The Kent Anglo-Saxon Emporia Project (KASEP)

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Of the major research topics in Early Medieval studies over the past twenty years, the question of trade and coastal trading places has retained continued interest. As part of this debate, the study of wics or coastal emporia, which flourished in England and Continental Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries, has become central to interpretations of post-Roman urban and economic development. The quantity and variety of finds from these excavated sites, the pan-European character of much of the material and their frequent allusion in documentary records has, however, often been overstated, whilst their role in local social and economic networks remains to be addressed.

The Kentish Anglo-Saxon Emporia Project was established in 1998 in an attempt to focus on some of these previous shortcomings. By researching the landscape in which the wics are sited (the settlement topography, environment, patterns of landuse and their modal network location) KASEP hopes, in the vein of the Sutton Hoo and Shapwick projects, to create a spatio-temporal model of the wic hinterland. In tandem with the sister-project ASKED (Anglo-Saxon Kent Electronic Database), this combined focus on micro-economic structures aims to provide the background for a regional case-study of an important area of Anglo-Saxon England, in which the interdependence of settlement, production and exchange is more fully understood.

As part of these broader aims, members of the Institute of Archaeology (funded by the Society for Medieval Archaeology and the Institute of Archaeology) have conducted field-work at the suggested emporia sites of Sarre and Fordwich in Kent over the past two seasons. Extensive test-pitting, field-walking and geophysical prospection has allowed for early tentative suggestions regarding the size, shape and location of the Mid- to Late Saxon settlements (c.AD 800-1100). These reveal, in concordance with previously held hypotheses, that the Anglo-Saxon settlements occupied much the same locations as their modern counterparts, despite some later medieval displacement and nucleation. Field-walking at Sarre for instance, has revealed concentrations of Mid-to-Late Saxon fabrics stretched along the former Wantsum Channel shore to either side of the modern village. This suggests that changes to the waterfront through medieval inning and economic decline combined to focus the settlement on reclaimed soils around the later medieval ferry crossing. The positive identification of Middle Saxon Sarre presents an exciting addition to the archaeology of Kent, as the settlement is recorded in toll remissions of the 8th century and has been postulated as a royal toll station ever since the excavation of a large, exceptionally rich cemetery there in the later 19th century. Although, as yet, no Early Anglo-Saxon material contemporary with the burials has been discovered, the model of Sarre's topographic expansion and contraction suggested by later developments strengthens the hypothesis that any settlement core (if one existed) is to be sought adjacent to the cemetery beneath the modern village.
Continuing work at Fordwich appears to confirm this pattern of topographic development. Located near the tidal head of the Early Medieval Stour estuary, Fordwich is believed to have functioned as the port for Canterbury for much of its life and may have acted as the domestic settlement associated with the Kentish *villa regalis* at Sturry on the opposite bank. Detailed survey and excavation of a number of features visible as cropmarks to the west of the modern town appears, prior to detailed analysis, show no evidence of Anglo-Saxon activity. In contrast, the identification of some scattered Middle Saxon pot sherds and two silver pennies of Offa (c.792-6) to the east of the built-up area, may provide support for a topographical model of Anglo-Saxon Fordwich stretched around a natural flat harbour below the modern river crossing, itself perhaps an allusion to the *Ford-* of the place-name.

It is this last hypothesis that will form the basis of this year’s field-work objectives. The detailed survey and geophysical prospection of the eastern half of the Fordwich liberty is expected to reveal the size and shape of the Middle Saxon settlement. Additionally, members of the Institute of Archaeology are currently undertaking the dissemination of the collected data, the findings of which should allow for the targeted excavation of some of the identified features during the next season. Most importantly, the incorporation of all the KASEP and ASKED data within a GIS of Anglo-Saxon Kent is now well underway, allowing for the exciting future applications of spatio-temporal landscape analysis central to the project aims. This complete integration of both datasets is envisaged as first step towards the launch of the entire textual content of the archaeological component over the World Wide Web, facilitating the rapid interrogation of the metadata by professionals and amateurs alike. Thus ASKED/KASEP hopes to lay the foundations for total landscape coverage of (and public access to) the archaeological material, as a necessary precursor for future investigations, and as the framework within which the Kentish Anglo-Saxon landscape can be modeled.

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