



Historic England

Pre-Christian Cemeteries

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Pre-Christian cemeteries. The idea of clearly defined spaces set aside for the orderly interment of the deceased is, in archaeological terms, a relatively recent development, dating from the Early and Middle Bronze Age. Descriptions of Iron Age, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Viking cemeteries and their development follow. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover

Crouched burial of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age date at Huntsmans Quarries, Naunton, Gloucestershire.

Introduction

Although cemeteries of one form or another represent the final resting place for the vast majority of the population today, the idea of clearly defined spaces set aside for the orderly interment of the deceased is, in archaeological terms, a relatively recent development. The remains of the dead have been dealt with in remarkably varied ways in the past. As well as regional and chronological variations in the preference for inhumation – the interment of a complete corpse – or cremation – the reduction of a corpse to ashes prior to interment – there is a considerable variety in many other aspects of funerary rites. This includes things like the treatment of a corpse prior to interment; the presence or absence of accompanying artefacts, or ‘grave-goods’; and the matter of what constitutes an appropriate place for deposition.

In addition, for much of the prehistoric period in particular, it is abundantly clear that only a small proportion of the population received an archaeologically visible burial rite – the majority were dealt with in ways that have left little or no trace. This has prompted debate about other possible rites and practices including, for example, excarnation – the exposure of the corpse to the elements and scavengers; or perhaps cremation, but with the ashes being deposited in rivers, or being scattered rather than buried.

At the same time, many of the interments dated to the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age that have been discovered by archaeologists do not comprise the entire skeletal remains of the deceased. Skeletons may be missing limbs or skulls, for example; many individuals are represented by a small selection of bones at best; while many cremation deposits have been shown not to contain all of the ashes and bone fragments that could have been recovered from the pyre. It is only during the Roman period that we start to see the widespread appearance of cemeteries in something approaching the modern sense.

1 History of Research

For later prehistory, human remains are perhaps best associated with the various forms of funerary monument – the long barrows of the Neolithic (Figure 1), the many types of round barrow of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, and the square barrows of the Iron Age, for example. However, over the same period human remains, sometimes just the odd bone, sometimes the complete remains of one or more individuals (Figure 2), were being put in all manner of places – the ditch segments of Neolithic causewayed enclosures; in and around henges and stone circles; within pits or ditches associated with Bronze Age and Iron Age settlements, including hillforts; in rivers, lakes, and bogs; and so on.

Apart from the burial mounds (Figure 3), some of which attracted dozens of interments over a period of time, what we might regard as a cemetery – a discrete, perhaps carefully defined space within which burials were placed over a period of years, perhaps decades or longer – does not really occur in the archaeological record until the middle centuries of the 2nd millennium BC, the early and middle Bronze Age, a time when cremation was the dominant funerary rite across much of the British Isles. Prior to this time, there were sites and monuments that have been called cemeteries, though the situation is far from straightforward.



Figure 1
Excavation of the Neolithic, 4th millennium BC, Hazleton North long barrow, Gloucestershire, in 1980. Ploughsoil stripping reveals the overlying stone cairn



Figure 2
Crouched burial of late Bronze Age/early Iron Age date at Huntsmans Quarries, Naunton, Gloucestershire.

A class of Neolithic monument called ‘enclosed cremation cemeteries’ has previously been identified by some archaeologists, although it was poorly-defined and related to very few sites. In fact, the most commonly cited examples were Stonehenge (Wiltshire) and a much smaller enclosure near Dorchester-on-Thames (Oxfordshire). In both cases, it is highly debatable whether there was a distinct phase in their history

when cremation burial was the primary function. In any case, what is being referred to is not a distinctive site type, but phases or elements in the use of particular enclosed ceremonial monuments.

The term enclosed cremation cemetery has also been loosely applied by archaeologists to a range of circular and funerary monuments of Bronze Age date, including ring cairns and embanked stone circles. The term is perhaps most appropriate to a range of sites which comprise a ditch, presumably once accompanied by a bank, enclosing a circular area within which cremations were deposited in pits. The cremated remains were often contained within a pottery vessel, though many were unaccompanied, or were perhaps buried in an organic container such as a bag or basket which has long since perished. It is rarely possible to tell either from surface evidence or from excavation as to whether a mound was ever present within the enclosed area. Indeed, it is only excavation that offers the potential to distinguish between such enclosed cemeteries and levelled round barrows.



Figure 3
Excavation of a Bronze Age barrow’s ring ditch at Bromfield, Shropshire. Originally twenty or so barrows stood here.

Unenclosed cremation cemeteries also occur during the Bronze Age, particularly during the Middle Bronze Age. As the term suggests, these comprise clusters of urned or unurned cremations that, although occupying a discrete area, lack evidence for any kind of enclosing ditch or fence. It is not unusual for these to develop alongside an existing round barrow or ring ditch, a good example being Handley Hill 24 on Cranborne Chase, Dorset, where a low circular mound was surrounded by a ditch just 7 m in diameter. More than 50 cremation deposits, plus some deposits of pottery without cremated bone, were all interred in pits outside the ring ditch. At Bromfield, Shropshire, the cremations, both urned and unurned, were arranged around one side of a circular area which may either have been maintained as an open space or, possibly, marked the site of a destroyed enclosure or round barrow. Such clusters of cremations are far from unusual, and generally comprise between 5 and 20 individuals. This underlines the need, in terms of both archaeological investigation and designation, to consider the areas between mounds in a group of round barrows. Elsewhere, there may be no obvious connection with a pre-existing monument.

Unenclosed cremation cemeteries are highly unlikely to be encountered through anything other than excavation.

For both enclosed and unenclosed examples, the term 'urnfield' has sometimes been used instead of 'cremation cemetery'. Although the two may seem superficially similar in meaning, the term 'urnfield' has distinct associations with a phenomenon that occurs widely across continental Europe in the middle and especially late Bronze Age. However, the cremation cemeteries of Bronze Age Britain are very different in character to the Urnfields of Europe.

All forms of Bronze Age cremation cemetery will be difficult to identify without excavation. Developments in the radiocarbon dating of cremated bone mean that it is now possible to accurately date unurned cremations, which allows for the possibility that more cemeteries of Bronze Age date might be identified from earlier excavations. However, new cemeteries are only likely to be identified if geophysical survey and excavation encompasses areas outside and away from the more obvious monuments. Unenclosed cremation cemeteries are highly unlikely to be discovered in any other way, while enclosed cremation cemeteries, even where the enclosing earthworks are relatively well preserved, will be difficult to distinguish from the wide range of other broadly circular earthwork-defined enclosures, not all prehistoric in date, let alone Bronze Age, without excavation.

2 Iron Age Cemeteries

As with the preceding Bronze Age, the Iron Age saw a variety of burial practices across England throughout the period. Again, only a small percentage of the population is visible archaeologically, and most human remains do not occur in a 'cemetery' context.

There are, however, some exceptions, most of which relate to quite specific regional traditions of burial that emerged during the Iron Age and lasted for varying periods of time. Perhaps the best known Iron Age funerary structures are the square barrows, most commonly associated with Yorkshire (Figure 4).

A small number of inhumation cemeteries of Middle Iron Age have been discovered through excavation, the best explored being those at Yarnton in Oxfordshire; Kemble in Gloucestershire; and Suddern Farm, Hampshire. These generally feature crouched inhumations in shallow grave pits, and usually lack grave goods. The most



Figure 4
The burial of a high-status late Iron Age woman accompanied by a chariot or cart uncovered by quarrying at Wetwang, North Yorkshire, in 1984.

extensively examined is that at Yarnton, where 35 burials in two main clusters were encountered. It has been suggested that this kind of cemetery may be fairly widespread, but that a focus on settlement excavation, plus the difficulty of identifying unenclosed cemetery sites through remote sensing techniques (geophysics), may account for the small numbers identified to date.

Inhumation cemeteries ranging in date from the 4th century BC through to the end of the Iron Age have also been identified in the south-west of England, and may represent a distinctive regional tradition. Examples include sites at Mount Batten, Devon, and Trethellan Farm, Cornwall, the latter including some 21 inhumations. Again, the interments are usually crouched, and many of the grave pits were lined with stone slabs. Many featured grave goods, though these tend to be limited to personal items such as pins, bracelets and brooches. Again, these cemeteries were encountered in the course of excavation, and may be difficult to identify using other prospection techniques.

Towards the end of the Iron Age in south-eastern Britain, a tradition of sizeable unenclosed cremation cemeteries emerged. These generally range in date from the early 1st century BC through to, and perhaps just beyond, the Roman invasion in the mid-1st century AD. The sites at Aylesford and Swarling in Kent were among the first to be identified, and some spectacular individual burials, accompanied by considerable quantities of wine amphorae, drinking vessels and numerous other grave goods, have been discovered at places like Welwyn, Hertfordshire.

More recently discovered examples include cemeteries at King Harry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire and at Westhampnett, West Sussex. At the latter, almost the entire complex was excavated. It contained around 160 individual cremations, estimated to have been buried over a period of around 40 years. They were arranged around, and mainly south-east of, a circular area which was maintained as an open space throughout. Interestingly, adjacent to the cemetery was a number of X-, Y- and T-shaped features interpreted as the sites of funeral pyres. Some structures suggested to be shrines were also present. Most of the cremations were not contained in urns, though of course they may originally have been buried within organic containers which have long since perished.

All forms of Iron Age cemetery will be difficult to discover without excavation. In some cases, dating to the Iron Age may be impossible without further scientific analysis – radiocarbon dating, for example.

3 Roman Cemeteries

In simple terms early Roman burials studies are dominated by cremation cemeteries that may in part reflect pre-existing insular tradition, but may also be influenced by intrusive traditions and practices. From the later 2nd century AD cremation is gradually superseded by inhumation burials as the preferred rite (Figure 5). While this is generally correct, and exceptions have been recognised by researchers for many years – for example the later survival of cremation burial in the north (Figure 6) – the picture is actually far more complex and regionally varied. The current balance of evidence is heavily weighted towards southern England and to urban cemeteries. Wiltshire appears to represent an area where inhumation was the preferred early Roman rite, perhaps reflecting localised pre-Roman preferences.



Figure 6
Roman cremation burials from Birdoswald, Cumbria.



Figure 5
3rd or 4th century Roman inhumation burial in a limestone cist from Bainesse Roman roadside settlement near Catterick, North Yorkshire

The recognition of extensive urban cemeteries located, as Roman law demanded, alongside the main roads on the approaches to a town or city is relatively easy with Roman burials, normally inhumations, often reported by early antiquaries and readily recognised in evaluations and watching briefs (Figure 7).

However, the recognition of the extent of cemeteries in areas that may at other times in the Roman period be occupied by suburban buildings or industry is more difficult, as is adequate recognition of cremation cemeteries, or cremations within mixed cemeteries, at least when confronted with antiquarian or other inadequate records.

Modern excavations of substantial elements of cemeteries, such as the Eastern Cemetery of Roman London, have shown use from the 1st to the 5th century AD and the variety of rites practiced. The complexity of rites has long been recognised with the recording of evidence of in situ cremations (Silchester, Hampshire), *ustina* (pyre structure, The Mount Cemetery, York), but what is increasingly clear is that the diversity of customs is immense.

Early high status burials in southern England, such as the Bartlow Hills (Cambridgeshire) barrows, reflect the immediately pre-Roman rites involving conspicuous display and display regional diversity. Traditions of display are

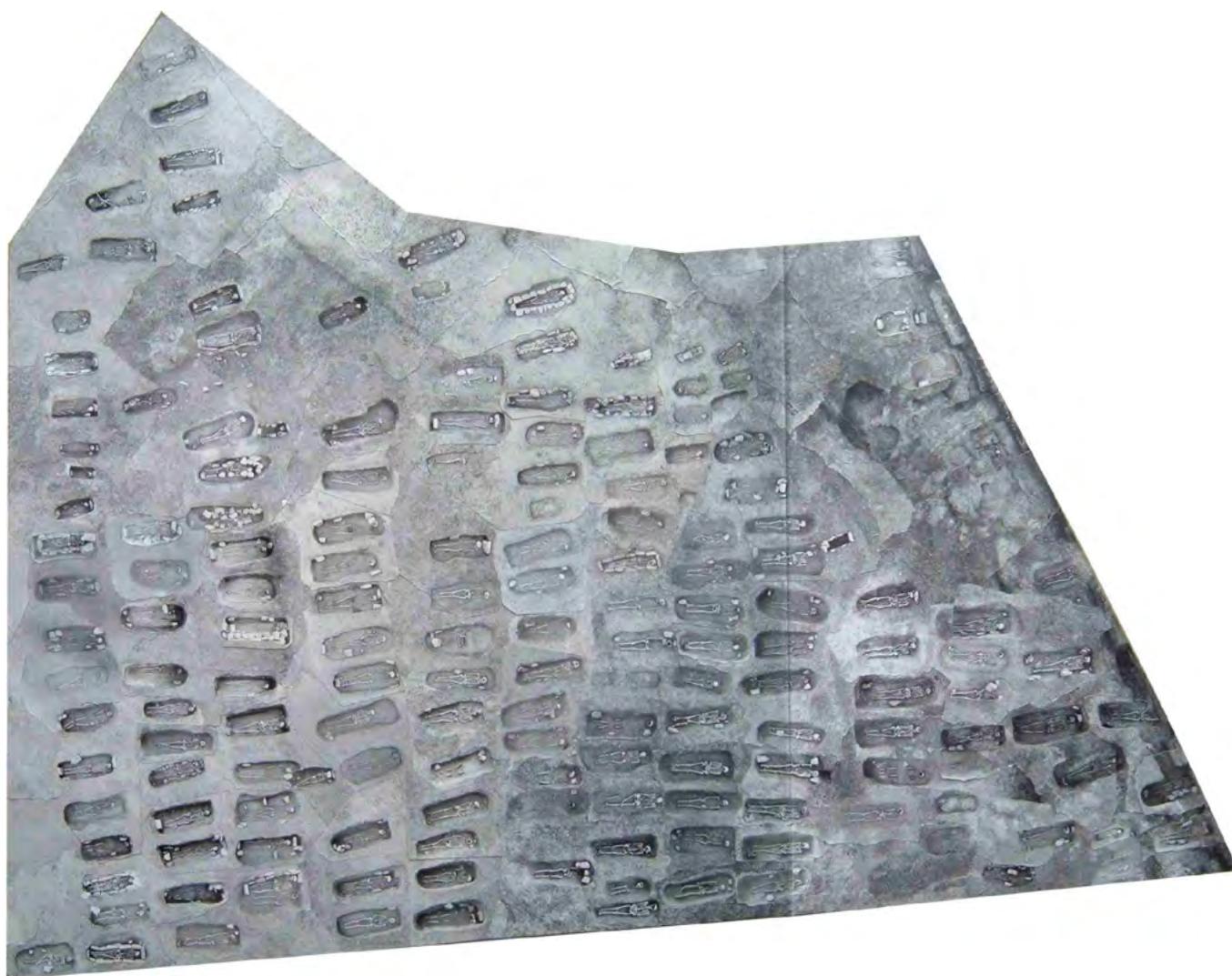


Figure 7
The 4th century Roman cemetery at Ashton, near Oundle, Northamptonshire, found during development work.

continued with the construction of mausolea (for example at Binchester, Durham and Poundbury, Dorset) often in prominent positions and with inscribed and highly decorated sarcophagi and cremation containers, lead coffins and carved tombstones. Such discoveries are often reported in antiquarian literature and, may, if adequately located, provide pointers to cemetery locations, although the fact that they tend to derive from the most prominent locations may do little to assist with determining the extent of burial areas. Equally high status burials need not be indicative of a larger cemetery, for example the 4th century AD double burial in the temple mausoleum at Lullingstone (Kent).

Intrusive groups, particularly military communities appear to have brought their own burial rites with them, for example the 3rd century 'Pannonian' burials from Brougham (Cumbria) and thereby added to the existing diverse regional mix of traditions. Upstanding cemetery structures are rare, but the Petty Knowes cemetery at High Rochester (Northumbria) provides a rare example, the small size of the 'barrowlets' emphasising the vulnerability of such evidence and explaining the paucity of similar survivals. Other intrusive traditions are recognisable in the burial record, such as the 'gallus burial' from Bainesse, near Catterick (North Yorkshire) which arguably provides clear evidence of the beliefs and even occupation of the deceased – a priest of the cult of Cybele.

Inhumation cemeteries may be extensive, if associated with a town or other substantial settlement, but they can also be limited in extent and presumably associated with smaller rural communities. Some cemeteries were enclosed by features that incorporated ditches and are therefore visible in the archaeological record, others may have either been open, or more likely surrounded by hedges or other archaeological difficult to see features.

The later Roman period appears to have seen the creation of more ordered cemeteries, with few inter-cutting graves indicating that graves must have been marked and to some being indicative of an expectation of rising from the dead and

therefore of the Christian rite, at Poundbury the Christian murals in the mausolea provide support for such an attribution, elsewhere it may be representative of another social phenomenon.

In rural areas individual inhumations are commonly found scattered in field systems, along with small cemetery groups. Some features of Roman period burials, such as the use of stone built cists, in part may be the result of the location of the burials (ie availability of stone), but the use of similar structures in towns, such as the tile cists recorded at York suggest that apparent mixtures of rites, may in fact be pragmatic responses to the need to appropriately dispose of the dead and as such identifying particular 'signatures' for evidence of cemeteries may be difficult.

Unless clearly demarcated with ditch boundaries the extent of cemeteries will always be challenging to designation and mitigation strategies, as will the relative invisibility of cremation cemeteries in comparison with inhumation burials. The practice of interring grave goods with burials makes cemetery sites attractive to metal detectorists and consequently vulnerable to nighthawking, particularly given their peripheral location in relation to settlement sites.

4 Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries

Three main types of Anglo-Saxon cemetery are known:

- 1) Cremation Cemeteries
- 2) Inhumation Cemeteries
- 3) 'Mixed' Cemeteries

Cremation cemeteries normally date from the 'Early' Anglo-Saxon period (5th to 7th centuries AD). Individual cemeteries can contain hundreds of burials - there were more than 2,000 at Spong Hill, Norfolk – although most are far smaller. Only 20 of the 200 or so known Anglo-Saxon cremation cemeteries contain more than 50 burials.

Individual cremations were normally placed in a ceramic vessel, though glass and metal containers are also known. These vessels – usually placed in pits – and any associated grave goods are the main dating evidence for cremation cemeteries. Cremation burials, often with very rich grave goods, are also known from barrows.

Cremation cemeteries tend to form linear or roughly circular shapes, and the fact that few cremation grave pits cut each other supports the idea that the locations of the graves were generally marked in some way. The known distribution of cremation cemeteries is concentrated in East Anglia and the other eastern counties of England, especially Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Humberside.

Inhumation cemeteries are well documented from the 5th to 7th centuries AD, although

some have been dated into the 8th century AD. Some cemeteries have been shown to contain hundreds of burials – more than 50 at Sewerby, East Yorkshire, and around 365 at Morningthorpe, Norfolk – but few examples have seen complete excavation.

Burials were normally placed in an extended or loosely flexed position within a sub-rectangular grave cut. Sometimes the body was contained within a coffin or wooden chamber, and may have been accompanied by several artefacts, the latter usually providing dating evidence.

At most excavated sites, it seems that the burials were randomly distributed, but some attempts at cemetery planning and formal organisation can be seen at Buckden, Kent and at Sewerby, East Yorkshire, and again, some form of grave marker may have been used.

There is a distinctive group of so-called 'Final Phase' cemeteries in which most burials contained few or no grave goods. The burials in these cemeteries are often orientated east-west and may sometimes have been placed within coffins. Some of these cemeteries, such as Chamberlains Barn II, Bedfordshire and Winnall II, Hampshire, seem to date to the 7th and 8th centuries AD and may reflect the transition to a Christian burial rite.

The main concentrations of inhumation cemeteries seem to be in the south and east of England, with inhumation apparently the principal burial rite in Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Wiltshire, Derbyshire and much of Yorkshire and Northumberland. Anglo-Saxon inhumations

also occur as secondary insertions in prehistoric barrows, as well as beneath newly-constructed barrow mounds.

Technically, many Anglo-Saxon cemeteries should be classed as **mixed cemeteries**, as they contain both inhumations and cremations. At Bishopstone, East Sussex for example there were six cremations among a total of 112 burials, while in contrast, at Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire, the total of around 1,500 burials included just 47 inhumations. And at Spong Hill, Norfolk, the total of some 2,300 excavated burials included only 57 inhumations, these being clustered together as a distinct group within the cemetery. Other sites show less marked differences – for example, at Girton, Cambridgeshire, there were 131 cremations and 80 inhumations, and at Little Wilbraham, also in Cambridgeshire, there were 135 cremations and 193 inhumations.

It has been suggested that over time, inhumation became more common than cremation, while for cemetery classification it is clear that there is no clear distinction between cremation, inhumation and mixed cemeteries, especially as so few sites have seen anything approaching total excavation.

Identifying the existence of an Anglo-Saxon cemetery is far from straightforward. There are no distinctively Anglo-Saxon earthworks associated with any of the cemetery types. In the right conditions, an inhumation cemetery might produce cropmarks, but only excavation could (a) confirm interpretation as a cemetery and (b) establish its date. However, sites are increasingly being identified by metal detectorists, especially where distinctive grave goods are present. Cremation cemeteries are likely only to be identified through excavation.

5 Viking Cemeteries

Archaeologists are less ready than they were half a century ago to apply ethnic labels to burials on the basis of rites or grave goods. But undeniably Scandinavians, or Vikings as they are generally known, did raid and then settle parts of the British Isles in the 9th and 10th centuries AD.

In England, just a few dozen burials and cremations (the latter mostly in the north-west) are attributed to Vikings, mostly single examples.

Wholly exceptional is the barrow cemetery in Heath Wood, Ingleby, Derbyshire, where 59 barrow mounds mark the remains of men cremated with weapons and clothing (Figure 8). Dr Julian Richards, who has excavated part of the site, argues that they were part of the Viking Great Army of 873-878 which was garrisoned nearby at Repton. Some probably died there; others were brought from elsewhere for burial with their fellows.



Figure 8
Excavation of a Viking barrow at Ingleby, Derbyshire. The upper levels of the barrow have been excavated in quadrants leaving baulks as a record of the stratigraphy.

6 Further Reading

Mike Parker Pearson, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial* (2003) is a useful and wide-ranging introduction to funerary and burial practices in the past. Much of the accessible literature on prehistoric burial and funerary traditions focuses mainly or solely on the burial mounds – the various forms of barrows.

Aside from detailed excavation reports, there is little that covers the non-monumental burial traditions in any meaningful way. Some discussion of Bronze Age cremation cemeteries can be found in Richard Bradley, *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland* (2007). The Handley Hill example is described in J Barrett, R Bradley and M Green, *Landscape, Monuments and Society: The Prehistory of Cranborne Chase* (1991).

Iron Age cemeteries are described in Barry Cunliffe, *Iron Age Communities in Britain* (4th edition 2005). Detailed accounts of specific sites include A P Fitzpatrick, *Archaeological Excavations on the Route of the A27 Westhampnett Bypass, West Sussex, 1992, Volume 2* (1997), and I M Stead and V Rigby, *Verulamium: The King Harry Lane Site* (1989).

Roman period cemeteries are described in R Philpott, *Burial Practices in Roman Britain* (1991). Key detailed accounts of specific sites include: L P Wenham, *The Romano-British Cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York* (1968); G Clarke, *The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills* (1978); A McWhirr, L Viner and C Wells, *Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester* (1982); D E Farwell and T I Molleson, *Poundbury Volume 2: The Cemeteries* (1993); B Barber and D Bowsher, *The Eastern Cemetery of Roman London: Excavations 1983–1990* (2000); and H E M Cool, *The Roman Cemetery at Brougham Cumbria: Excavations 1966-67* (2004).

Howard Williams, *Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain* (2006) is an important overview of burial in Britain AD 400- 1100. Aspects of the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon cemeteries are discussed in E Southworth, *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: A Reappraisal* (1991); S Lucy, *The Early Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries of East Yorkshire: An Analysis and Re-interpretation* (1998); S Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (2000); and S Lucy and A Reynolds (eds), *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales* (2002); and J Buckberry and A Cherryson, *Burial in Later Anglo-Saxon England c.650-1100 AD* (2010).

Detailed accounts of cemetery excavations include S Chadwick Hawkes and G Grainger, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent* (2006); C M Hills and K J Penn, *Spong Hill Part V* (1994); and C Scull, *Early Medieval (Late 5th-Early 8th Centuries AD) Cemeteries at Boss Hall and Buttermarket, Ipswich* (2009).

7 Where to Get Advice

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8 Acknowledgments

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