The remains of an Anglo-Saxon woman recently excavated in Cambridgeshire were accompanied by Norman pottery. Why had this pagan been reburied by Christians? Did they see her as a distant ancestor nevertheless demanding respect? Or were they scared that the disturbed corpse would come back to haunt them?

Tom Woolhouse reports

PROTO-CHRISTIAN OR EVIL DEAD?

In summer 2004, Archaeological Solutions carried out an excavation in advance of housing development in Hilton, a small village south-east of Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire. In many respects the archaeology on site was typical of medieval villages across the country, consisting of late Anglo-Saxon and medieval property boundary ditches, rubbish pits and other “backyard” activity.

However, one feature was more unusual: at the northern edge of the site the field team discovered a shallow circular pit containing a human skeleton. The “grave” was puzzling in several respects. The skeleton was disarticulated and jumbled. It was also incomplete, but not all the missing elements were likely to be accounted for by poor bone survival. Most puzzling of all were the objects found in the pit. Although sherds of 10th–12th century pottery lay amongst the bones, the pit also contained a spindle whorl, a copper alloy disc, a terracotta glass bead and a cowry shell from the Red Sea. These objects are typically found in “final phase” pagan Saxon graves of the late 6th–7th century – at least 200 years before the pottery was made.

Radiocarbon dating of bone samples confirmed that the skeleton belonged to an Anglo-Saxon woman who had died c AD700. The jumbled and incomplete skeleton, together with the Saxo-Norman pottery in the grave fill, suggested that the body had been disturbed, moved from its original location and reburied in the 10th–12th century. Perhaps the original grave had been accidentally discovered during the medieval pit-digging on site.

It seems highly likely that the burial’s medieval discoverers recognised it as non-Christian: the reburial took place on unconsecrated ground rather than in the nearby churchyard, which was almost certainly in use by the 12th century at the latest.
However, despite this, it appears that a degree of care was taken over the reburial. At least some of the original grave goods, several of which were very small (like the glass bead) and could easily have been overlooked, were carefully gathered up and placed in the new grave.

The grave was probably also marked: three postholes were positioned around the pit in an east to west arc, possibly having once held grave markers. This recognition of the individual as non-Christian, combined with the apparent care taken over the reburial is intriguing. It stands in stark contrast to the careless treatment of earlier interments often seen in medieval Christian cemeteries.

This respect could have stemmed from a recognition on the part of the burial’s discoverers that the individual was in some way connected to them. They may have had some sense that she had lived in the same village and local landscape as them, and was therefore, in a sense, their ancestor.

Similar concerns influence the treatment of pagans in the Icelandic sagas. Although they were written in the post-conversion period (after c AD1000) by medieval Christians, the sagas often portray the pagan Icelanders in a positive light. In some passages they are depicted almost as proto-Christians, as occurs, for example, in the Laxdaela Saga when a child is named and sprinkled with water in a ritual strongly reminiscent of Christian baptism. The saga writers seem reluctant to reject their ancestors just because they were not Christian, and display a respectful curiosity about paganism rather than condemning it. A similar sense of affinity, transcending the religious divide, may help to explain the respect shown to the pagan Saxons at Hilton.

However, this is probably stretching things too far. It is to be doubted whether the grave’s medieval discoverers had any real idea of the antiquity or cultural context of the burial. When accidentally coming across a skeleton in unconsecrated ground, accompanied by unusual objects such as the cowry shell and copper disc, their reaction is probably far more likely to have been one of fear than of affinity.

They may have been more worried about the consequences of angering the spirit of the dead individual. In early medieval thought and folklore, the evil dead could physically rise up from the grave and haunt the living. William of Malmesbury writes around 1120-40 that it is well-known that the Devil causes the bodies of the evil dead to walk. William of Newburgh (c 1198) recorded four contemporary accounts of physically active and malevolent corpses in various parts of Britain, and claimed to have heard of others. Belief in the restless dead may also explain why criminals and suicides were routinely buried at crossroads from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards: the choice of roads may have been thought to confuse the angry ghosts of the deceased and stop them from returning to haunt their homes (see “Criminal graves and rural crossroads” by Robert Halliday, Jun 1997).

This fear of haunting by the restless corpses of criminals and unrepentant sinners may have extended to the pagan dead. The medieval villagers who disturbed the Hilton burial may have felt it necessary to attempt to placate the deceased by reburying her with her original grave goods. It is tempting to see the postholes around the pit as holding warning markers to make sure the burial was not disturbed again, or perhaps wooden crosses, to keep a potentially restless spirit at bay.

Aubrey Burl notes that when thunderstorms followed the opening of a round barrow at Beedon, Berkshire in the 19th century, the villagers thought it “caused by the sacrilegious undertaking to disturb the dead”. One of the labourers employed left the work in consequence. It is not difficult to imagine this irrational fear of the dead and perceived supernatural punishment for disturbing them persisting even today.

Archaeological Solutions would like to thank Campbell, Melhuish & Buchanan Ltd for funding the investigation. The excavation was directed by Nick Crank and Kat Manning. Tom Woolhouse is a project officer for Archaeological Solutions (Bury St Edmunds).