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Sex and the elderly: Attitudes to long-lived women and men in early Anglo-Saxon England☆

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ABSTRACT

Currently, in the industrialised world, women have a higher life expectancy than men, a pattern often seen in the past as well. However, in Britain, from the Neolithic to medieval period, it has been suggested that men outlived women. One issue with such statistics is that age estimation techniques are often biased, underestimating the age of older individuals, while the oldest individuals in a sample often disappear into catch-all categories such as 50+ years. Here we employ an approach that renders visible the older individuals in three archaeological cemeteries (Great Chesterford; Mill Hill; Worthy Park) to assess gendered longevity and differential mortuary treatment of the elderly in Anglo-Saxon England. We find that women tended to outlive men and while some elderly females were respected in death, others were more likely to receive a non-normative burial than males. Old males tended to receive 'elaborate' burial, and were less likely to receive a deviant burial. It appears that ageing in Anglo-Saxon England was a gendered process, with some older women respected like their male counterparts, while others were possibly perceived less auspiciously.

1. Introduction

People wear out: with increasing age, physiological function decreases while probability of death increases; these senescent changes eventually cause systemic collapse and a life ends (Ricklefs, 2008: 379). Although current day life expectancy at birth varies from 46 years in Sierra Leone to 84 years in Japan (World Health Organisation, 2015), the human species has an evolved characteristic life span of about seven decades (Gurven and Kaplan, 2007). Actual differential life expectancies at birth are more likely to reflect extrinsic than intrinsic mortality factors; although there are differences in mortality rates between populations and over time, differences in age of senescence have been found to be small (Gurven and Kaplan, 2007).

Nonetheless, life expectancy for males and females tends to differ. In the modern Industrialised world, women have a higher average age at death than men. For example, in Australia 2010–12, men had a life expectancy at birth of 79.9 years (up from 47.2 in 1881–90) while women could expect to live 84.3 years after birth (up from 50.9 years in 1881–90) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). This trend continues in countries with very low overall life expectancies; for instance, in Sierra Leone women have a greater life expectancy at birth of 46.2 years to men's 45.8 years (World Health Organisation, 2015). This is not only a modern phenomenon: in Sweden 1751, males had a life expectancy at birth of 36.8 years, against 39.9 years for females (Sundbärg, 1906). In addition, the gap between male and female life expectancy has widened as general life expectancy has increased (Colchero et al., 2016).

There appear to be exceptions, at least to some extent. For instance, in rural India 1957–8, men had a life expectancy at birth of 26.9 years while their female counterparts could expect only 26.6 years (Kumar De and Kumar Som, 1964). Nonetheless, although the gap between male and female life expectancy widens to peak at 2.8 years at age ten, after that point it declines; at age 50 rural Indian women have a greater life expectancy than men, an advantage which they maintain for the rest of their lives (Kumar De and Kumar Som, 1964). This pattern possibly reflects not only the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth but also a culture preferencing male children; when those hazards are survived, women begin to live longer than men.

This pattern may also suggest that higher age at death for women is part of the human condition. This is supported by studies in the biological sciences, where it is noted that in primates in general, female survival advantage is ubiquitous and persistent throughout life, especially in humans; this is despite females suffering greater morbidity and physical limitations than males, particularly late in life (Austad and Fischer, 2016; Colchero et al., 2016).

In contrast, in the distant past expectations are often otherwise. In

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his report on the human remains at the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Great Chesterford, Waldron (1994: 52–53) states:

> The cumulative percentage distribution for males and females of known sex shows that the men in the population tended to outlive the women, for whereas only 14.3% of the women survived beyond the age of 45, 26.7% of the men did so. The tendency for males to outlive females in the past has been noted by other authors (see Brothwell (1972), for example), and it is only comparatively recently that the converse has been the case, almost certainly as a result of improved obstetric care.

One of the major problems in these types of analyses is the low, catch-all highest age at death category. An age category of 45+ years encompasses all individuals ranging from fit and energetic athletic types who have just passed middle age, up to the physically and presumably psychologically frail. Such highest age categories also mask the transition from the period where a woman is at risk from the negative effects of pregnancy to the relative safety of menopause. Although categories like 45+ years do not deny the existence of the very old, they render them invisible (see Cave and Oxenham, 2016). Other factors also conspire to disguise the elderly in archaeological samples: taphonomic processes, which are further considered below, methodological practices, inappropriate reference populations or poor correlation of certain traits with age at death (Boddington, 1987; Cave and Oxenham, 2016; Gowland, 2007). In addition, known biases affect the age at death estimations of the elderly, tending to underage them (e.g. Molleson et al., 1993: 167).

Taphonomic processes have long been considered to affect, and thus bias, preservation of archaeological skeletal remains in several ways. Weiss (1972) notes that skeletal collections are usually found to contain more males than females. While noting that differential burial practices, unrepresentative cemeteries, or poor preservation of more gracile female skeletons could be responsible, he suggests biases in sexing methods are most likely to blame. While sexing methods have improved since the early seventies, Walker et al. (1988: 186–7) find males still overrepresented in archaeological sites, and also suggest that the comparatively rapid breakdown of more gracile female skeletons, especially those of postmenopausal females, may be the cause. To test this hypothesis, they examined age and sex biases in the preservation of human remains by comparing skeletal remains with burial records from two Californian sites from differing time periods; they found that age, rather than sex, was the major cause of this bias (Walker et al., 1988: 184–186). This potentially means that the remains of both infants and the elderly are most likely to be poorly represented in demographic profiles (Walker et al., 1988: 187). With regards to sex, they found sex ratios between burial records and the skeletal data were comparable, and sex differences in fragmentation were not demonstrated, despite low numbers of surviving bones; they concluded that sex biases were not likely to be a significant cause of missing females (Walker et al., 1988: 18).

Walker (1995: 35) further addressed this issue using skeletal material from St Bride's Church in London; this time finding that preservation differences, while small, can be large enough to affect mortality profiles. The pubic bone is one of the most reliable for the interpretation of both age and sex, but its preservation is problematic; without this element many skeletons are categorised as being of undetermined sex (Walker, 1995: 35). Walker found that for individuals with a documented age over 44 years, poorly preserved pubic bones in females significantly outnumbered those in males, causing older women to be underrepresented in skeletal collections (Walker, 1995: 35–6). Walker also adds that post-menopausal females tend to exhibit male cranial features, which, when combined with the higher possibility of a decomposed pubic bone, further biases sex ratios (Walker, 1995: 36).

Whether a community held larger numbers of very old men or women will influence the perceptions of age in that community, especially if one sex experiences greater ill health. Great age is easily perceived in the body, through wrinkled skin, grey hair, difficulties in movement and memory, and these changes, today at least, are considered to be unsightly, inconvenient and even abhorrent (Gowland, 2007: 154). Furthermore, it appears likely that greater ill-health (a concomitant of the ageing process) is likely to amplify negative perceptions. While the modern world tends to venerate youth and beauty, greater respect and notice is afforded older males in distinction to older females. This is amply demonstrated in a study of film dialogue: men's dialogue (and by extension, roles) continues to increase until they are 65, while women's work peaks between 22 and 31 years of age (Anderson and Daniels, 2016). Moreover, this is despite, or possibly related to, women's greater survivorship.

With modern data (including evidence from the poorest of the poor) suggesting otherwise, can the view that ancient men survived their women be justified? Before this can be explored, the elderly need to be made visible. This paper aims to examine the age at death profiles from three early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries to determine whether life expectancy for females was greater than that for males, or vice versa. Secondly, we will explore the lived experience of these oldest Anglo-Saxons through mortuary analysis, to discover how elderly Anglo-Saxon men and women were perceived and treated; we seek to determine whether older men and women were conceptualised similarly or differently, and whether their social standing in the community was one of respect, indifference or antipathy.

Like many archaeological studies, examination of the concept of age during this period in south-east England has been limited by the difficulties of identifying extreme age from skeletal material. Nonetheless, Crawford (2007) has explored perceptions of old age, largely through literary sources given the limitations of skeletal ageing. Literary sources for this period are also problematic, as they almost all come from the later Christian period. Crawford (2007: 86) convincingly argues that they provide the closest parallels to the earlier period, but this is a time where many aspects of life and culture have changed and we cannot be certain that attitudes to the elderly were not among them. Our approach provides direct evidence from hitherto invisible elderly individuals now identified within cemetery contexts to illuminate aspects of their life and death.

2. Materials and methods

Longevity in Anglo-Saxon England and elsewhere

Waldron's (1994) assertion (see above) that Anglo-Saxon men outlived women is not without precedent. As Waldron notes, Brothwell (1972) also presents evidence to support this contention, and these data are included in Table 1. While Brothwell's section of Table 1 is somewhat eclectic, in that a range of categories from settlements, to periods, to types of grave good inclusions is listed, it does demonstrate that in all but one instance (Bronze Age burials lacking ceramics) the mean age at death of males exceeds that of females. In addition to Brothwell's data, we have added two Anglo-Saxon cohorts, a multi-cemetery dataset (Stoodley, 1999: 235) where male mean age at death is higher than females; and the cemetery of Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire (Wells et al., 2003), where women appear to survive longer than males. Both of these cohorts include only sexed individuals, which largely removes subadults from the calculations, whereas Brothwell's data includes only individuals aged over 19 years. Hines (2002: 99) also presents data from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries listing the proportion of males and females in various age categories. Summing all samples indicates 22.7% of males occurred in the oldest age category (45+ years), in comparison to 18.7% of females (Hines, 2002: 99). However, a greater proportion of females occupy the oldest age category in 4/9 of these same cemetery samples (Hines, 2002: 99). It would seem that females are not always underrepresented in the oldest age categories or have a lower mean age at death in Anglo-Saxon samples.

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