

# Ancient graves hint at cultural shift to Anglo-Saxon Britain

February 14 2014, by Alex Peel

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Anglo-Saxon burial site, Oxfordshire. Credit: Oxford Archaeology

Human remains dug up from an ancient grave in Oxfordshire add to a growing body of evidence that Britain's fifth-century transition from Roman to Anglo-Saxon was cultural rather than bloody.

The traditional historical narrative is one of brutal conquest, with invaders from the North wiping out and replacing the pre-existing population.

But a new study, published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*, hints at a more peaceful process. Dr Andrew Millard, from Durham University, is one of the study's authors.

'The main controversy over the years has centred on how many Anglo-Saxons came across the North Sea,' he says.

'Was it a mass invasion, where the existing population was wiped out completely or forced back into Wales, or was it a small band of elites whose ways were then adopted very quickly?'

'Our evidence favours the second option.'

The team of archaeologists investigated the [tooth enamel](#) of 19 individuals dug up from an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery in the Upper Thames Valley in Oxfordshire.

The balance of particular chemicals in our teeth can give clues about where most of our food and drink have come from. Scientists can use this information to work out where ancient people were born, and where they lived in childhood.

Had there been a mass invasion, the graves would be expected to contain around 20 per cent immigrant remains. But only five per cent of the buried individuals seem to have come from outside the local area.

'Oxfordshire is quite some distance from the landing point of any invasion, but it seems that there was not a mass invasion everywhere,' says Millard.

'The broader question is still open to debate, and we're still gathering evidence, but our evidence favours a scenario where there was not a wholesale replacement of the population, but a shift in culture.'

'By exploring this question, we hope that we can address the broader issue of how cultural change happens on a wide scale.'

**More information:** Susan S. Hughes, Andrew R. Millard, Sam J. Lucy, Carolyn A. Chenery, Jane A. Evans, Geoff Nowell, D. Graham Pearson, "Anglo-Saxon origins investigated by isotopic analysis of

burials from Berinsfield, Oxfordshire, UK," *Journal of Archaeological Science*, Volume 42, February 2014, Pages 81-92, ISSN 0305-4403, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2013.10.025](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2013.10.025).

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