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978-0-521-84019-4 - Death and Memory in Early Medieval Britain

Howard Williams

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Death and memory in early medieval Britain

How were the dead remembered in early medieval Britain? This innovative study demonstrates how perceptions of the past and the dead, and hence social identities, were constructed through mortuary practices and commemoration in the period c. AD 400–1100. Drawing on archaeological evidence from across Britain, including the latest archaeological discoveries, Howard Williams presents a new interpretation of the significance of portable artefacts, the body, structures, monuments and landscapes in early medieval mortuary practices. He argues that materials and spaces were used in ritual performances that served as ‘technologies of remembrance’, practices that created shared ‘social’ memories intended to link past, present and future. Through the deployment of material culture, early medieval societies were therefore selectively remembering and forgetting their ancestors and their history. Throwing new light on an important aspect of medieval society, this book is essential reading for all archaeologists and historians with an interest in the early medieval period.

HOWARD WILLIAMS is Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Exeter. He has published widely on death and memory in past societies and has co-directed archaeological fieldwork at early medieval burial sites in Britain and Sweden.

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Dedicated to the memory of:

Michael Williamson

24 January 1893–30 July 1965

William John Williams

15 July 1903–5 May 1989

Phyllis Williams

13 August 1911–4 February 2003

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PREFACE

How did early medieval people commemorate the dead? Were mortuary practices not just contexts for personal recollection, but contexts in which perceptions of the dead and the past were created and reproduced? Early medieval graves have been studied for many decades by many researchers, but this particular perspective and line of enquiry has yet to be fully explored and developed. In addressing such an approach, this book is intended as an exploration of new ideas and new perspectives in early medieval archaeology. As such it is intended as a building-block towards future research rather than as a final statement.

My research concerning early medieval archaeology and mortuary archaeology has been influenced and inspired from many directions, and I have many people to thank for inspiration and encouragement. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mike Parker Pearson, John Moreland and Alex Woolf for introducing me to the study of early medieval and mortuary archaeology during my undergraduate degree at Sheffield. For the development of my ideas during my postgraduate research at the University of Reading, I particularly appreciate the guidance, discussions and debates provided by Richard Bradley and my doctoral supervisor, Heinrich Härke. I also appreciate the innumerable discussions and feedback upon conference presentations, seminars, lectures and publications by many friends and scholars while I was researching and teaching at the University of Reading, Trinity College Carmarthen and Cardiff University. Since being appointed to a position at the University of Exeter in the autumn of 2003, I have enjoyed generous support and guidance from colleagues both in the Department of Archaeology and elsewhere in the University. In addition to those persons already mentioned, I am grateful for beneficial discussions with and support from: Jo Buckberry, Martin Carver, Annia Cherryson, Hella Eckardt, Bonnie Effros, Rebecca Gowland, Catherine Hills, Richard Hingley, Cornelius Holtorf, Andy Jones, Brynmor Morris, Alikei Pantos, Kenneth Penn, Tim Pestell, David Petts, Andrew Reynolds, Julian D. Richards, Martin Rundkvist, Hannah Sackett, Sarah Semple, Chris Smart, Nick Stoodley, Eva Thäte, Victoria Thompson, Sam Turner and Aaron Watson.

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