The Role of Anglo-Saxon Great Hall Complexes in Kingdom Formation, in Comparison and in Context AD500-750

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Cover illustrations: The dancing warriors on the Sutton Hoo helmet attest to the rich symbolic and ritual life of Anglo-Saxon society and the performative nature of Anglo-Saxon power. It is through this lens that we must view the Anglo-Saxon halls, as theatres for the performance of rituals of power (dancing warriors redrawn from Bruce-Mitford 1978; various Anglo-Saxon halls redrawn from Addyman and Leigh 1973; Hope-Taylor 1977; Millet and James 1983; Williams et al. 1985; Hinchliffe 1986; O'Brien and Miket 1991; Upex 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; Kirby 2012; Thomas and Knox 2013; Tester et al. 2014; Brennan and Hamerow 2015; Thomas 2017).

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Contents

List of Figures vii

List of Tables xiii

List of Graphs xiii

Preface and Acknowledgements xv

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
1.1 The Great Hall Complexes 1
1.1.1 The Sites 1
1.1.2 The Extent of Fieldwork at the Great Hall Complexes 3
1.2 The Study of Great Hall Complexes 4
1.2.1 Yeavering and the Culture-Historical Paradigm 4
1.2.2 Cowdery's Down and the Growing Influence of Processual and Post-Processual Archaeology 21
1.2.3 Great Hall Complexes in the 21st Century 23
1.2.4 Key Themes and Unanswered Questions 24
1.3 Great Hall Complexes in Comparison and in Context 26

Part I: Great Hall Complexes in Comparison

Chapter 2: The Characteristics and Functions of Great Hall Complexes 27
2.1 The Built Environment 27
2.1.1 The Architecture 27
2.1.1.1 Building Forms 27
2.1.1.2 Foundations 27
2.1.1.3 Wall Types 30
2.1.1.4 External Raking Posts 32
2.1.1.5 Great Halls and the Anglo-Saxon Building Tradition 35
2.1.2 The Layout 35
2.1.2.1 The Central Precinct 35
2.1.2.2 The Associated Activity 39
2.1.2.3 Evidence for Planning 39
2.1.2.4 Variation in Layouts 44
2.2 The Cultural and Physical Landscape 48
2.2.1 The Physical Landscape 48
2.2.2 The Cultural Landscape 48
2.2.2.1 The Local Scale 48
2.2.2.2 The Regional and Supra-Regional Scale 48
2.3 The Material Culture 50
2.3.1 The Material Culture of the Central Precinct 50
2.3.2 The Material Culture of Associated Activity 51
2.4 Dating Evidence 56
2.5 Great Hall Complexes and Kingship 59
2.5.1 Peripatetic Kingship 59
2.6 Ritual and Cult Activity at Great Hall Complexes 60
2.6.1 Special Deposits 60
2.6.2 Cult Structures 60
2.6.3 Prehistoric Monuments 66
2.6.4 Standing Posts 67
2.6.5 Burial 67
2.7 Craft-working, Agriculture and Exchange at Great Hall Complexes 73
2.7.1 Craft-working 73
2.7.2 Agricultural Production and Collection 73
2.7.3 Exchange 78
2.8 Variation among Great Hall Complexes 78

2.8.1 Variation in the Documented Terms for Great Hall Complexes....78
2.8.2 Variation in the Archaeology of Great Hall Complexes....83
2.8.2.1 Variation in Overall Size....83
2.8.2.2 Variation in Layout....86
2.8.2.3 Variation in Great Halls....88
2.8.3 Great Hall Complexes and Minor Hall Complexes....91

Chapter 3: The Emergence, Development and Obsolescence of Great Hall Complexes....99
3.1 The Emergence of the Great Hall Complexes....99
3.1.1 The Antecedents of the Great Hall Complexes....99
3.1.1.1 Great Hall Complexes and the Appropriation of the Public Assembly....102
3.1.1.2 The Origins of the Minor Hall Complexes....103
3.1.2 The Emergence of the Great Hall Architectural Style....107
3.1.3 The Cultural Context of the Anglo-Saxon Hall....109
3.1.3.1 Yeavering and the Question of British Influence....110
3.1.3.2 The Scandinavian Halls....114
3.1.3.3 A Northern European Hall Culture....114
3.1.3.4 The Romanized Hall....114
3.1.3.5 Great Hall Complexes on the Periphery: the Distribution of Great Hall Complexes within Anglo-Saxon England....117
3.2 The Early Development of Great Hall Complexes....117
3.2.1 The Development of Wall Types....119
3.3 The Later Development of Great Hall Complexes....124
3.3.1 New Wall Types....124
3.3.2 New Building Forms....128
3.3.3 New Layouts....131
3.3.4 New Diversification....135
3.3.4.1 The Later Development of Minor Hall Complexes....135
3.3.5 The New Architectural Style and the Development of Power....139
3.3.5.1 The Decline of Public Space at High Status Sites....139
3.3.5.2 Christianity and the Relationship between Public Assembly, Cult and Kingship....142
3.3.5.3 Shifting Priorities: from the Public Assembly to the Means of Production....143
3.3.5.4 The Development of Complex Settlement Hierarchies....144
3.4 The Abandonment of the Great Hall Complexes....144

Part II: Great Hall Complexes in Context

Power and Place in the Upper Thames Valley....147
A Regional Case Study....147
The Upper Thames Valley....147
Power and Place....148

Chapter 4: Burial Methodology....151
4.1 The Aims....151
4.2 The Methodology....151
4.2.1 The Cemeteries Data....151
4.2.1.1 The Sources and Typology....151
4.2.1.2 The Cemeteries....151
4.2.2 The Chronology....151
4.2.2.1 Phasing....151
4.2.2.2 Dating....153
4.2.2.3 Mercian Hegemony and the Retreat of Wessex....153
4.2.2.4 Roman Influences....153
4.2.3 The Four Metrics of Socio-Economic Power....153
4.2.3.1 The Distribution of Burials....153
4.2.3.1.1 Kernel Density....154
4.2.3.2 Average Quantified Burial Wealth....154
4.2.3.2.1 The Sample....154
4.2.3.2.2 Gender....154

4.2.3.2.3 The Weighted Artefact Count 154
4.2.3.2.4 The Average Weighted Artefact Count 155
4.2.3.2.5 Normalization 156
4.2.3.2.6 Kernel Density 158
4.2.3.3 The Distribution of High Status Artefacts 159
4.2.3.4 Individual Quantified Burial Wealth 160
4.2.3.4.1 The Wealthiest Burials 160
4.2.3.4.2 The Concentration of Burial Wealth in the Wealthiest and Poorest 10% of Burials 160
4.2.4 Methodological Limitations 160
4.2.4.1 Poorly Recorded and Incomplete Assemblages 160
4.2.4.2 Quantity versus Quality 161
4.2.4.3 The Proportion of Gendered Burials 161
4.2.4.4 Unrepresentative Samples 162
4.2.4.5 Imbalances in the Number of Male and Female Burial Sites 163
4.2.4.6 Burial Sites and Proximity to their Burying Communities 163

Chapter 5: Power in Burial 164
5.1 The Distribution of Burials 164
5.1.1 The Long Sixth Century 164
5.1.1.1 Cemetery Size in the Long Sixth Century 164
5.1.1.1.1 Alpha Cemeteries 164
5.1.1.1.2 Beta Cemeteries 164
5.1.1.1.3 Gamma Cemeteries 168
5.1.1.1.4 Delta Cemeteries 169
5.1.1.2 The Distribution of Burials in the Upper Thames Valley 169
5.1.1.3 Conclusions 170
5.1.2 The Mid-Seventh Century 172
5.1.2.1 Cemetery Size in the Mid-Seventh Century 172
5.1.2.1.1 Alpha Cemeteries 174
5.1.2.1.2 Gamma Cemeteries 174
5.1.2.1.3 Delta Cemeteries 175
5.1.2.1.4 Isolated Burials 175
5.1.2.2 The Distribution of Burials in the Upper Thames Valley 175
5.1.2.3 Core Areas, Isolated Burials and Supra-Local Communities 175
5.1.2.4 Conclusions 183
5.2 The Distribution of Burial Wealth 185
5.2.1 The Long Sixth Century 185
5.2.1.1 Average Female Burial Wealth 185
5.2.1.2 Average Male Burial Wealth 187
5.2.1.3 Normalized Average Male and Female Burial Wealth 187
5.2.1.4 Normalized Average Artefact Count and Cemetery Size 187
5.2.1.5 Normalized Average Artefact Count and Cemetery Location 191
5.2.1.6 The Spatial Distribution of Quantified Burial Wealth 191
5.2.1.7 The Distribution of High Status Artefacts 193
5.2.1.8 Individual Quantified Burial Wealth 194
5.2.1.8.1 The Concentration of Burial Wealth in the Wealthiest and Poorest 10% of Burials 195
5.2.1.8.2 The Wealthiest Burials 197
5.2.1.9 Conclusions 197
5.2.2 The Long Sixth Century by Period 200
5.2.2.1 AD 475-530 to AD 530-580 200
5.2.2.2 AD 580-630 201
5.2.2.3 Conclusions 209
5.2.3 The Mid-Seventh Century 211
5.2.3.1 Average Female Burial Wealth 211
5.2.3.2 Average Male Burial Wealth 212
5.2.3.3 Normalized Average Male and Female Burial Wealth 214
5.2.3.4 The Wealthiest Burials 215
5.2.3.5 The Distribution of High Status Artefacts 216

5.2.3.6 A Holistic Ranking of Final Phase Burial Wealth....217
5.2.3.7 The Spatial Distribution of Burial Wealth....218
5.2.3.8 Conclusions....219
5.3 The Development of Socio-Economic Power in Burial....219
5.3.1 Power in Numbers....219
5.3.2 The Formation of Supra-Local Socio-Political Units....220
5.3.3 The Expansion and Consolidation of the West Saxon/Gewissan Kingdom....221

Chapter 6: Settlement Methodology....223
6.1 The Aims....223
6.2 The Methodology....223
6.2.1 The Settlements Data....223
6.2.1.1 The Sources....223
6.2.1.2 The Settlement Sites....223
6.2.2 The Chronology....223
6.2.2.1 Dating....223
6.2.2.2 Phasing....225
6.2.3 The Two Metrics of Socio-Economic Power....225
6.2.3.1 The Distribution of Settlement Activity....225
6.2.3.1.1 The Distribution of All Excavated Settlement Sites....225
6.2.3.1.2 The Distribution of Excavated Sunken-Feature Buildings....225
6.2.3.1.3 The Distribution of Excavated Earthfast Buildings....225
6.2.3.1.4 The Distribution of Unexcavated Settlement Sites....225
6.2.3.2 High Status Settlements....226
6.2.4 Methodological Limitations....226
6.2.4.1 The Distribution of Anglo-Saxon Material Culture....226

Chapter 7: Power in Settlement....227
7.1 The Distribution of Settlement Activity....227
7.1.1 The Distribution of All Excavated Settlement Sites....227
7.1.2 The Distribution of Excavated Sunken-Feature Buildings....227
7.1.3 The Distribution of Excavated Earthfast Buildings....231
7.1.4 The Distribution of Unexcavated Settlement Sites....232
7.1.4.1 Factors Affecting the Distribution of Excavated Settlement Sites....232
7.1.4.2 The Distribution of Cropmark Settlement Sites....233
7.1.5 Chronological Change in the Distribution of Anglo-Saxon Settlement....234
7.1.6 Comparing the Distribution of Settlements and Burials....238
7.1.7 Conclusions....240
7.2 High Status Settlements....242
7.2.1 Sutton Courtenay....243
7.2.1.1 The Built Environment....243
7.2.1.2 The Wider Site....246
7.2.1.3 Material Culture and Craft-Working....246
7.2.1.4 Ritual Activity....248
7.2.1.5 Chronology and Development....250
7.2.2 Long Wittenham....251
7.2.2.1 The Built Environment....251
7.2.2.2 The Wider Site....251
7.2.2.3 Material Culture and Craft-Working....255
7.2.2.4 Ritual Activity....255
7.2.2.5 Chronology and Development....256
7.2.3 Worton....257
7.2.3.1 The Built Environment....257
7.2.3.2 The Wider Site....257
7.2.3.3 Chronology and Development....257
7.2.4 Benson....261
7.2.4.1 The Built Environment....261
7.2.4.2 The Wider Site....261
7.2.4.3 Chronology and Development....265

7.2.5 Dorchester and Bishop's Court ... 265
7.2.5.1 The Built Environment ... 265
7.2.5.2 Dorchester, Bishop's Court and the Wider Site ... 268
7.2.5.3 Material Culture and Craft-Working ... 268
7.2.5.4 Chronology and Development ... 269
7.2.6 Aylesbury ... 271
7.2.6.1 The Built Environment ... 271
7.2.6.2 The Wider Site ... 271
7.2.6.3 Material Culture and Craft-Working ... 271
7.2.6.4 Chronology and Development ... 273
7.2.7 Eynsham Abbey ... 274
7.2.8 Yarnton ... 274
7.2.9 Fairford, Horcott Quarry ... 274
7.2.10 Lower Slaughter ... 275
7.2.11 Other Possible High Status Settlements ... 276
7.2.11.1 Sunningwell ... 276
7.2.11.2 Cresswell Field ... 276
7.2.11.3 Latton Quarry ... 277
7.2.11.4 Lechlade, Sherborne House ... 280
7.2.11.5 Wantage, Mill Street ... 280
7.2.11.6 Other Possible Ditched Enclosures ... 280
7.2.11.7 Shakenoak ... 281
7.2.11.8 Swindon ... 281
7.2.11.9 Purwell Farm ... 281
7.2.11.10 Barton Court Farm ... 281
7.2.11.11 New Wintles Farm ... 282
7.2.11.12 Black Bourton ... 282
7.2.12 High Status Settlements and the Development of the Settlement Hierarchy ... 282
7.2.12.1 The First High Status Settlements ... 282
7.2.12.2 The Expansion of the Settlement Hierarchy ... 285

Chapter 8: Great Hall Complexes in Context ... 286
8.1 The Emergence of Supra-Local Socio-Political Units ... 286
8.1.1 The First Supra-Local Socio-Political Units in the Upper Thames Valley ... 286
8.1.2 Supra-Local Socio-Political Units and the Development of Socio-Economic Power ... 287
8.1.2.1 The Distribution of Socio-Economic Power in the Sixth Century ... 287
8.1.2.2 The Concentration of Power and the Emergence of Supra-Local Socio-Political Units ... 288
8.1.3 Corporate Power, Assembly and the Formation of Supra-Local Socio-Political Units ... 290
8.1.3.1 Corporate Power and Supra-Local Socio-Political Units ... 290
8.1.3.2 Supra-Local Socio-Political Units and Supra-Local Assemblies ... 291
8.2 Great Hall Complexes and the Emergence of Supra-Regional Kingdoms ... 292
8.2.1 The Gewisse and the Emergence of Supra-Regional Hegemony ... 292
8.2.1.1 Supra-Local Socio-Political Units and the Emergence of Supra-Regional Hegemony ... 293
8.2.2 Great Hall Complexes and the Consolidation of Power ... 293
8.2.3 Long Wittenham, Dorchester and the Beginnings of the Settlement Hierarchy ... 295
8.2.4 Supra-Local Burials and the Expansion of the Gewissan Heartland ... 296
8.3 The Development of the Settlement Hierarchy and the Obsolescence of the Great Hall Complexes ... 297
8.3.1 The Mercian Conquest ... 299
8.3.2 The Development of the Settlement Hierarchy ... 299
8.3.3 The Dissemination and Degeneration of the Great Hall Architectural Style ... 299
8.3.4 The Dissemination, Degeneration, Obsolescence and Abandonment of the Great Hall Complex Phenomenon ... 300

Appendix 1: The Cemeteries ... 306
1.1 The Cemeteries of the Long Sixth Century ... 306
1.2 The Cemeteries of the Mid-Seventh Century ... 312

Appendix 2: The Burials Methodology ... 316
2.1 Phasing ... 316

2.1.1 The Allocation of Burials to Phases 316
2.1.2 Exclusive Period AD 580-630 (Phases D-E) 316
2.1.3 Episodes B-C, C-D, and D-E 316
2.2 The Re-Dating of Male Artefacts 316
2.3 Age Determination 319
2.4 Defining the Anglo-Saxon Gendered Burial Rite 319
2.4.1 Female Gender in the Sixth Century 319
2.4.2 Female Gender in the Seventh Century 320
2.5 Artefact Types 320
2.6 Weighted Artefact Types 320
2.6.1 Weapons 320
2.6.2 Brooches 322
2.6.3 Medium Status Types 323
2.6.4 High Status Types 323
2.6.5 Highest Status Types 324
2.7 Kernel Density 324
2.8 Wealth Inequality in the Wealthiest and Poorest 10% of Burials 324
2.9 The Proportion of Gendered Burial 324
2.9.1 The Proportion of Gendered Burial in the Sixth Century 324
2.9.2 The Proportion of Gendered Burial in the Seventh Century 324

Appendix 3: The Settlements (including cropmark sites) 326

Bibliography 336
Primary Sources 336
Secondary Sources 336

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: The great hall, Building C12, at Cowdery's Down 2
Figure 1.2: The distinctively structured layouts of Yeavering, Cowdery's Down and Sutton Courtenay 3
Figure 1.3: The nineteen sites discussed in Part I of this book 4
Figure 1.4: Brian Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavering and the 1976 excavations at Yeavering Henge 5
Figure 1.5: Martin Millett's excavations at Cowdery's Down 6
Figure 1.6: Gabor Thomas' excavations at Lyminge 7
Figure 1.7: The cropmarks at Cowage Farm, partially excavated by John Hinchliffe in 1983 8
Figure 1.8: The cropmarks at Sutton Courtenay, partially excavated in 2001-2003 and 2010 9
Figure 1.9: The Eynsford hall 10
Figure 1.10: The great hall at Rendlesham, identified from aerial photographs and geophysical survey 11
Figure 1.11: The recent excavations at Long Wittenham, undertaken by the author, in collaboration with Helena Hamerow and Jane Harrison 12
Figure 1.12: The great halls at Atcham, partially excavated by Roger White 13
Figure 1.13: The cropmarks at Hatton Rock, bisected by the 1970 pipe trench 13
Figure 1.14: The cropmarks at Milfield 14
Figure 1.15: The cropmarks at Long Itchington 15
Figure 1.16: The cropmarks at Sprouston 16
Figure 1.17: The possible great hall complex at Dover 17
Figure 1.18: The possible great hall complex at Repton 17
Figure 1.19: The minor hall complex at Chalton 18
Figure 1.20: The minor hall complex at Polebrook 18
Figure 1.21: The minor hall complex at Thirlings 19
Figure 1.22: The minor hall complex at Lockerbie 20
Figure 1.23: The buildings at Cowdery's Down compared with other Anglo-Saxon buildings 22
Figure 1.24: The distribution of great hall complexes and princely burials clustered around the edges of John Blair's 'eastern zone' 25
Figure 2.1: The open-form great halls 28
Figure 2.2: The annexed great halls 29
Figure 2.3: Cross-sections of various foundation trenches 31
Figure 2.4: Reconstructed wall types from Yeavering and Cowdery's Down 32
Figure 2.5: External posts. Above, the raking posts at Cowdery's Down, showing the excavators' proposed reconstructions Below, various buildings with external posts, showing a range of different configurations 35
Figure 2.6: The largest, most skilfully constructed building at Mucking compared with the great halls at Cowdery's Down and Yeavering 36
Figure 2.7: The central precinct of Yeavering, showing the creation of extensive, multi-focal ritualized spaces through the use of a consistent orientation scheme, linear and perpendicular alignments, and a variety of focal elements ... 37
Figure 2.8: The extensive, multi-focal ritualized spaces of the Sutton Courtenay central precinct 38
Figure 2.9: The associated activity surrounding the Sprouston central precinct 40
Figure 2.10: The associated activity surrounding the Milfield central precinct 41
Figure 2.11: The associated activity surrounding the Sutton Courtenay central precinct 42
Figure 2.12: The associated activity surrounding the central precinct at Rendlesham 43
Figure 2.13: Great hall complex layouts: variations on a theme 45
Figure 2.14: Great hall complex layouts: further variations on a theme 46
Figure 2.15: The orderly central precincts of Yeavering and Sutton Courtenay juxtaposed with the sprawling settlement at Mucking 47
Figure 2.16: The topographical setting of great hall complexes 49
Figure 2.17: The distribution of seventh-century occupation debris and high status refuse at Lyminge 52
Figure 2.18: The distribution of occupation debris and craft-working evidence at Sutton Courtenay 53
Figure 2.19: The distribution of craft-working, food processing and sunken-feature buildings at Yeavering 54
Figure 2.20: The distribution of settlement and refuse pits at Long Wittenham 55
Figure 2.21: The tentative phasing of great hall complexes, based on the available dating evidence 56
Figure 2.22: The possible pre-Christian cult building D2 at Yeavering 61
Figure 2.23: The square structures at Yeavering and Cowdery's Down 62
Figure 2.24: The royal minster at Lyminge 63
Figure 2.25: The possible churches at Cowage Farm and Hatton Rock 64
Figure 2.26: The possible mortuary chapels at Yeavering and Sprouston 65
Figure 2.27: The use of prehistoric monuments at Yeavering 68
Figure 2.28: The near identical use of prehistoric monuments at Lyminge, Sutton Courtenay and Hatton Rock 69
Figure 2.29: The use of prehistoric monuments at Long Wittenham and Cowage Farm 70
Figure 2.30: The locations of standing posts identified at Yeavering 71
Figure 2.31: The standing posts at Cowdery's Down, Cowage Farm, Sutton Courtenay and Yeavering 72
Figure 2.32: Craft-working at Sutton Courtenay 74

Figure 2.33: The distribution of craft-working and prestige goods at Rendlesham 75
Figure 2.34: The distribution of craft-working and prestige goods at Lyminge 76
Figure 2.35: Supernaturally-charged metalworking at Yeavering and Lyminge 77
Figure 2.36: The possible livestock enclosures, droveways and outbuildings at Sprouston 79
Figure 2.37: The possible livestock enclosures and outbuildings at Milfield 80
Figure 2.38: The possible livestock enclosures and outbuildings at Yeavering 81
Figure 2.39: The eighth-century barns at Higham Ferrers and Lyminge 82
Figure 2.40: The seventh-century royal *urbs* at Dunbar 83
Figure 2.41: The largest great hall complexes: Cowage Farm, Yeavering, Sprouston and Cowdery's Down 84
Figure 2.42: The midsized great hall complexes: Sutton Courtenay, Long Itchington, Long Wittenham, Hatton Rock and Milfield 85
Figure 2.43: The smallest great hall complexes: Lyminge, Rendlesham, Atcham and Eynsford 86
Figure 2.44: The T/L-shaped great hall complexes 87
Figure 2.45: The poly-axial great hall complexes 88
Figure 2.46: The integral and extensive use of boundary features at Sprouston and Milfield 89
Figure 2.47: The boundary features at Cowage Farm, Hatton Rock and Yeavering 90
Figure 2.48: The minor hall complex at Chalton compared with the large poly-axial sites at Cowage Farm and Cowdery's Down 92
Figure 2.49: Building AZ1 – the largest building at Chalton constructed in the great hall style – compared with the great halls at Cowdery's Down and Cowage Farm 93
Figure 2.50: The minor hall complex at Polebrook compared with Yeavering 94
Figure 2.51: The buildings at Polebrook compared with the buildings at Yeavering 95
Figure 2.52: The minor hall complex at Thirlings compared with Yeavering 96
Figure 2.53: The buildings at Thirlings compared with the buildings at Yeavering 97
Figure 2.54: The minor hall complex at Lockerbie 98
Figure 3.1: The earliest phases of Lyminge and Yeavering 100
Figure 3.2: The great halls at Sutton Courtenay were constructed to the south of the main concentration of settlement, on top of a Bronze Age barrow cemetery 101
Figure 3.3: The early phases of Polebrook and Thirlings look more like domestic settlements than ritual foci, and while the exact phasing of Chalton is uncertain, the overall layout of the site resembles a large, carefully planned domestic settlement 104
Figure 3.4: The minor hall complex at Lockerbie. The possible ring cairn may have been visible in the Anglo-Saxon period, but the Neolithic hall is unlikely to have been visible 105
Figure 3.5: The incremental development of the great hall architectural style at Cowdery's Down and Lyminge 108
Figure 3.6: The development of the great hall architectural style at Yeavering 109
Figure 3.7: The British and sub-Roman buildings at Birdoswald, South Cadbury, Frocester Court and Poundbury 111
Figure 3.8: The sites at Poundbury and Frocester Court, showing their location and layout 112
Figure 3.9: The Scandinavian halls at Gudme, Tissø and Lejre 115
Figure 3.10: The Scandinavian central places at Lejre and Tissø 116
Figure 3.11: The distribution of great hall complexes and princely burials appears to avoid John Blair's 'eastern zone' 118
Figure 3.12: The early development of wall types at great hall complexes, showing the synchronized development of similar wall types across different sites 120
Figure 3.13: The spatial distribution of wall types at Cowdery's Down 122
Figure 3.14: Comparing the C9 and A2 wall types 123
Figure 3.15: The development of wall types and foundations at Yeavering 124
Figure 3.16: The development of wall types at Cowdery's Down 126
Figure 3.17: Building B/C15 is stylistically and spatially more closely related to the C9 buildings, strongly suggesting that it developed out of the C9 wall type and is probably the latest building identified at Cowdery's Down 127
Figure 3.18: The development of wall types at Lyminge 128
Figure 3.19: The annexed halls 129
Figure 3.20: The early square shrine annexes 130
Figure 3.21: The development of late-type annexes at Yeavering 131
Figure 3.22: The distribution of late-type annexed halls 132
Figure 3.23: The enclosed annexed halls at Milfield, Hatton Rock and Cowage Farm 133
Figure 3.24: The boundary features at Sprouston, Brandon and Yeavering 134
Figure 3.25: The layouts of Cowage Farm, Milfield, Sprouston, Hatton Rock and Atcham, showing the striking differences between these sites 136
Figure 3.26: The development of the minor hall complexes, showing the increasing similarity with great hall complexes 137
Figure 3.27: The development of the architectural style at the minor hall complexes 138
Figure 3.28: The later development of the great hall complexes, showing the diversification of great hall complexes, the development of annexed halls, the increasing use of boundary features, and the increasing similarity between minor hall complexes and great hall complexes 140
Figure 3.29: The decreasing accessibility of the Yeavering great hall from Phase IIIab to Phase IV 141
Figure 3.30: The eighth-century sites at Brandon, Lyminge, Northampton and Higham Ferrers 146
Figure II.1: The Upper Thames Valley study area 147
Figure II.2: The topography of the Upper Thames Valley 148
Figure II.3: The excavated settlements and cemeteries of the Upper Thames Valley, AD 475-750. 149
Figure II.4: The evidence for kingdom formation in the Upper Thames Valley 149
Figure 4.1: The 156 cemeteries or possible cemeteries analysed in this study 152

Figure 4.2: The chronological framework used in this study 152
Figure 4.3: The two-layer kernel density of the normalized average weighted artefact count for sixth-century cemeteries 158
Figure 4.4: The distribution of rare, imported or otherwise high status artefacts in sixth-century cemeteries 159
Figure 5.1: All cemeteries analysed in this study 165
Figure 5.2: The unweighted kernel density of all cemeteries 165
Figure 5.3: The sixth-century cemeteries 166
Figure 5.4: The unweighted kernel density of sixth-century cemeteries 167
Figure 5.5: The kernel density of sixth-century burials, weighted by the number of recorded burials at each site 170
Figure 5.6: The kernel density of sixth-century burials, weighted by cemetery size categories 171
Figure 5.7: The primary sixth-century burying communities in the Upper Thames Valley, based on the distribution of burials and the layout of the river network 171
Figure 5.8: The seventh-century cemeteries 172
Figure 5.9: The unweighted kernel density of seventh-century cemeteries 173
Figure 5.10: The kernel density of seventh-century burials, weighted by the number of recorded burials at each site 176
Figure 5.11: The kernel density of seventh-century burials, weighted by cemetery size categories 176
Figure 5.12: The barrow burials at Lowbury Hill and Compton, perched on the edge of the Berkshire Downs 177
Figure 5.13: The princely burial at Cuddesdon, overlooking the Thame river valley 178
Figure 5.14: The princely burials at Sutton Hoo were positioned to overlook the River Deben, a major routeway between the North Sea and the royal centre at Rendlesham 179
Figure 5.15: The supra-local burials at West Hanney and Frilford III, lying along the Ock river valley 180
Figure 5.16: The West Hanney composite disc brooch compared with the Milton composite disc brooches 180
Figure 5.17: The supra-local burials of the Abingdon to Dorchester area, placed along important routeways leading into the area 181
Figure 5.18: The distribution of supra-local burials surrounding the Abingdon to Dorchester area, paralleling the distribution of sixth-century Beta and Gamma cemeteries surrounding the Abingdon to Dorchester area 182
Figure 5.19: The Rollright burial and the Asthall barrow burial, straddling the northern edge of the Upper Thames Valley 183
Figure 5.20: All possible isolated supra-local burials 184
Figure 5.21: The three core areas of seventh-century burial. The possible extent of these areas is defined by the isolated supra-local burials 184
Figure 5.22: The average weighted artefact count of female gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 186
Figure 5.23: The average weighted artefact count of male gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 188
Figure 5.24: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials at each sixth-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 190
Figure 5.25: The normalized average artefact count of sixth-century cemeteries with two or more gendered burials, showing the relationship between burial wealth and cemetery location 191
Figure 5.26: The two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count of sixth-century cemeteries 192
Figure 5.27: Burial wealth and burying communities during the 6th century 193
Figure 5.28: The distribution of rare, imported or otherwise high status artefacts in sixth-century cemeteries 194
Figure 5.29: High status artefacts and burying communities during the 6th century 195
Figure 5.30: The kernel density of the single wealthiest female burial at each sixth-century cemetery, weighted by the weighted artefact count of each burial 199
Figure 5.31: The kernel density of the single wealthiest male burial at each sixth-century cemetery, weighted by the weighted artefact count of each burial 199
Figure 5.32: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, AD 475-530 202
Figure 5.33: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, AD 530-580 202
Figure 5.34: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, AD 580-630 inclusive 204
Figure 5.35: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, AD 580-630 exclusive 205
Figure 5.36: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, Episode B-C 206
Figure 5.37: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, Episode C-D 207
Figure 5.38: Two-layer kernel density of the normalized average artefact count, Episode D-E 208
Figure 5.39: Diagnostic late sixth-/early seventh-century brooches and weapons and high status artefacts interred in late sixth-/early seventh-century burials, including the early seventh-century princely burials at Asthall and Cuddesdon 209
Figure 5.40: The Abingdon to Dorchester area exhibits a remarkable concentration of wealth and power during this period; in addition to the concentrations of gendered burial and burial wealth, the great hall complexes at Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham, the episcopal seat at Dorchester, and the princely burial at Cuddesdon were all located in or around the Abingdon to Dorchester area 210
Figure 5.41: The average weighted artefact count of female gendered burials at each seventh-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 212
Figure 5.42: The average weighted artefact count of male gendered burials at each seventh-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 213
Figure 5.43: The normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials at each seventh-century cemetery, displayed by proportional symbols 214
Figure 5.44: The distribution of rare, imported or otherwise high status artefacts in mid-seventh-century burials 216
Figure 5.45: The distribution of rare, imported or otherwise high status artefacts in mid-seventh-century burials, overlying the two-layer kernel density of normalized average burial wealth 218

Figure 5.46: The core areas of seventh-century burials and burial wealth, showing the locations of the great hall complexes at Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham and the episcopal seat at Dorchester 219
Figure 5.47: The kernel density of sixth-century burial wealth, showing the hypothetical burying communities 220
Figure 5.48: The concentration of burial wealth in the Abingdon to Dorchester area during the late 6th/early 7th century, soon followed by the emergence of the great hall complexes at Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham, the establishment of the first West Saxon bishopric at Dorchester, and the interment of the princely burial at Cuddesdon 221
Figure 5.49: Burial wealth and burying communities in the mid-7th century 222
Figure 6.1: All settlement sites analysed in this study, including 166 excavated settlement sites and 47 cropmark sites 224
Figure 7.1: The 166 excavated settlement sites analysed in this study, showing the close relationship between Anglo-Saxon settlement and the river network 227
Figure 7.2: The unweighted kernel density of all excavated settlement sites, showing the primary and secondary concentrations of sites 228
Figure 7.3: The weighted kernel density of sunken-feature buildings, weighted by the number of distinct sunken-feature buildings at each site 228
Figure 7.4: The largest individual settlement excavations, in terms of the number of distinct sunken-feature buildings, overlying the unweighted kernel density of all settlement sites 229
Figure 7.5: The weighted kernel density of earthfast buildings, weighted by the number of distinct earthfast buildings larger than 20 m^2 at each site 231
Figure 7.6: The largest individual settlement excavations, in terms of the number of distinct earthfast buildings, overlying the unweighted kernel density of all settlement sites 232
Figure 7.7: The circumstances of discovery for all excavated settlement sites, overlying the unweighted kernel density of all excavated settlement sites 233
Figure 7.8: All Anglo-Saxon cropmark sites identified in aerial photographs – predominantly consisting of possible sunken-feature buildings – overlying the weighted kernel density of excavated sunken-feature buildings 234
Figure 7.9: The distribution of sunken-feature buildings at sites with evidence for sixth-century occupation 235
Figure 7.10: The distribution of earthfast buildings at sites with evidence for sixth-century occupation. 235
Figure 7.11: The distribution of sunken-feature buildings at sites with evidence for seventh-century occupation 236
Figure 7.12: The distribution of earthfast buildings at sites with evidence for seventh-century occupation 236
Figure 7.13: The distribution of sunken-feature buildings at sites with evidence for late seventh-/eighth-century occupation 237
Figure 7.14: The distribution of earthfast buildings at sites with evidence for late seventh-/eighth-century occupation 237
Figure 7.15: All excavated settlement sites, overlying the unweighted kernel density of all cemeteries 238
Figure 7.16: The distribution of sunken-feature buildings and earthfast buildings at sixth-century settlements, displayed by proportional symbols, overlying the weighted kernel density of sixth-century burial 239
Figure 7.17: The distribution of sunken-feature buildings and earthfast buildings at seventh-century settlements, displayed by proportional symbols, overlying the weighted kernel density of mid-seventh-century burial 239
Figure 7.18: The combined distribution of sixth-century settlement and burial 240
Figure 7.19: The combined distribution of seventh-century settlement and burial 241
Figure 7.20: The combined distribution of late seventh-/eighth-century sunken-feature buildings and earthfast buildings 242
Figure 7.21: The probable and possible high status sites analysed in this section, overlying the unweighted kernel density of all excavated settlement sites 243
Figure 7.22: The great hall at Sutton Courtenay, compared with various other large buildings excavated in the Upper Thames Valley 244
Figure 7.23: The foundation trench of the Sutton Courtenay great hall, compared with the foundations of various other large buildings in the Upper Thames Valley 245
Figure 7.24: The Sutton Courtenay central precinct, compared with the central precinct at Long Wittenham, the possible high status site identified at Sunningwell, and the possible eighth-century high status site at The Orchard in Aylesbury 245
Figure 7.25: The associated activity to the northeast of the Sutton Courtenay central precinct 247
Figure 7.26: The wider landscape of settlement and burial surrounding the Sutton Courtenay great hall complex 248
Figure 7.27: The halls at Long Wittenham, before and after the recent fieldwork 252
Figure 7.28: Long Wittenham: great hall complex or minor hall complex? 253
Figure 7.29: Structure 4100, in plan and in section 254
Figure 7.30: The wider settlement and burial activity at Long Wittenham 255
Figure 7.31: Worton Building B103, in plan and in section 258
Figure 7.32: The irregular foundations of the Worton building appear to represent the culmination of the later development of the great hall architectural style 259
Figure 7.33: The wider settlement and burial activity at Worton 260
Figure 7.34: Benson Feature 1006, in plan and in section 262
Figure 7.35: The profile of the Benson feature is unusually shallow and irregular when compared with the earlier seventh-century great halls at Sutton Courtenay and Yeavering, but the latest halls at Yeavering were constructed with considerably shallower foundations, and the eighth-century hall at Worton had highly irregular foundations, although they were deeper than the Benson foundations 263
Figure 7.36: The wider site at Benson 264
Figure 7.37: The post-in-trench buildings at the Dorchester Allotments and Dorchester Abbey 266
Figure 7.38: The Bishop's Court building, in plan and in section 267
Figure 7.39: The extended high status complex at Dorchester/Bishop's Court 269
Figure 7.40: The Aylesbury sites 270
Figure 7.41: The Orchard bears a strong resemblance to Chalton and, to a lesser degree, Cowage Farm 272

Figure 7.42: The wider activity surrounding The Orchard....273
Figure 7.43: The site at Yarnton, showing the ditched enclosure system, the granary and a possible helm 275
Figure 7.44: The Middle Saxon enclosure at Lower Slaughter 276
Figure 7.45: The magnetometer survey at Sunningwell, showing a transcription of the possible Anglo-Saxon buildings 277
Figure 7.46: The site at Cresswell Field, showing the large annexed building and its proximity to Worton and Yarnton 278
Figure 7.47: The Latton Quarry building, compared with the buildings at Yarnton and New Wintles Farm 279
Figure 7.48: The ditched enclosure systems at Lechlade, Sherborne House and Wantage, Mill Street 281
Figure 7.49: High status settlements during the late 6th and earlier 7th centuries, overlying the kernel density of seventh-century sunken-feature buildings and burials 283
Figure 7.50: High status settlements during the late 7th and 8th centuries, overlying the kernel density of eighth-century sunken-feature buildings and earthfast buildings 284
Figure 8.1: A hypothetical reconstruction of the sixth-century communities of the Upper Thames Valley....287
Figure 8.2: The distribution of sixth-century burial wealth, showing the high status artefact types recovered from each cemetery, overlying the kernel density of the normalized average artefact count 288
Figure 8.3: The kernel density of the average weighted artefact count, showing the increasing concentration of burial wealth over the course of the 6th century 289
Figure 8.4: A hypothetical reconstruction of supra-local assembly networks 292
Figure 8.5: The early seventh-century high status settlements and princely burials, overlying the distribution of seventh-century burial and settlement 294
Figure 8.6: A hypothetical reconstruction of the new supra-regional assembly network, centred on the great hall complex at Sutton Courtenay 295
Figure 8.7: The early seventh-century princely burials and the mid-seventh-century supra-local burials are strongly concentrated around the Gewissan heartland – the Abingdon to Dorchester area – and along the postulated supra-regional border between the Gewisse and Mercia 297
Figure 8.8: The changing distribution of Anglo-Saxon burial and settlement over the course of the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries 298
Figure 8.9: The dilution of the great hall architectural style....301
Figure 8.10: The diversification of eighth-century high status sites in the Upper Thames Valley 302
Figure 8.11: The proliferation and diversification of high status sites and the concomitant dissemination, diversification and dilution of the great hall architectural style 304

List of Tables

Table 2.1: The dimensions of the largest open-form great halls identified at each site ... 30
Table 2.2: The dimensions of the largest annexed great halls identified at each site ... 30
Table 2.3: The available dating evidence for each great hall complex, arranged from earliest to latest ... 58
Table 3.1: The available dating evidence for each minor hall complex, from earliest to latest ... 106
Table 4.1: The weighted artefact count of female burial 111 at Lechlade ... 156
Table 4.2: The average weighted artefact count of female burials 33/2, 111 and 81/4 at Lechlade ... 156
Table 4.3: The normalized average weighted artefact count of sixth-century cemeteries ... 157
Table 5.1: Change in the average artefact count of each cemetery from AD 475-530 to AD 530-580 (Phases A1-A2 to Phases B-C) ... 203
Table App.2.1: The method for counting various artefact types in the burials of the Upper Thames Valley ... 322
Table App.2.2: The proportion of gendered burials from all adult sexed burials, AD 475-630 ... 324
Table App.2.3: The proportion of gendered burials from all adult sexed burials, AD 630-675 ... 324
Table App.2.4: The total proportion of all burials, regardless of sex or age, that received gendered burial, AD 630-675 ... 325

List of Graphs

Graph 4.1: In the burials analysis (Chapter 5), the normalized average weighted artefact count is represented in graphs, like this one ... 158
Graph 4.2: The weighted artefact count of the wealthiest sixth-century adult female gendered inhumation burials from each cemetery ... 160
Graph 4.3: This graph displays the percentage of the total weighted artefact count of each cemetery that was concentrated in the wealthiest 10% of burials and the poorest 10% of burials of that particular cemetery ... 161
Graph 4.4: Burial wealth and the proportion of gendered burial ... 162
Graph 5.1: The recorded number of excavated burials at each sixth-century cemetery with intact Anglo-Saxon gendered burial ... 166
Graph 5.2: Sixth-century cemeteries grouped by size ... 167
Graph 5.3: The recorded number of excavated burials at each seventh-century cemetery ... 173
Graph 5.4: Seventh-century cemeteries grouped by size ... 174
Graph 5.5: The average weighted artefact count of female gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery ... 185
Graph 5.6: The average weighted artefact count of female gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery, only including those sites with two or more female gendered burials ... 186
Graph 5.7: The average weighted artefact count of male gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery ... 187
Graph 5.8: The average weighted artefact count of male gendered burials at each sixth-century cemetery, only including those sites with two or more male gendered burials ... 188
Graph 5.9: The normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials at each sixth-century cemetery ... 189
Graph 5.10: The normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials at each sixth-century cemetery, only including sites with at least two gendered burials ... 189
Graph 5.11: Comparing the size of sixth-century cemeteries with the normalized average artefact count of each cemetery 190
Graph 5.12: The percentage of the total weighted artefact count of each sixth-century cemetery that was concentrated in the wealthiest and poorest 10% of female burials at each cemetery ... 196
Graph 5.13: The percentage of the total weighted artefact count of each sixth-century cemetery that was concentrated in the wealthiest and poorest 10% of male burials at each cemetery ... 196
Graph 5.14: The percentage of the total weighted artefact count of each sixth-century cemetery that was concentrated in the wealthiest 10% of female and male burials at each cemetery ... 196
Graph 5.15: The single wealthiest female gendered burial at each sixth-century cemetery ... 197
Graph 5.16: The single wealthiest male gendered burial at each sixth-century cemetery ... 198
Graph 5.17: The wealthiest male and female burials at each sixth-century cemetery, combined using normalization ... 198
Graph 5.18: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, AD 475-530 (Phases A1-A2) ... 201
Graph 5.19: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, AD 530-580 (Phases B-C) ... 201
Graph 5.20: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, AD 580-630 inclusive (Phases D-E) ... 204
Graph 5.21: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, AD 580-630 exclusive (Phases D-E) ... 205

Graph 5.22: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, Episode B-C (all burials solidly dated to Phases B-C) 206
Graph 5.23: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, Episode C-D (all burials solidly dated to Phases C-D) 207
Graph 5.24: The combined normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials for each cemetery, Episode D-E (all burials solidly dated to Phases D-E) 208
Graph 5.25: The normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female burials at mid-seventh-century cemeteries..211
Graph 5.26: The average weighted artefact count of female gendered burials at each seventh-century cemetery 212
Graph 5.27: The average weighted artefact count of male gendered burials at each seventh-century cemetery..... 213
Graph 5.28: The normalized average weighted artefact count of male and female gendered burials at each seventh-century cemetery. 214
Graph 5.29: The single wealthiest female burial at each seventh-century cemetery 215
Graph 5.30: The single wealthiest male burial at each seventh-century cemetery..... 215
Graph 6.1: The Anglo-Saxon settlement sites..... 224
Graph 7.1: The number of distinct sunken-feature buildings and earthfast buildings larger than 20 m^2 excavated at each site..... 230
Graph 7.2: The proportion of different types of material culture recovered from all stratified contexts at Sutton Courtenay, Barrow Hills and Horcott Quarry..... 249

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is based on the doctoral research of the author, undertaken at the University of Oxford in 2014-2018 under the supervision of Helena Hamerow and examined by John Blair and Gabor Thomas in January 2019. In light of the examiners' comments, the submitted dissertation has been reworked for publication, resulting in the present volume.

On the one hand, this book is the product of a particular academic discipline – Anglo-Saxon history and archaeology – and it has been heavily influenced by the ideas and individuals within this field, most notably, Helena Hamerow and John Blair, but also Matt Austin, Andrew Holland, Faye Minter, Gordon Noble, Ian Ralston, Chris Scull, Sarah Semple, Cliff Sofield, Gabor Thomas, Abi Tompkins, Dries Tys, Roger White and Howard Williams, among others. On the other hand, however, this book has also been immeasurably shaped by the wider socio-cultural moment, by the upheaval and new ideas emerging in many academic disciplines and reshaping many societies around the world. In trying to make sense of these changes, the ideas presented in this book have benefitted immensely from a range of cross-disciplinary conversations with various colleagues at The Queen's College, especially Morganne Graves, Ross Speer, Jack Fitzsimons, Steph Carey, Julia Hamilton, Yongqi Wang, Max Lawton, Charlie Troup, Dan Iley-Williamson, Eleri Watson and Marina Lambrakis. And long before this research began, the ideas presented in this book were indelibly shaped by my upbringing, by my parents, Mary and Lee, by my trailblazing sister, Jessica, and by my *gesiths*, Joe, Tommy, Charlie, Zach, Oliver, Dave, Daniel and Patrick.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Great Hall Complexes

The term 'great hall complex' describes a distinctive group of early Anglo-Saxon sites that exhibit a common architectural and spatial vocabulary, which was exceptional, monumental, ritualized and symbolic.

The architectural style of great hall complexes was characterized by large timber buildings with substantial post-in-trench foundations, elaborate wall types and external raking posts (Figure 1.1). The largest building at each site – the great hall – was at least 18 m long, and the smaller buildings at each site were typically 10-20 m long. The layouts of the great hall complexes were distinctively structured by consistent orientation schemes, linear and perpendicular alignments and focal elements, and the layout of each site appears to be a coherent, planned entity, in which each element was laid out in reference to the other elements (Figure 1.2).

Most great hall complexes have produced very little material culture, but great hall complexes are uniformly interpreted as high status sites. In most cases, great hall complexes are assumed to be royal sites, due in large part to the documented royal status of Yeavering (Northum.) and Milfield (Northum.). Great hall complexes have also produced considerable evidence for ritual and cult activity, and a few great hall complexes have produced evidence of specialist craft-working and exchange.

As a group, great hall complexes are typically dated between the late 6th and the early 8th centuries. This dating corresponds to the emergence and early development of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and great hall complexes are widely considered to be one of the earliest archaeological indicators of kingdom formation. This parallel chronology, between great hall complexes and kingdom formation, strongly suggests that the great hall complexes played a critical role in the emergence and early development of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. However, the exact nature of this role remains uncertain. The further study of great hall complexes therefore holds significant potential for understanding kingdom formation in Anglo-Saxon England and for understanding the emergence and early development of kingdoms across human history. For these reasons, great hall complexes warrant significant further study.

1.1.1 The Sites

This study has identified nineteen sites that exhibit the characteristics of great hall complexes (Figure 1.3). Of these sites, ten can be unequivocally called great hall complexes: Atcham (Shrops.), Cowage Farm (Wilts.), Cowdery's Down (Hants.), Hatton Rock (Warks.), Long Itchington (Warks.), Lyminge (Kent), Milfield (Northum.), Sprouston (Scot. Bord.), Sutton Courtenay (Oxon.) and Yeavering (Northum.). Each of these sites has produced evidence for at least two exceptionally large buildings arranged in a formalized layout.[1]

A further three sites – Rendlesham (Suff.), Eynsford (Kent) and Long Wittenham (Oxon.) – share strong similarities with these sites, but thus far, only one building has been identified at Rendlesham and Eynsford, and while Long Wittenham has produced evidence for several buildings arranged in a formalized layout, the buildings are relatively small when compared with the other sites.[2] Nevertheless, these three sites are assumed to be great hall complexes in Part I of this book, although the status of Long Wittenham is further interrogated in Part II.

Another group of four sites – Chalton (Hants.), Lockerbie (D.&G.), Polebrook (Northants.) and Thirlings (Northum.) – share certain characteristics with the great hall complexes, but their less formal layouts, smaller buildings and less robust construction methods differentiate these sites from the great hall complexes. In this book, these four sites are referred to as 'minor' hall complexes; 'minor' refers to the significant differences in scale and precision between these sites and the 'great' hall complexes, and this terminology avoids the interpretative baggage of terms like 'thegnly' or 'aristocratic'.

The sites at Dover (Kent) and Repton (Derbs.) also exhibit certain characteristics of the great hall complexes, but the interpretation of these sites is complicated by their ecclesiastical associations and by the circumstances of their excavation; the Dover buildings were heavily damaged by repeated rebuilding, and the Repton

[1] References for these sites are given below in Section 1.1.2.

[2] The site at Doon Hill (E. Loth.), previously believed to be an Anglo-Saxon great hall complex, has recently been re-dated by Ralston 2018; 2019 to the Neolithic, based on radiocarbon dates taken from archived charcoal samples, and in light of the Doon Hill re-dating, the sub-rectangular halls at Whitekirk (E. Loth.), identified in aerial photographs by Brown 1983, also look more at home in the Neolithic. As such, Doon Hill and Whitekirk are both excluded from this study. The author is grateful to Ian Ralston for discussing both of these sites.

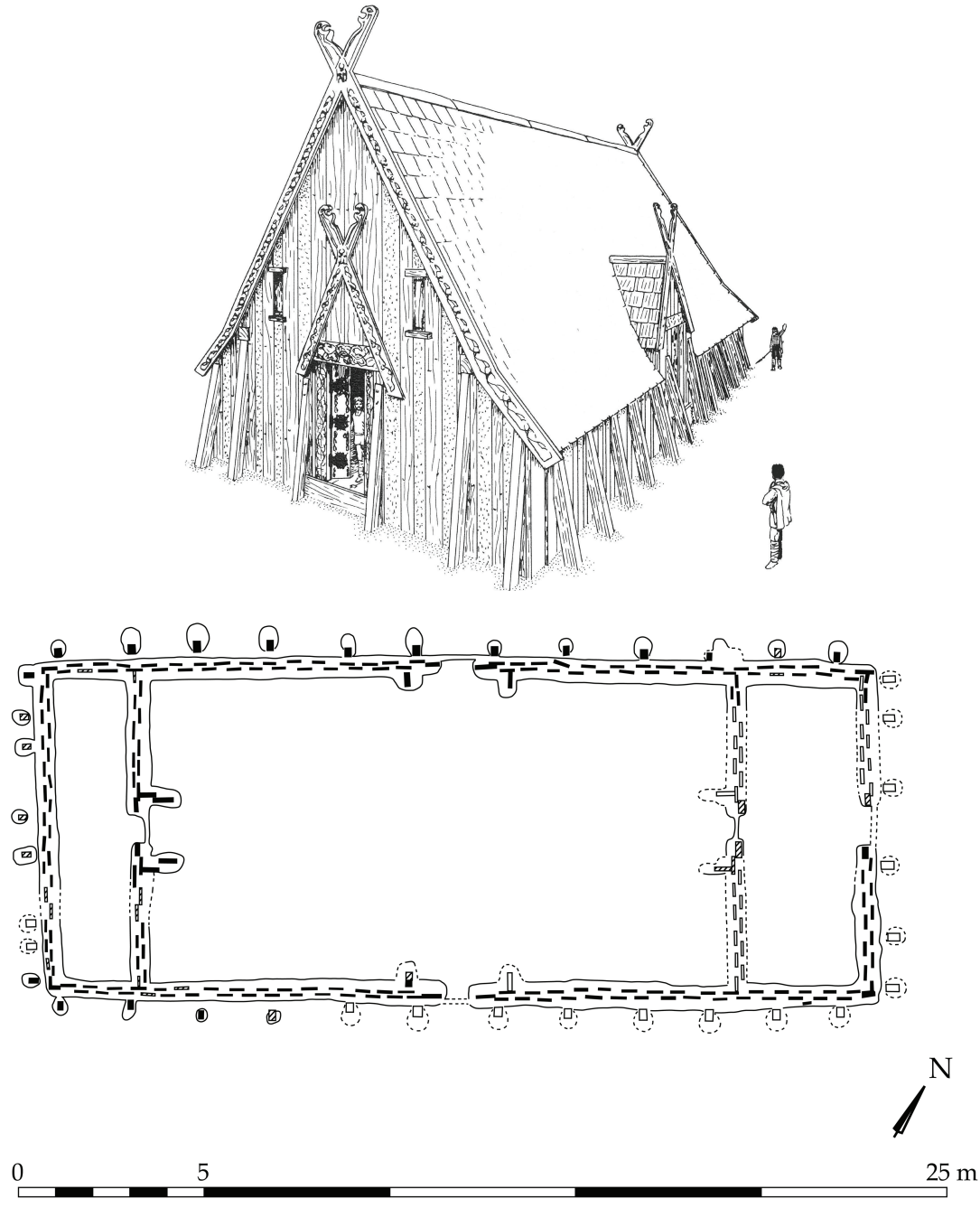


Figure 1.1: The great hall, Building C12, at Cowdery's Down (reconstruction after Millett and James 1983: figure 71 © Royal Archaeological Institute, reprinted by permission of Taylor & Francis Ltd, http://www.tandfonline.com on behalf of Royal Archaeological Institute).

buildings are currently unpublished.[3] Several other possible great hall complexes are also identified in Part II of this book, but these sites are not discussed in Part I.

Twelve of the nineteen sites included in this study – Atcham, Cowage Farm, Hatton Rock, Long Itchington, Long Wittenham, Milfield, Polebrook, Rendlesham, Sprouston, Sutton Courtenay, Thirlings and Yeavering – were discovered from aerial photography.[4] Only Chalton, Cowdery's Down, Dover, Eynsford, Lockerbie, Lyminge and Repton were discovered during excavation, and this suggests that there is a bias among the identified

[3] For Repton, see Blair 2005: 187; 2018: 131; Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2012. For the debate over Dover, see Philp 2003: 58-72; Welch 2007: 203; Thomas and Knox 2013: 13; Blair 2018: 133; Thomas 2018: 274-86. Thomas 2018, in particular, makes a convincing case for reinterpreting Dover as a royal centre, similar to Lyminge; however, this book was largely complete when this article was published, and as such, Dover does not feature prominently in this study. Nevertheless, future discussions will hopefully take both Dover and Repton into account.

[4] The possible hall at Rendlesham was discovered from a combination of aerial photography and geophysics, but Scull *et al.* 2016: 1597 give the primary credit to aerial reconnaissance.

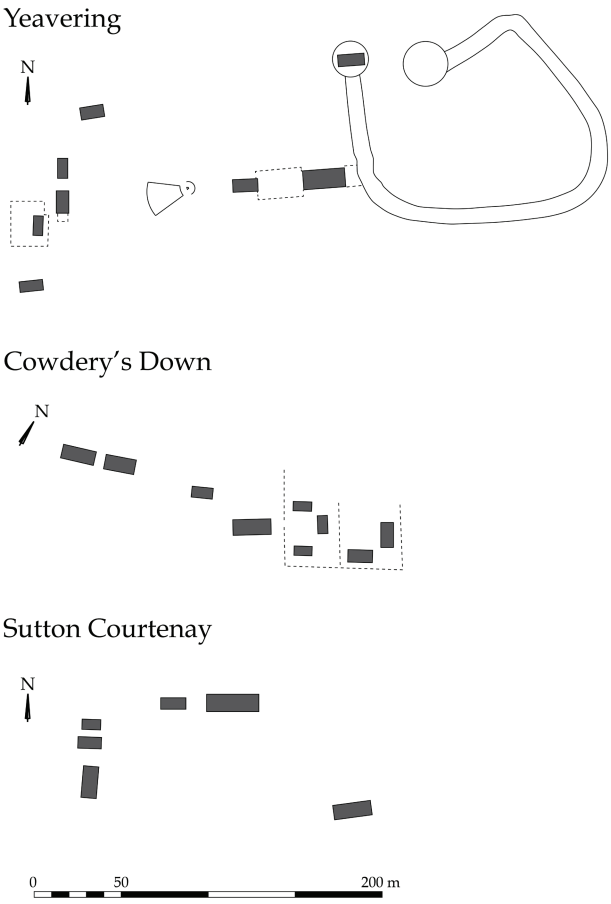


Figure 1.2: The distinctively structured layouts of Yeavering (redrawn from Hope-Taylor 1977), Cowdery's Down (redrawn from Millett and James 1983) and Sutton Courtenay (redrawn from Booth *et al.* 2007; Hamerow *et al.* 2007; Wessex Archaeology 2010).

sites towards certain geologies and land uses that are conducive to aerial photography, particularly modern agricultural fields and freely draining gravel geology. Great hall complexes and minor hall complexes that are located on less conducive geologies and under modern towns or villages are less likely to be discovered, and when discovered, they are less likely to be identified as such, because their distinctive layout and monumental scale are often unclear in small-scale excavations, especially in urban situations.

1.1.2 The Extent of Fieldwork at the Great Hall Complexes

Yeavering (Figure 1.4), Cowdery's Down (Figure 1.5) and Lyminge (Figure 1.6) have each been the subject of large-scale excavations.[5] However, the excavations at Lyminge are currently still in post-excavation, and although several interim reports are available, the final report will no doubt add many details to the current picture.

Smaller scale excavations have been carried out at Cowage Farm (Figure 1.7), Sutton Courtenay (Figure 1.8), Eynsford (Figure 1.9), Rendlesham (Figure 1.10), Long Wittenham (Figure 1.11) and Atcham (Figure 1.12), and a watching brief was carried out at Hatton Rock when a pipe trench was cut across the site (Figure 1.13).[6] Large cemeteries have also been separately excavated at Milfield (Figure 1.14), Lyminge and Long Wittenham.[7]

Long Itchington (Figure 1.15), Sutton Courtenay, Rendlesham, Long Wittenham and Atcham have also been metal-detected,[8] and Hatton Rock, Milfield, Cowage Farm, Long Itchington, Sutton Courtenay, Rendlesham, Atcham and Long Wittenham have been subject to geophysical surveys.[9] However, the Hatton Rock and Milfield surveys did not return significant results, and the Long Itchington survey is unpublished and apparently lost.[10]

The site at Sprouston (Figure 1.16) is known almost exclusively from aerial photographs,[11] but 'hearths, and foundations of houses and kitchen utensils' were apparently ploughed up at Sprouston in the 1840s,[12] and the cropmarks at Sprouston are exceptionally clear, revealing post-built buildings and individual graves.[13]

The possible great hall complexes at Dover and Repton have been extensively excavated, but as previously mentioned, the Dover features are difficult to interpret (Figure 1.17), and the Repton excavation is currently unpublished (Figure 1.18). The minor hall complexes

[5] For Yeavering, see Hope-Taylor 1977; Harding 1981; Tinniswood and Harding 1991. For Cowdery's Down, see Millett and James 1983. For Lyminge, see Thomas 2008; 2009; 2010; 2017; 2018; Thomas and Bray 2010; Thomas and Knox 2013; 2014; 2015.

[6] For Cowage Farm, see Hinchliffe 1986. For Sutton Courtenay, see Hamerow *et al.* 2007; Wessex Archaeology 2010; Brennan and Hamerow 2015. For Eynsford, see Philp 2014: 118-36; Thomas 2018: 286-8. For Rendlesham, see Scull *et al.* 2016. For Long Wittenham, see Section 7.2.2; McBride *et al.* Forthcoming. For Atcham, see White and Young 2019. For Hatton Rock, see Hirst and Rahtz 1973.

[7] For Milfield, see Scull and Harding 1990. For Lyminge, see Jenkins 1885; Warhurst 1955; Parfitt 2002. For Long Wittenham, see Clutterbuck 1848; Akerman 1860; 1861; 1862.

[8] For Long Itchington, see Jones and Wise 1997; 1998a; 1998b. For Sutton Courtenay, see Hamerow *et al.* 2007. For Rendlesham, see Scull *et al.* 2016. For Atcham, see White and Young 2019. For Long Wittenham, see Section 7.2.2; McBride *et al.* Forthcoming.

[9] For Hatton Rock, see Rahtz 1970. For Milfield, see Bartlett 1978. For Cowage Farm, see Hinchliffe 1986; David 1994. For Long Itchington, see Jones and Wise 1997; 1998a; 1998b. For Sutton Courtenay, see Hamerow *et al.* 2007; Wessex Archaeology 2010. For Rendlesham, see Scull *et al.* 2016. For Atcham, see Hannaford and Wigley 2010; Roseveare 2011. For Long Wittenham, see Section 7.2.2; McBride *et al.* Forthcoming.

[10] Warwickshire HER pers. comm.

[11] St Joseph 1982; Reynolds 1980: 50-2; Smith 1983; 1992.

[12] Smith 1992: 265.

[13] Throughout this book, the term 'post-built building' is used exclusively to describe buildings that were founded in individual postholes, as opposed to post-in-trench buildings, which were constructed with continuous foundation trenches; the term 'earthfast building' is used to describe both post-built and post-in-trench buildings.

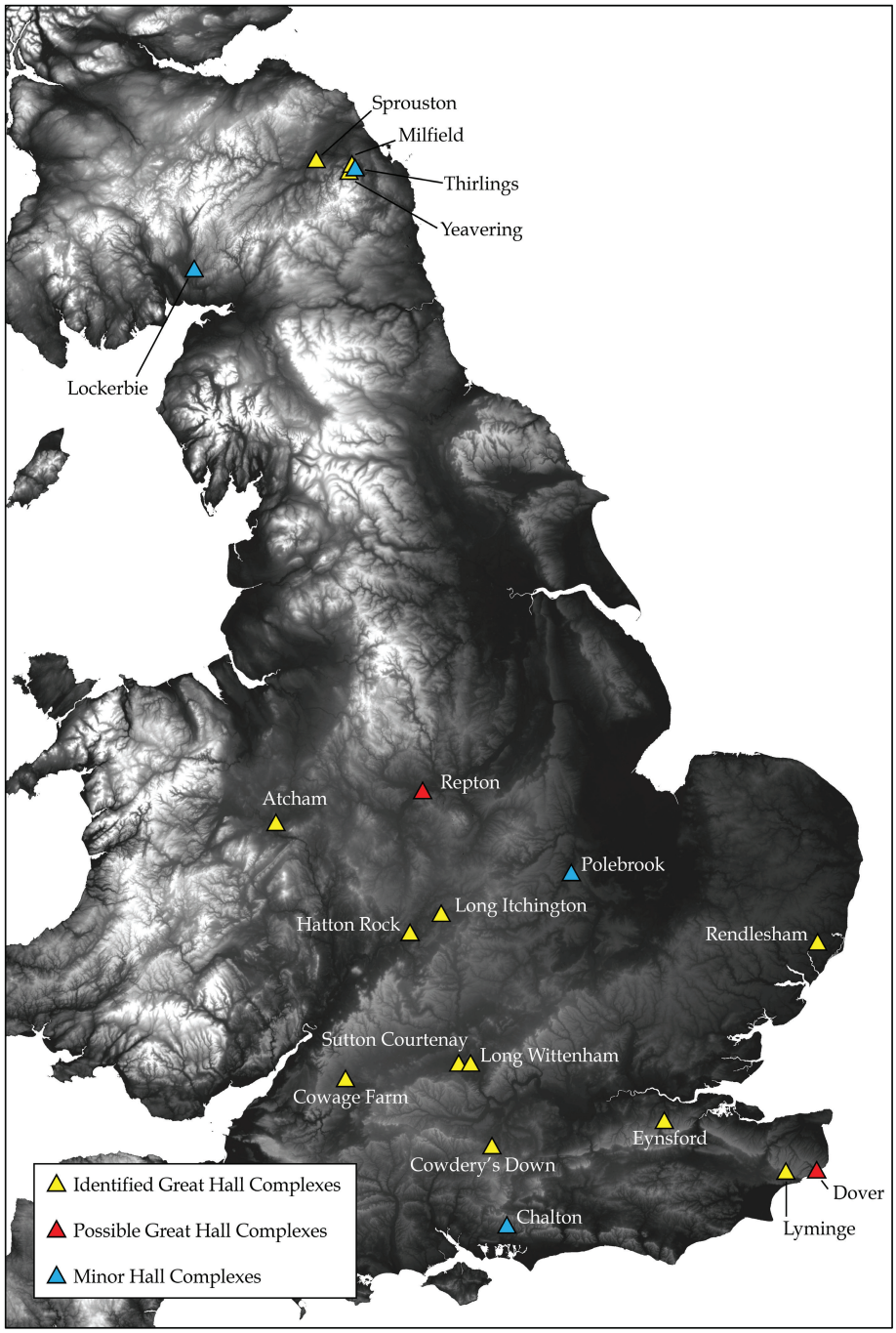


Figure 1.3: The nineteen sites discussed in Part I of this book.

at Chalton (Figure 1.19), Polebrook (Figure 1.20) and Thirlings (Figure 1.21) have also been extensively excavated, and the minor hall complex at Lockerbie (Figure 1.22) was subject to fairly extensive trial trenching, although only one building was excavated. The sites at Lockerbie, Thirlings and Polebrook have also been fully written up, but the Chalton excavations remain only partially published.[14]

1.2 The Study of Great Hall Complexes

1.2.1 Yeavering and the Culture-Historical Paradigm

In 1949, the first great hall complexes were identified from aerial photographs at Yeavering and Milfield and interpreted as the seventh-century '*villae regiae*' recorded by Bede at *Ad Gefrin* (Yeavering) and *Maelmin* (Milfield).[15] Soon afterward, in 1952, Yeavering came under threat from quarrying, and rescue excavations

[14] For Lockerbie, see Kirby 2012. For Polebrook, see Upex 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005. For Thirlings, see O'Brien and Miket 1991. For Chalton, see Addyman *et al.* 1972; Addyman and Leigh 1973; Champion 1977.

[15] Bede HE II: 14; Knowles and St Joseph 1952: 270-1; Hope-Taylor 1977: 1-5.

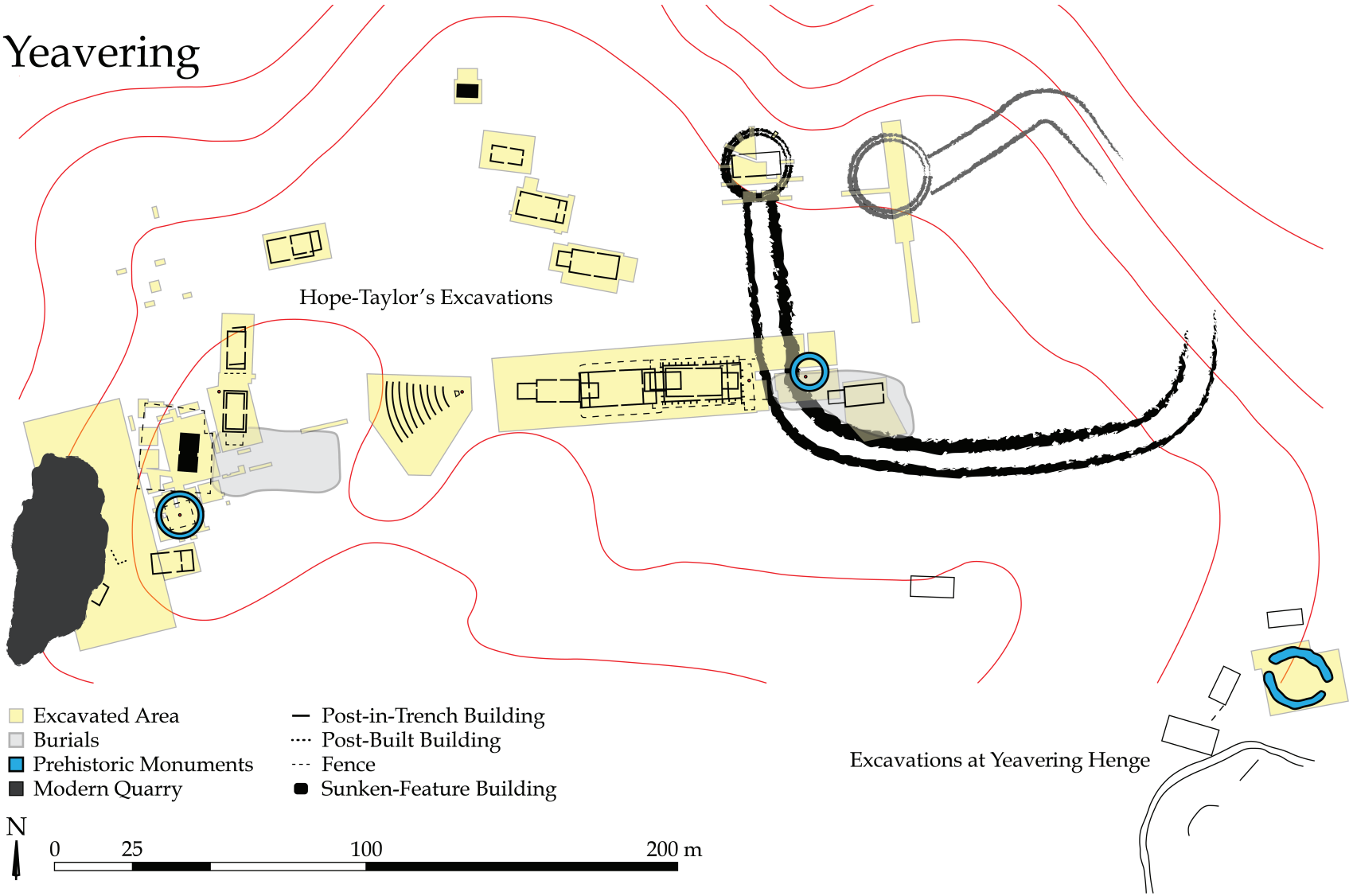


Figure 1.4: Brian Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavering (redrawn from Hope-Taylor 1977) and the 1976 excavations at Yeavering Henge (redrawn from Tinniswood and Harding 1991); due to discrepancies in the published plans, there may be inaccuracies in the placement and orientation of certain features, especially regarding the spatial relationship between Hope-Taylor's excavations and the Yeavering Henge features (n.b. in this figure and throughout this book, the term 'post-built building' is used exclusively to describe buildings that were founded in individual postholes, as opposed to post-in-trench buildings).

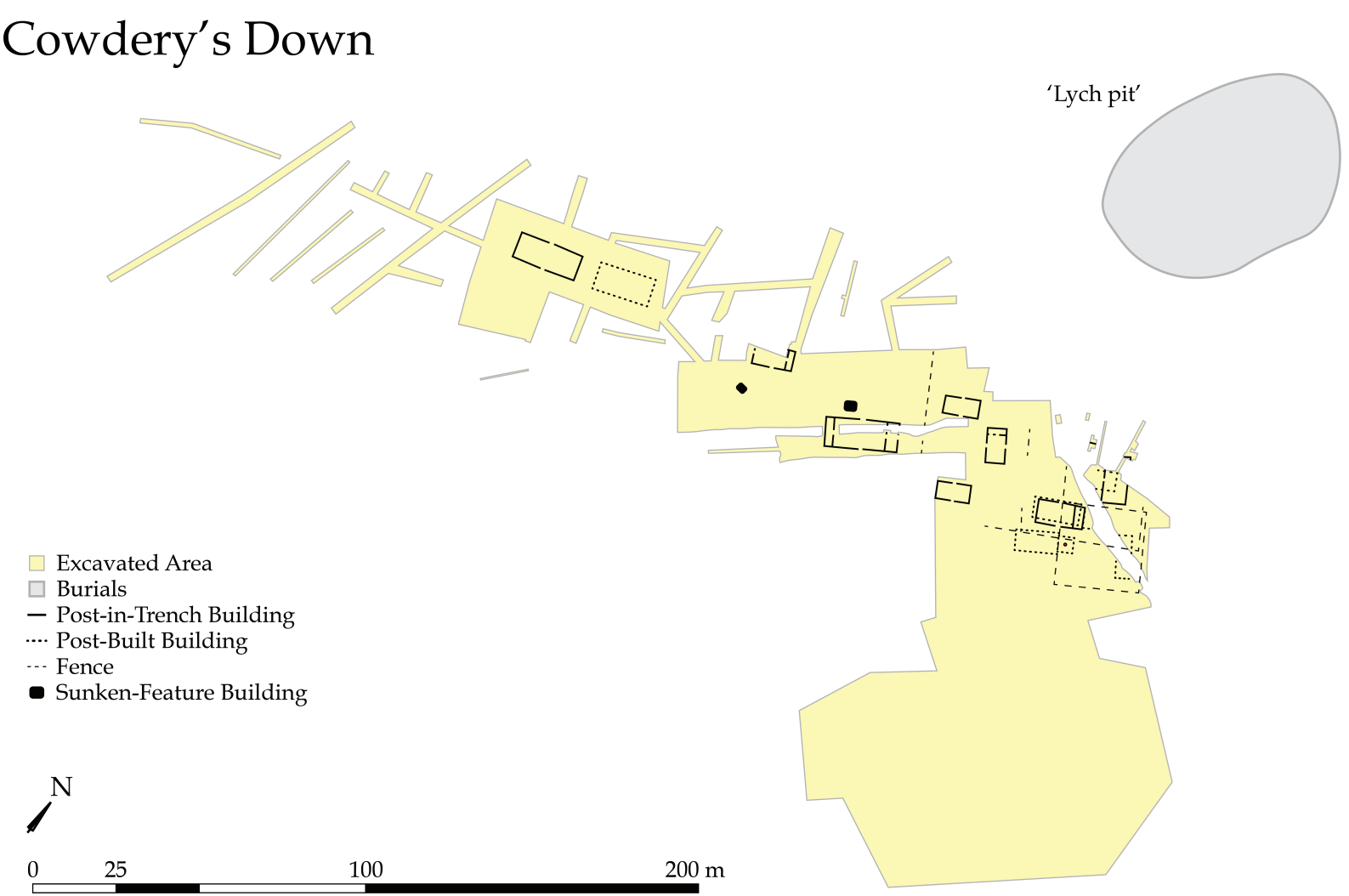


Figure 1.5: Martin Millett's excavations at Cowdery's Down (redrawn from Millett and James 1983). The nearby 'Lych pit' or 'corpse pit' recorded in AD 945 (S 505) may be an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery, or perhaps a hollow associated with dead or supernatural spirits (n.b. this figure and the following Figures 1.6-1.13 are depicted at the same scale as Figure 1.4).

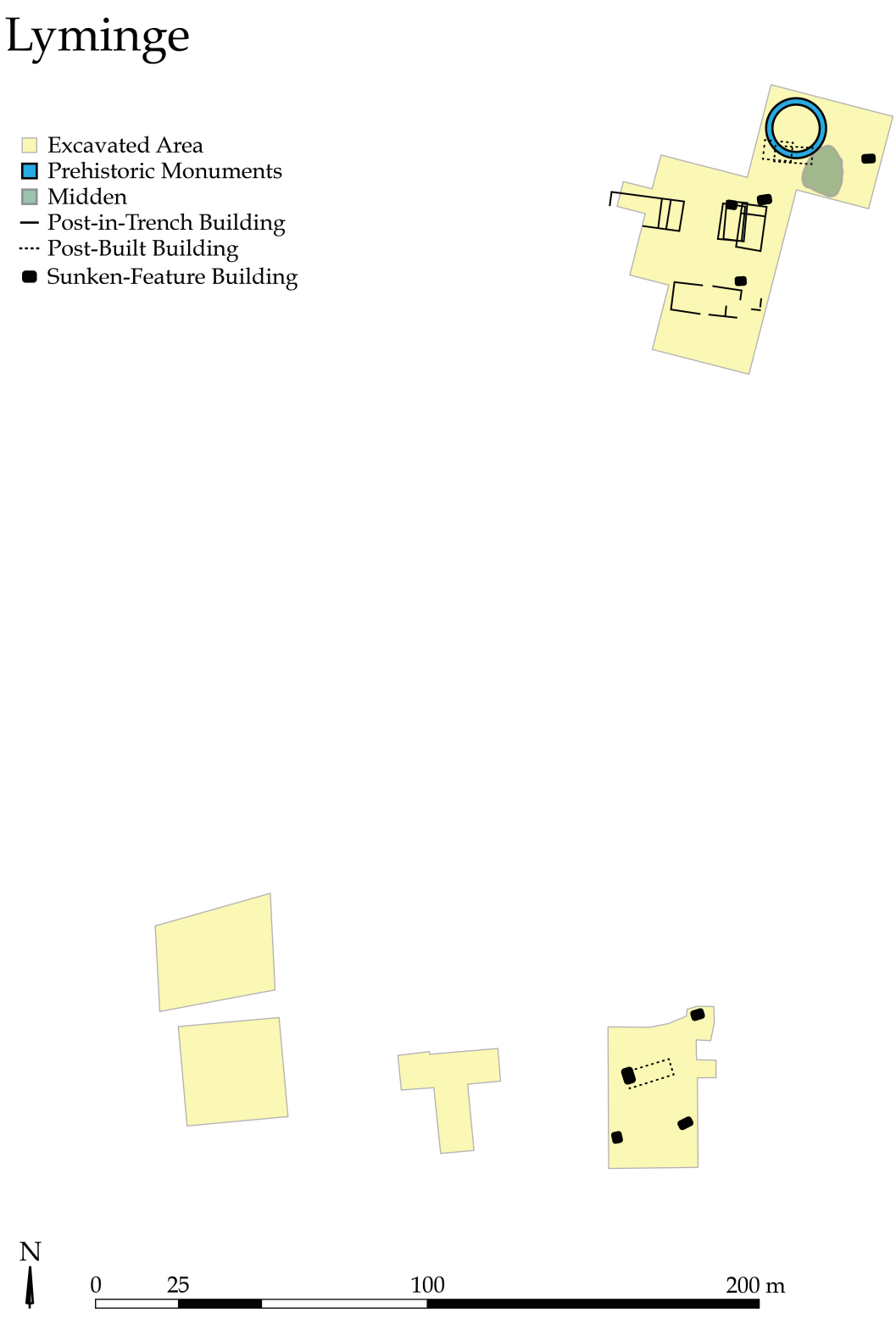


Figure 1.6: Gabor Thomas' excavations at Lyminge (redrawn from Thomas 2017). Only the sixth- and seventh-century features are depicted in this plan; the eighth-century minster buildings are not included (Due to discrepancies in the currently available plans, there may be inaccuracies in the placement and orientation of certain features).

Figure 1.7: The cropmarks at Cowage Farm, partially excavated by John Hinchliffe in 1983 (redrawn from Hinchliffe 1986).

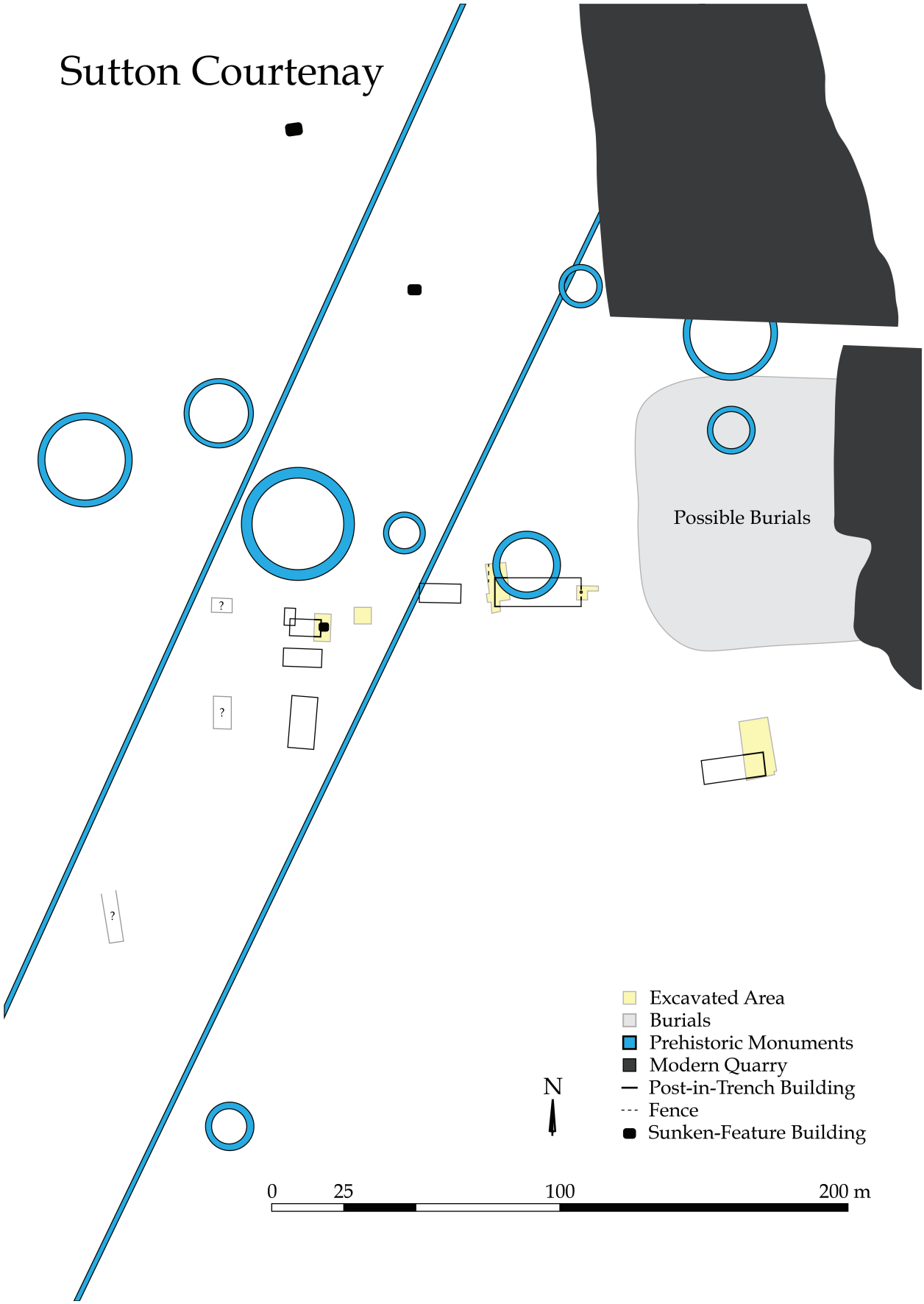


Figure 1.8: The cropmarks at Sutton Courtenay, partially excavated in 2001-2003 and 2010 (redrawn from Booth *et al.* 2007; Hamerow *et al.* 2007; Wessex Archaeology 2010) (Due to discrepancies between the different published plans, there may be inaccuracies in the placement and orientation of certain features).

Eynsford

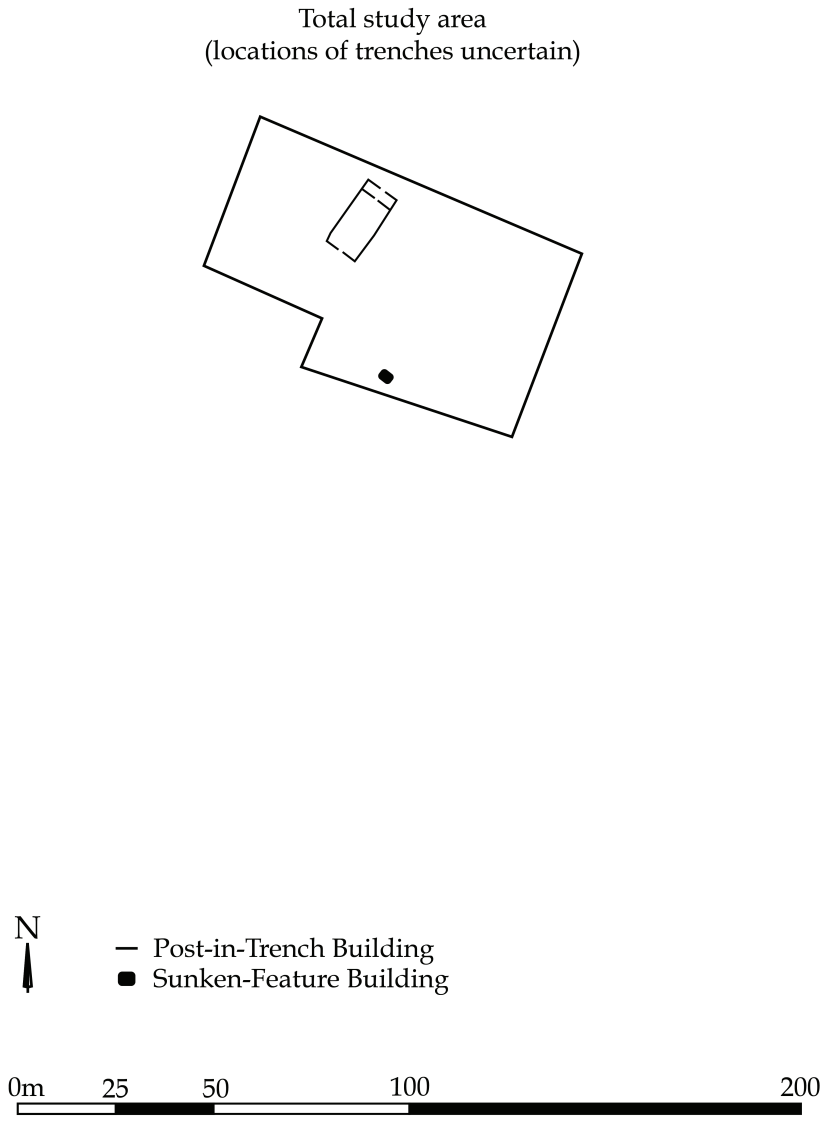


Figure 1.9: The Eynsford hall (redrawn from Philp 2014) (The exact location of the hall and sunken-feature building and the extent of the excavated area are not depicted in the published plans; the locations of these features have therefore been estimated from the description of the features' locations, relative to the total study area).

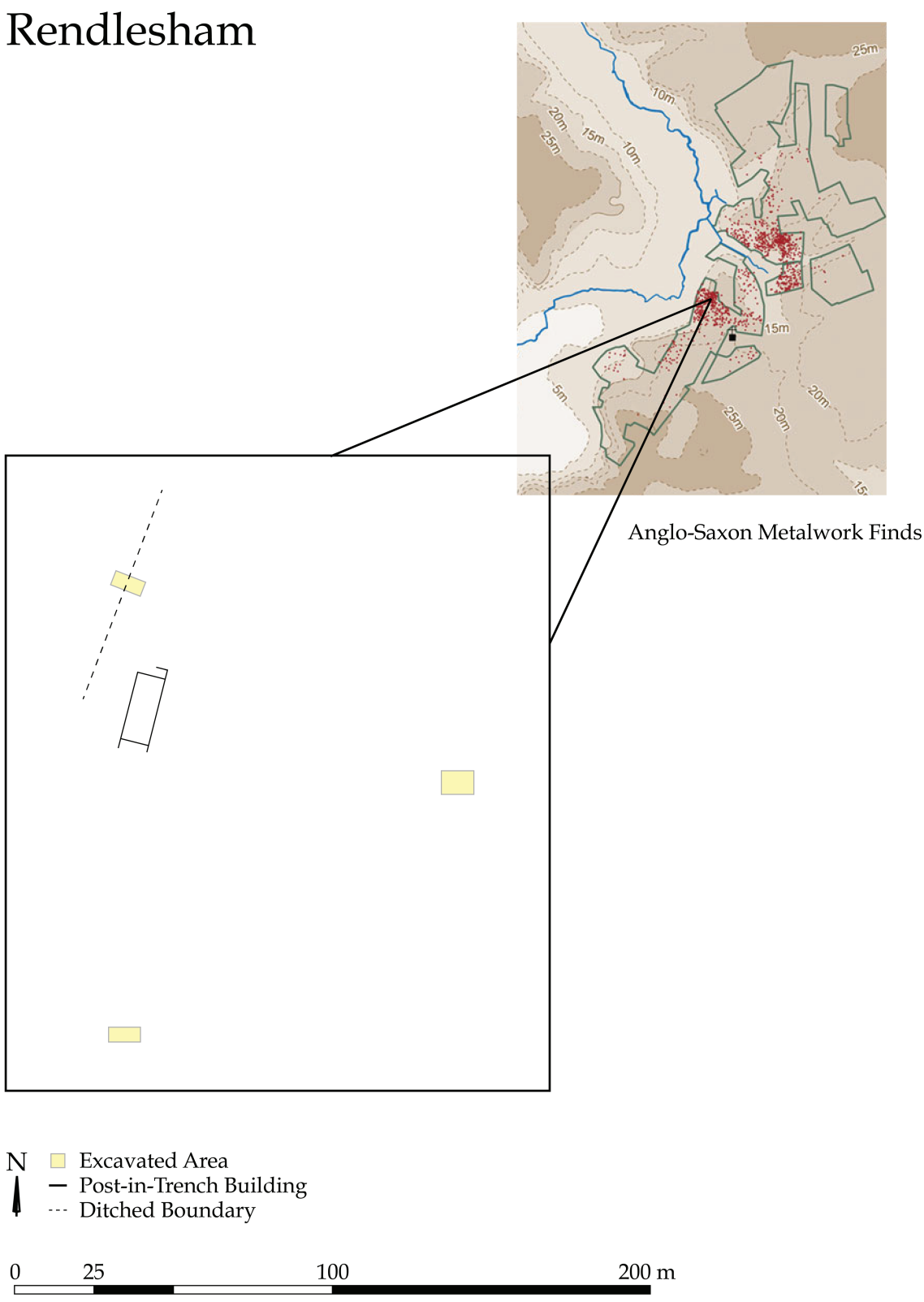


Figure 1.10: The great hall at Rendlesham, identified from aerial photographs and geophysical survey (after Scull *et al.* 2016; © Suffolk County Council). Metal-detecting and test-pitting have revealed strong evidence for high status Anglo-Saxon occupation, but the great hall has yet to be ground-truthed.

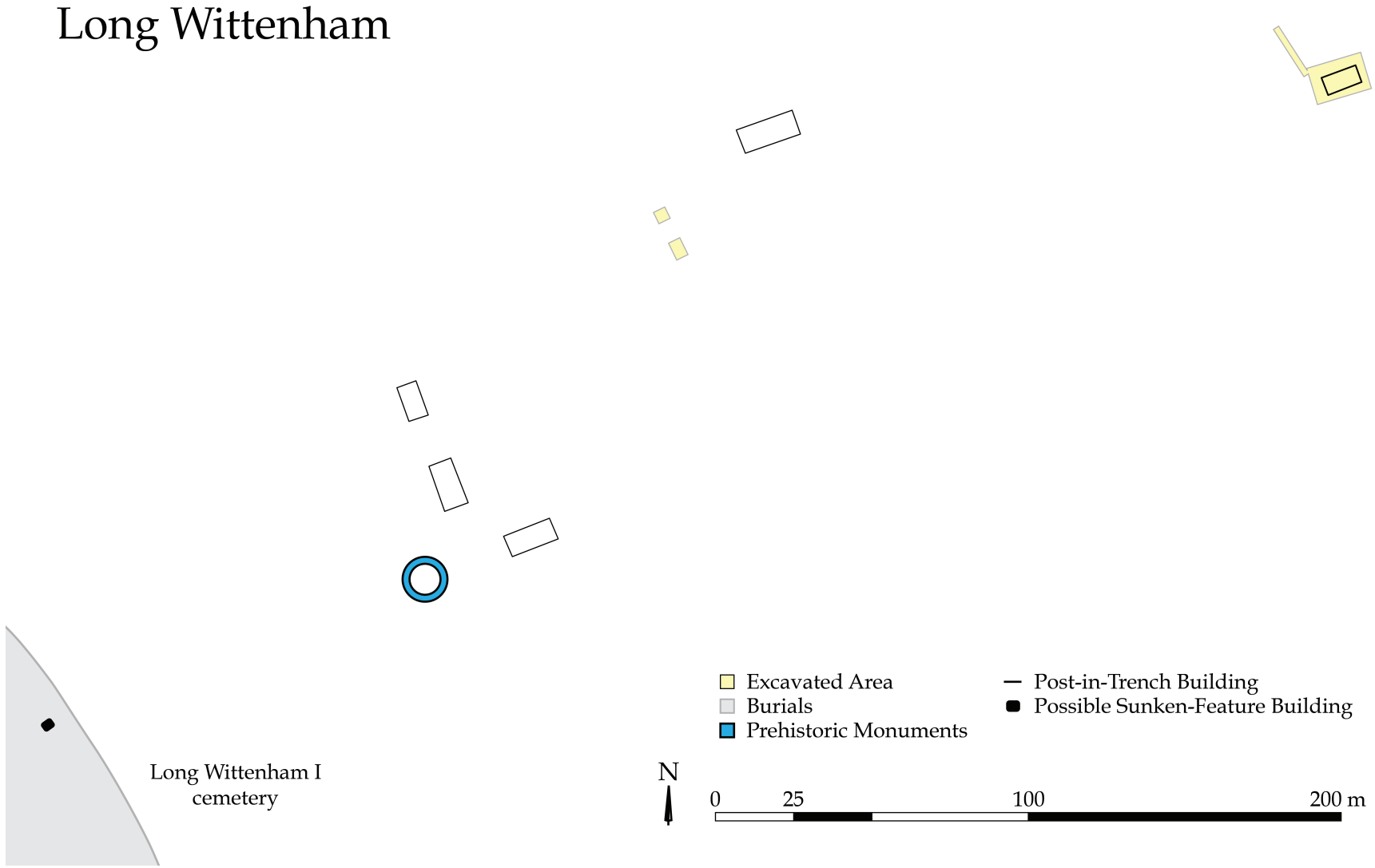


Figure 1.11: The recent excavations at Long Wittenham, undertaken by the author, in collaboration with Helena Hamerow and Jane Harrison. A sunken-feature building was also apparently excavated at the eastern edge of the Long Wittenham I cemetery in the 19th century (Hamerow *et al.* 2013: 63) (The exact location of this feature is unknown, however, and the location shown here is only approximate).

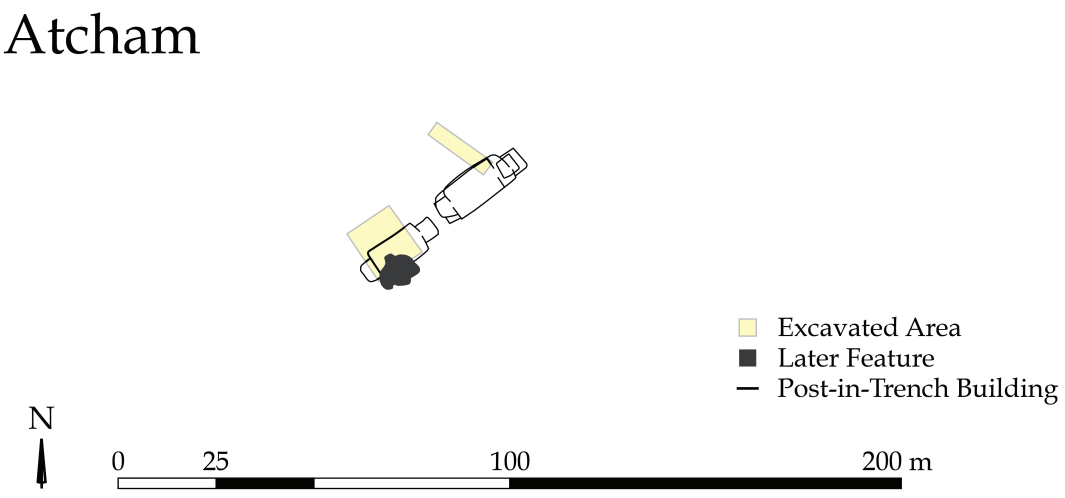


Figure 1.12: The great halls at Atcham, partially excavated by Roger White (redrawn from White and Young 2019). The cropmarks at Atcham are unusually irregular, and the buildings appear to be almost sub-rectangular, but aerial photographs can be misleading. Detailed plans of the excavation are not yet available, and it remains unclear if this irregularity will be borne out in excavation.

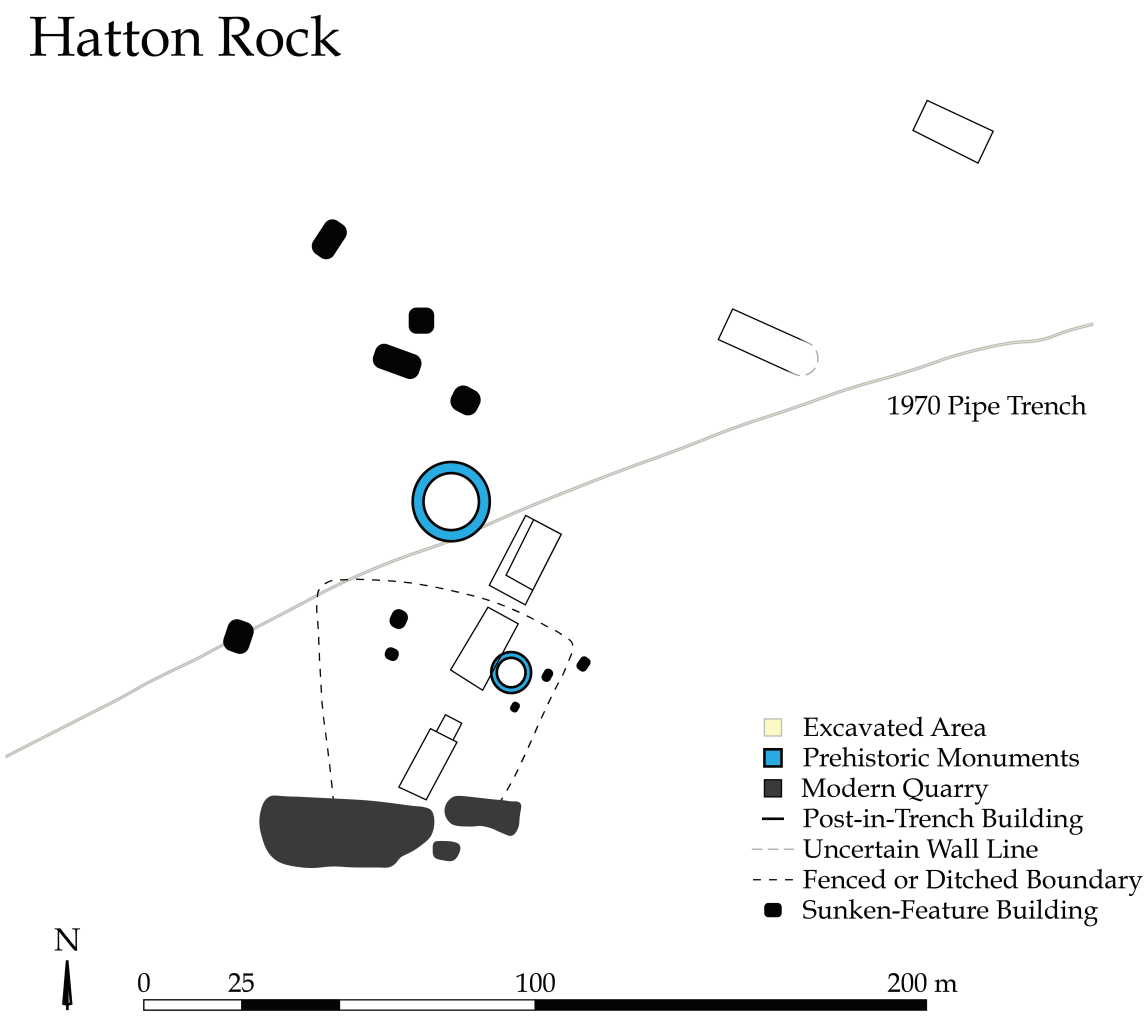


Figure 1.13: The cropmarks at Hatton Rock, bisected by the 1970 pipe trench (redrawn from Hirst and Rahtz 1973; Gethin 2007). One of the largest buildings appears to have had a rounded end wall, possibly indicative of an apse, but this feature is not well-defined in the aerial photographs, and its existence is uncertain.

Figure 1.14: The cropmarks at Milfield (redrawn from Gates and O'Brien 1988) (n.b. the scale of this figure is different from that of the previous figures – the site is simply too extensive to be depicted at the same scale).

Long Itchington

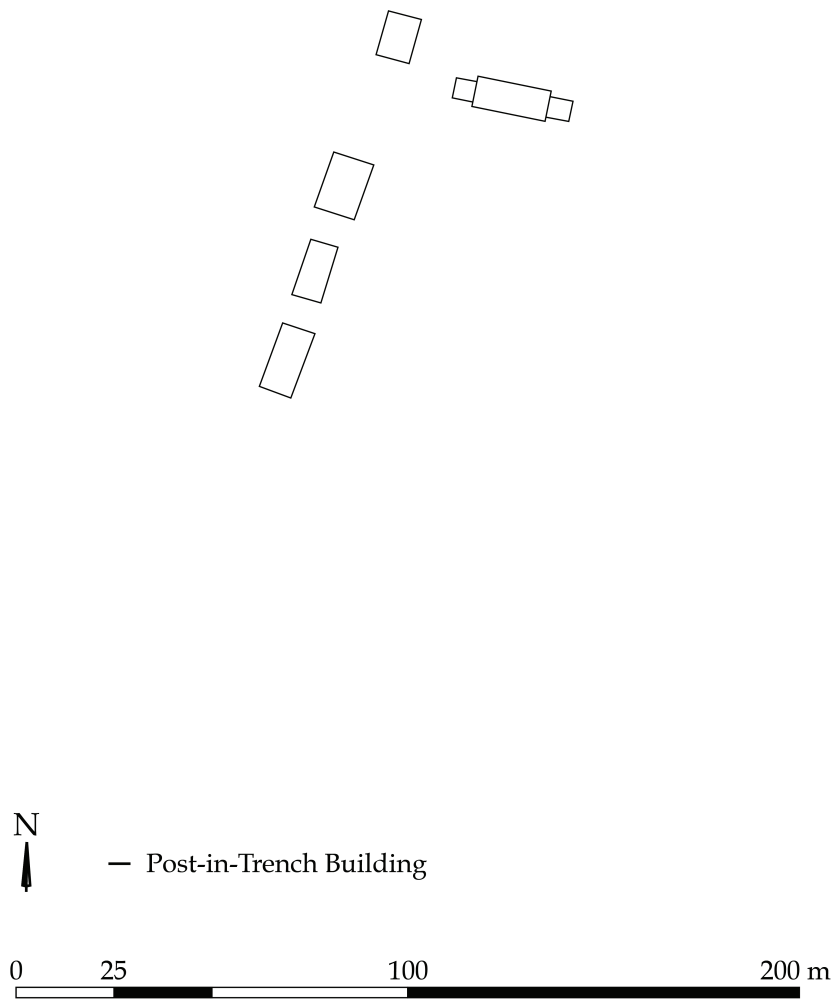


Figure 1.15: The cropmarks at Long Itchington (redrawn from an unpublished plan provided by Abi Tompkins) (n.b. this figure and Figures 1.16-1.22 are depicted at the same scale as Figures 1.4-1.13). Long Itchington is one of the least understood sites, and the only published plan (Wilson 1980) depicts the site as a Roman villa.

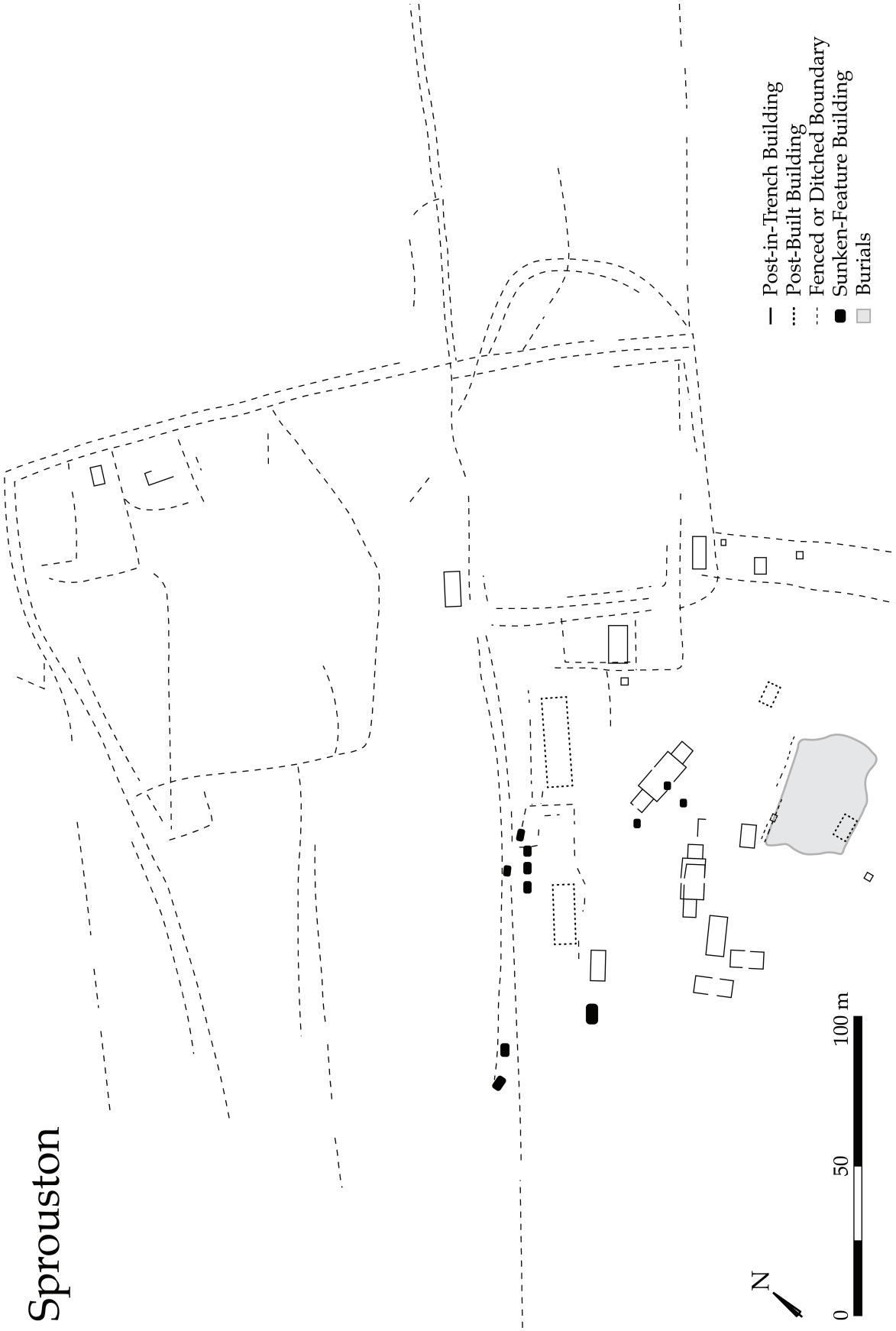


Figure 1.16: The cropmarks at Sprouston (redrawn from Smith 1992).

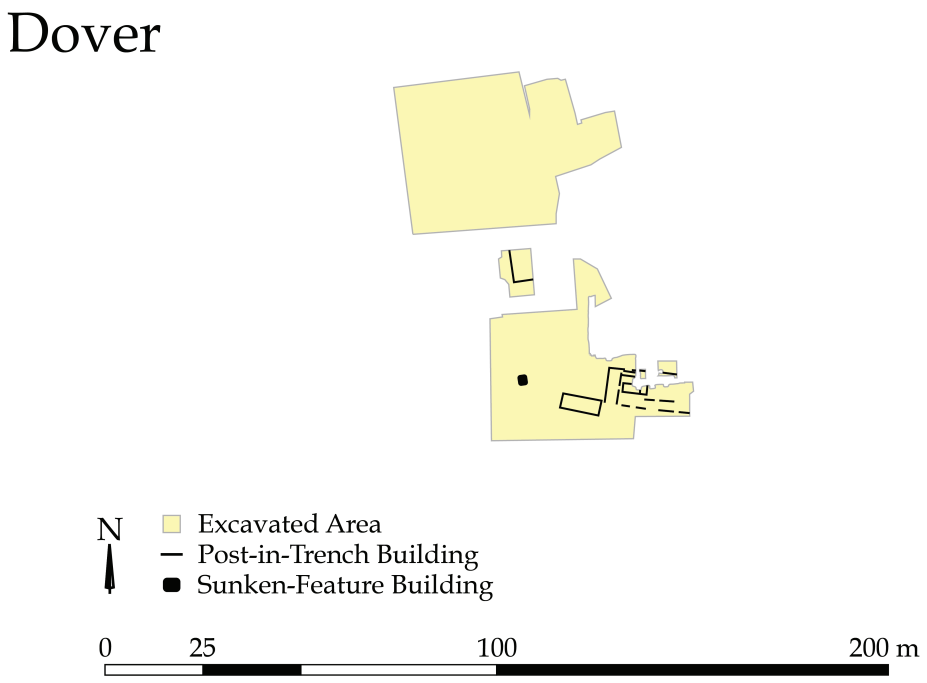


Figure 1.17: The possible great hall complex at Dover (redrawn from Philp 2003). Only the possible sixth- and seventh-century features are depicted in this plan (Due to discrepancies in the published plans, there may be inaccuracies in the placement and orientation of certain features).

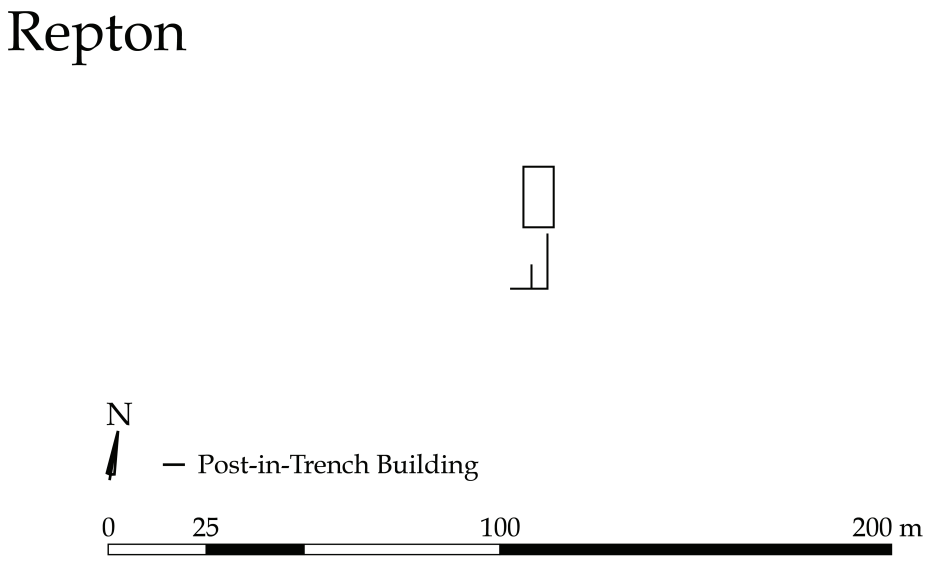


Figure 1.18: The possible great hall complex at Repton (redrawn from Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2012). The site is unpublished, and the excavated area is unknown. These possible buildings were identified underneath the later minster buildings – nothing else is known.

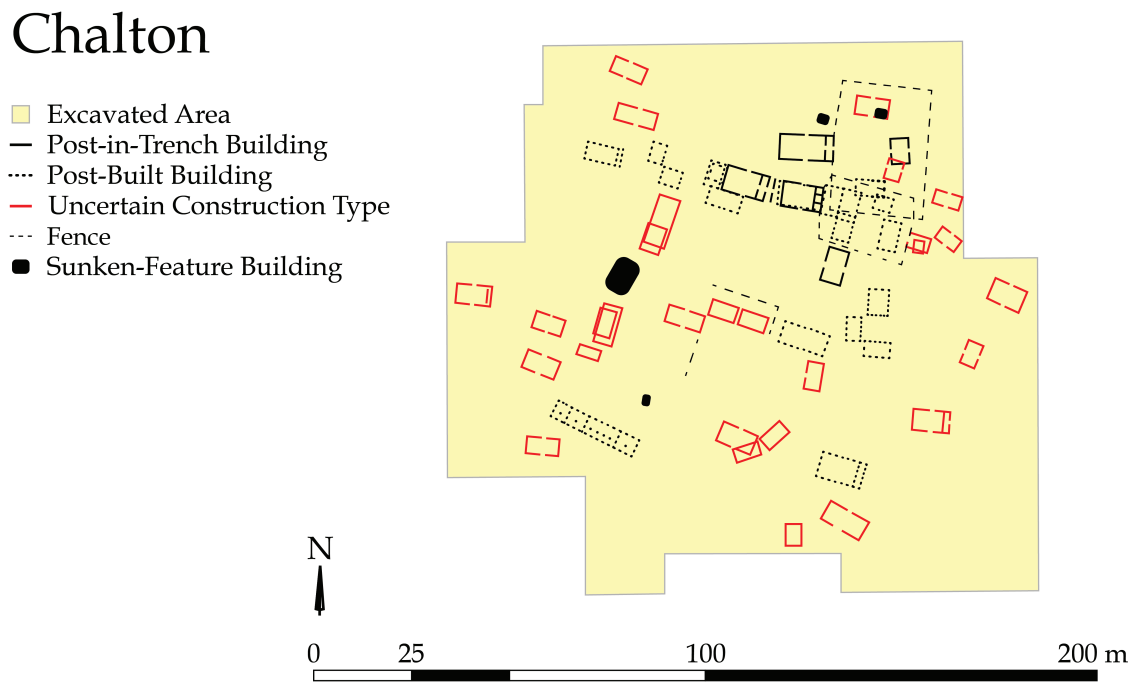


Figure 1.19: The minor hall complex at Chalton (redrawn from Champion 1977). The site is only partially published, and the construction technique used in most of the buildings is unknown, but the majority were probably post-built buildings, based on the predominance of post-built foundations among the known buildings.

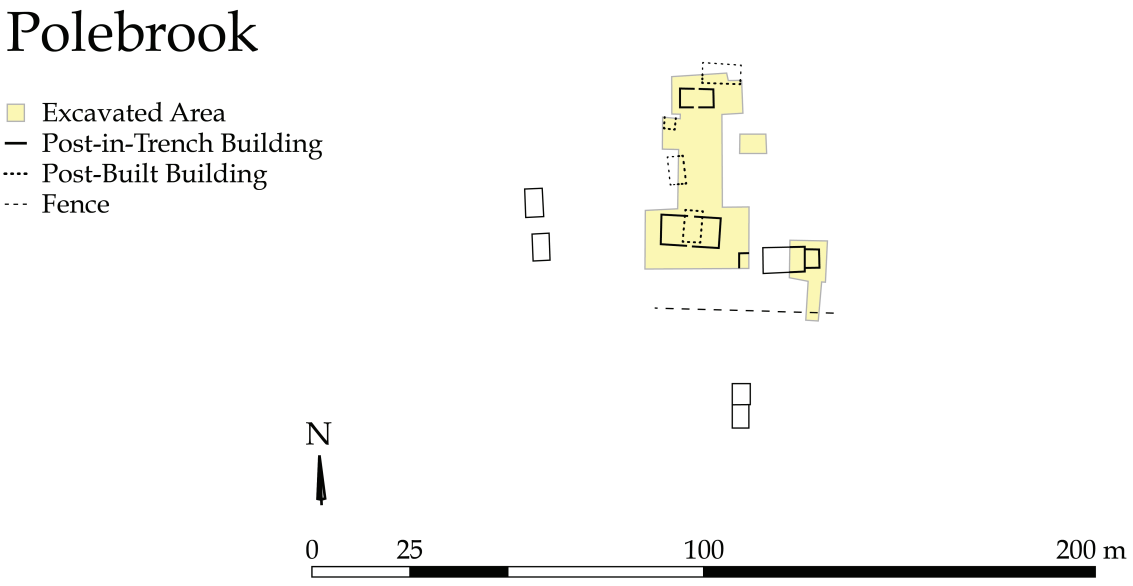


Figure 1.20: The minor hall complex at Polebrook (redrawn from Upex 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005).

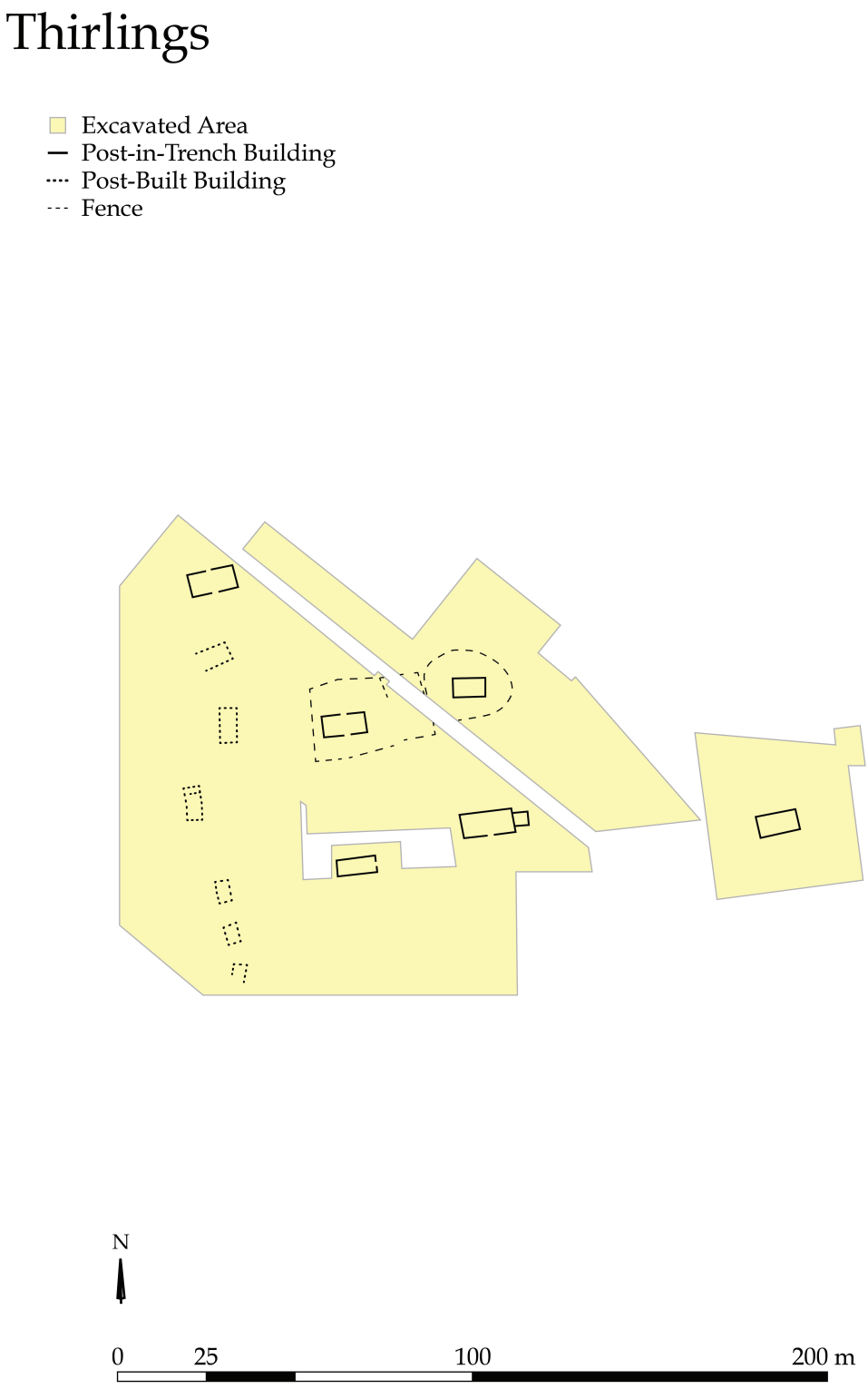


Figure 1.21: The minor hall complex at Thirlings (redrawn from O'Brien and Miket 1991).

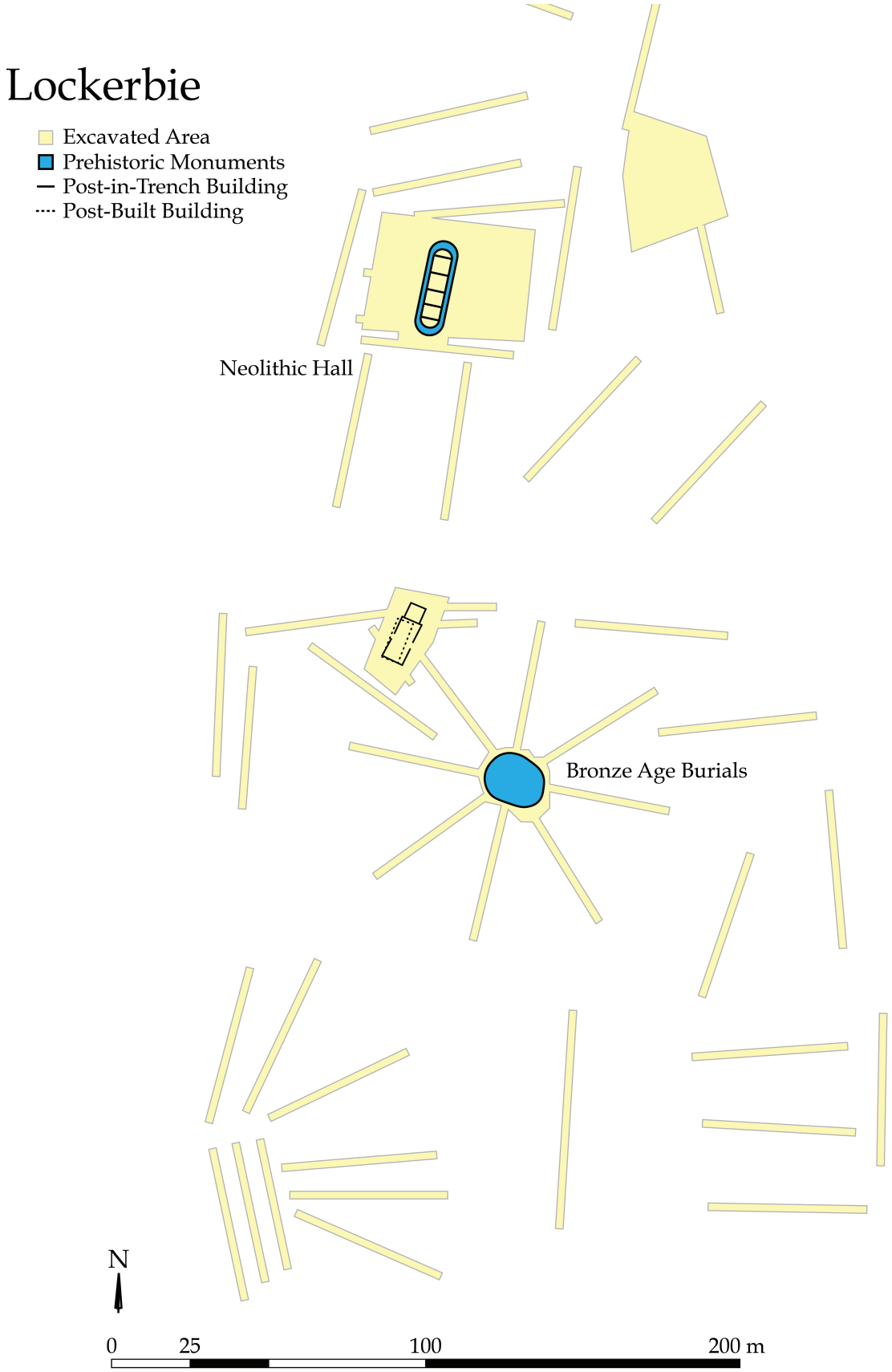


Figure 1.22: The minor hall complex at Lockerbie (redrawn from Kirby 2012).

began under the direction of Brian Hope-Taylor (Figure 1.4).[16]

Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavering were technically brilliant, heralding a new age of English archaeology, but the 'heroic' renaissance-man paradigm of rescue archaeology was not well-suited to post-excavation. The Yeavering report was published fifteen years after the excavation concluded, and the original draft report was lost.[17] Many details are missing from the final report, certain details are contradictory and the physical archive is in complete disarray.[18]

Nevertheless, Hope-Taylor's excavation dominates the study of great hall complexes. The monumental architecture and meticulously structured layout identified by Hope-Taylor remain the primary identifying characteristics of great hall complexes. The overarching interpretation of Yeavering – a royal *villa* of peripatetic kings – remains the dominant paradigm for understanding great hall complexes, and the central roles of public assembly and ritual activity have also remained fundamental to the interpretation of great hall complexes.

However, there are significant flaws in Hope-Taylor's interpretation. Approaching Yeavering from a culture-historical framework, Hope-Taylor sought to explain the emergence, development and abandonment of the site through historical events and cultural conflict between British, Germanic and Irish influences.[19] To Hope-Taylor, Yeavering originated as a British 'folk-centre', and the emergence of the great hall complex was attributed to the arrival of Anglo-Saxons, while the episodes of burning were attributed to the historical campaigns of Penda and Cadwallon, and the later architectural development of the site was attributed to the Irish influences of King Oswald.[20] This approach places immense strain on the fragmentary historical record, but more fundamentally, this approach fails to adequately explain the underlying mechanisms of change.[21] Why were the great halls built, what role did this new monumentality play in the wider society and why did the architectural style change over time? Hope-Taylor does not directly address these questions.

Nevertheless, Hope-Taylor's culture-historical approach has had a substantial impact on the discipline. Soon after the Yeavering excavations concluded, Brian Hope-Taylor excavated the site at Doon Hill in 1964-1966. Paralleling and no doubt contributing to his interpretation of Yeavering, Hope-Taylor identified an Anglo-Saxon great hall superimposed onto a British great hall.[22] However, the excavation was never fully published, and both the 'British' hall and the 'Anglo-Saxon' hall have now been radiocarbon dated to the Neolithic.[23] Nevertheless, for several decades, the site was believed to be conclusive evidence that certain Northumbrian great hall complexes had British antecedents.[24]

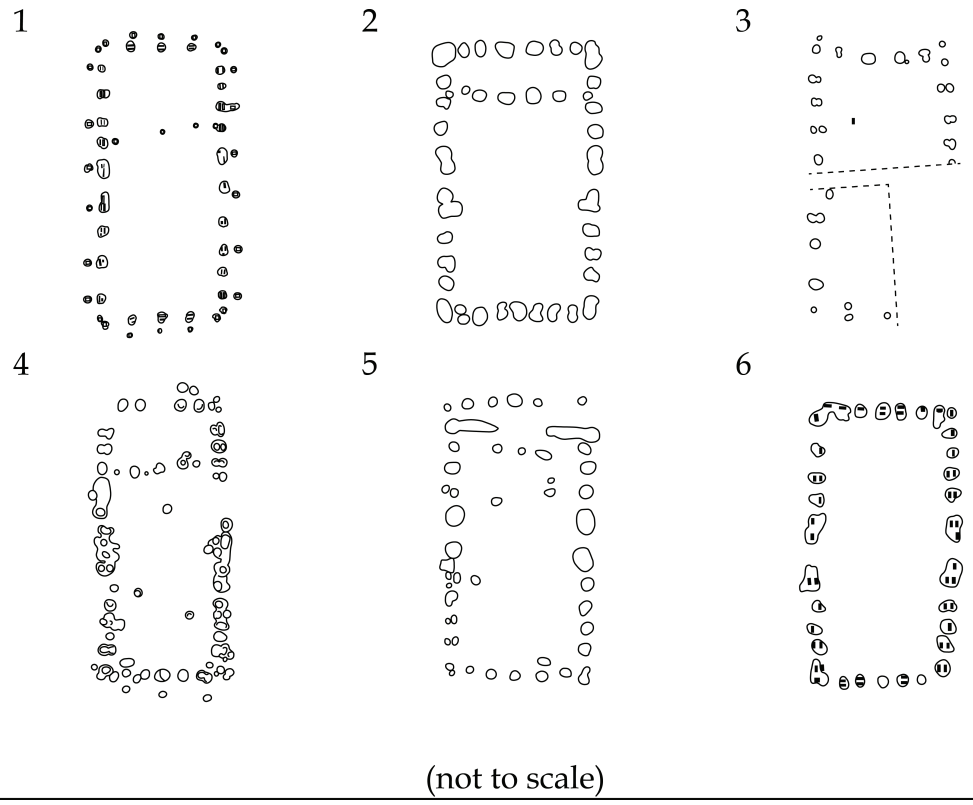
This emphasis on British influences – also seen in the interpretation of Atcham, which was identified from aerial photographs in 1975[25] – was part of a larger trend challenging the impact of Germanic migrations in Anglo-Saxon archaeology.[26] However, as more Anglo-Saxon settlements were excavated, a well-defined Anglo-Saxon building tradition began to take shape, and the great halls began to look increasingly at home among Anglo-Saxon architecture. Soon after the Yeavering report was published, Roger Miket and Philip Rahtz expressed doubts about British influences in the Yeavering buildings, and following the excavation of Cowdery's Down, James *et al.* convincingly argued that the great halls shared fundamental similarities with the Anglo-Saxon building tradition (Figure 1.23).[27] Chris Scull further argued that the earliest buildings at Yeavering, predating the great hall complex, were also characteristically Anglo-Saxon, suggesting that the origins of Yeavering lay in a typical Anglo-Saxon settlement, rather than a British 'folk-centre'.[28]

1.2.2 Cowdery's Down and the Growing Influence of Processual and Post-Processual Archaeology

The excavation of Cowdery's Down in 1978-1981 (Figure 1.5) and the subsequent metrical analysis of the Anglo-Saxon building tradition marked the conspicuous advent of processual archaeology in the study of great hall complexes.[29]

The excavation report for Cowdery's Down could hardly be more different from the excavation report for Yeavering. The Cowdery's Down report focused on the form and construction of the buildings, and little attention was given to written sources. The excavators identified Cowdery's Down and Yeavering as high

[16] Hope-Taylor 1977.
[17] Hope-Taylor 1977: xvii.
[18] For issues with the Yeavering report, see Gates 2005: 72-5; O'Brien 2005: 150. For the Yeavering archive, see Gefrin Trust 2007.
[19] See Walker 2010: 82-5 for a discussion of the culture-historical paradigm in Hope-Taylor's work.
[20] Hope-Taylor 1977: 267-77.
[21] Alcock 1988: 7-8; 2003: 242-4; Driscoll 2005: 162; Walker 2010: 82-5.
[22] Hope-Taylor 1966; 1980.
[23] Ralston 2018; 2019.
[24] Cf. Reynolds 1980; Alcock 1988; 2003; Smith 1992: 267-9; Blair 2018: 38, 115; Ian Ralston 2018; 2019.
[25] Rahtz 1975; 1976a; St Joseph 1975.
[26] Cf. Dixon 1982; see Hamerow 2012: 18-9 for a brief discussion.
[27] Miket 1980; Rahtz 1980; James *et al.* 1984.
[28] Scull 1991.
[29] For Cowdery's Down, see Millett and James 1983. For the Anglo-Saxon building tradition, see James *et al.* 1984. The structural interpretation of Cowdery's Down was later reconsidered by Alcock and Walsh 1993.



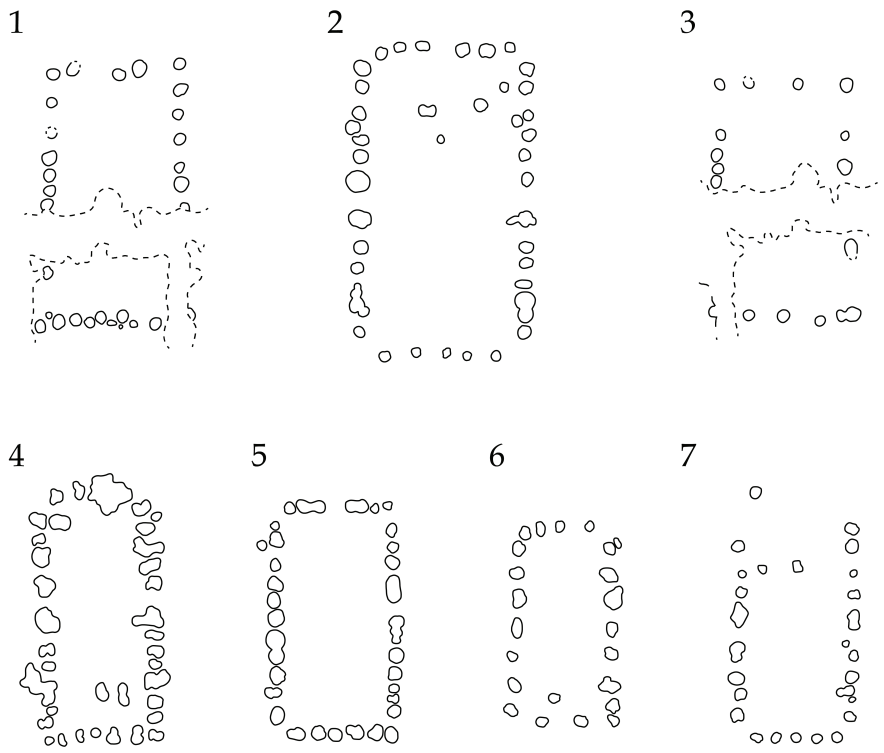


Figure 1.23: Above, the buildings at Cowdery's Down compared with other Anglo-Saxon buildings: 1. Cowdery's Down B4, 2. Chalton A20, 3. Bishopstone XXVIII, 4. West Stow 2, 5. Mucking, 6. Thirlings G (redrawn from James *et al.* 1984: figure 9). Below, the early buildings at Yeavering compared with other Anglo-Saxon buildings: 1. Yeavering A6, 2. Mucking, 3. Yeavering A7, 4. West Heslerton, 5. West Stow, 6. Barrow Hills, 7. Spong Hill (redrawn from Scull 1991: figure 4).

status sites because the great halls were statistical outliers among excavated Anglo-Saxon buildings.[30] Whereas Yeavering was linked to historical kings, Cowdery's Down was cast in the processual terminology of 'chieftains'. This independent interpretation of the archaeological evidence was an important shift in the study of great hall complexes. However, as a result, the Cowdery's Down report was predominantly concerned with architectural details, and the broader interpretation – the functions and purpose of the site – was left largely unexplored.

The processual approach was also showcased in a series of articles debating the standardized measurements used in the construction of Yeavering, but written sources and themes of cultural conflict remained central to the discipline.[31] Leslie Alcock argued that many Northumbrian high status sites appropriated earlier British power centres, based primarily on documentary and toponymic sources.[32] Alcock disputed the connection between the Yeavering conflagrations and the historical campaigns of Penda and Cadwallon, but Alcock's alternative explanations were nevertheless firmly rooted in the written sources.[33] Back-projecting from later sources, Alcock also expanded upon Hope-Taylor's interpretation of great hall complexes as royal estate centres, raising questions about the economic functions of great hall complexes and suggesting that the great halls may in fact be barns.[34] This suggestion – that great halls might actually be barns – has found little support among other scholars, but the broader question of economic functions and agricultural processing facilities is an important one.[35]

Meanwhile, Richard Bradley's 1987 article on the appropriation of prehistoric monuments at Yeavering heralded the first impact of post-processual archaeology in the study of great hall complexes.[36] However, while this article was influential, post-processual interpretations remained rare in the study of great hall complexes. When the excavators of Yeavering Henge discovered evidence for in situ Anglo-Saxon metalworking cut into a prehistoric monument, they dismissed the possibility that this might represent a deliberate act of appropriation.[37] It was not until 1999 that Paul Frodsham suggested connections between elite metalworking and the supernatural powers of prehistoric monuments.[38] Nevertheless, this theme of supernatural power and the creation of special objects at great hall complexes remains underdeveloped. Similarly, Andrew Reynolds has suggested that the symmetrical layout of great hall complexes is indicative of ritually organized space, but what exactly this means and its implications for the functions of great hall complexes remains underexplored.[39]

Meanwhile, the identification of great hall complexes at Hatton Rock, Sprouston, Sutton Courtenay, Long Wittenham and Cowage Farm as well as the excavation of Yeavering Henge and the reinterpretation of the Milfield cropmarks had relatively little impact on the field.[40] The primary focus remained on Hope-Taylor's excavations at Yeavering and Martin Millett's excavations at Cowdery's Down.

The enclosures and droveways identified at Sprouston (Figure 1.17) and the evidence for metalworking recovered from Yeavering Henge provided particularly important evidence for the economic functions of great hall complexes, but the impact of these discoveries was marginal; Leslie Alcock failed to mention either site in his discussion of economic functions.[41]

1.2.3 Great Hall Complexes in the 21st Century

The new millennium heralded a new phase in the study of great hall complexes. The 2001-2003 excavation at Sutton Courtenay was the first new excavation at a great hall complex in twenty years, and in conjunction with E.T. Leeds' settlement excavations at Sutton Courtenay in the 1920-1930s, this provided the first concrete evidence for more typical Anglo-Saxon settlement at great hall complexes.[42] Meanwhile, amateur metal-detecting at Sutton Courtenay also provided the first evidence for high status metalworking and early eighth-century exchange at great hall complexes.[43]

Soon afterward, John Blair's *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* provided one of the first overarching interpretations of great hall complexes that was not back-projected from later sources; although Blair's conclusions were based in part on written sources, his treatment of the sources was significantly more critical than that of Hope-Taylor or Alcock. Instead of back-projecting royal estate centres, Blair argued that royal activity was largely unstable before *c.* 800 AD and great

[30] Millett and James 1983: 247; James *et al.* 1984: figure 5.
[31] Huggins 1981; 1991; Fernie 1985; 1991; Bettess 1991.
[32] Alcock 1988.
[33] Alcock 1988; 2003: 244.
[34] Alcock 1988: 25-6; 2003: 255-6.
[35] With the exception of O'Brien and Miket 1991: 89 and Philp 2014: 134.
[36] Bradley 1987.
[37] Tinniswood and Harding 1991: 107.
[38] Frodsham 1999: 195; 2005: 29-31.
[39] Reynolds 2003: 104-6.
[40] For the early interpretation of Hatton Rock, see Webster and Hobley 1964; Rahtz 1970; Hirst and Rahtz 1973. For Sprouston, St Joseph 1971, 1982; Reynolds 1980: 50-2; Smith 1981; 1982; 1983; 1992. For Sutton Courtenay, see Benson and Miles 1974a; 1974b; Hawkes 1986. For Long Wittenham, see Hawkes 1986. For Cowage Farm, see Hampton 1981; Hinchliffe 1986. For the Yeavering Henge excavations, see Harding 1981; Tinniswood and Harding 1991. For the reinterpretation of the Milfield cropmarks, see Gates and O'Brien 1988.
[41] Alcock 1988: 25-6; 2003: 255-6.
[42] Leeds 1923; 1927; 1947; Hamerow *et al.* 2007.
[43] Hamerow 1999b; Hamerow *et al.* 2007.

hall complexes were instead part of a shifting landscape of enduring royal interests.[44]

In the same year, *Yeavering: People, Power & Place* brought together a range of perspectives to reconsider the site at Yeavering, and although there was some support for Hope-Taylor's views, in general, this volume represented a concerted shift away from the culture-history that had continued to plague the study of Yeavering. Carolyn Ware's contribution, in particular, represented the first explicit and informed post-processual interpretation of Anglo-Saxon great halls, suggesting that the great halls had a fundamental role to play in reshaping social structures and mediating the transition from local chiefs to established royal dynasties.[45] This post-processual approach was also later explored by Jenny Walker, although it has gone largely unnoticed.[46] Meanwhile, Paul Barnwell's article comparing Yeavering's theatre to provincial Roman theatres and Yeavering's standing posts to the Frankish *staffolus* was also an important contribution to understanding the creation of power at great hall complexes.[47]

More recently, the theme of cultural conflict has been recast and reinvigorated by John Blair, who has argued that Anglo-Saxon monumentality, both great hall complexes and princely burials, emerged out of a broad 'middle zone', which emerged around the fringes of the more economically developed, more populous and more dynamic 'eastern zone' (Figure 1.24).[48] Ostensibly, this middle zone lies between the Anglian east and the British west, and Blair argues that this area displays a mix of Anglo-Saxon and British cultural traits, but this hypothesis also moves beyond the British/Anglo-Saxon dichotomy, proposing that great hall complexes developed out of a broader social, political and economic package, which would also produce many of the largest and most powerful kingdoms.

Meanwhile, the recently discovered sites at Lyminge and Rendlesham were the first great hall complexes to produce truly exceptional material culture assemblages. Lyminge and Rendlesham produced staggering evidence of high status craft-working and exchange, and the presence of high status fifth- and sixth-century material provided the first evidence that great hall complexes may have been important centres prior to the construction of the great halls.

The scale of the Rendlesham project also reflects a growing interest in the wider activity surrounding great hall complexes, and this interest in wider activity was also reflected in the Origins of Wessex pilot project, set in the regional hinterland of Sutton Courtenay and Long Wittenham.[49] However, the structure and extent of Blair's shifting royal landscapes and the place of great hall complexes in regional settlement networks remain underexplored.

Meanwhile, the discovery and excavation of two new sites at Lockerbie and Eynsford went largely unnoticed; the excavators did not make efforts to disseminate the results, and in each case, the excavators appear to have been relatively unfamiliar with the study of great hall complexes.[50]

1.2.4 Key Themes and Unanswered Questions

The study of great hall complexes prior to the excavation of Sutton Courtenay can be understood in terms of two excavations: Yeavering and Cowdery's Down. Yeavering defined the discipline; it is inevitably the first site to be cited, and it continues to exert significant influence over the study of great hall complexes. However, Hope-Taylor's reliance on written sources and his emphasis on cultural conflict have been detrimental to understanding the underlying processes driving the emergence, development and obsolescence of great hall complexes. The processual approach at Cowdery's Down represented a stark rebuttal of Hope-Taylor's interpretation. However, the Cowdery's Down report was primarily descriptive, and like the Yeavering report, the Cowdery's Down report failed to provide meaningful conclusions about the underlying processes driving the great hall complex phenomenon.

The excavation of Sutton Courtenay heralded a new phase of investigation and a diversification of interpretative approaches. Sutton Courtenay, Lyminge and Rendlesham provided new evidence of economic complexity, sixth-century antecedents and eighth-century continuity. John Blair, Carolyn Ware and Jenny Walker advanced stimulating interpretations of great hall complexes from opposite ends of the spectrum, shining new light on the historical and archaeological evidence.[51] Nevertheless, there remain significant gaps in the study of great hall complexes.

The dominant medium of scholarship continues to be excavation reports, and as a result, there is a conspicuous lack of comparative analysis and 'big picture' interpretations. A comprehensive comparative

[44] Blair 2005: 275-81. The only other sources that provide an overarching review of all great hall complexes are Welch 1992 and Hamerow 2010.
[45] Ware 2005.
[46] Walker 2010; 2011.
[47] Barnwell 2005.
[48] Blair 2013a: 12, 23-5; 2018: 27-32, 71-3, 114-5.
[49] Hamerow *et al.* 2013.
[50] Kirby 2012; Philp 2014.
[51] Blair 2005; 2018; Ware 2005; Walker 2010; 2011.

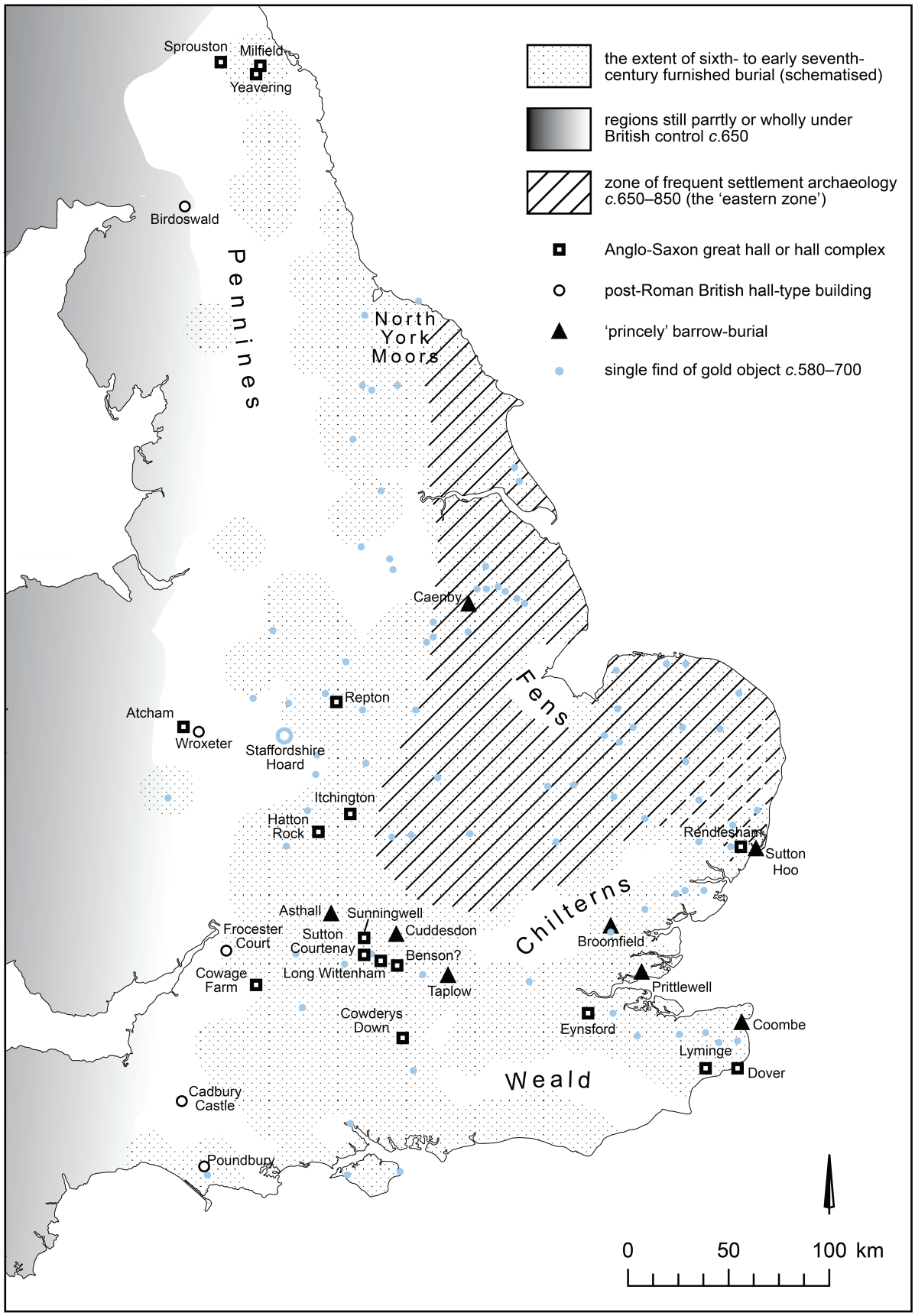


Figure 1.24: The distribution of great hall complexes and princely burials clustered around the edges of John Blair's 'eastern zone' (after Blair 2018: figure 29).

analysis of great hall complexes is required to address these issues.

The regional context of great hall complexes also remains underexplored. Great hall complexes are often depicted as places of public assembly, where power relationships between rulers and subjects were created and reinforced, but the relationship between great hall complexes and wider society is poorly understood.[52] A regional study of great hall complexes is therefore needed to understand the place of great hall complexes within regional systems.

There also remains a general lack of explicitly theoretical interpretations. The majority of scholarship on great hall complexes continues to be primarily descriptive, rather than interpretative. In this respect, the study of Anglo-Saxon great hall complexes should take inspiration from the study of Scandinavian 'central places', which has been more receptive to post-processual archaeology and cultural anthropology.[53]

Ultimately, the most significant deficit in the study of great hall complexes is a failure to answer *why* great hall complexes were built. The emergence of great hall complexes was not a foregone conclusion. Each aspect of a great hall complex was developed, adopted, adapted and then eventually abandoned by agents acting under conscious and unconscious motivations. This process cannot be taken for granted; it must be explained.

These gaps in the existing scholarship are therefore the starting point for this book.

1.3 Great Hall Complexes in Comparison and in Context

The primary aim of this book is to explain why great hall complexes were built, why and how they developed over time and why they were abandoned.

This is accomplished through two avenues of research – a broad comparative study of all great hall complexes and a regional case study of great hall complexes in context – and the book is correspondingly divided into two parts: Part I (Chapters 2-3) and Part II (Chapters 4-8).

Part I begins with Chapter 2, which compares and contrasts the known sites, analysing the basic characteristics of great hall complexes and the evidence for their functions. Chapter 3 then considers the overall development of great hall complexes, directly addressing the primary aims of this book – why great hall complexes were built, why and how they developed over time and why they were abandoned.

Part II then explores the wider context of great hall complexes with a regional case study, analysing the development of socio-economic power in the burials and settlements of the Upper Thames Valley, before situating the great hall complexes within this development. First, Chapters 4-5 lay the groundwork, analysing the development of socio-economic power through the distribution of burials and burial wealth. Chapters 6-7 then analyse the development of socio-economic power through the distribution of settlement activity and high status settlements. Finally, Chapter 8 brings together the conclusions from Chapters 4-7 and Chapters 2-3 to explore the overall development of socio-economic power in the Upper Thames Valley and the role of great hall complexes in this development.

[52] Hope-Taylor 1977; Alcock 1988: 19-20, 24; Semple 2004: 137-9; Barnwell 2005; Blair 2005: 56-7; Scull *et al.* 2016: 1602, 1605.
[53] Cf. Herschend 1998; Bazelmans 1999; Hedeager 2001; Thurston 2012.