‘Middle Saxon’ Settlement and Society: The Changing Rural Communities of Central and Eastern England

Submitted by Duncan William Wright to the University of Exeter
As a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Archaeology,

October 2012

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Signature: …………………………………..
Abstract

This thesis explores the experiences of rural communities who lived between the seventh and ninth centuries in central and eastern England. Utilising archaeological evidence as the primary source for study, the central aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the ways in which settlement remains can provide a picture of contemporary social, economic and political conditions in ‘Middle Saxon’ England. Analysis of archaeological evidence from currently-occupied rural settlements represents a particularly unique and informative dataset to accomplish this central aim, and when combined with other forms of evidence illustrates that the seventh to ninth centuries was a period of fundamental social change, that impacted rural communities in significant and lasting ways. The transformation of settlement character was part of a more widespread process of landscape investment during the ‘Middle Saxon’ period, as rapidly stratifying social institutions began to manifest power and influence through new means.

Such an analysis represents a significant departure from the prevailing scholarly outlook of the early medieval landscape, which continues to posit that the countryside of England remained largely unchanged until the development of historic villages from the ninth century onward. In this regard, the evidence presented by this thesis from currently-occupied rural settlements provides substantial backing to the idea that many historic villages emerged as part of a two-stage process which began during the ‘Middle Saxon’ period. Whilst it was only following subsequent change that recognisable later village plans began to take shape, key developments between the seventh and ninth centuries helped articulate the form and identity of rural centres, features that in many instances persisted throughout the medieval period and into the present day.
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For My Family
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my most sincere thanks to all of those who have supported and encouraged over previous years. In particular I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Julia Crick and Professor Stephen Rippon, for their invaluable input, advice, and support. I would also like to thank the staff and students of the Archaeology Department at the University of Exeter, and especially Professor Oliver Creighton, who provided much encouragement. My appreciation is expressed to Professor John Blair who read and discussed my work, and provided many useful comments. My thanks are also expressed to the members of staff at the various Historic Environment Records which I utilised, whose help was utterly essential for the completion of this work.

I would also like to thank the entirety of my family for all of the support and advice they have given me. I am also grateful to those friends, in Exeter, Bristol, and elsewhere, who have offered encouragement throughout: you know who you are. For reading and discussing my work in particular I wish to thank Nicola Abram, Dr. Michael Fradley, Scott Chaussée, Kate Mees, Dr. Ben Pears, Dr. Michael Shapland, and Dr. Chris Smart.