**Without a trace? Archaeology, literature, and the life and death of children in 5th-11th century England**

Kirsty E Squires, Staffordshire University

 (Kirsty.Squires@staffs.ac.uk)

**Introduction**

Studies that explore childhood in the past typically focus on one specific period and geographical location. This is incredibly valuable as it provides an in-depth exploration of the treatment and attitudes towards infants and children in life and death. However, there is little research that addresses how these attitudes and treatments changed over time. This issue is pertinent to all aspects of literary cultures and childhoods and is a central theme throughout this volume. One way of identifying shifting behaviours is by adopting a multi-period and multi-disciplinary approach to this area of research. Anglo-Saxon England has been studied extensively by archaeologists since the early twentieth century (Leeds 1913). The date range in question ranges from the fifth century A.D. through to the mid eleventh century A.D., though the period can be subdivided further due to the arrival of Christianity. The early Anglo-Saxon period spans from the fifth century, following the collapse of the Roman Empire, to the mid-seventh century. During this period, richly furnished inhumation burials can be found throughout England, whilst the cremation rite was chiefly practiced in eastern England. It is important to note that there are no surviving written records from the early Anglo-Saxon period. Without ample literary evidence, we are essentially forced to rely upon material remains. Archaeologists must thus ‘read’ this evidence which can be detrimental to our understanding of children from this period. Yet, later Anglo-Saxon law codes, epigraphic, and hagiographic sources are frequently used to provide a glimpse into early Anglo-Saxon life and death. The seventh century Kentish laws of Æthelbert (*c.*595-616 A.D.) and Hlothhere and Eadric (*c.* 616-686 A.D.) and the Wessex law of Ine (*c.* 686-726 A.D.) are the earliest written sources from the period (Crawford 1999). There are then no written codes until Alfred’s rule in the late ninth century meaning that scholars must once again rely on the archaeological record (*ibid.*).

Christianity was (re-)introduced into England in the seventh century. Consequently, funerary rituals employed from the mid-seventh through to the early eighth centuries started to change (Geake 1997; Welch 2011). It was during this period that the use of grave provisions decreased and the types of objects afforded to the dead were more restricted than the preceding period. Children buried in so-called “Final Phase” cemeteries (sites dating to the aforementioned period) were offered artefacts commonly associated with females, such as jewellery and amulets (Crawford 1999, 80; Welch 2011). The cremation rite also ceased in the early seventh century due to incoming Christian beliefs. Chamber graves, ship burial, and barrow burials, which contained artefacts displaying pagan and Christian symbolism, also appear in “Final Phase” cemeteries (Hoggett 2010). Hoggett (2007) has identified that objects possessing mixed ideological symbolism demonstrates the gradual acceptance of Christian beliefs. The later Anglo-Saxon period spans from the eighth to mid-eleventh century. Inhumations during this period conformed to Christian beliefs, in that bodies were laid in a supine pose, oriented west-east, and largely unaccompanied by grave goods (Hadley and Buckberry 2005). However, these burials were not homogenous. The burial containers used and the placement of graves in the landscape varied significantly (Hadley 2004). Documentary sources are more abundant in the later period which can be used alongside the physical evidence to facilitate our understanding of the late Anglo-Saxons.

Over the past forty years the development of osteological methodologies and artefact studies has allowed archaeologists to gain a greater insight into Anglo-Saxon society. The study of children and childhood during the early Anglo-Saxon period has advanced significantly over the past two decades and is largely attributable to the ground-breaking work of Sally Crawford (1999, 2000, 2004, 2007). Despite the great strides that have been made in this field of research, the majority of studies focus on either the early or late Anglo-Saxon period which, in turn, hinders our insight into how attitudes and treatments of children changed over the period as a whole. This chapter aims to provide an up-to-date exploration of the lives and deaths of children from the fifth to eleventh century. There are conspicuous issues with both documentary and archaeological evidence when examined in isolation. For example, archaeological remains may not survive in the burial record, hence evidence is lost, whilst documentary sources may have once served as propaganda for ideological or political causes. However, the simultaneous use of both literary and archaeological evidence will provide a more rounded understanding of Anglo-Saxon childhood. Therefore, this chapter will focus upon the transition from childhood to adulthood through an investigation of the demographic profile of cemetery sites, the artefactual assemblages associated with the youngest members of society, the placement of children in the funerary landscape, and literary sources from the period. It is hoped that this chapter will highlight the value and importance of adopting a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to research that will, in turn, further our knowledge of childhood and multiple constructions of the child in the medieval period.

**The demographic nature of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries**

The mortality rates of a population can be affected by many factors, such as famine and disease. Documentary and environmental evidence suggests a downturn in climatic conditions from the fifth to seventh century A.D., in that it became much wetter and colder (Brooks 1949; Carver 1989; Dark 2000; Hooke 2011; Lamb 1981). These conditions would have resulted in decreased agricultural output and made food storage extremely difficult (Koepke and Baten 2005, 147). Consequently, seasonal scarcities and, in the most severe of cases, famine would have ensued leading to increased mortality rates. In the early eighth century, the Venerable Bede recorded numerous episodes of pestilence and famine which were caused by draught (Hines 1997, 424), whilst *The Peterborough Manuscript* chronicles an episode of the “great plague” in 664 A.D. (Swanton 2000). Such events have the biggest effect on the youngest and oldest members of society. Based on epigraphic records and model life tables, it has been estimated that infant mortality rates in early Anglo-Saxon England lie within the region of 40-50% (Buckberry 2000; Squires 2014). This figure would have been attained by famine and disease, lack of healthcare, insanitary living conditions, and even infanticide (Molleson 1991). Yet the data under investigation paints a different picture and shows that the number of infants and children buried in communal cemeteries was low. Squires (2016) examined the demographic profiles of 1356 inhumations and 4536 cremation burials from early Anglo-Saxon England. The frequency of individuals under 13 years old from early Anglo-Saxon cremations and inhumations totalled 19.6% and 23.2%, respectively (Figures 1 and 2). Demographic variability is seen throughout England, though the inhumation cemetery at Great Chesterford (Essex, 49%) and the cremation cemetery at Caistor-by-Norwich (Norfolk, 46%) are the only known sites to contain over 40% of individuals under the age of 13 years (Squires 2014). This in part can be explained by the excavation strategy of archaeologists. For example, at Caistor-by-Norwich, archaeologists were actively seeking the skeletal remains of young individuals (Squires 2011). This will consequently make archaeologists more vigilant of smaller bones and teeth that once belonged to infants and children which can, in turn, skew the demographic profile of a site.

The under-representation of infants and children from these sites has been discussed at length by archaeologists (Buckberry 2000; Lucy 2000; Squires 2012, 2014; Stoodley 2000). Scholars have attributed the low number of individuals to a variety of factors, including local funerary customs, poor preservation of remains, the fragility of juvenile remains, and excavation and recovery strategies adopted by archaeologists (Squires 2014). Interestingly, infants and children are found in higher numbers in cemeteries dating to the late Anglo-Saxon period (Lucy 1994). Thus, quashing the theory that poor preservation was the ultimate cause of low frequencies in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

**Figure 1: Demographic profile of a sample of early Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Insert Figure 2 here**

**Figure 2: Demographic profile of a sample of early Anglo-Saxon cremation cemeteries1**

The increased representation of infants and children from the late Anglo-Saxon period cannot be attributed to higher mortality rates but, instead, changing funerary rites (Dapling 2010). An examination of 4109 late Anglo-Saxon inhumation burials shows that the number of individuals under 13 years of age totalled 30% (Figure 3). Again, there is inter-site variability in terms of the number of infants and children interred in each cemetery. In some cases, low numbers can be explained in part by poor preservation, for example at North Elmham (Norfolk) (Wells and Cayton 1980). Ultimately, the introduction of Christianity and burial within consecrated ground is the primary reason for increased numbers of infants and children at these sites. This subject will be revisited at a later stage in this chapter.

**Insert Figure 3 here**

**Figure 3: Demographic profile of a sample of later Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemeteries[[2]](#footnote-2)**

**Artefacts associated with children**

Despite the dearth of written sources from the early Anglo-Saxon period, burial evidence can provide an exceptional insight into the social transition from childhood to adulthood. In early Anglo-Saxon England, infants and children were typically afforded gender neutral objects (i.e. items found with adult males and females), such as knives and pottery, or provisions more commonly associated with adult females, for example combs, beads, spindle whorls, brooches, and rings (Crawford 1999; Lucy 2000; Squires 2014). The nature of these artefacts emphasises the close association of infants and children with adult females, perhaps because they had yet to adopt full adult status within society, and the limited gender distinctions between boys and girls (Squires 2014). Even though these young individuals had yet to achieve this status, they were still valued members of society as illustrated by the *wergild* values attached to foetuses, infants, and children. Law 9 of Alfred the Great (871-899 A.D.) states that “If anyone kills a pregnant woman, while the child is in her womb, he shall pay the full compensation for the woman, and half the compensation for the child, in accordance with the wergild of the father’s kindred” (Dapling 2010). Interestingly, there is no distinction between the *wergild* value of boys and girls in the Anglo-Saxon period, rather their value was dependent on the status of their mother (Oliver 2002). The lack of distinction between girls and boys is notable in other lawcodes. For example, Law 25 of Æthelbert of Kent (595-616 A.D.) stipulates that “If any one slay a ceorl’s half-aeta [bread eater or dependant], let him make bot with 6 shillings” (Reilly 2012). On a similar line, sons and daughters appear to have possessed a similar social status and treatment in life. Roberts, Roberts and Bisson (2009) examined 39 Anglo-Saxon wills and identified that there is no evidence to show that sons were more likely to inherit estates over daughters. The archaeological and literary evidence illustrates that the differential treatment of children in life and death was not related to their sex or gender, but the social standing of their kin group.

A recurring trend identified from early Anglo-Saxon cremation cemeteries is the burial of older individuals in taller cinerary urns (Squires 2013). This evidence suggests that as individuals passed through different age thresholds they were bestowed taller pots which may have served as a visual demarcation of their newly assigned social roles (*ibid.*). Härke (1989) has similarly found that the length of knives buried with individuals from inhumation burials is closely associated with age, that is, the length of knives increases with age. The provision of longer knives and taller pots at the funeral is an interesting parallel. These objects may have initially served as a visual means of distinguishing age during life, whereby individuals received a taller pot or longer knife at important “milestones” in the lifecycle. When an individual died these highly-personalised objects fell out of use and were consequently interred with the deceased, which further emphasised the differences between individuals based on their age at the funeral. In the seventh century, there was a decline in the display of age and gender at the funeral. However, Craig-Atkins (2012) has identified that chest burials, which were primarily employed from the seventh to ninth century, were rarely afforded to infants and children. These findings infer that the age-related identity of infants and children continued into the afterlife as did the constant distinction between the young and old within Anglo-Saxon society. Furthermore, we can see that infants and children were marked apart from the adult populace based on the objects they were buried with throughout the period in question. Yet, the archaeological remains offer no explanation for the differential treatment of juveniles and the absence of literary sources evidently limits our comprehension of these mortuary practices.

Animal offerings formed an integral part of the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite and, to a lesser extent, the inhumation rite. Regardless of funerary tradition, individuals under 13 years of age were less likely to be afforded animal funerary offerings than older members of the community (Squires 2014). At Castledyke South (Lincolnshire) only 9% of inhumation burials belonging to infants and children contained faunal offerings whilst animal remains were recovered in slightly higher numbers from the cremation cemeteries at Elsham (13%) and Cleatham (32%) (both located in Lincolnshire) (Squires 2013). The lesser provision of animal offerings may relate to restrictions placed on the economic investment of children’s funerals, e.g. the cost of slaughtering an animal or the expenditure required to build a larger pyre to accommodate faunal offerings. Nonetheless, this does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the lack of animal offerings found with infants and children. Although a larger pyre would have been needed for numerous faunal offerings or the provision of a large animal, smaller animals or cuts of meat could have been positioned alongside the deceased on a smaller pyre (Squires 2016). Therefore, the absence of faunal gifts appears to have been a social rather than a practical choice.

The association between animal offerings and age suggests that adolescence was considered a key transitional stage in the lifecycle amongst early Anglo-Saxon groups. It is during this stage of the lifecycle, that individuals would have adopted new responsibilities in their immediate household and wider kin group which would have ultimately led to the formation of a new social identity, namely adulthood. Their involvement in economic activities, such as craft production and livestock management, would have resulted in increased interaction with animals and their produce (Richards 1987). The participation of adolescents in these activities and their contribution to the livelihood of their kin group are factors that would have justified the provision of faunal offerings at their funeral (Squires 2014). Therefore, it appears that many children were not provided animal products at the funeral on the grounds of their social responsibilities. Adolescence appears to be a fixed transitional stage in the lifecycle in Anglo-Saxon England, which is in stark contrast to documentary evidence from the Continent. Tacitus, who chronicled the lives of the Germanic people on the Continent in the late first century A.D., noted that boys of the Chatti tribe were emancipated when they were physically mature (i.e. ability to grow a beard) and capable of bearing arms, specifically when they had killed an enemy (Birley, *Germany*,31). Males were prohibited from cutting their hair or beard until they had slayed an opponent. This indicates that there was no fixed age when males reached adulthood; instead the transition to adulthood was based on an individual’s ability to fight. It is plausible that children in Anglo-Saxon England did undertake more labour-intensive work from a younger age than the physical evidence suggests. However, this aspect of social age is difficult to detect in the surviving archaeological and written records.

In the 1st century A.D. Pliny noted that cremation was the norm once teething had commenced due to the belief that these individuals were still ‘wet’ (i.e. they had yet to develop into a separate person with their own identity and adopt full societal roles) (Beagon 2005). Similarly, the importance placed on age thresholds during infancy, childhood, and adolescence persisted throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. The artefactual evidence examined in this chapter illustrates that adolescence was a key phase in the lifecycle as individuals were assigned new roles, responsibilities, and social identities. Interestingly, this largely corresponds to historical sources. Law 6 of Hlothere and Eadric, both of whom were Kentish Kings in the seventh century, indicates that once children reached ten years of age they were old enough to manage their family’s property and land (Kuefler 1991). By the eleventh century, the age of responsibility increased to 12 years old (*Canute* 21, Crawford 1999) though it is not entirely clear when this was initially actioned. Some still felt 12 years of age was too young to assign adult responsibilities to individuals. For example, in the tenth century King Æthelstan attempted to increase the age of criminal liability and adult responsibilities to 15 years old (*Æthelstan* 12, Orme 2003). Crawford (1999, 42) notes that this law was short-lived and was likely to reflect an ideal as opposed to a custom, by which 15 years was seen as the age of legal maturity and not the traditional age of maturity. By the reign of King Henry I (12th century) the legal age was increased to 15 years old at which point an individual could be prosecuted for criminal behaviour or sit on a jury (Orme 2003). The written and archaeological evidence implies that the point at which a child became an adult changed over the course of the Anglo-Saxon period. This would have influenced their roles within the household and variable attitudes and treatment of children depending on their legal status.

**Placement of infants and children in the landscape**

Early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries ranged significantly in size, for example only two dozen individuals were recorded from the inhumation cemetery at Tittleshall (Norfolk) (Walton Rogers 2013) whereas over 2500 individuals were identified at the cremation cemetery at Spong Hill (Norfolk) (McKinley 1994). During this period, infants and children were not segregated from the adult populace at cemetery sites (Squires 2013). It is widely held that the lack of zoning indicates the use of large household burial plots, which themselves contained internal social divisions (Hirst 1985; Sayer 2009; Sayer and Wienhold 2013; Squires 2013; Stoodley 1999). Early Anglo-Saxon households were not solely comprised of immediate blood relations but rather, a variety of kin associations. Kinship systems are outlined in various law codes, wills, and ecclesiastical texts. For example, *Ine* 38 stipulates that “If a man and his wife have a child between them, and the man dies, the mother will keep and rear the child: she will be given 6 shillings to maintain it, a cow in the summer and an ox in winter. The kinsman will look after the property until it comes of age” (Crawford 1999, 176). This illustrates the expectations placed upon extended kin to support this individual family unit during a period of hardship. Fostering, wet nursing, and the general care of infants and children also seem to have played an integral role in early Anglo-Saxon society and would have created artificial kin associations (Goody 1984; Sayer 2009). The lack of segregated groupings in early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries implies that kin members, regardless of their biological relationship, shared common attributes, for instance, ethnicity and ideological beliefs (Squires 2013). These characteristics appear to have held greater importance than the age of the deceased. Even though children had yet to take on their full social roles, the common identity they shared with the rest of their household made them valued members of their kin group, which warranted their inclusion in these plots.

With the introduction of Christianity and increased stability of social hierarchies the funerary treatment of infants and children started to change in the seventh century. In the late Anglo-Saxon period, there is greater emphasis on the nuclear family (i.e. husband, wife, and children) as well as the increased use of the multiple burial rite (Stoodley 2002). *Ine* 63 implies that families of a higher social standing were still likely to have large households in the late seventh to early eighth century. This law states that “If a thane travels, he may take with him his reeve, his smith and his children’s nurse” (Crawford 1999). However, attitudes towards certain roles carried out by extended kin started to change during this period. There is evidence to suggest that the use of wet nurses was frowned upon by the Church. This in itself would have consequently changed the structure of a household. Bede’s narrative of the *Libellus responsionum*, which details letter correspondence between Bishop Augustine and Pope Saint Gregory I (596-601 A.D.), addresses issues concerning baptism and other matters surrounding the conversion of the English to Christianity. In this letter, Augustine asks Gregory several questions, the eighth of which focuses on wet nursing. Gregory’s response to this question is direct and considers the practice to be an “evil custom” (McClure and Collins 2008). This custom was condemned as the cessation of breastfeeding by the mother related to the resumption of sexual relations, which the Church prohibited during lactation (Kuefler 1991). The Church aspired to control all aspects of reproduction but wet nursing allowed mothers to overcome this restriction meaning they could procreate shortly after giving birth (Goody 1984). Thus, the sanction on wet nursing was intended as an additional contraceptive practice (*ibid.*). If wet nursing was a common practice in the earlier period it may have been abandoned by later households. This in turn would have reduced the number of extended kin within a household unit.

Segregation of infants and young children in cemeteries, particularly near the walls of churches, in late Anglo-Saxon England was a relatively common practice. So-called “eaves-drip” burials have been identified at numerous cemeteries and date from the eighth century through to the eleventh century (Craig-Atkins 2014). Scholars have traditionally believed that posthumous baptism was the primary reason for burying infants and children next to the eaves of churches (Boddington 1996; Crawford 1999; Craig-Atkins 2014). The importance of baptism is highlighted in documentary sources from the late seventh century. *Ine* 2 states that: “A child must be baptised within thirty days: if this is not done, 30 shillings to be paid in compensation. If, however, it dies without being baptised, he shall pay as compensation all he possesses” (Cunningham 2006). Crawford (1999, 42) believes that King Ine of Wessex introduced this law in an attempt to be viewed as a Christian ruler. It is also postulated that Ine wrote this law as he feared that unbaptised youngsters would incur the wrath of God (*ibid.*). The reasons for Ine’s decision to implement this law are two-fold. in the first instance, it would have punished non-believers or careless parents if they had not baptised their child (Lee 2008). Additionally, it ensured the laity entered (and was initiated into) the Church from a young age meaning they were tied to the institution throughout the course of their life. The implementation of this law could be partly responsible for the increased frequency of infants and children in late Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, parents would not have wanted to pay significant fines if their unbaptised child was to die. Furthermore, baptism would have ensured their burial in consecrated ground. Secondly, as Crawford (1999, 42) notes, families may have feared the spiritual consequences of not baptising their babies. Thus, a greater number of juveniles were baptised and subsequently interred in community cemeteries.

Political and ideological changes influenced the treatment of infants and children at the funeral in Anglo-Saxon England. However, the tradition of burying infants and children in dwellings, settlements, and liminal spaces persisted from the fifth to ninth century (Sofield 2015). It is unclear why this custom continued as there are no surviving historical sources that refer to this practice. Several archaeologists have suggested that burials located in close proximity to the living held ideological or ritualistic significance (Sofaer-Derevenski 1997; Kamp 2001; Hamerow 2006). The close association between the home, women, and youngest members of society is illuminated by funerary assemblages found with infants and children from these contexts. Pottery sherds, combs, spindle whorls, pins, and animal bone are the most commonly identified artefacts recovered from these burials, all of which are closely connected to female-oriented tasks that would have been carried out in the home and around the settlement (Crawford 2008, 173). Tacitus identified that tasks in the household were conducted by women and children (Birley, *Germany*,25). Juveniles would have been assigned basic tasks around the settlement, such as collecting wood for the hearth or gathering food (Squires 2016). It could be speculated that children were most commonly afforded female-oriented grave goods as a means of reinforcing the link between the household and their female carers. These findings also indicate that children, regardless of sex, adopted a feminised identity until the moment they were recognised as an adult (Squires 2014). As previously noted, the *wergild* value of both girls and boys was dependent on the social standing of their mother which, again, further emphasised the strong links between children, female kin, and the home (Oliver 2002). Crawford (2008) has identified that this funerary practice came to an end upon the creation of parish churches and associated cemeteries. However, the rite did continue into the ninth century. Indeed, there is the possibility that unbaptised infants and children were interred in these spheres to avoid paying fines, as outlined in *Ine* 2.

**Conclusion**

The main aim of this chapter was to explore the lives and deaths of children living in the Anglo-Saxon period through documentary and archaeological evidence. The information presented in this paper has demonstrated that the use of both the literary and physical evidence are complementary, especially when examining the lifecycle and transition to adulthood. In the early Anglo-Saxon period, younger individuals were afforded shorter funerary vessels and knives. Similarly, at some later sites adults were more likely to be associated with chest burials. This corroborates with the law codes when considering ages of responsibility. The introduction of Christianity and the importance placed on baptism can account for increasing numbers of children in cemeteries over time though some were still buried in settlements up until the ninth century. Fines imposed on parents that failed to baptise their offspring and persistent beliefs surrounding the connection between children and their female carers within the household may account for this practice. Greater segregation of children in cemeteries was also witnessed in the later period, whereby they were interred next to the eaves of churches. Again, this can be attributable to shifting ideological beliefs and attitudes towards children. It is clear that documentary and archaeological evidence can be concurrently used to enhance our understanding of childhood in the Anglo-Saxon period. Over the past ten years the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past has encouraged and promoted greater multi-disciplinary research in this field. Indeed, collaborations between archaeologists, osteologists, historians, and literary experts are needed if we are to truly appreciate the lives and deaths of children in the medieval, post-medieval, and modern periods.

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1. The age categories employed in this paper are based on those initially employed by McKinley (1994, 19). Foetus: 8 weeks–39 weeks *in utero*; infant: 0-4 years; child: 5-12 years; adolescent: 13–18 years; adult: 19+ years. For the purpose of this paper, adolescents and adults have been examined together. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The age groupings used in this chapter are outlined in footnote1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)