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The historical context and importance of Bamburgh

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1.1. Introduction

The Bowl Hole cemetery, first discovered in the nineteenth century, lies within an area of the dune-field to the immediate south of Bamburgh Castle, a Medieval castle that was rebuilt as a stately home. It is set dramatically on a volcanic rock outcrop on the north-east coast of the English county of Northumberland (Figure 1.1). The cemetery was identified following a storm in the winter of 1817, when a number of stone-lined graves were revealed in the sand dunes. Despite initial investigation by antiquarians, the exact position of the site had been lost by the later twentieth century, and it was rediscovered by the Bamburgh Research Project (BRP) in 1998. This prompted a research excavation to be undertaken by the BRP in conjunction with Durham University from 1999 until 2007. This monograph contains the results of those excavations along with the detailed analysis of the skeletal

Figure 1.1. Aerial photo showing the location of Bamburgh Castle, Bamburgh Village and the Bowl Hole cemetery (BKS 827/61400, taken on 22 October 1941) (© Historic England Archive).

and artefactual material and isotopic analyses undertaken at Durham University and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This work has provided a fascinating insight into the Early Medieval community associated with one of the principal palace sites of the kingdom of Northumbria.

The cemetery is important for several reasons. Firstly, it represents a rare example of (generally) well-preserved skeletal remains of Early Medieval date in Northumberland, where the soil conditions often do not favour bone preservation. In addition, as the cemetery can be associated with one of the most important Early Medieval sites within the region, the information from each skeleton adds substantially to the understanding of the royal site.

The AHRC-funded research project (Grant 119260) had a number of distinct aims, spanning issues of Early Medieval cultural contact, population movement, status relations and religious change in the seventh to eighth centuries AD, specifically to gain a better understanding of the regional origins, relative status and lifestyle of people buried at the Bowl Hole, and to explore the correlations between the cemetery archaeology, literary and historical sources relating to the Early Medieval royal site at Bamburgh. In more detail, the project sought to address the following questions: (1) What were the childhood origins of the people here? (2) Could 'non-locals' be distinguished from 'locals' (in terms of skeletal profile, isotopic signature or burial treatment)? (3) Were there temporal differences, were 'locals' healthier, did they eat a different diet, were they shorter or taller, did they live longer, and were there differences between the sex, age and status groups? (4) What was the relationship between the castle royal settlement and the Bowl Hole cemetery? (5) How did the movement of people relate to the import of 'goods' to the castle? (6) How does the pattern of human movement to Bamburgh compare with other sites from the same time period? (7) How extensive was the original cemetery? We hope that this volume now allows most of those questions to be answered.

The importance of Bamburgh in the Early Medieval kingdom of Northumbria is undisputed (see Section 1.3 below); from the sixth century AD it was one of the principal palace centres of the Bernician kings, and before that it has been postulated that it was the site of a British fortress, *Din Guaire* (Morris 1980, 66) within the polity of the *Gododdin* tribal group. This group may itself have been derived from the *Votadini* tribe of the Roman period. As one of the foremost royal estate centres, Bamburgh should have contained a great hall complex (Early Medieval elite settlements with major halls or hall complexes that emerged in the sixth and seventh centuries AD and that are known from numerous sites within Britain: see Scull & Thomas 2020 for a recent review). Such sites operated as governmental administrative centres within broader economic and politico-religious networks. However, there is more than one type of such estate centre, and Bamburgh is better grouped with those such as Canterbury, Winchester and York, or royal centres with a more urban character, Roman antecedents and often fortifications (Campbell 1986, 99–108). In the case of Bamburgh, the early adoption of stone architecture may also fit with a picture of the site drawing on Rome as a prototype for power and legitimacy as well as for its impressive architectural impact.

Archaeological investigation of the Early Medieval period palace suggests the presence of a variety of mostly timber structures, with increasing evidence for masonry structures from the late seventh to eighth centuries (see Chapter Two Section 2.2.1). This is a sequence that is likely to also be reflected in the defensive structures of the site. Within the palace walls it is predicted that there was a great hall forming the focus on the summit of the rock (Inner Ward) alongside a church that is known from documentary evidence (see Section 1.3 below and Chapter Two Section 2.2.2 for archaeological evidence). Elsewhere within the fortress manufacturing industries, particularly metalworking, are present together with very extensive faunal remains and other palaeoenvironmental evidence (see Chapter Two Section 2.2.4).

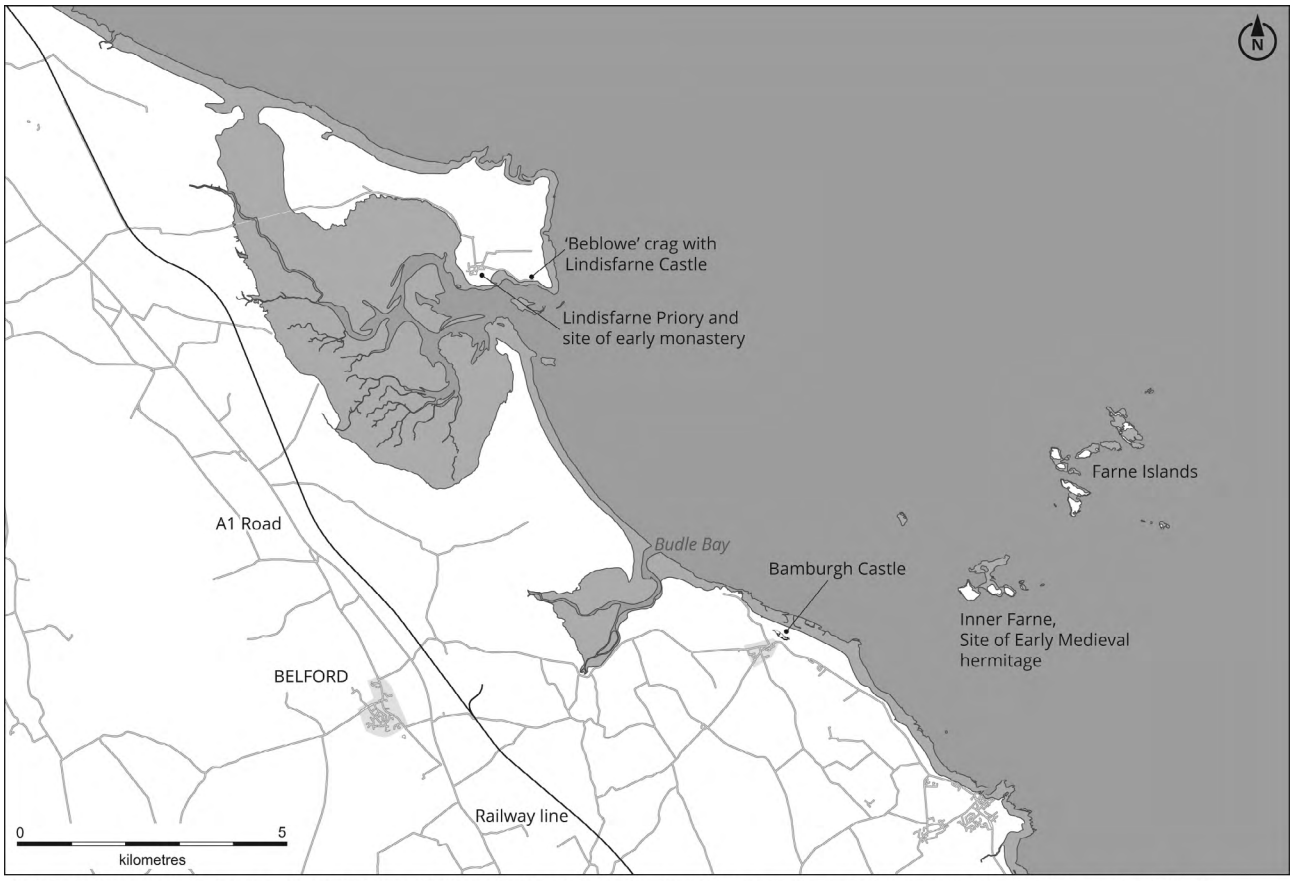
The fortress at Bamburgh may thus have served as a centre for industry, and also for centralised food collection and processing, where food-rent was collected and redistributed, as is suggested for the contemporary nearby palace site at Yeavering (O'Brien 2002, 66). The fortress was strategically located, dominating the surrounding land and well positioned to take advantage of the coastal communication routes along the North Sea littoral. In fact, it is likely that a small harbour was located adjacent to St Oswald's Gate, the main and perhaps only entrance to the fortress at that time, while the extensive tidal beach could easily have hosted a seasonal beach market.

The investigation of the Bowl Hole cemetery forms part of a wider exploration of the site of Bamburgh and its environs following the creation of the Bamburgh Research Project (BRP) in the winter of 1996. The early work of the project comprised archival research and the compilation of a project design. The existence of the Bowl Hole burial ground, and the apparent loss of its specific location, was one of the more intriguing issues to emerge from the documentary research. In addition to its obvious archaeological potential, the report on the human bone fragments that were recovered from a depression in the dune-field, identified as the topographic feature labelled as the Bowl Hole, suggested that the nearby cemetery was becoming visible as a result of erosion due to the weather patterns, or that it had suffered erosion in the past (Northumberland HER No. NU13SE12). This added some urgency to the need to relocate and investigate the cemetery and, at the very least, to define the extent of any evident risk to its long-term preservation by limited excavation work, which is described in more detail in Chapter Two.

1.2. Site location and topographical context

Bamburgh Castle stands at the east end of Bamburgh Village in north-east Northumberland, and the Bowl Hole burial ground is located south-east of it within the coastal dune-fields (Figure 1.2). The cemetery lies 300m south-east of the castle main gate on a localised plateau at the base of some high ground that extends from beneath the castle (NGR NU 18673485). The plateau, which is 90m north-west to south-east by 40m south-west to north-east, is defined on its north and east sides by a low-lying depression in the dune-field. It is bordered to the south by an uneven area of dune through which a small stream finds its way to the sea and to the west via the aforementioned ridge. The stream is present on an estate map dated to 1794 (NRO 452/D/7/1/1) where it is depicted extending from a low-lying area of wet ground to the west of the road and around the south side of the burial ground plateau only some 5m from the southernmost excavation trench. The subsoil that underlies the site comprises a glacial boulder clay overlying sandstone. The plateau slopes very gradually downwards from south-west to north-east, from 10.65m OD to 10.10m OD within the site area, and lies some 15m below the ridge and 8m above the base of the Bowl Hole depression. The cemetery today is mostly under rough grass, although there is some encroachment from sycamore and other trees from the sandstone ridge and it lies within the Bamburgh Dunes SSSI. A number of small sand dunes, up to 10m in diameter and 1m in height, overlie the cemetery area at several points (Figure 1.3).

The present condition of the burial ground does not completely reflect its condition in the Early Medieval period, as there is evidence that the coastline has undergone substantial changes. A simple map regression demonstrates that the dune-field has accumulated significantly even since the time of the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey of the area dated to 1860. This depicts the high tide line reaching the northern end of the base of the castle rock at this time and it shows that much of the dune-field in the area of the Bowl Hole is absent compared to what we see today. If this process of deposition is extrapolated backwards in time, there is a strong likelihood that the high tide reached as far as the base of the slope on the east side of the cemetery plateau in the Early and Later Medieval periods. This would suggest that when the burial ground was in use it would have had a much more intimate geographical relationship to the coast and the tidal beach. Excavation within the West Ward of the castle would appear to offer some evidence to confirm this extrapolation (see Chapter 2). Examination of the deep excavation sections within the castle reveals that



OS VectorMap™ District [SHAPE geospatial data], Scale 1:25000, Tiles: nt,nu, Updated: 23 September 2024, Ordnance Survey (GB), Using: EDINA Digimap Ordnance Survey Service, <https://digimap.edina.ac.uk>, Downloaded: 2025-08-06 10:11:21.484

Figure 1.2. Map of Bamburgh in its local context.

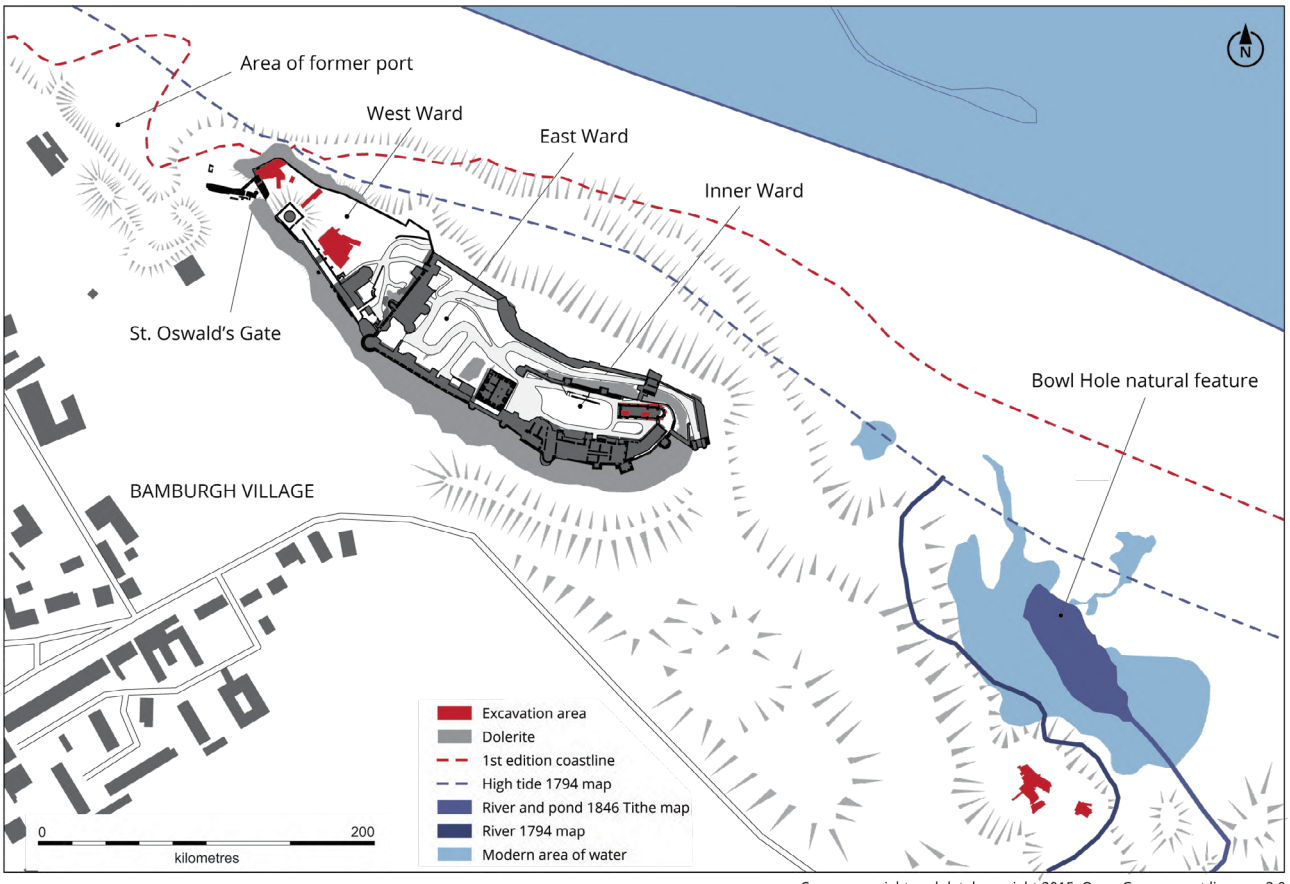


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Figure 1.3. Detailed topographical plan of the castle and cemetery area.

deposits from the Later Medieval period down to the base of the sequence have a soil matrix dominated by silt with only a modest sand content, suggesting that accumulation was driven by midden-like deposition. This continues to the Later Medieval period when sand becomes a greater proportion of the soil matrix with relatively clean layers of aeolian sand above it. This evidence does seem to suggest that, prior to the Later Medieval period, the beach area was fully tidal up to the base of the castle rock and without the dry sand that we see today (dry sand that is easily blown around).

This evidence does therefore suggest that the burial ground lay on a distinctive plateau above the tidal reach with good views out to the north, east and south, but dominated by the higher sandstone ridge to the west that would have cut off all views from the site to the landward side. This is potentially significant, as St Aidan's church lies in the area of the current village and must surely be the general location of the *vill* near Bamburgh where Aidan built a church on land donated by King Oswald, as described by Bede (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 262–7; see Yorke below). However, there would have been clear views to the palace site on the castle rock, where the church dedicated to St Peter containing the relics of St Oswald stood in what is now the Inner Ward of the castle (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 252–3).

1.3. Written sources and the Early Medieval history of Bamburgh *c.* 500–800

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Written references to Bamburgh in Early Medieval texts are summarised in Table 1.1. At first sight the number of references might appear somewhat meagre, but in fact there are more of them, and from a greater number of works, for the years 500–800 than for any other site in Northumbria that was not a major ecclesiastical centre. Bede has more references to Bamburgh than to any other place in Britain with the exception of Canterbury (Campbell 1986, 116–17). He refers most frequently to the *urbs regia* 'royal city' of Bamburgh, and twice in his writings, apparently with the same intent, to *regia civitas* (see Table 1.1 and Campbell 1986, 99–102, 116). These terms may imply a significance for Bamburgh that goes beyond that of other sites in royal ownership, though Bede also seems to have wanted to distinguish the fortress site from the wider estate or *villa* of Bamburgh where Aidan founded a church and there was a settlement (*vicus*) burnt down by Penda of Mercia (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 262–5). Aidan's church is said to have been 'not far' (*longe*) from the *urbs*, and can be presumed to be on the site of the Medieval and current parish church of Bamburgh which has apparently the only known pre-modern dedication

Table 1.1. Early Medieval written sources for the history of Bamburgh, c. AD500–800.

Source	Reference	Event date	Source date	Citation
Historia Brittonum ch. 61	Morris 1980, 37 and 78		829–30	Ida joined Din Guaire to Bernicia
ch. 63	38 and 79			[K.Æthelfrith] the Artful gave Din Guaire to his wife whose name was Bebba and it is named *Bebbanburh* after her
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Northern Recension E	Irvine 2004, 20	547 +	?	Ida built *Bebbanburh* which was first enclosed with a hedge and after with a wall
Irish Annals	Charles-Edwards 2006, I, 132–3	623	7th c?	The storming of Rátha Guala by Fiachnae son of Báetan
Irish tale-lists	Ireland 2022	(623)	Pre 10th c	The military expedition of Fiachnae son of Báetan to Dún Guaire among the Saxons
Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III, 16	Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 262–3	Before 635	731	K. Penda of Mercia attacked *urbs regia* called after a former queen Bebba. He dismantled buildings neighbouring the *urbs* and piled up beams, rafters, wattles and thatched roofs on the side which faced the land. The smoke was seen by B. Aidan on Farne Island and he prayed for the direction of the wind to change to save the *urbs*.
III, 17	262–5	635		B. Aidan died not far from the *urbs* in the *villa regia* where he had a church and small dwelling where he often stayed. He died leaning against an external buttress of the church in a tent erected against its west wall. When K. Penda burnt down the *vicus* and the church the buttress alone survived. It also survived a second fire caused by carelessness even though the nail holes were burnt. On the third rebuilding the buttress was placed inside the church and became a place of prayer. Splinters from the buttress placed in water had healing powers.
III, 12	252–3	643		The year after K. Oswald was slain at *Maserfelth* his brother K. Oswiu took away his head and arms that had been hung on stakes, and placed the hands and arms in *regia civitate*
III, 6	230–1			K. Oswald's right hand and arm which St Aidan had said would never decay are preserved in a silver shrine in St Peter's church in *urbs regia* which is called after Queen Bebba
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Northern Recension E	Irvine 2004, 25	641 +		The holiness and miracles of Oswald were made known throughout the island, and his hands are undecayed in Bebbanburh.
Alcuin, *Bishops, Kings, and Saints*, lines 300–10	Godman 1982, 28–31		After 781/2	Oswiu took away the severed hand of K. Oswald that had been blessed by Aidan to *urbem Bebbam*, and placed it in a silver casket in the church dedicated to St Peter which he had built. It remains uncorrupted and the nails continue to grow.
Stephen, *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ch. 60	Colgrave 1927, 130–3	705/6	c.713	During a disputed succession following the death of K. Aldfrith (705) his young son and heir Osred was besieged with the *princeps* Berhtfrith in *urbs Bebbanburg* and sheltered in a narrow place in the stony rock. When the besiegers withdrew their opposition the gates were opened.
Bede, *Life of St Cuthbert*, ch. 27	Colgrave 1940, 244–5	685	c.720	B. Cuthbert advised Queen Iurminburg to leave Carlisle and travel to *regia civitas* as he had learnt from a vision that her husband K. Ecgfrith has been slain in battle with the Picts. [Colgrave 1940, 352: 'presumably Bamburgh']

(*Continued*)

Table 1.1. (*Continued*).

Source	Reference	Event date	Source date	Citation
Historia Regum	Arnold 1882-5, II, 39–40	750	Lost N. annals 732–802	King Eadbert took Bishop Cynewulf [of Lindisfarne] as prisoner to Bamburgh, and had the church of St Peter in Lindisfarne besieged. Offa son of Aldfrith had fled to the relics of St Cuthbert and was dragged from the church.
	II, 45	774		King Alhred was deposed. He departed with a few companions in flight, first to Bamburgh and then to King Kenneth of the Picts. *'The city of Bebba is exceedingly well fortified, but by no means large, containing about the space of two or three fields, having one hollowed entrance ascending in a wonderful manner by steps. It has, on the summit of the hill, a church of very beautiful architecture, in which is a fair and costly shrine. In this, wrapped in a pall, lies the uncorrupted right hand of St. Oswald, king, as Bede the historian of this nation relates. There is on the west and highest point of this citadel, a well, excavated with extraordinary labour, sweet to drink, and very pure to the sight'*. [cited in Young 2003, 5.]

to St Aidan in England (Cambridge 1995, 136–9). As St Aidan's lies in the village about a third of a mile from the fortress while the Bowl Hole cemetery is only 300m to its south, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Bowl Hole cemetery is more likely to have been connected with the *urbs* than with the wider *villa* and *vicus*. Consideration of the significance that the Bamburgh *urbs* had for the Bernician royal house may therefore help us to understand what type of people might have lived, and, crucially, died, within the fortress.

1.3.1. Bamburgh and the Bernician Royal House

Before it fell into Northumbrian hands it would appear that Bamburgh was a British fortification. The *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 61) reveals that its previous name was *Din Guaire* with *din* being an Old Welsh word for a stronghold or fort (Morris 1980, 79). Bamburgh can be seen as part of a wider pattern in which the Bernicians took over existing northern British forts and, presumably, the territories dependent upon them (Higham 1986, 250–74; Alcock 1987, 211–54). Other examples with a first element *din*, and which were known to Northumbrians as *burg*, *urbs* or *civitas,* are *Din Eidin* (Edinburgh) and *Dynbaer* (Dunbar), while *urbs Coludi* (Coldingham) can be suspected of being a further example although its British name is not known (Campbell 1986, 99–119; Higham 1986, 263–7; Stronach 2005). Among these Bamburgh seems to have held a particular significance for the Bernician royal house. The *Historia Brittonum* records that Ida joined *Din Guaire* to Bernicia (Morris 1980, 78), perhaps implying that he was first associated with *Din Guaire*/Bamburgh before expanding his rulership. Identification of a ruling house with a major fortification in their territory is another northern British feature that the Idings may have taken over. The pre-eminent example is the formidable Dumbarton Rock which was used to designate the British kings of that area (Alcock 1987, 210–13, 232–8). The Northumbrians knew the site as Alcluith which, as Bede explains, 'in their language means "Clyde Rock"' (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 40), and it is another place he describes as *urbs* and *civitas* (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 20, 40 and 42).

Ida can be accepted as a real person, the grandfather, according to Northumbrian genealogies, of King Æthelfrith (592–616) whose family dominated the province in the seventh century. But it is also apparent that Ida has undergone a degree of mythologisation in the sources that we have for him (Fraser 2009, 149–54). According to the *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 57; Morris 1980, 77), whose compiler had access to Northumbrian genealogies, Ida had 12 sons, including all but one of the rulers named in a king-list as ruling between him and his grandson Æthelfrith (ch. 63; Morris 1980, 79). A comparable king-list is included in the Moore Manuscript of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica,* and was evidently the source Bede used to calculate the date of 547 for Ida's accession that he gives in the *recapitulatio* at the end of his history (Blair 1950; Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 562–3). Both these assumptions, that all these rulers were sons of Ida and that they ruled successively, seem doubtful. Frithuwold, whose regnal listing implies he ruled 579–85, was according to another entry in the *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 63; Morris 1980, 79) on the throne when Augustine came to Kent in 597, though calculations from the Northumbrian king-list, and implied in Bede's narrative (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 116–7), would suggest that Æthelfrith was king at that time. Perhaps some of these kings ruled concurrently not successively, and were rivals of the Idings. Ida became a flexible founding father whose achievements seem to have been expanded to match developments in the Northumbrian kingdom. The *Historia Brittonum* describes him as first king of Bernicia (ch. 56; Morris 1980, 76) and king of all the *regiones* north of the Humber (ch. 61; Morris 1980, 78) (which would include the kingdom of Deira), both of which are likely to have been exaggerations (though the first is often taken at face value). Kings who challenged the descendants of Æthelfrith for the throne in the later seventh and eighth

centuries claimed descent from among the supposed sons of Ida which, in some cases at least, may have been a convenient fiction (Fraser 2009, 149–64).

Bamburgh had not only a royal founding father, but a founding mother. This is Queen Bebba after whom, as Bede twice explains, the settlement was named (he never gives the place-name as such). It is the *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 63; Morris 1980, 79) which supplies the information that Bebba was the queen of King Æthelfrith (the grandson of Ida) who, it claims, gave the fortress of *Din Guaire* to her and so it was renamed after her. Deducing the existence of individuals from place-names was a common Early Medieval habit, and Bede makes several such deductions which are often suspect, such as his statement that *Hrofæscæstre* (Rochester, Kent) was called 'after one of their former chiefs whose name was Hrof' (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 142–3) [it in fact derived from the place's Roman name Durobrevis]. But the statement that Bamburgh took its name from Queen Bebba appears in several early sources (Table 1.1) and so was evidently believed to be the case quite widely, which is perhaps what matters most in interpreting the significance of her association.

Bebba may also have had a link with the nearby site of Lindisfarne, the site of the first bishopric established by the Bernician royal house (see Figure 1.2). A sixteenth-century map records the name Beblowe for the rocky outcrop on which Lindisfarne Castle was built (Hope-Taylor 1977, 291–3; O'Sullivan & Young 1995, 89–92), and this may have been derived from an earlier form of *Bebbanlowe* 'hill of Bebba' (Jones 1990, 127–8). It has also been proposed that the castle site could have been the *urbs regis Broninis* 'the breast-shaped island' where Bishop Wilfrid was imprisoned by a royal reeve in *c.* 680 (Jones 1990; Colgrave 1927, 72–3). That name also seems to have had female associations and the Wilfridian reference implies a royally controlled stronghold (though the identification is far from certain). An Early Medieval fortification beneath the later Lindisfarne Castle may also be implied by the *Historia Brittonum* (ch. 63; Morris 1980, 79) reference to Ida's son Theodoric being blockaded for three days and three nights on the island of *Medcaut* (the Brittonic name for Lindisfarne) by the British king Urien. Ida's occupation of Bamburgh does not seem to have meant that his family's control of the surrounding area went unchallenged; an association of Bebba with both Bamburgh and Lindisfarne would have helped underscore the family's claims.

There is a persistent link in Anglo-Saxon sources of queens with towns or fortified sites (Stafford 1997, 107–42), and *burh/burg* was one of the commonest second elements in female names (see Queen Iurminburg below) (Okasha 2011). There may be connections here with the portrayal of royal women being responsible for the well-being of halls in Old English verse, and with ideas of women as protectors that can be seen in their links with amulets, medicine and healing (Meaney 1981; Fell 1984, 89–107). A possible meaning of *Medcaut* was 'healing island' (Breeze 2005). Lurking further in the background is the shadowy world of goddesses who seem to have been highly significant in pre-Christian Germanic (and Celtic) religion (Shaw 2011). In the late sixth and seventh centuries Anglo-Saxon women had important roles in signalling identity through their distinctive dress and accessories (Martin 2013 and 2015). Rights of ownership and control of land might be underscored in the seventh century by rich female burials in prominent places in the landscape that could lead to their names being immortalised in place-names (Stenton 1970; Hamerow 2016). Bebba's links with Bamburgh and Lindisfarne may therefore have been powerful statements about rights claimed by the Idings over these important British sites.

A third symbolic link for Bamburgh and the Bernician royal house was provided when King Oswiu (642–70) placed the arms of his brother King Oswald (634–42) in the chapel of the fortress. Oswald had been killed at the battle of *Maserfelth* by King Penda of Mercia who, as Bede recounts, had Oswald's head and arms severed from the body and hung on stakes. The following year Oswiu arrived with an army to take them back to Northumbria, and placed the head in the cemetery of Lindisfarne and the hands and arms in Bamburgh (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 250–3). Penda's intention may have been humiliation of the enemy and celebration of his success though religious connotations to the ritual cannot be ruled out (Chaney 1970, 116–19; Thacker 1995, 97–104). In taking his brother's remains to his centres of Bamburgh and Lindisfarne, Oswiu may have been influenced by a precedent when King Edwin of Northumbria (from the rival Deiran royal house) had died in battle with Penda in 633. His head also was removed after death, but subsequently it was taken to his episcopal centre at York and placed in a chapel of St Peter's which Edwin had begun to build, but which was completed by Oswald himself (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 202–7). Alcuin in his poem on *Kings, Bishops, and Saints of York* records that Oswiu built a chapel dedicated to St Peter in the *urbs* of Bamburgh to house the relics (Godman 1982, 28–31). This was probably on the same site as the Romanesque chapel at the east end of the fortification which was dedicated to St Oswald (Bateson 1893, 104; Cambridge 1995, 135–9). Whether Oswiu had originally intended it from the start or not, his retrieval of some of Oswald's remains kick-started the development of Oswald's very influential, but precocious cult as a saint (Thacker 1995).

Oswiu by his placing of remains of Oswald at both Bamburgh and Lindisfarne emphasised the link between them, as well as his authority over both sites. However, the church of Lindisfarne, it would appear, was alert to any challenge to its leadership on ecclesiastical matters. Bede records how Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne was so impressed by Oswald's charity in giving away a great silver dish that he seized the king's right hand and said 'May this hand never decay' (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 250–1). By this account, which was no doubt developed

retrospectively at Lindisfarne, any desire by Oswiu to be impresario of his brother's cult was trumped by the claim that a previous intervention from Bishop Aidan was responsible for the incorruption of Oswald's arm. It is not clear exactly when the arm clasped by Aidan was placed in a silver shrine in the chapel at Bamburgh, but it was a well-established saintly relic by the time Bede wrote his history in 731. Alcuin writing later in the eighth century believed it had been enshrined by Oswiu himself and that its nails continued to grow (Godman 1982, 30–1). Its presence at Bamburgh was recorded subsequently in the *Old English Martyrology* (Rauer 2013, 154–5) and the *Resting Places of Saints* [Secgan] (Rollason 1978, 81 and 87 [entry no. 5]). However, in the 1050s it was reportedly neglected and was stolen by a monk of Peterborough where it became one of the monastery's most significant relics (Tudor 1995, 191–2), though there is an alternative tradition that it ended up with the head at Durham (Plummer 1896, II, 158). Possibly head and arm were taken to Durham together. Reginald of Durham writing *c*. 1165 recorded that Oswald's head had been taken back to Bamburgh by 'relatives' and 'successors' of Oswald, but it is unclear when that might have occurred, or even if it is a valid tradition (Bailey 1995, 198–9; Tudor 1995, 186–9).

Oswald's cult developed rapidly following his brother's intervention and had cult sites throughout Northumbria, but Bamburgh may have had a special significance as it housed relics of his body. E.G. Stanley has drawn attention to a tenth-century annotation to the Lindisfarne Gospels that seems to equate Bamburgh with Nazareth as a holy city (Stanley 2017). The marginal annotation was made to help readers understand why Jesus was described as *Nazarenus* and reads *nazarenisca ł ðe bebbisca .i. allsua monn cueðas* 'the Nazarene, that is, as one says, Bebbish'. Stanley explains that what the annotation is saying is that 'in Palestine they call Jesus "the Nazarene" after their holy city much as we might have called him 'the man from Bamburgh' after our holy city here in Northumbria' (Stanley 2017, 212).

The associations of Bamburgh with the Northumbrian royal house were still green in the tenth century, and were utilised by the family that came to control the very much reduced rump of northern Bernicia after Scandinavian rulers had taken control further south in Northumbria (McGuigan 2018). This family was regularly identified as being 'of Bamburgh' as in an entry for 926 in the D version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* where Ealdred from *Bebbanbyrig* was among the northern and western rulers giving an oath of loyalty to King Athelstan of Wessex (Cubbin 1996, 41). The family had their own significant female ancestor who linked them with the former kings of Northumbria for they claimed descent from King Ælla (d. 867) through his daughter Æthelthryth (McGuigan 2018, 107–8, 134–5). The Ælla connection is responsible for a fourth legendary association for Bamburgh as Ælla came to have a major role to play in Scandinavian sagas concerned with his major opponents, the sons of Ragnar *Loðbrok* (McGuigan 2015; see also the discussion of possibly Scandinavian non-locals below).

1.3.2. Bamburgh as fortress

Bamburgh's importance to the royal house of Northumbria, and its tenth-century successors, lay not only in its links with royal ancestors, but in its practical importance as a defensive site on a formidable volcanic outcrop that commanded approaches along the east coast. The entry for 547 in the E version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* weaves together these two aspects:

> '[Ida] reigned twelve years; and he built Bamburgh which was first enclosed with a hedge and afterwards with a wall' (Whitelock 1961, 12; Irvine 2004, 20).

The exact origins of this statement are hard to ascertain. It is usually assumed to derive from lost Northumbrian annals that lie behind the so-called northern recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but the entry is now known only from the twelfth-century E version made at Peterborough (Irvine 2004, xxxvi–lviii). It is, however, unlikely that Ida was the first to add defences to the site as its Brittonic name Din Guaire implies it was a British fortified site (Alcock 1987, 211–13). As such it might be expected to have had significant amounts of timber framing in its construction (Aitchison 2003, 96–8); Penda's attempts to burn it down point in the same direction (Table 1.1) and possible traces of a timber-framed rampart have been found in excavation, with stone walls added by the ninth century (Young 2003, 7; see Chapter Two).

References to warfare involving Bamburgh can be found intermittently throughout the Medieval period, and it is likely that there were further engagements that have not been recorded. Putting aside the somewhat problematical references to Ida, there is reference in the Irish annals for 623 to an attack on 'Ratha Guala' by the Irish king Fiachnae mac Báetáin and a list of lost historical tales seems to refer to the same event at Dún nGuaire (which is close to the British name for Bamburgh) (Charles-Edwards 2000, 499–501; Ireland 2022, 140–1; Table 1.1). Penda of Mercia is reported by Bede to have unsuccessfully tried to take Bamburgh twice, once before the death of Bishop Aidan in 651 and once after it (Table 1.1). On both occasions Penda tried to burn down the fortress, and the description of his first attempt is particularly vivid. Bede records how he dismantled timber buildings from the *vicus* and piled beams, rafters, wattle walls and thatched roofs against the landward side of the fortification which he then fired (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 262–5). Although Penda had waited for a favourable wind, Bishop Aidan saw the smoke from Inner Farne Island and through his prayers changed the wind's direction and saved the *urbs*. Burning of forts was very much a feature of warfare in northern Britain and there are many records of such incidents involving forts of northern British, Picts and Scots (Aitchison 2003, 100–102).

The main alternative in northern Britain was to try to take a fort by siege (Aitchison 2003, 102–4). Stephen in his *Life of Bishop Wilfrid* describes such a siege between rival Northumbrian claimants on the death of King Aldfrith (son of Oswiu) in 705 (Colgrave 1927, 130–3). Aldfrith's young son Osred had taken refuge with his supporters inside the fortification which was surrounded by forces of a rival claimant called Eadwulf. On this occasion the siege was lifted after diplomatic negotiations in which Bishop Wilfrid of Hexham, who had been one of Eadwulf's main supporters, was persuaded to change sides. There is possibly an implication that those besieging Bamburgh on this occasion suspected that their chances of taking it were slim, and any engagement would be lengthy. The description of Bamburgh in the annal for 774 in the twelfth-century *Historia Regum* refers to its well 'on the west and highest point …excavated with extraordinary labour, sweet to drink and very pure to the sight', and is probably the rock-cut well still extant in the western part of the residential complex at the east end of the citadel (Arnold 1882–5, 45; Young 2003, 5). As other wells are also known it would seem that Bamburgh was effectively set up in that respect to withstand a lengthy siege. Prince Osred and his chief supporter Berhtfrith (who was probably the Northumbrian equivalent of the Frankish mayor of the palace) are said to have been hidden 'in a narrow place in the stony rock' (Colgrave 1927, 132–3). This refuge has not been identified, but suggests an extra degree of security which would make it unlikely that Osred could be killed by (say) firing arrows into the fort or be easily snatched if besiegers did break inside. Stephen's description ends with the gates being opened once terms have been agreed. The strength of these was obviously essential for the effectiveness of the fortress, and the 774 description refers to 'a hollowed entrance ascending in a wonderful manner by steps'. This is probably to be identified with St Oswald's Gate at the north-western end of the castle site which is indeed a stepped entrance cutting through the bedrock and probably the only entrance to the site (Young 2003, 9).

This would have been where Penda set his fire, but failed to breach. Bamburgh would therefore seem to have been a very difficult place to take, and a safe refuge in which to place people or important objects such as Oswald's arm in its silver shrine. Possibly this was what Bishop Cuthbert of Lindisfarne had in mind in 685 when he advised Queen Iurminburg to travel from Carlisle to the 'royal city' (which can be presumed to be Bamburgh as this was Bede's habitual way of describing it) (Colgrave 1940, 244–5). Cuthbert had seen in a vision that Iurminburg's husband King Ecgfrith (half-brother of Aldfrith) had been killed in battle with the Picts, though whether he thought she should go to Bamburgh for her own safety or for some other purpose connected with the succession (which was in dispute) is not clear. Bamburgh would also have been a suitable place for important prisoners. In 750 King Eadbert imprisoned Bishop Cynewulf of Lindisfarne in Bamburgh so that the king could remove a rival claimant—Offa the brother of Osred of the 705 siege—who had sought refuge in Cynewulf's church (Arnold 1882–5, II, 39–40). In 774 King Alhred was deposed and took refuge with his supporters in Bamburgh, but with the intention of taking a ship from there to seek the protection of the Pictish king (Arnold 1882–5, II, 45). This draws attention to the fact that, although the castle today is a little distance from the sea, in the Early Medieval period there was probably a small natural harbour at the northern end of the rock and the sea may have run along the whole of the east side (Young 2003, 21). In 796 the deposed king Osbald retreated to Lindisfarne with the intention of taking a ship with some of the brothers to the Pictish royal court (Arnold 1882–5, II, 57–8).

This is evidently the same sailing route of which Bamburgh was a part (Carver 1990; Ferguson 2011). Between them the Bamburgh fortification and the Lindisfarne Castle site overlooked Budle Bay, as well as each having their own small harbours, and so controlled the most significant landing places on that part of the east coast (Hope-Taylor 1977, 291–3). That must have been an important aspect of Bamburgh's strategic importance that also emphasises its interconnection with Lindisfarne. The possibility of bringing in extra supplies or troops by sea increases appreciation of the difficulties in trying to take Bamburgh by siege. Bamburgh is likely to have been one of the places where ships of the royal fleet were housed, for although records of naval battles are rare, there were various support roles in which they could have been used on campaigns as well as for more general travel up and down the east coast. There was also prestige attached to owning ships in Early Medieval Britain (Aitchison 2003, 111–29; Ferguson 2011). Of course, many other vessels are likely to have been travelling along the east coast which belonged to other royal families (including the Picts as well as southern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms), to religious houses (including Lindisfarne) and to traders, some of whom may have travelled more widely across the North Sea. There was also the possibility of intersecting with other sailing routes further south to travel across the Channel to Francia and beyond.

1.3.3. The people of the Bamburgh fortification

The people specifically named as being inside the royal Bamburgh site are all of high status and stayed there for a relatively short amount of time, but many additional people would have accompanied them or enabled their visits. By drawing upon wider knowledge of the history of the Northumbrian royal house, and of how royal sites generally seem to have operated in Early Medieval Britain, one can suggest something of the range of people likely to have been associated with royal Bamburgh. Some of these would have been permanent residents and this group would be those most likely to have been buried in the Bowl Hole cemetery.

The highest status permanent resident is likely have been a royal reeve. There is no specific reference to a reeve of Bamburgh, but they are recorded at other royal *urbes* and *civitates* in Northumbria. Bishop Wilfrid was first imprisoned under the supervision of Osfrith *praefectus* of *Broninis* (possibly the breast-shaped island of Lindisfarne Castle: Jones 1990) and then transferred to the custody of Tydlin *praefectus* of Dunbar (Colgrave 1927, 72–9). Waga the *praepositus* of Carlisle showed Bishop Cuthbert and Queen Iurminburg around its Roman remains while they waited for news of King Ecgfrith's ill-fated expedition against the Picts (Colgrave 1940, 122–3). The fact that these reeves are named probably implies they are of noble status, and they would have had other lesser officials to help them carry out royal commandments and to protect royal interests. As a significant fortress in a strategic position off the east coast, one would expect that Bamburgh would have had a permanent garrison which would be supplemented by other troops serving the royal house as needed. As we have seen, various military engagements at Bamburgh have been recorded that would have led to some loss of life, and there may well have been others that have gone unrecorded. The royal chapel may have had one or more permanent chaplains, though these could have been provided as needed from Lindisfarne or have also served the church in the *vicus*; they are perhaps less likely to have been buried in the Bowl Hole cemetery. One can also expect that there would be many other lesser people to service the needs of those living in the fortification, and these would have been of various free and unfree statuses, including slaves. The more or less permanent residents may well have lived there with their families, so it is not surprising to find women and children well-represented in the cemetery. Women of lesser status, including slaves, could have had various roles in addition to those of wives and mothers, such as cooks, cleaners and needlewomen. Children could be put to work assisting them and some of them are likely to have been slaves.

Kings can be presumed to have visited Bamburgh as part of their royal itineration as well as during military emergencies. One might have expected in view of the symbolic associations of Bamburgh that it would have been the site of some special royal ceremonies (as other comparable sites in the non-Anglo-Saxon parts of northern Britain appear to have been: Welander *et al*. 2003). What seems to have been the ornamented arm of a stone chair recovered from the castle in 1893 could be considered as part of a throne and so suggestive of royal ceremonial (Cramp 1984, I, 161–2). No specific practices are referred to in the written sources, but Bishop Cuthbert's advice to Queen Iurminburg to proceed to the royal *civitas* (presumed to be Bamburgh) on the death of her husband King Ecgfrith, and the siege of Bamburgh after the death of King Aldfrith, seem connected with disputes over the succession. Did possession of Bamburgh aid a claim to the throne? Was there perhaps a role for the arm of the royal saint Oswald in ceremonies surrounding the succession or on other occasions when the position of a ruler might need reinforcement? These points are speculative, but there are likely to have been more royal visits to Bamburgh than those that have come down to us. Not only kings, but other men, women and children of the royal house, as well as other royal officials, could have been occasional visitors. A royal entourage would include many individuals of different status, and an official visit would need much preparation with extra foodstuffs delivered by land and sea. Individuals from roundabout might be summoned to meet the king, and some visitors might have travelled from some distance for a rendezvous such as ambassadors, messengers and traders from other kingdoms, both from Britain and overseas. No doubt some transient visitors would have died while at Bamburgh, especially those who came as members of armies (though not enough is known about the treatment of bodies of dead combatants). But the most likely candidates for burial in the Bowl Hole cemetery must be those who lived there more or less permanently including not only its garrison and perhaps ships' crews, but also many non-combatants. Normal patterns of mortality might apply to long term residents, but all might be adversely affected by warfare, and the relatively enclosed living conditions might have made them particularly susceptible to contagious diseases.

The written records are not detailed enough to indicate where the disparate people of Bamburgh came from, and this is where the scientific analysis of the Bowl Hole skeletons can make a particularly valuable contribution (see Chapter Six). The burial population is likely to have included some people of different origins, even if the majority were from the Northumbrian province. Northumbria was an exceptionally large kingdom and by 800 had expanded to include land from the Humber to the Firth of Forth in the east across to the west coast including lands either side of the Solway Firth and the Isle of Man, with most of the land taken in different stages from British leaders (Rollason 2003, 25–36; Fraser 2009; Edmonds 2019, 23–44). Levying of military forces probably applied to all areas of Northumbria, but skilled warriors (and sailors) are likely also to have been recruited from other parts of Britain (and beyond). King Oswine of Deira is said to have had such a reputation as a ruler, including for his generosity, that men flocked to serve him from other kingdoms (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 256–9). To the south of Northumbria were the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and to the north the Picts and the British kingdom of Strathclyde/Dumbarton. Northumbrian rulers intermarried with neighbouring royal houses and went to them in exile, and would have had a wide range of interactions with them through messengers and other intermediaries. They also fought battles in many of the closest territories, and when victorious can be expected to have brought back individuals as part of their booty, many of whom would be enslaved or kept as hostages (or both)—though hostage-taking is poorly attested in Anglo-Saxon sources (Lavelle 2017).

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* gives many examples of people moving between different areas of Britain. Bede

was particularly interested in church people and royalty, but their movements can be seen as indicative of the amount of criss-crossing the country that occurred, and, of course, other classes of people would travel with the individuals he does describe. He includes an East Anglian steward who moved to Northumbria with the East Anglian princess Æthelthryth (the first wife of King Ecgfrith), and who stayed in the province when she returned home (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 338–9); a Northumbrian nobleman who escorted King Edwin's widow and the bishop of York by boat to safety in Kent after Edwin's death in battle (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 204–5); and Northumbrians living in former Pictish territory who were enslaved by victorious Picts after King Ecgfrith's defeat and death (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 428–9).

Bede also records much travel between Northumbria and Ireland and the Irish territories in western Scotland which, of course, included Iona (Stancliffe 2017; Edmonds 2019, 72–98). Many of his travellers were churchmen, but not exclusively so, and additional information in Irish sources suggest it would not have been surprising to find people brought up in Gaelic-speaking areas at a Northumbrian royal site (Moisl 1983; Edmonds 2019, 72–126). Before his accession Oswald with a supporting group of nobles was in exile amongst the Irish of Argyll (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 218–19), while his younger brother Oswiu was in Ireland itself, and fathered a son with a member of the Cenél nÉogain dynasty of Donegal (a kinswoman of Bishop Fínan of Lindisfarne, 651–61) (Ireland 1991; Yorke 2010). Irish annals suggest that both Oswald and Oswiu, and other exiled Northumbrian princes, were involved in fighting in Ireland in the armies of their Irish hosts (Moisl 1983). Analogous circumstances could have meant the presence of Irish or northern British warriors in a Northumbrian army. Other Irish may have come to Northumbria in even more unfortunate circumstances. In 685 Oswiu's son King Ecgfrith raided Brega in the midlands of Ireland and took 60 captives back to Northumbria as slaves. The Irish annals record that Abbot Adamnán of Iona was subsequently able to obtain their release and return to Ireland, but this was probably a rather unusual outcome (Pelteret 2020).

Our ecclesiastical sources recount trips mainly by churchmen to and from Francia and Italy, and surrounding areas, but say little about other groups of people who may have accompanied them or travelled in different circumstances (Tinti 2021, 38–50). None of the Northumbrian kings are known to have travelled to Rome as some of their southern counterparts did (but some are said to have contemplated it, and messengers were certainly despatched). The best indications we have of the circumstances in which foreigners who were not ecclesiastics might have come to a royal court are records of the unusually literate court of King Alfred of Wessex (871–99). Alfred's biographer Asser specifically mentions the king was known for his generosity to 'foreign visitors of all races', and he may not have been unusual in this as Bede's reference to the Northumbrian king Oswine used a similar trope. Asser continues, 'many Franks, Frisians, Gauls, Scandinavians [*pagani*], Britons, Irishmen and Bretons subjected themselves willingly to his lordship, nobles and commoners alike' (ch. 76; Stevenson 1904, 60; Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 91). Some of these would be the craftsmen the king assembled 'from many races', and he is said to have spent a third of his revenues set aside for secular purposes on commissions from them (ch. 101; Stevenson 1904, 87; Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 106). Others might have been employed for special military or naval skills; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 796 records the deaths of three named Frisians and several others who were part of the king's naval forces (Whitelock 1961, 58).

Another third of Alfred's secular revenues went to 'foreign visitors of all races' who flocked to his court for reasons that are unspecified (ch. 101; Stevenson 1904, 87; Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 107). This category may have included the Norwegian chieftain Ottar who brought King Alfred a gift of walrus ivory and regaled him with accounts of his travels and life in the far north (Bately & Englert 2007). Now, it could be claimed that that the presence of Scandinavians at Alfred's court reflects the circumstances of the viking invasions, but this is not necessarily the case. There was probably never a time from the sixth century onwards when there was not contact between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and Scandinavia as finds in England of Scandinavian items, including coins from Ribe in Denmark, suggest (Hines 1984; Metcalf 1993, 275–93). Alcuin complained to King Eardwulf of Northumbria of the imitation at his court of Scandinavian ('pagan') fashions in trimming hair and beards (Whitelock 1979, no. 193, 842–4). That was apparently a feature of the Northumbrian court before the viking attack in 793 and so implies their presence in Northumbrian court circles in the eighth century.

1.3.4. Conclusion

Bamburgh and Lindisfarne lay at the heart of one of the core areas of Northumbria (Rollason 2003, 45–53). In many ways they were complementary settlements, but to see Bamburgh as the royal centre with Lindisfarne as its ecclesiastical counterpart would be to simplify a more complex interrelationship. Bamburgh had its own ecclesiastical foci which linked it to Lindisfarne—the holy city and the holy island. The church of St Aidan of Lindisfarne was the site of one of the miracles of Aidan recounted by Bede, and it was Aidan who foretold King Oswald's sanctity when he grasped his arm. That arm in its silver reliquary was kept in the royal chapel at Bamburgh, but Oswald's head was (initially) buried in the cemetery of Lindisfarne. The *urbs* of Bamburgh was undoubtedly the most significant fortification in the region, but it may have operated in tandem with the eminence that became Lindisfarne Castle in order to control that part of the eastern seaway; both may also have been linked with

Queen Bebba. Both sites protected Northumbria through military and naval presence and through their saints and holy places.

Bamburgh was a symbolic as well as a strategic centre for its Early Medieval rulers. It had played an essential role in the establishment of the Bernician dynasty who wrested it from British counterparts and came to dominate the whole of Northumbria. After the dissolution of the Northumbrian kingdom it had a comparable significance for the earls of Bamburgh who controlled the rump of Bernicia in the tenth century. It would have been a busy place, of which we only get some glimpses in the written sources, with many temporary visitors passing through, from the royal court downwards. But there must also have been more permanent residents including those who administered and protected the site and its territories on behalf of the crown and those who in turn looked after their needs and maintained the site, not to mention (in all probability) the families of many of them. These individuals are largely missing from the written sources, and their presence has had to be inferred. However, it is these permanent residents who are most likely to have been buried in the Bowl Hole cemetery, and the analysis of those burials has the potential to restore them to life and to enhance our understanding of what went on at the Bamburgh Castle site in the Early Medieval period.

1.4. Archaeological background of Bamburgh

We know from the excavated evidence (see Chapter 2) that the occupation of the castle rock site at Bamburgh extends back to at least the late Bronze Age, based on the earliest radiocarbon date on an animal bone fragment from a layer above subsoil within the West Ward (980–836 calBC at 94.5% confidence). Yorke details above how Bamburgh, like Edinburgh and Dumbarton, both in modern day Scotland, is believed to have been an important regional focus in the immediate post Roman period before passing into the hands of an Anglo-Saxon dynasty. Some indication of this implied potential can be gleaned from the finds that have already been discovered, which includes a fragment of a carved stone throne or chair (Cramp 1984, 162–3), recovered from beneath foliage within the grounds of the castle, together with a substantial assemblage of metalwork, recovered by archaeological excavation, that includes numerous decorated gold items and two pattern-welded swords from the Early Medieval period that attest to the high status nature of the site as a royal palace.

Bamburgh was maintained as a palace of the kings and later earls of Anglian Northumbria until the Norman suppression of the earldom in 1095, after which it became a holding of the English Crown (Rollason 2003, 249). The castle was substantially damaged by gun fire in 1464, during the Wars of the Roses (Bateson 1893, 48), after which it was only sparsely occupied. Granted to the Forster family after the Union of the Crowns it later passed into the ownership of the Prince Bishop of Durham, Nathaniel Lord Crewe (Bateson 1893, 54). Substantial restoration works to the surviving Medieval fabric were carried out during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to provide structures useful to the pursuance of the aims of the Lord Crewe Trust. The estate was again purchased in 1890 by the 1st Lord Armstrong, who undertook an extensive programme of building and restoration, culminating in the castle as it stands today. The recent archaeological excavations of the Bamburgh Castle site are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

1.4.1. The Bamburgh vill

As described by Yorke in more detail above, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede reports that St Aidan died at a church in a royal vill (*villa regia*) near to the *urbs* of Bamburgh (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 262–7). Given that the church of St Aidan in the village of Bamburgh and 450m to the west of the castle is the only known Medieval dedication to St Aidan in England, it is reasonable to assume that the Later Medieval church preserves the focus of its Anglo-Saxon predecessor. This being the case then a royal vill or estate centre, with its own church, lies under the present village (Cambridge 1995, 136–8). We can therefore assume, with some confidence, that at the time of the Bowl Hole being in active use at least two ecclesiastical foci were present at Bamburgh, the *vill* and its church later dedicated to St Aidan and the Church of St Peter within the palace fortress (Figure 1.2).

Archaeological interventions within the village include both research and commercial work undertaken as part of planning consent in advance of modern development (Figure 1.4). A considerable number of geophysical surveys were undertaken in fields on the western and southern sides of the village by the BRP as part of a Heritage Lottery funded research project in 2003, and commercial work has been undertaken within some properties. Two of the more substantial of these were carried out at the Grace Darling Museum and within its Walled Garden, revealing mostly ditch features and some indication of stone structures of Medieval date (BRP 2016).

However, no features from any of this work can be dated to the Early Medieval period with any certainty. Some anomalies on the geophysical survey within the Glebe Field to the west of St Aidan's Church align with the church and, when taken into consideration alongside persistent boundary features in the area, seen over a number of the early maps, allow for the possibility that traces of a larger ecclesiastical boundary with internal features may be present here. The origins of such an enclosure could date back to the Early Medieval arrangements that followed St Aidan's foundation of a church within the *vill*, but in the absence of any firm dating evidence is purely a matter of conjecture. Firm evidence for the early *vill* therefore remains elusive.

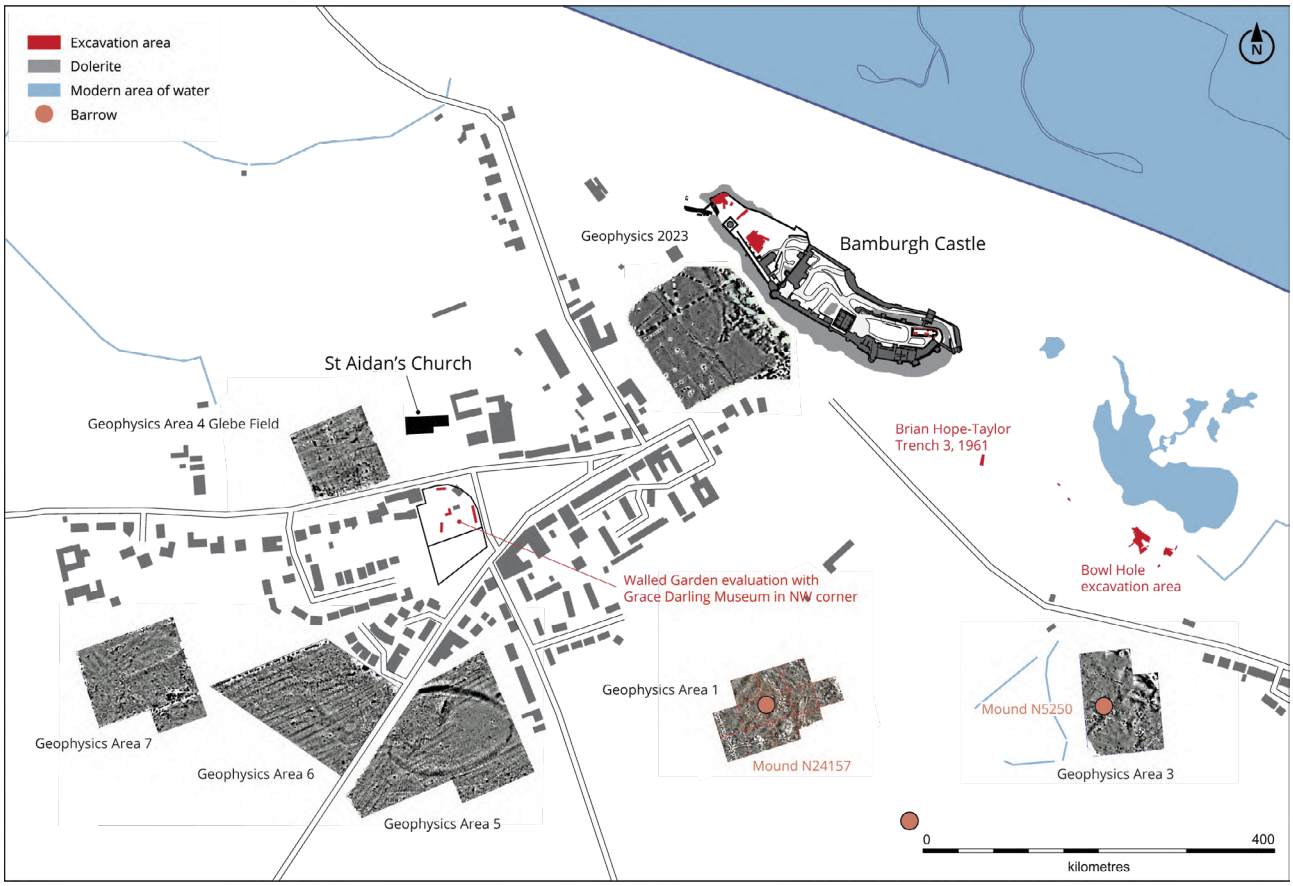

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Figure 1.4. Plan showing all excavated and surveyed areas, plus other monuments recorded in the Historic Environment Record.

1.5. Previous investigations at the Bowl Hole

1.5.1. Circumstances around the discovery of the Bowl Hole cemetery

The earliest documentary record of the Bowl Hole burial ground is by the antiquarian Mackenzie, who in 1825 described the discovery of the cemetery following a storm in the winter of 1817, the full account of which is repeated below:

> The strong westerly winds that prevailed in 1817 removed a great mass of sand, at the distance of about 200 yards in a south easterly direction from the porters lodge, laid bare a burial ground, which must have been covered for ages, as not the least discovery had been made that might produce even a supposition that such place was so near the castle. The graves had been formed with flag stones set on edge. From an idea entertained by many, that something of value might be found, they have scarcely left any of the graves unexplored, which had greatly tended to remove the traces of them; and the stones being principally of soft freestone and slate, perish fast from the effects of weather. The part uncovered at present is about one quarter of an acre; and, apparently, more lies hid under the sand (Mackenzie 1825, 409).

Evidently the storm event that uncovered the burials was a particularly strong one to have displaced such a volume of sand and revealed a land surface that had been buried for generations. The statement that a number of the graves had been disturbed at that time is interesting and poses questions of interpretation regarding some elements of disturbance seen during the excavation. It is uncertain whether the area of this initial discovery can be identified from the archaeological evidence, and it remains a distinct possibility that this area was not within the more recent excavation limits. It also indicates that we must account for antiquarian interest when interpreting disturbance in any of the graves, alongside the possibility that some disturbance occurred during the lifetime of the cemetery.

1.5.2. Antiquarian and early archaeological interest

Given the drama of its discovery and its location so close to Bamburgh Castle, the burial ground did attract antiquarian interest in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Newcastle upon Tyne (3rd Series Volume I of 1903 to 1904) contains two anonymous accounts of such work. The first and shorter of these is a little confusing but worth recounting:

> In 1894 an Ancient British burial ground was discovered amongst the sandhills a little to the south

> of St. Oswald's gate, several graves being uncovered and an urn found. A short account of what was found, by Prof. McKenny Hughes of Cambridge, with illustrations by Miss Hodgkin, appeared in the Daily Graphic for 31st August, 1894, p. 13. Lord Armstrong has kindly promised to make enquiries as to the present whereabouts of the urn, and to exhibit it at one of the meetings of the society, that a record may be made of the discovery. (Anon. 1905, 167)

The reference to burials to the south of St Oswald's Gate may well be in error (with perhaps the Great Gate meant instead) as the high tide reached the base of the castle rock on the seaward side at the north end of the castle at this time and to the landward side is the area of the village green. We are unaware of the urn ever being located and in the initial reports of the site's discovery no mention is made of urn burial at all.

A more extensive account of the then recent work at Bamburgh Castle is included later in that volume:

> These constitute the principal discoveries within the precincts of the castle up to the present time. To deal with those outside. As we go south from the castle gate crossing the traces of a tremendous fosse with a barbican beyond, we see in front of us a straight path which in places can be seen to be a metalled road, although much obscured by blown sand. About 300 yards down this road we come to an open space on the left hand, which has long been known as 'bowl-hole'. Tradition, accepted by the Ordnance Survey, has called this a Danes cemetery, but the spade tells us that it has a much longer history. There is one series of interments, at small depths below the present surface, in which the bodies are generally disposed at length in rough cists, formed by placing slabs edgewise in the form of a coffin, often with slabs at the bottom also. But it is not clear how they were covered, or even if they were covered at all. The difficulty of ascertaining the depth and mode of interment arises from the fact that the ground was covered by blown sand, and it was only after a severe storm of wind, which shifted the sand, that the graves were discovered in recent times. These shallower graves may belong to any part of the Early Medieval age. There are, however, other interments on the same site at a much greater depth, of which several examples have just been found. From this fact alone we should have been inclined to refer these deeper interments to a different age. The bodies lay in the sandy, boulder clay, whereas the others were generally in the bottom of the blown sand. We therefore carefully examined the site for evidence of British burial, and soon noticed that the large boulders on the side next the sea were arranged so as to form part of a large circle enclosing the area within which the interments occurred, while others lay at the base of the steep slope, just where they might have been expected to fall if they had once formed part of the circle, but had been pushed from the slope by holiday-makers. The conjecture as to the British date of this cemetery is fully borne out by the position in which the bodies were interred. The skull of one of them was slightly turned to the left, and the hands extended along the sides; the legs were doubled up, so that both femurs were almost at right angles to the general direction of the body, while the tibia and fibula returned at a small angle, bringing the feet into the line of the body. In a grave previously explored the body lay on the left side, with the skull resting on the hand, and the right hand also lifted to the head. As far as can be ascertained no traces of ornament or weapons have ever been discovered with these remains. The skulls belong to the brachycephalic type, and we may, therefore, refer these skeletons to some race, probably belonging to the bronze age, though possibly having even then a strong admixture of the hardy races of north-western Europe. In a shallow grave, close by were the remains of an infant, whose little bones had so far perished that we could form no opinion as to its relations to the other bodies. (Anon. 1905, 203–4).

The location of the cemetery reported here matched the previous reports and the site as revealed by the modern excavation, and therefore does recognise that the burials varied in depth, with some considerably deeper than others. The description of boulders partly surrounding the site was not detected in the modern excavation. There are some features, indicated by the resistivity survey of the north-eastern edge beyond the limit of the cemetery excavation (see Chapter 2), that could represent a possible indication of this type of feature. The description of what appears to be more extensive outlining in stone and the mention of base slabs is at odds with the limited stone elements and complete absence of base slabs identified within the modern excavation. This may be an indication that the area examined in antiquity was located in a part of the burial ground that the modern excavation did not expose.

In the initial phase of the excavation of the Bowl Hole in 1999 the team were fortunate to have a visit from a family in the village, including a very elderly lady who recalled excavations during the 1930s by her father, a local doctor, in the burial ground. She and some of her school friends had also dug nearby and uncovered a skeleton before being reprimanded by her father. Even many years later she appeared still to be annoyed that the adults got to dig and she did not. A small quantity of human bone, together with an iron object found at the Bowl Hole, donated to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle in 1935, are likely to have derived from this excavation (Accession No: 1956.110.A, box 310). This was recovered from the store by Lyndsey Allason-Jones, the curator at the time, and found to contain a few bone fragments and almost no records. The location of any further skeletal remains recovered at this time is not known.

1.5.3. Brian Hope-Taylor's investigations in the area

In the last years of his excavation of the Early Medieval site of Yeavering in Northumberland, Dr Brian Hope-

Taylor embarked on the excavation of Bamburgh as a second Northumbrian royal palace site within the county. It appears that he hoped that this additional work at Bamburgh would be valuable in contextualising the Yeavering excavation within the wider archaeology of Early Medieval Northumbria and aid him in answering wider research questions. Initially at Bamburgh he undertook a survey followed by the excavation of three trial trenches between 1959 and 1961, and published short notes on this work in 1959, 1960 and 1962. He returned to the site in 1970 for four more seasons before abandoning the excavation incomplete in 1974. His work in the castle is presented in Chapter Two; here we focus on his work in the cemetery area.

The area of the present castle car park was investigated by topographical survey by Hope-Taylor in 1959, and this was built upon in the third season of work at the castle in 1961 when his two main aims were the investigation of the large mound adjacent to the east gate of the castle in the area of the car park, which he investigated through a substantial trial trench (Hope-Taylor Trench 3, 1961 on Figure 1.4), together with test pitting in an attempt to re-locate the long cist cemetery. It is clear from Hope-Taylor's short reports and the documentation recovered from his house following his death that he assumed that the burial ground described in antiquarian reports would be on the wooded ridge adjacent to the car park and not at the precise point noted on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map (1865) and labelled as the 'Old Danish Burying Ground'. In fact, he marked 'Long cist cemetery' on his plan of Bamburgh Castle and its immediate area that he compiled following his survey in 1959 (https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1178936 Accessed 17/09/2025) in just this area. He also noted in his first report that he thought it highly likely that the two mounds in the area were burial mounds, evoking Sutton Hoo as a parallel for a burial ground associated with a royal estate centre (Hope-Taylor 1959, 5–7). It seems that such a parallel very much coloured his expectations and interpretation of the limited evidence available to him at that time. This hypothesis was tested by the investigation of one of the mounds in the car park during his third season at Bamburgh in 1961. He identified two layers of occupation of broadly thirteenth- to fourteenth-century date and an earlier one of twelfth-century date, ruling out both the theory that the mounds were early burial mounds and also making it too late to be the eleventh-century siege mound referenced in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Hope-Taylor 1962, 5–7; Swanton 1996, 230–1).

Hope-Taylor's idea of a burial landscape of barrows and long cists to the south of the royal palace had proven under investigation to be invalid, at least as he first envisioned it. The car park mounds were ascertained to be Post-Medieval in date, overlying a twelfth-century ground surface, and the long cist cemetery when re-located was more low lying and a little further to the south than he expected. A site inspection of the Bowl Hole depression in 1968 indicated that human bone had recently been exposed from the surrounding ground that had eroded (Northumberland Historic Environment Record 5252).

It is perhaps worth noting that there are other mounds associated with burials present at Bamburgh. The Historic Environment Record notes three round barrows (PRN N24157, N5251 and N5250) within the fields to the west and south of the present village (Figure 1.4). The most prominent of these was N5250 that lay in the field opposite the coast road, 200m to the south of the Bowl Hole. It was 65m in diameter and 9.5m high; limited investigation noted by the HER as being undertaken in 1928–9 indicated that the mound appeared to be artificial. Mound N5251 lay 250m to the south-west of N5250 and was irregular in shape, being 55m by 90m and 3m high. A clay urn was recovered from the mound prior to 1860 according to a now lost Ordnance Survey report and a stone-lined cist, 1.3m by 1m, had been sunk into the surface below the summit by 0.65m. It had also been investigated in 1928 when the fragmentary remains of a previously disturbed skeleton were seen. This investigation also noted that despite its size the mound appeared to be artificial. The final mound (N24157) lay 200m to the NNW and was 60m in diameter and 7.25m high.

Mounds N24157 and N5250 were explored using geophysical surveys undertaken by BRP in 2004, and N24157 was also subject to a resistivity profile at the same time (Wood & Young 2006). This was followed up by trial trench investigation of Mound N24157 in 2004 and 2005 (see Chapter Two). A total of four trenches were excavated in N24157 using a combination of hand and mini mechanical excavation. It was found to be composed of interleaving bands of sands and gravels and was investigated to below the exterior ground level without encountering a buried ground surface. This together with the absence of any trace of an external ditch, as well as the very large diameter of the mound, strongly indicate a natural origin for the mound, an interpretation at odds with that of the 1928–9 excavators. Whilst the modern excavation was only of the one mound, the general similarity of the three and their scale makes it likely that all are of natural (glacial) origin and not created as burial mounds. The presence of a secondary style cist burial cut into the surface of mound N5251 does indicate that, natural or not, it may have been mistaken for a barrow in the Bronze Age leading to the presence of secondary burials, despite the likely absence of a primary burial (Wood & Gething 2004).

1.6. Structure of the volume

This monograph provides a detailed description of the excavation and analysis of the discoveries made during the exploration of the Bowl Hole cemetery, alongside its immediate context and wider regional/national significance. Chapter Two details older archaeological investigations within the castle area, plus all of the modern excavations, including the cemetery area itself. Chapter Three then presents the burial catalogue, whose detailed

osteological results are analysed in Chapter Four, with comparisons drawn to other sites. Chapter Five offers a chronological sequence for the burials and initial analysis of burial patterning, and then Chapter Six reports on the isotopic analyses (carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and strontium isotopic ratios were analysed for every available burial with relevant surviving material). Finally, Chapter Seven presents a synthetic analysis of the osteological, archaeological and isotopic data, alongside comparative material from other sites in the north of England and southern Scotland.

1.7. Reburial of the human remains recovered from the Bowl Cemetery (1998–2007)

Following detailed study of the skeletons, they are now 'reburied' within the crypt of St Aidan's Church, Bamburgh. The formal reburial, on 23rd June 2016, was organised by St Aidan's Bamburgh and Bamburgh Castle and included a procession from the castle, the deposition of the ossuary boxes within the crypt at St Aidan's, concluding with a church service led by the Reverand Brian Hurst. In 2018 the Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund) supported a project entitled 'Accessing Aidan', a partnership between St Aidan's Parochial Church Council, The Northumberland Coast ANOB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), and the Bamburgh Heritage Trust, and supported by the Bamburgh Research Project and Durham University (https://www.northumberlandcoastaonb.org/accessing-aidan/ Accessed 18/04/2024).

The project was initiated because Bamburgh's local community was keen to see the stories of their ancestors revealed, and was led by Project Officer, Jessica Turner. The project utilised the analysis of the skeletal remains and their associated features to compile an open access 'Digital Ossuary' (https://bamburghbones.org/ Accessed 17/09/2025). The project aimed to provide an interpretation of Bamburgh's Early Medieval heritage through a focus on the skeletons within the Bamburgh ossuary in the church. This project was completed in 2021, and was complemented by a popular book (Turner 2021); in May 2022 a conference was held at Bamburgh for the wider public to celebrate the project's end. To complete the proceedings, there was a launch of a pamphlet inspired by the ossuary entitled *A Hut a Byens* ('A heap of bones'), encompassing 10 new poems (Challis & Williams 2022).