

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

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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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