

Somerset in the Ages of Arthur and Alfred (400 to 900AD) Project: New Radiocarbon Dates for Early Medieval Somerset

When Professor Philip Rahtz wrote about 'The Dark Ages 400-700' in 1982 he said 'we must regard cemeteries as fundamental to dark age studies'; 'new radiocarbon techniques could provide both precise dating, and from that, the period of use, and the mode of development of the cemeteries';¹ and 'All this cemetery data will not only inform us on mortuary practice and demography, but also on the location, date and character of deserted settlements'. Somerset is well-known for sites of the so-called Dark Ages – now referred to by most archaeologists as Early Medieval – with Glastonbury, South Cadbury, Cannington and Congresbury all being key high-status sites which are well known nationally. It has, however, proved very difficult to find ordinary rural settlements of this period. We know this only too well from the research on the Shapwick project!

Following Philip Rahtz's comments, one route seems to be to obtain as many as possible radiocarbon dates for burial remains. We should not assume that burials that appear to be in a late-Roman context from the archaeological evidence are not in fact actually of fifth- or sixth-century date. A number of such post-Roman/early-medieval dates already exist for cemeteries which have been excavated in recent decades in Somerset. These include Brean Down, Lamyatt Beacon, Shepton Mallet, Stoneage Barton (Bishops Lydeard) and, most importantly, Cannington. But there are other places where excavation has produced burial remains before radiocarbon dating was available or where the technique was not used at the time of discovery. In some cases, where the skeletal material was retained in various museum collections, dates could be obtained now. A programme to obtain radiocarbon dates from such bone, held in museums and elsewhere, has begun under the auspices of the Society, using funds in the Maltwood and Aston Funds.

This is being run in association with Jackie McKinley, an osteo-archaeologist at Wessex Archaeology, and as a collaborative project with Professor Gordon Cook of the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre where the radiocarbon dating is carried out. The first two sets of dates are discussed here; it is hoped that in future, samples will be dated from Portishead, Weston-super-Mare, Ilchester and elsewhere.

Footnote 1: Philip Rahtz 1982 'The Dark Ages 400-700AD' in M Aston and I Burrow (eds) *The Archaeology of Somerset*, Somerset County Council.

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