

The Nunnery of St Kyneburgha at Castor

By Carolyn G. Dallas

Small-scale excavations by Dr J.P.Wild and Mr G.B.Dannell in a private garden (Elmlea) in Castor village have produced positive evidence of Anglo-Saxon and Mediaeval occupation over the north wing of a large Roman building. The site is situated just north of Castor church.

The church is dedicated to St. Kyneburgha, and she is reputed to have founded a nunnery at Castor in the mid seventh century. This foundation is not one of those mentioned in the church history of Bede, written before A.D. 731, which is the only trustworthy pre-Conquest source. He names a Kyneburgha, daughter of Penda the heathen king of Mercia, who is married to Alhfrith of Northumbria by A.D. 653. Alhfrith and his father King Oswui were Christian, and they killed Penda in battle in A.D. 654. All Penda's children were Christian, and Bede tells us that he had allowed the new faith to be preached in his kingdom. It is unlikely, however, that any monastic foundations would have existed in his kingdom before his death in A.D. 654.

A twelfth-century document which seems an authentic copy of a charter granting land in Ailsworth dated A.D. 948 refers to Castor as 'Kyneburga caestre'. Mediaeval historians, such as William of Malmesbury, tell us that Kyneburga, daughter of Penda, became an abbess but, except for a 'Kineburga's castrum' in a later appendix to the chronicle of Florence of Worcester, they do not name the place. Unfortunately, it is not until the fourteenth century that a historian appears with all the credentials we now require. John of Tynemouth, when a monk at St. Albans c. A.D. 1325-48, assiduously gathered material for a collection of English saints' lives. He had difficulty with Kyneburgha and her sister Kyneswytha, but in their story he amalgamates the information given by previous writers and then goes on to trace the position of the nunnery by the name 'Kyneburga's castrum'. He says the place is not far from the river Nene 'about two miles from Peterborough and is called by its inhabitants simply Castre'. It is on his account that all later works are based.

There is considerable confusion among the mediaeval historians about the end of this nunnery, but it seems almost certainly to have been destroyed by the Danes. The original foundation probably met its end in the ravages of A.D. 870, although there may have been some form of survival until renewed Danish violence in A.D. 1010 and 1013. The archaeological evidence from 'Elmlea' does not at the moment support the latter view, as Mr John Hurst in his examination of the pottery has noticed a dearth of sherds of Late Saxon date. The material fits a context of about A.D. 655-870.

The Middle Saxon occupation at 'Elmlea' has unfortunately been much disturbed by mediaeval and later activity. But there are traces of structures and some remarkable small finds.

Two features cut through earlier Roman flooring may be interpreted as sunken huts (*Grubenhäuser*). One produced two sherds of undatable shelly pottery, the other another sherd of this ware and a rim-sherd of hand-made Middle Saxon pottery.

The most interesting and productive Saxon feature, however, is a pit, of which roughly a quarter has been excavated. The total diameter will probably be about 3 metres. The lower levels contained bone and were very productive of Middle Saxon pottery. At the bottom was greenish clayey material which has so far produced only Roman pottery. This might be a Roman latrine-pit, either silted over naturally or covered in clean material, and then used later by the Saxons as a rubbish-pit.

The pit has yielded over 80 Middle-Saxon pots (fig.8). The total for the site is now over 200, an unusual quantity for such a small area excavated. The fabrics consist of wheel-made 'Ipswich ware' (87), hand-made shelly wares (77) and a range of local hand-made wares (52). The shelly rims are straight, and have usually been flattened at the top. The local fabrics vary, but are basically thick sherds of a rough fabric and thinner, reduced, sherds in a finer ware.

Saxon small finds, mainly from the pit, were unexpectedly rich, and show that the nuns, many from the upper class of Saxon society, were far from ascetic. Finds include iron knives, a pair of shears, a fine bronze triangular wrist-clasp, a lathe-turned stone spindle-whorl, a bone pin-beater for weaving, fragments of bone comb, bone pins and two possible glass vessel-fragments. Pride of place must go to a complete, double-sided bone comb with incised decoration (fig.7).

In 1957-58 the late Charles Green discovered Middle Saxon occupation while excavating in the proposed southern extension to the churchyard. The site lay some 130 metres to the south of 'Elmlea'. It seems possible that the settlement is continuous between the two sites. If so, St Kyneburgha's nunnery and the quarters of her attendant servants were of considerable extent and importance. Further excavation can be expected to throw much more light on this question.

We are grateful to Mr and Mrs F. Sismey for allowing the excavations in their garden and for many other acts of kindness.