

THE ARCHAEOLOGY
OF THE
EAST ANGLIAN
CONVERSION

Richard Hoggett



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The conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia left huge marks on the area, both metaphorical and real. Drawing both on the surviving documentary sources, and on the eastern region's rich archaeological record, this book presents the first multi-disciplinary synthesis of the process. It begins with an analysis of the historical framework, followed by an examination of the archaeological evidence for the establishment of missionary stations within the region's ruined Roman forts and earthwork enclosures. It argues that the effectiveness of the Christian mission is clearly visible in the region's burial record, which exhibits a number of significant changes, including the cessation of cremation. The conversion can also be seen in the dramatic transformations which occurred in the East Anglian landscape, including changes in the relationship between settlements and cemeteries and the foundation of a number of different types of Christian cemetery. Ultimately, it shows that, far from being the preserve of kings, the East Anglian conversion was widespread at a grass-roots level, changing the nature of the Anglo-Saxon landscape forever.

Dr Richard Hoggett is currently Coastal Heritage Officer with Norfolk County Council.

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The Archaeology
of the
East Anglian Conversion

Richard Hoggett

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For my family
and
for Alice

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JUDITH MIDDLETON-STEWART *Inward Purity and Outward Splendour: Death and Remembrance in the Deanery of Dunwich, Suffolk, 1370–1547*

CHRISTOPHER HARPER-BILL, CAROLE RAWCLIFFE, R. G. WILSON (eds) *East Anglia's History: Studies in Honour of Norman Scarfe*

CHRISTOPHER HARPER-BILL (ed.) *Medieval East Anglia*

DAVID BUTCHER *Lowestoft, 1550–1750: Development and Change in a Suffolk Coastal Town*

MARK BAILEY *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200–1500*

LUCY MARTEN *Late Anglo-Saxon Suffolk* (forthcoming)

Abbreviations

- BAR British Archaeological Reports
CAU Cambridge Archaeological Unit
CBA Council for British Archaeology
EAA East Anglian Archaeology
HE *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (B. Colgrave and R. Mynors (eds),
Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People (Oxford, 1969)
LDB Little Domesday Book. Alecto, *The Digital Domesday Book* (Hampshire,
2002)
NHER Norfolk Historic Environment Record
NMAS Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service
PPG16 *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning*
(Department of the Environment, 1990)
SCCAS Suffolk County Council Archaeological Service
SHARP Sedgeford Historical and Archaeological Research Project
SHER Suffolk Historic Environment Record
SMA Society for Medieval Archaeology
-

A Note on Burial Alignments

When describing the orientation of burials the convention of giving the head-end first has been followed. Thus a west–east burial lies with its head to the west and feet to the east.

A Note on Footnotes

Where no specific page references are given in footnotes this is because the entire cited work is relevant to the arguments developed there.

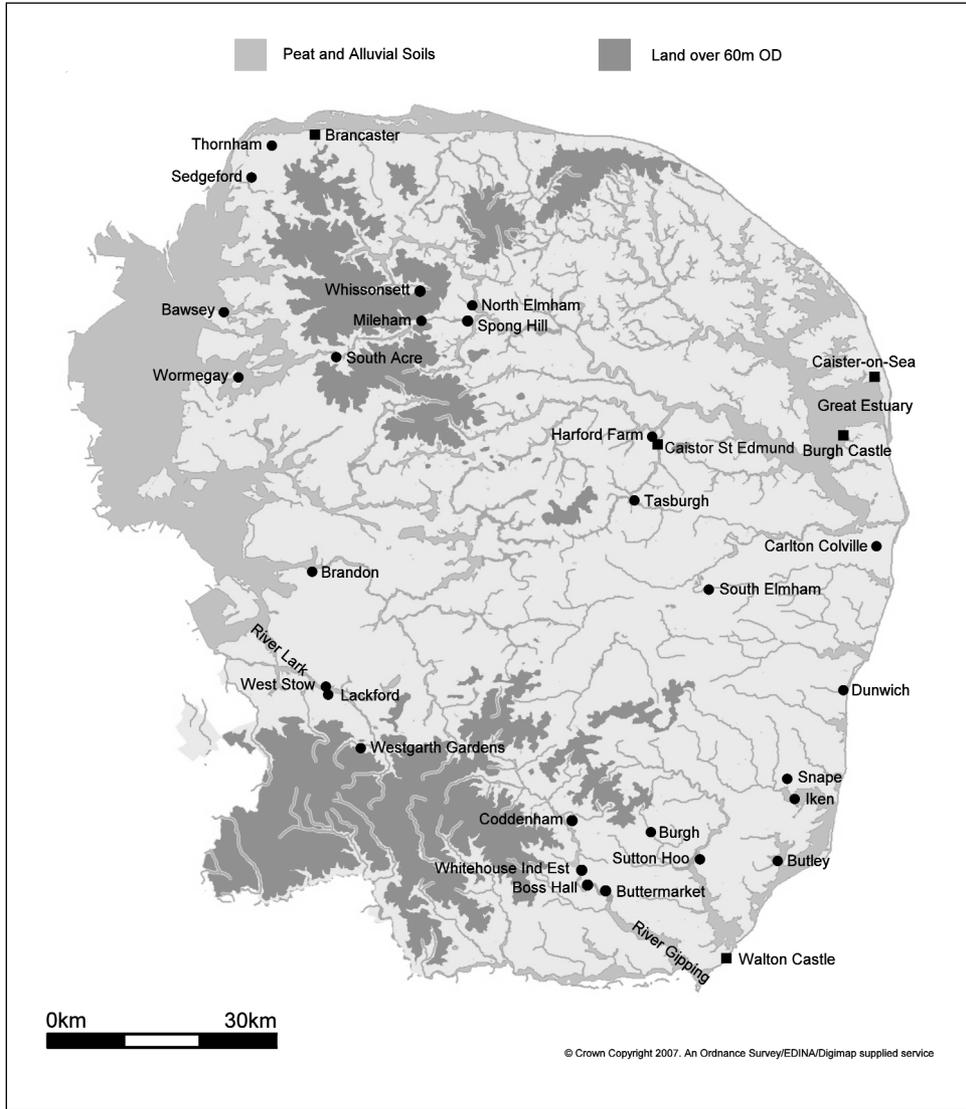


Fig. 1: Map of East Anglia, showing the principal places mentioned in the text set against the topography of East Anglia and areas of peat and alluvium.

Introduction

The Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons was one of the most significant events in this country's history, the effects of which continue to shape society to this day. When Pope Gregory's emissary Augustine and his entourage landed in Kent in AD 597 — the event traditionally taken to mark the beginning of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons — he was not entering a unified country.¹ In the late sixth century the country's political geography comprised a number of kingdoms of varying size and political allegiance, of which Kent was then among the most powerful. During the first half of the seventh century Christianity began to spread from kingdom to kingdom, radiating from its Kentish bridgehead and percolating from the north as members of the Irish church also became engaged in the conversion process.² The people of each kingdom responded to the new religion in different ways, with some readily accepting the new faith and others remaining steadfastly opposed to it, but by c. AD 700 the first stage of the conversion had effectively been completed across all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.³ This book is the first to use both the surviving historical sources and the eastern region's rich and varied archaeological record to examine the mechanisms by which Christianity was introduced into the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia and to assess the rate at which and extent to which it spread throughout society.

Anglo-Saxon East Anglia

The Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia, which comprised most of modern-day Norfolk and Suffolk and perhaps the eastern part of the fen basin (Fig. 1), appears to have emerged as a political entity in the second half of the sixth century and by the early seventh century the Wuffing kings of south-eastern Suffolk had risen to prominence.⁴ Some of the boundaries of the kingdom are relatively easy to identify, others less so. To the north-west, north and east the kingdom was bordered by the North Sea, at once both a natural boundary and a thriving maritime link to

¹ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 51–68; Gameson, 'Augustine of Canterbury'; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 9–15; Bassett, 'In Search of the Origins', pp. 3–27.

² Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 69–77 and 94–102; Brown, *How Christianity Came to Britain*, pp. 118–37; Yorke, *Conversion of Britain*, pp. 122–8; Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 43–56.

³ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 13–113; Yorke, *Conversion of Britain*, pp. 98–148; Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, pp. 187–94.

⁴ Bassett, 'In Search of the Origins', pp. 26–7; Carver, 'Kingship and material culture'; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 1–24 and 58–71; Scull, 'Before Sutton Hoo', pp. 1–7; Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 73–83; Plunkett, *Suffolk in Anglo-Saxon Times*, pp. 55–96.

Scandinavia and the northern reaches of Germany.⁵ The processes of coastal erosion and deposition have greatly altered the shape of the coastline since the Anglo-Saxon period, with deposits having accrued along the central northern coast while at the same time the east coast has suffered erosion, most famously around Dunwich.⁶ Sea levels apparently rose slightly during the Roman period, inundating much of the fens throughout the Early and Middle Saxon periods, before receding again in the Late Saxon period, leaving large areas of alluvial deposits bordering the Wash and the Norfolk and Suffolk coasts.⁷ Throughout the Iron Age and Roman periods a large estuary existed in the vicinity of present-day Great Yarmouth (Fig. 2), but during the Late Saxon period the sea retreated and a shingle spit built up across the estuary's entrance.⁸ This 'Great Estuary' was flanked to the north and south by a pair of Roman forts — at Caister-on-Sea and Burgh Castle — which, as explored in Chapter 3, were to play a significant role in the Christianisation of the kingdom.

To the west lay the natural barrier of the fens, although it is not clear exactly where the Anglo-Saxon political boundary lay. The Tribal Hidage, a record of the relative sizes of the tribal territories of seventh-century England, listed several small territories lying within the area of the fens, including the North and South Gyrwe, the Winxa and the Willa.⁹ Their existence would seem to suggest that during the seventh century the boundary of East Anglia lay somewhere to the east of the fens, yet in the early eighth century Bede described Ely as lying within the East Anglian kingdom, suggesting that the smaller territories recorded in the Tribal Hidage had been subsumed by this date.¹⁰ A fluctuating western boundary to the kingdom is also suggested by the series of Anglo-Saxon linear earthworks, thought to have marked territorial boundaries, which crowd the landscape to the south of the fens in Cambridgeshire, the most famous of which is the Devil's Dyke.¹¹

To the south, the border with the neighbouring kingdom of the East Saxons has traditionally been assumed to have followed the line of the River Stour, which forms the modern boundary between Suffolk and Essex. However, recent scholarship has challenged this assumption and demonstrated convincingly that the rivers Gipping and Lark, which form a navigable corridor running north-west–south-east approximately between Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich, marked a much more substantial cultural boundary throughout later prehistory, the Anglo-Saxon period and well into the medieval period (Fig. 1).¹² Consequently, much of what is now

⁵ cf. Hines, *Scandinavian Character*, pp. 286–91; Carver, 'Pre-Viking traffic'.

⁶ Murphy, 'Coastal Change', p. 7; Williamson, *Sandlands*, pp. 128–32; Chester-Kadwell, *Early Anglo-Saxon Communities*, p. 51.

⁷ Chatwin, *British Regional Geology*, pp. 95–8; Martin, 'Soil Regions'; Williamson, 'Soil Landscapes'.

⁸ Green, 'East Anglian Coast-line Levels'; Murphy, 'Coastal Change'; Albone *et al.*, 'Archaeology of Norfolk's Coastal Zone', p. 14.

⁹ Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 76–7; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 9–15; Higham, *English Empire*, pp. 74–111.

¹⁰ HE, iv, 19; Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 63–4; Bassett, 'In Search of the Origins', pp. 17–20; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 9–15.

¹¹ Malim *et al.* 'New Evidence on the Cambridgeshire Dykes'; Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation*, pp. 11–12.

¹² Parker Pearson *et al.*, 'Three Men and a Boat', pp. 28–41; Newman, 'Exceptional Finds', pp. 99–100; Williamson, *England's Landscape: East Anglia*, pp. 29–30; Martin and Satchell, *Where Most Inclosures Be*, pp. 198–206; Rippon, *Beyond the Medieval Village*, pp. 140–43.

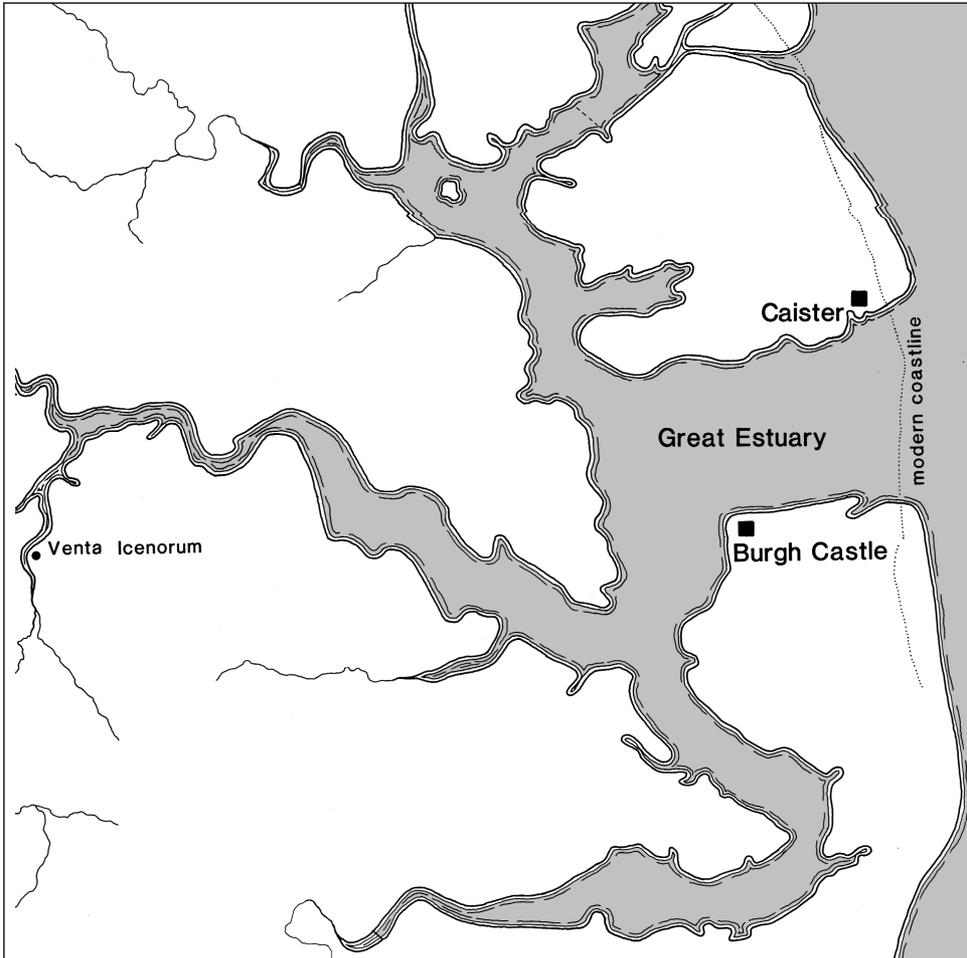


Fig. 2: The Great Estuary, showing the probable extent of the Roman coastline and the locations of Burgh Castle, Caister-on-Sea and *Venta Icenorum* (after Darling with Gurney, *Caister-on-Sea*, fig. 168). © NMAS

south-west Suffolk may once have lain outside the kingdom and therefore been subject to different cultural influences. Indeed, such differences are visible in the material discussed in later chapters, not least in the burial practices which were employed across the region during the Anglo-Saxon period.

The archaeological record

As is explored thoroughly in Chapter 2, Anglo-Saxon East Anglia is particularly poorly represented in the surviving historical sources, yet the kingdom's archaeological record is exceptional in both its quality and its quantity. This means that the archaeological record of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia is exceptionally well suited to answering questions such as those posed here. We are additionally fortunate that discoveries began to be recorded at a relatively early date, as

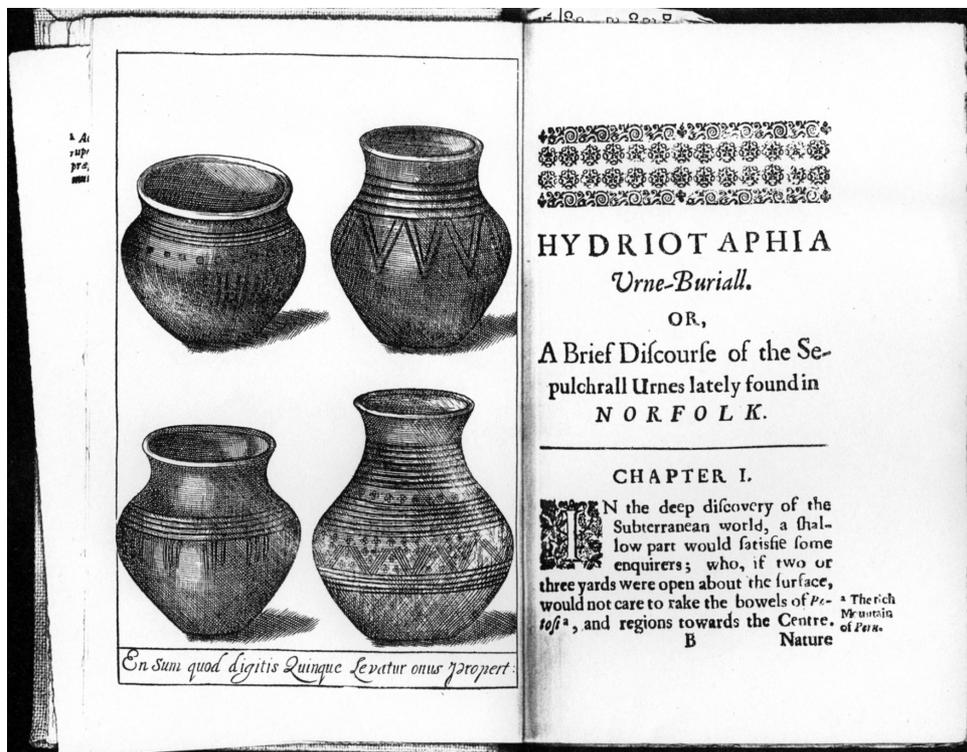


Fig. 3: The opening pages of Sir Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia*, published in 1658, which contained the earliest illustrations of East Anglian cremation urns.

demonstrated by the publication by Sir Thomas Browne in 1658 of *Hydriotaphia*, which recorded how at a site near Little Walsingham (Norfolk) 'were digged up between fourty and fifty Urnes, deposited in a dry and sandy soile, not a yard deep, nor farre from one another' (Fig. 3).¹³ Many other important archaeological discoveries were made in East Anglia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the post-war period seeing a particularly dramatic rise in the number of archaeological discoveries owing to strategies instigated by the authorities in Norwich, Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds during the redevelopment of these towns and cities.¹⁴ These strategies presaged the introduction in 1990 of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 16: Archaeology and Planning* (PPG16), which resulted in a vast increase in the quantity (if not the quality) of archaeological fieldwork in the region.¹⁵ We are fortunate that many of these sites have been comprehensively published in the regional archaeological journals and the monograph series *East Anglian Archaeology*.

We are additionally fortunate that East Anglia's largely arable agricultural

¹³ Browne, *Hydriotaphia*, p. 14.

¹⁴ e.g. Scole Committee, *Ipswich*; Carr, 'Archaeological potential'; Norwich Survey, *Norwich Survey*.

¹⁵ Darvill and Russell, *Archaeology After PPG16*, pp. 12–50.

economy makes fieldwalking surveys — the systematic collection of artefacts from the ploughsoil — particularly effective; several large-scale campaigns, such as the Deben Valley Survey in south-east Suffolk and the Fenland Survey in west Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire, have produced results significant to this discussion (see Chapter 5).¹⁶ Allied to fieldwalking is metal-detecting: vast areas of Norfolk and Suffolk have been examined by amateur metal-detectorists since the emergence of the hobby in the 1970s. Thanks primarily to the positive relationship developed between detectorists and the region's archaeological authorities, this information has greatly enhanced our understanding of many archaeological periods, the Anglo-Saxon period being foremost amongst them (see Chapter 4).¹⁷ The archaeological record of the Early Saxon period (c. AD 411–650) is broadly characterised by artefacts from funerary contexts — cremations urns, grave-goods and human remains — and many Early Saxon cemeteries have been excavated across the region, as at Spong Hill (Norfolk) and Snape (Suffolk).¹⁸ Two extensively excavated Early Saxon settlements also lie in Suffolk, at West Stow and Carlton Colville, although very few other Early Saxon settlements have been excavated across the region.¹⁹ The archaeological record of the Middle Saxon period (c. AD 651–850) presents a complete reversal of the Early Saxon picture. Middle Saxon cemeteries are rare discoveries in East Anglia, the handful of excavated examples including the cemeteries at Harford Farm and Burgh Castle (both Norfolk).²⁰ The Middle Saxon settlements of East Anglia, by contrast, are easily recognised archaeologically because of the prevalence of Ipswich ware, a well-fired and robust domestic pottery produced at the eponymous *wic* during the Middle Saxon period.²¹

The extent of the period during which Ipswich ware was produced has been the subject of much debate. Initially its production was thought to span c. AD 650–850 on the basis of its associations with other seventh- to ninth-century artefacts.²² More recently, Blinkhorn has argued that production did not begin until c. AD 700–720,²³ although the discovery of several hundred Ipswich ware sherds in seventh-century contexts at West Stow provides a compelling argument for the earlier dates.²⁴ It would seem that the production of Ipswich ware began perhaps as little as a generation after

¹⁶ Newman, 'Sutton Hoo before Rædwald' and 'Survey in the Deben Valley'.

¹⁷ Gurney, 'The Distribution of Metal-Detecting'; Chester-Kadwell, 'Metallic Taste', 'Metal-Detector Finds in Context' and *Early Anglo-Saxon Communities*, pp. 62–90; Newman, 'Metal Detector Finds' and 'Exceptional Finds'; Rogerson, 'Six Middle Anglo-Saxon Sites'.

¹⁸ Smith, 'Anglo-Saxon Remains' (1901) and 'Anglo-Saxon Remains' (1911); Clarke, 'Norfolk in the Dark Ages II'; Meaney, *Gazetteer*, pp. 169–85 and 224–36; Myres, *Corpus*; Myres and Green, *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, pp. 258–62; O'Brien, *Post-Roman Britain*, pp. 105–17; West, *Corpus*; Penn and Brugmann, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Inhumation Burial*, pp. 101–11; Chester-Kadwell, *Early Anglo-Saxon Communities*, pp. 173–212; Hills, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill I*; Hills and Penn, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill II*; Hills *et al.*, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill III*; *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill IV* and *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Spong Hill V*; Filmer-Sanke and Pestell, *Snape*.

¹⁹ West, *West Stow* and *West Stow Revisited*; Lucy *et al.*, *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Cemetery*.

²⁰ Penn, *Excavations on the Norwich Southern Bypass*; Johnson, *Burgh Castle*.

²¹ Hurst and West, 'Middle Saxon Ipswich Ware'; Smedley and Owles, 'Some Suffolk Kilns'; West, 'Excavations at Cox Lane'.

²² Hurst and West, 'Middle Saxon Ipswich Ware'; Hurst, 'The Pottery'.

²³ Blinkhorn, 'Of Cabbages and Kings', pp. 8–10.

²⁴ West, *West Stow*, pp. 137–8, *Corpus*, p. 317, and *West Stow Revisited*, pp. 28–32.

the East Anglian conversion began in earnest in the mid-seventh century and its presence at a number of the region's key early ecclesiastical sites is of fundamental importance to the arguments developed later in this book (Chapters 4 and 5).

The current approach

Anglo-Saxon religious practices have attracted a considerable degree of academic interest: the evidence for the nature of Anglo-Saxon paganism has been presented numerous times,²⁵ while the history and archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Church have received even greater attention because of the better survival of the evidence.²⁶ Yet, despite this high level of interest, relatively few studies have addressed the Anglo-Saxons' conversion from one set of religious beliefs to another, although it is extremely encouraging that the last few years have seen a number of new publications on the subject.²⁷ Within this limited set of studies the conversion of individual Anglo-Saxon kingdoms has been subject to disproportionate degrees of study: Kent's connections with Augustine's mission and the archiepiscopal see at Canterbury have attracted a great deal of attention, not least around the time of the 1500th anniversary of Augustine's landing in 1997,²⁸ while the Northumbrian conversion has been well studied because of its central place in Bede's writing and the region's high number of architectural and archaeological survivals.²⁹

The conversion of the East Anglian kingdom, by contrast, has not yet been studied in any great depth, although several authors have considered individual aspects of the subject or taken broad-brush approaches to the Anglo-Saxon period. For example, an assessment of the surviving historical evidence for the pre-Viking East Anglian church was published by Dorothy Whitelock in 1973 and was subsequently built upon by James Campbell within the context of a wider study of the pre-Conquest history of the East Anglian diocese published in 1996.³⁰ Other authors, such as Margaret Gallyon and Trefor Jones, have focused on the lives and deeds of the East Anglian saints, placing them into their appropriate historical and social contexts.³¹ On a broader scale, the mid-1990s saw the publication of a pair of books in which Tom Williamson and Peter Warner considered the historical and archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon Norfolk and Suffolk respectively. However, although the conversion was discussed in both cases, the division of the discussion between the two counties rather limited its effectiveness.³² A similar

²⁵ e.g. Branston, *Lost Gods of England*; Owen, *Rites and Religions*; Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*; Hutton, *Pagan Religions*; Ewing, *Gods and Worshipers*.

²⁶ e.g. Thomas, *Early Christian Archaeology*; Butler and Morris, *The Anglo-Saxon Church*; Morris, *Churches in the Landscape*, pp. 93–167; Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*; Foot, *Monastic Life*.

²⁷ e.g. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*; Fletcher, *Conversion of Europe*, pp. 108–29; Cusack, *Conversion*, pp. 88–118; Carver, *The Cross Goes North*, pp. 227–411; Yorke, *Conversion of Britain*; Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*.

²⁸ e.g. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 51–68; Wood, 'The Mission of Augustine' and 'Some Historical Re-identifications'; Gameson, 'Augustine of Canterbury'.

²⁹ e.g. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 148–67; Blair, *The World of Bede*; Hawkes and Mills, *Northumbria's Golden Age*; Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*.

³⁰ Whitelock, 'The Pre-Viking Age Church'; Campbell, 'The East Anglian See'.

³¹ Gallyon, *The Early Church*; Jones, *The English Saints*.

³² Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, pp. 137–61; Warner, *Origins of Suffolk*, pp. 108–43.

geographical restriction besets Steven Plunkett's otherwise masterly synthetic summary of Anglo-Saxon Suffolk published in 2005, a volume of great interest and with much to offer, but which is crying out for a sister volume covering Norfolk.³³

This book aims to provide an overarching synthesis of the relevant historical and archaeological evidence pertaining to the conversion of the kingdom of East Anglia, in particular dealing with the mechanisms by which the new religion may have spread and the speed and scale of its adoption throughout the kingdom. In doing so, it complements the significant contribution to the subject made by Tim Pestell in another volume in this series published in 2004, in which he examined the development of the monastic landscape of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia.³⁴ Pestell's book was primarily concerned with the period after Christianity had been established, rather than the conversion period *per se*, and the beginning of his period of interest effectively marks the end of that considered here.

Chapter 1 presents the theoretical frameworks which underpin this work, considers various archaeological approaches to the study of religion and religious conversion, and develops a series of archaeological indicators through which religious practices might be recognised in the archaeological record. Chapter 2 focuses on Anglo-Saxon East Anglia, beginning with an analysis of the surviving documentary evidence and establishing a historical framework within which the archaeological record can be studied. Bede's accounts of the conversion of the East Anglian royal dynasty and other missionary activities are examined and placed within their wider contexts. Chapter 3 turns to the archaeological record and considers the means by which the region's early ecclesiastical sites were established, starting with the reuse of Roman enclosures as missionary stations and encompassing other missionary foundations established within earthwork enclosures and at topographically isolated locations. Chapter 4 continues the archaeological theme by focusing on the archaeological evidence for the burial rites which were performed during the conversion period — specifically inhumation and cremation — in an attempt to recognise material traces of the new religion. Particular attention is paid to the cessation of cremation, the changing use of pyre- and grave-goods and the alignment of inhumations. A broader approach is taken in Chapter 5, which examines the restructuring of the Middle Saxon landscape brought about by the coming of Christianity. The landscape settings of Early and Middle Saxon settlements and cemeteries are contrasted to demonstrate the degree to which the conversion affected the population of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia. Attempts are also made to overcome the difficulty of exploring the archaeological evidence which lies sealed beneath parish churches via the use of surface finds made in churchyards and data from the many fieldwalking surveys which have taken place in the vicinity of churches. Finally, the Conclusion to this work describes the development of Christianity in East Anglia as it can be reconstructed from the archaeological and historical sources, and presents an agenda for further research.

³³ Plunkett, *Suffolk in Anglo-Saxon Times*, pp. 97–126.

³⁴ Pestell, *Landscapes of Monastic Foundation*, especially pp. 18–64.

