphasised the changing nature of the human skeleton throughout the life course. The following analysis will link this evidence to the material components of the burial record with the aim of highlighting any age-related grave good patterning, in particular amongst the older individuals buried in the cemeteries studied. Burials in early Anglo-Saxon England are particularly rich in grave goods and therefore lend themselves to this type of analysis. Grave goods are the focus of most funerary analyses because material objects are key to the communication and expression of social identity (Sørensen 2000). Grave goods can be viewed as a way in which past societies symbolically constructed, reinforced, or subverted social norms (Lucy 1998). Subsequently, when examined in conjunction with skeletal evidence, they provide a unique, though by no means straightforward, way of accessing past social identities.

Numerous studies have examined the gender symbolism of grave artefacts from the early Anglo-Saxon period (*e.g.* Pader 1982; Brush 1993; Lucy 1997, 1998; Stoodley 1999; Knüsel and Ripley 2000). Items of material culture are traditionally perceived by archaeologists to be gendered because of their repeated and exclusive association with individuals of a particular biological sex. Grave goods, therefore, become 'masculine', 'feminine' or, if found with both sexes, 'gender neutral'. While it has been recognised that there are shortcomings with this terminology (Knüsel and Ripley 2000; Scull 2000), the terms do fulfil a useful discursive function and, with some

caveats, will be retained here. Comparatively few studies looking at gender symbolism from this time period have also examined the way that objects may also reflect age identity—beyond the Western adult/child dichotomy (for exceptions see Stoodley 1999; Crawford 1999).

Previous studies of the early Anglo-Saxon period have demonstrated that burials exhibiting a feminine gender are far more common than masculine burials and that more artefact types participate in the construction of a feminine identity (e.g. Pader 1982; Brush 1993; Stoodley 1999, 78). This was also noted at the cemeteries in this study, with the exception of Worthy Park, Hampshire, where masculine burials (*i.e.* burials with weapons) slightly outnumber feminine burials. Overall, at the sites examined here, general fluctuations were observed in both the proportion of individuals accorded 'gendered' grave goods and the composition of burial assemblages throughout the life course (Fig. 9.1). Some regional differences were also noted between the Oxfordshire and Hampshire sites and a brief discussion of these will be presented below.

This study does not focus too much on the burials of 'children' as these have been discussed at length elsewhere (e.g. Crawford 1991, 1999). However, a brief examination of the burials of the young from these cemeteries is required in order to contextualise the grave good patterns of the older individuals within the life course as a whole. One of the most striking patterns amongst the immature individuals is the apparent increase in the quantity and variety of grave goods from the age of 4–7 years. A similar pattern has been observed in previous studies by Stoodley (1999, 110) and Lucy (1998, 45). Focusing, first of all, on 'feminine' assemblages, it is notable that these increase markedly from 8–12 years, particularly at the sites of Abingdon and Berinsfield. At the other sites (all in Hampshire) gendered grave good assemblages were only

consistently buried with individuals at the slightly older age of 13–17 years. While gendered items such as brooches were buried with individuals from the age of one year they tend to be present only singly and were not worn in the 'adult' female style (one on each shoulder) until 8–12 years of age. All individuals in the 13–17 year age group with feminine assemblages were buried with brooches in the 'adult' manner.

This evidence may suggest that a shift in social status is occurring (for presumably female children) at around this age threshold, and that this transition coincides with the expression of a more strongly signified gender identity. There are, however, some subtle differences in the composition of the grave good assemblages between these young individuals and those of older females. For example, although saucer brooches are one of the most common brooch types overall, these were never buried with individuals below 18 years of age (Stoodley (1999, 115–116) has also noted at other sites that saucer brooches were not buried with young individuals). The brooches buried with individuals between 4–7 years are exclusively disc brooches, as are the majority of brooches in the 8–12 year age group. Overall, these brooch types are fairly uniform and smaller in size than those buried with 'adult' females. These younger individuals also tend to be buried with far fewer beads, particularly compared to the age category of 18–24 years (Fig 9.2). Could it be that females underwent an age transition beginning about the age of 8–12 years that saw a shift in gender status, and then a further transition around the age of 18 years, the latter possibly signifying marital status?

Finally, another interesting distinguishing feature of the assemblages of these younger individuals (between 8–17 years) is that they had a strikingly higher proportion of items of personal adornment that may be considered 'Roman' in style or origin (Fig. 9.3). It is interesting that

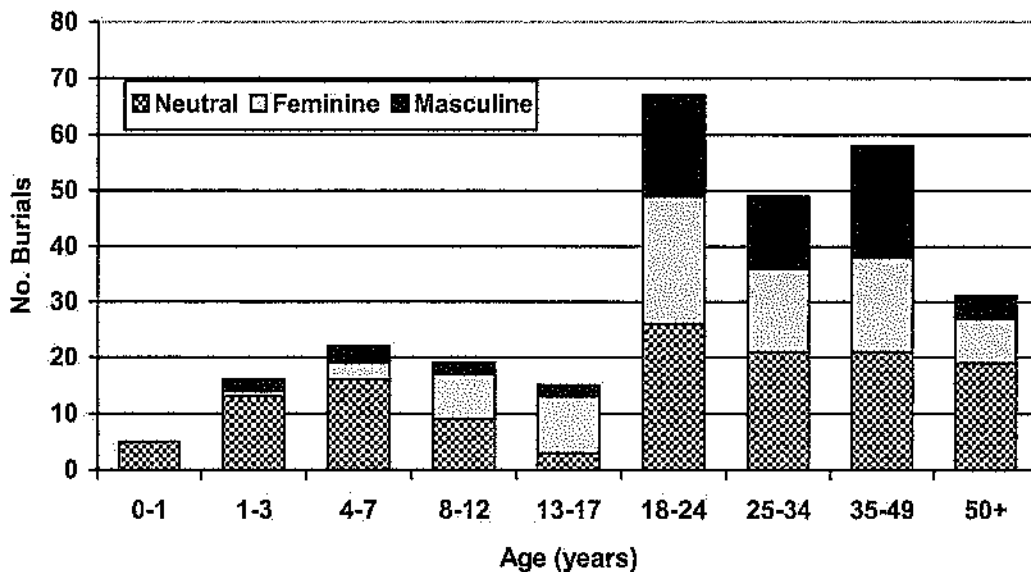


Figure 9.1. Number of individuals in each age group with 'gendered' burials.

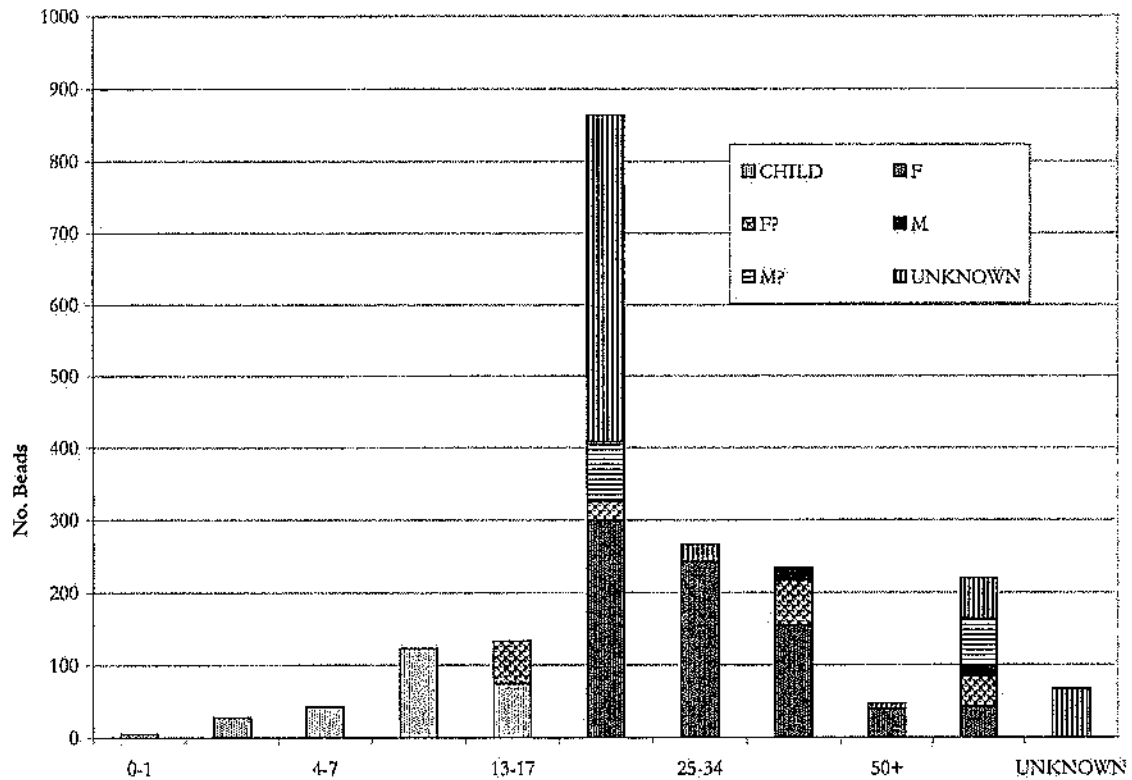


Figure 9.2. Quantity of beads buried with each age and sex at the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. There are a large number of individuals of 'unknown sex' in the 18-24 year age category. These were primarily the result of poor preservation, but also a result of ambiguity in the sexually dimorphic features.

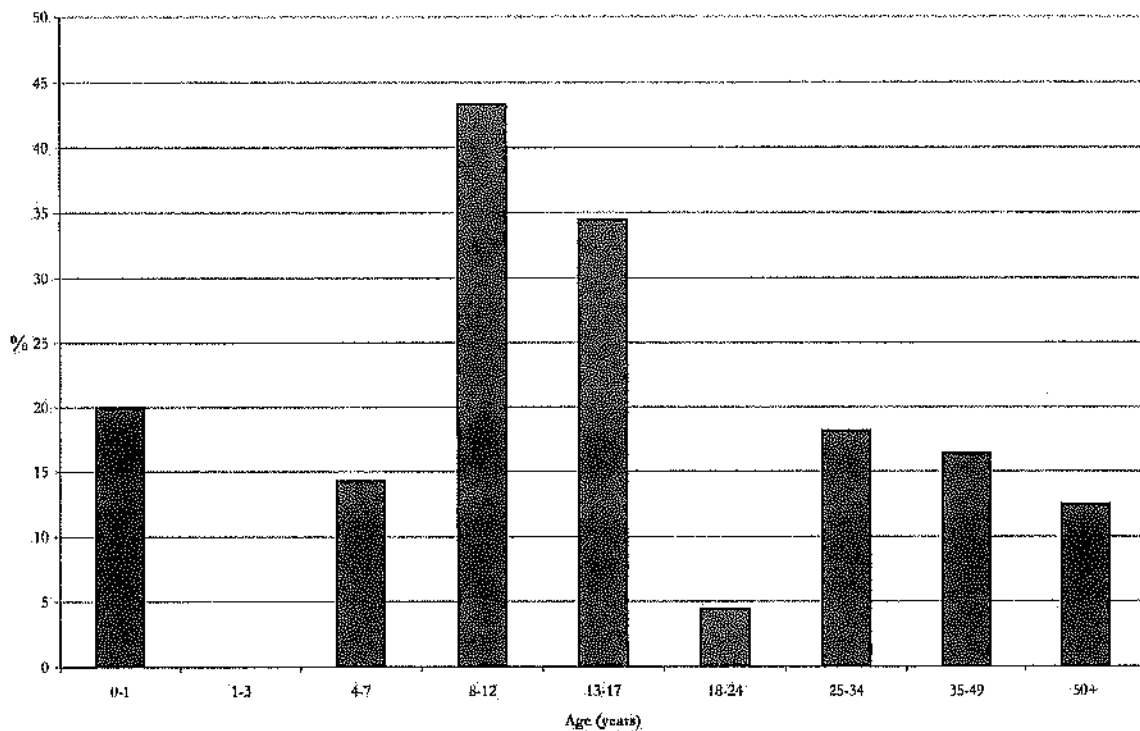


Figure 9.3. The proportion of items of personal adornment in each age group that may be considered 'Roman' in style or origin.

there is an age-related component to the presence of 'Roman' objects in Anglo-Saxon graves as these had often been attributed in the past to the expression of a 'native' Romano-British identity or aspiration (Gowland, in press).

When examining those females usually classed as 'adults' some age-related differences between the young and older ends of the spectrum were also noted amongst the cemetery sample. It has been noted elsewhere that there is a decrease in grave goods buried with older 'adult' females compared to younger ones (Stoodley 1999). If one examines the quantity of goods buried with each female age group, one does see what at first appears to be a significant drop in goods buried with older females, particularly over the age of 50 years. However, this relates primarily to the fact that there are fewer older females represented in the sample. At the cemeteries in this study it was observed that, in fact, approximately equal proportions of females in all age groups were provided with grave goods and that the average quantity of grave goods also remained approximately the same (with the exception of Abingdon where there is a decrease from the age of 35 years).

There are, though, some age-related differences in terms of the types of grave goods that constitute the burial assemblages. Older females were generally buried with slightly fewer items of personal adornment than younger

females, although the difference was not very marked (Fig. 9.4). One of the most notable age-related features of burial amongst the females in this sample was the large deposits of beads found with the 18–24 year group (Fig. 9.2). While beads were also buried with the older female age groups, these tend not to be in the same quantities. Other differences relate to brooch types, with younger 'adult' female burials exhibiting much more uniformity in brooch types – predominantly saucer and disc brooches. This was particularly apparent at the sites of Worthy Park and Abingdon. By contrast, older females were buried with a wide variety of brooch types and comparatively few were buried with saucer brooches. This may reflect age-related symbolism in everyday dress, if one assumes that this did not differ profoundly from burial costume.

Overall, a smaller proportion of older females were buried with 'feminine' assemblages when compared to younger females. The grave assemblages of older females more often contained 'gender neutral' items, such as buckles and buckets. Stoodley (1999, 108) also found a decline in 'feminine' items of grave goods with age (although the extent of this was overstated). Recent studies of the early Anglo-Saxon period have begun to stress the significance of these 'gender neutral' burials, both in terms of their frequency and implications for the binary gender system that has been envisaged for this period (e.g. Lucy 1998; Knüsel and Ripley 2000, 178).

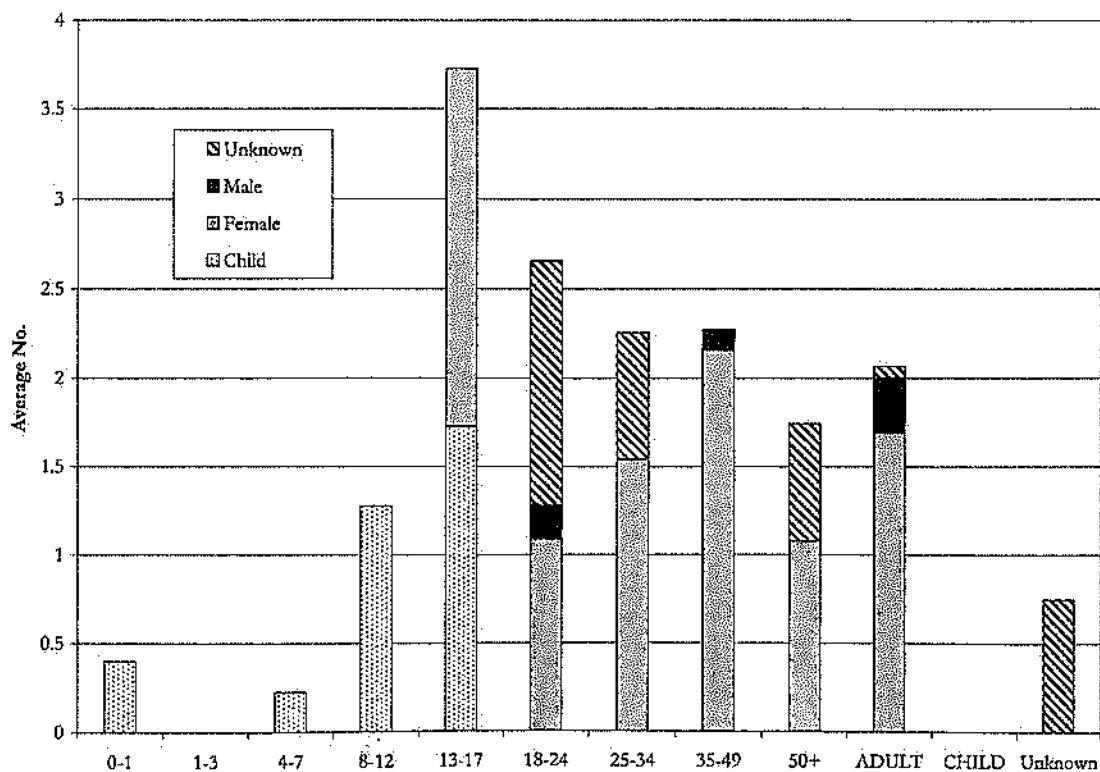


Figure 9.4. The average number of items of personal adornment buried with individuals in each age and sex group from the entire Anglo-Saxon cemetery sample (calculated from those buried with grave goods only).

Overall, individuals at each extreme of the life course spectrum, the very young and very old, tend to exhibit fewer grave goods and a greater proportion of gender neutral burial assemblages (Fig. 9.1). Often these are also interpreted as representing 'low status' graves (e.g. Halsall 1996), however, an alternative interpretation could be that gender was simply not an over-riding characteristic at these stages of the life course. For older females, items of jewellery may well have been passed on to daughters at marriage or left as heirlooms.

Stoodley (1999, 80, 106) refers to 'grades of femininity' and discusses the gender neutral grave assemblages of some older females as 'demarcating a change in identity associated with the menopause'. Ethnographic literature has demonstrated that a shift in female identity is often observed in old age and only occasionally coincides with the menopause. More often it is only indirectly associated with physiological age. For example, the marriage of a child, or widowhood may precipitate a transition to a new gender/age identity with the accompanying material and social norms (Rasmussen 1987, 1991). Often this age transition, far from resulting in reduced status, involves empowerment and freedom from the social constraints that govern the behaviour of younger females.

Amongst males at early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, burial with weapons is a common practice. Härke (1990, 1992) importantly suggested that these may not simply represent

'warrior' graves, but may be symbolic of other aspects of social identity. The cemeteries examined for the present study, along with the findings of others (e.g. Härke 1995; Stoodley 1998, 1999; Crawford 1999), demonstrate that there is also an age-related element to this rite, albeit not one that is straightforward to interpret. In this analysis it was found that while individuals below the age of 13 years were occasionally buried with a spearhead, the youngest to be buried with a shield was 16 years old and only those over 18 years were buried with a sword. It has previously been stated that a sword was buried with a juvenile at Abingdon (e.g. Brush 1993, 166; Stoodley 1999) based upon the report by Leeds and Harden (1936) which stated that Skeleton 42 was that of an 'adolescent'. However, personal examination of the skeletal remains indicated that this individual was in fact aged between 18–24 years. From the age of 18–24 years there was a dramatic increase in the number of males buried with weapons (Fig. 9.5), which quite possibly indicates an important shift in social identity/status at this stage in the life course.

Several authors (e.g. Härke 1995; Stoodley 1998, 1999) have argued that the majority of individuals accorded the weapon burial rite were young adult males. This ties in with images of warriors in 'prime' physical condition, rather than older males. In the present analysis, it was observed that at two of the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (Berinsfield and Abingdon) a smaller proportion of males

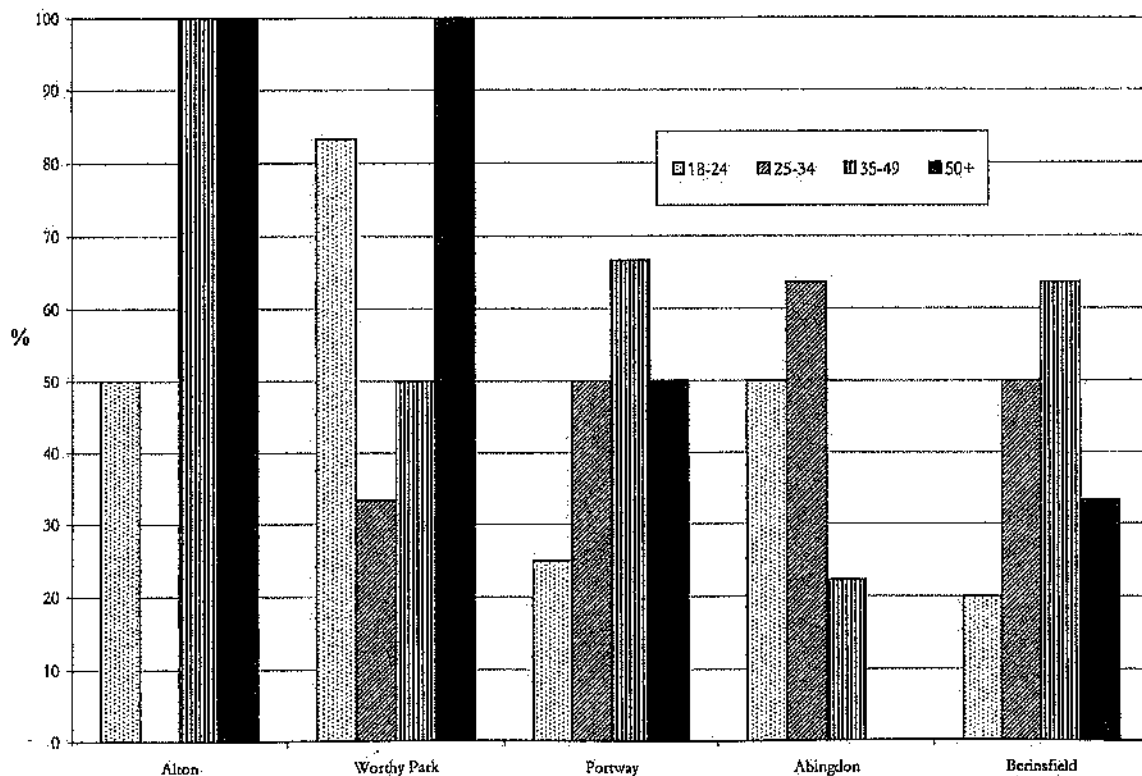


Figure 9.5. Percentage of each age group buried with weapons at the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries.

over the age of 50 years were indeed buried with weapons compared to other 'adult' age groups, although the difference was not as marked as has previously been suggested (e.g. Stoodley 1998, 1999). At Berinsfield and Abingdon, while males over the age of 50 years were more frequently buried with 'gender neutral' burial assemblages, those with weapons tended to have a higher average number of weapons than younger males. Brush (1993, 203) also found that those burials containing the most elaborate weapon sets were of older males. Furthermore, at the early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of Alton, Worthy Park and Portway (all in Hampshire) there was no drop in the proportion of individuals buried with weapons in the older age categories (Fig. 9.5). As observed in the examination of grave goods buried with 'children' and females, subtle regional differences are also apparent in male assemblage patterns between the Oxfordshire and Hampshire sites. It would seem from the present analysis that the notion of weapon burials being predominantly those of young adult males has been overstated. If these weapon burials also represent a social status, then there is no clear diminution of this amongst older males at early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, contra the suggestions of previous studies. It is possible that this was because older males were survived by adult children asserting their own social position through the funeral rites they accorded their father (Knüsel pers. comm.) (NB a practice not evident in the burial of mothers).

This leads to the point that when interpreting burial assemblages in terms of social identity, it should be remembered that as people get older, not only does their identity alter, but so too does that of the principal mourners. Archaeologically, this can be most clearly observed from the epigraphic evidence throughout the Roman Empire. For example, a female was commemorated by her parents in youth, after marriage by her spouse, and in old age by her children (Parkin 1992). Age and gender identity are lived relationally; therefore, the variation in funerary practice accorded to females throughout various life course stages could be reflecting and reproducing the changing relationships of the dead person with age. The increase in burial wealth associated with females buried in their early twenties, for example, may not necessarily reflect an increase in social status, or gendered identity, but a shift in the identity of the primary mourner and their relationship to the deceased.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to place the age and sex data retrieved from the skeleton within a theoretical context. There are clearly a number of problems when attempting to explore age as an aspect of social identity in the past that relate to our inability to reliably estimate chronological age. Furthermore, while it is easy to be over-simplistic in our interpretations of material culture associations, it is important to note that the social meaning imbued by

material culture may be far from straightforward. Material culture is just as likely to subvert and transform, as to reflect and conform to social norms, and this may be particularly so when associated with the dead, whose relationship to the living may be one that necessitates a subversive use of material culture items.

Despite these caveats, archaeology is uniquely placed to provide important insights into how age identity changes over time and the material symbols through which age is expressed. The majority of archaeological cemetery analyses have not considered the fluid nature of age and gender identity and instead have adopted a very rigid modern Western view of the adult/child, male/female distinction (though there are some exceptions e.g. Sofaer Derevenski 1997a; Stoodley 1999). As a result, the symbolism of funerary practice has often been obscured or misinterpreted because it falls outside modern social parameters. However, we need not simply reproduce our own social paradigms from past material culture, but through the cemetery data, seek to identify those age/gender thresholds that have symbolic and social significance within the populations under study. By taking a more reflexive approach to the archaeological data, we are able to suggest not only that certain goods are associated with either a masculine, or feminine gender, but also observe the fluidity and plurality of gender and status, as expressed in burial, with age.

Finally, archaeologists have overlooked the relationship between the changing physical nature of the body as it ages and the way in which this may influence and in turn, be affected by social factors. The influence of cultural beliefs and practices on the physical body in terms of the timing of age-related 'biological' changes is potentially profound. In turn, the physical condition of the body has an important part to play in social identity. We cannot, therefore, reduce the idea of age to a binary opposition of biological versus cultural age: the two are largely irreducible. This requires further consideration and future studies of past age identity must be sensitive to this complex inter-dependence.

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