Wandering Artisans? The Mobility of Smiths in Early Post-Roman England

Irene Bavuso*

This article seeks to re-evaluate the evidence for the itinerancy of smiths in the early medieval period, focusing especially on England between the fifth and the early seventh century. The »itinerant smith« is a well-known model to explain metalworking in north-western Europe during these centuries. Yet the idea of a totally itinerant smith relies heavily on outdated theoretical models, and on literary images that cannot be considered to represent reality at face value. Geographical mobility is to some extent inherent in metalworking, and it was also a way through which smiths could expand their networks and gain upward socio-economic mobility and social standing. However, it is profitable to consider a more complex model, in which various forms of mobility and sedentism coexisted. Given the severely fragmentary state of the evidence, both written sources and archaeological remains from the Continent will be considered, including fundamental insights from early medieval technical treatises. A re-evaluation of the mobility of the smiths – this article holds – may also have theoretical consequences for broader questions about early post-Roman England, especially concerning the landscape of settlement, the connections between elites and crafts, and the mechanisms of construction and reproduction of hierarchical relationships.

Keywords: early medieval England, mobility, smiths, metalworking, craftsmanship, craft treatises

Introduction

The fifth and sixth centuries in England are well known as marking a low point in socio-economic life, from several interconnected points of view. Among these, a general discontinuity of urban life can be mentioned, as well as the absence of coin minting and a severe simplification of crafts that were essential for everyday life such as pottery making. Communities and social structures are generally understood as displaying a reduced degree of hierarchisation in the fifth and sixth centuries, as shown by settlement and funerary remains.[1] From the perspective of rural production, this period has been defined as one of an »abatement

* Correspondence details: Utrecht University, Department of History and Art History, Drift 6, 3512 BS Utrecht, The Netherlands, i.bavuso@uu.nl.

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1 See e.g. Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*; Wickham, *Framing*; Scull, Social transactions; Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*; Crabtree, *Early Medieval England*, 18-85; Fleming, *Material Fall*.

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economy«, determined by a simplified agricultural structure and a high importance of husbandry.[2] Then, the seventh and eighth centuries mark a reflourishing of economic life; major evidence of this change is the rise of the coastal *emporia*, increased coin distribution, the presence of centralised production – crafts, agriculture and husbandry –, settlement development, and, from a political point of view, the structuring of larger kingdoms.[3]

The focus of the present article falls on the earlier period, before this strong seventh- and eighth-century economic growth. Specifically, this contribution seeks to address the theme of the mobility of metalworkers, re-evaluating the model of the itinerant artisan and its implications from a socio-economic perspective. The itinerant artisan is a model that has often been applied to post-Roman England but for which, at least in the case of metalworkers, we do not have conclusive evidence.[4] Whether craftsmanship was associated with itinerancy or sedentism (and everything that falls within this spectrum) is a question which is intimately connected with our understanding of the landscape of settlement, production and consumption. As will be discussed below, the presence of artisans in connection with the development of towns is, for instance, an important topic of recent research for studies on Scandinavia. In the case of England, the itinerant character of artisans would fit well with a context like that envisaged for the earliest post-Roman period, defined by the absence of economic structures capable of sustaining more permanent craftsmanship – such as large *emporia* and towns. Yet there is scope for arguing that even before the seventh- and eighth-century developments, the picture may have been more complex than this.

Itinerancy has been proposed in the case of a few highly skilled potters, in a context, however, where the overwhelmingly majority of pottery was crafted by low-skilled local »household productions« (in other words, it was produced in settlements).[5] However, much more famous than the peripatetic potter is the figure of the itinerant smith, which has received greater attention in the scholarship. This interest may have various motivations. First, metalwork is probably the most impressive archaeological evidence for this early period in north-western Europe in general. Moreover, as discussed below, scholarship attributes a special role to luxury metalwork in the creation and maintenance of hierarchical social relationships. Such centrality, in this view, is reflected in a particular social standing of the smiths, which sets them apart from other types of artisans. In addition, the early medieval smiths have literary and folkloric counterparts that have been amply studied.

The present article first discusses the model of the itinerant smith and the perspectives from which smiths are generally studied, namely social status and social and symbolic liminality. Then the contrast between mobility and sedentism is explored through written and

2 Faith, Forces and relations; Banham and Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms*. On rural economies, see Wickham, *Framing*; Bavuso, Peasant mode, with further references.

3 See e.g. Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England*; McKerracher and Hamerow, *New Perspectives*; McKerracher, *Farming Transformed*; Naismith, *Making Money*, esp. 253-258 and 262-282.

4 E.g. Hinton, *A Smith*; Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon Crafts*, 167-168; Hinton, *Gold and Gilt*, 36 (noting that smiths could also work at permanent sites).

5 On the possibility of skilled potters travelling, see Fleming, *Material Fall*, esp. 66-67. She also notes that »many settlements' pottery may not have been produced by households on their own, but rather by coresidential groups, that is, households within a single community« (p. 68).

archaeological evidence – the focus will be on goldsmiths, though other types of metalworkers will also be taken into consideration. Given the extreme scarcity of evidence for England, further contemporary evidence from the Continent will be discussed; the latter also clearly illuminates how mobility played an essential role in enabling metalworkers to achieve social and economic status. Among the written sources, the inclusion of early medieval craft treatises is essential. Although rarely considered from an economic point of view, craft treatises permit us to explore specialised knowledge and the interconnection of crafts. This recognition will then pave the way to some reflections at the broader socio-economic level, including on the landscape of settlements, on the system of construction and reproduction of hierarchical relationships – in which the smiths are deemed to play a pivotal role –, and on the connections between smiths and elites.

The Model of the Itinerant Smith

A brief preliminary overview is needed on the model of the itinerant smith and its origins, which are less acknowledged in scholarship than they should be, as they are potentially problematic. The notion of a free itinerant smith was theorised by V. Gordon Childe in the 1930s, in the Bronze Age context.[6] This idea was developed to explain the introduction and spread of technological developments of bronze making in Europe. Crucially, in this theory, it was the special high position of the smiths in society that permitted them to move freely – Childe envisaged them as »perhaps the first independent craftsmen«.[7] Although it falls outside the focus of the present contribution, it is important to note that Childe's model has been amply debated by scholarship on the Bronze Age.[8] After Childe, the special status of the smiths was also theorised by Mircea Eliade, another key scholar who helped to construct many of the current interpretations of the smiths' social position.[9] Eliade focused on the power of metalworkers in his 1956 book *Forgerons et alchimistes*, where he explored beliefs in the power of stones and in the forces of metals, which, being under the earth, belong to a place that is utterly different from the human dimension. It is from this kind of belief that the power of smiths derived, as smiths possessed specialised secret knowledge of and deep intimacy with these powerful elements, knowledge that to some extent set them apart from society.[10] This is a central aspect: the liminal character of metalworkers is very often highlighted in studies on the early medieval period (we will come back to this later in this section). Eliade's work provided a wide range of examples of beliefs in the power and liminality of smiths from non-European contexts, especially African. This kind of comparison continues to be used in

6 Childe, *Bronze Age*, 4-11; Childe, *Dawn*, 113-117.

7 Childe, *Bronze Age*, cit. p. 4.

8 See e.g. Rowlands, Archaeological interpretation; Webley *et al.*, *Social Context*, esp. 43-67, 187-189; Epimakhov *et al.*, Were metalworkers itinerant?, Stróżyk *et al.*, Tracking. Also, on late prehistory, see Gibson, Death of a salesman.

9 Mircea Eliade and his methods have been amply discussed and criticised; see e.g. Smith, *Relating Religion*; on history: Allen, *Myth and Religion*, esp. chapters 8 and 9; on smiths: Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*, 10.

10 Eliade, *Forgerons et alchimistes*; also Childe, *Bronze Age*, had stressed the secret knowledge of the smiths.

recent scholarship: in a 2019 article on the status of the early medieval smith, Duncan Wright refers to the African Mandingo in modern times, and to native North American groups.[11]

However, the construction of models for early medieval Europe on the basis of modern ethnographic research and theories about prehistoric smiths is methodologically difficult: the risk is that we end up with an a-historical picture. One reason why this kind of comparison might ultimately prove to be problematic is that it frequently cherry-picks individual elements that are deemed to be common, abstracting and isolating them from their own specific historical and social contexts. These common monadic elements are then applied to entire societies as if they were universal beliefs.[12] It is true that various expressions of the belief in the power of stones and metals were present in Roman and medieval Europe – we can see that in classical and medieval authors.[13] However, we do not know how and to what extent they were spread across specific societies, and whether and to what degree they affected the everyday life and craft of the metalworkers. It is highly likely that differences existed at regional and local levels, and a comparison that merely extrapolates commonalities offers limited value when attempting to reconstruct a multifaceted reality.

In the context of early medieval England, a much more stringent comparandum is provided by Scandinavia due to the historical connections between the two territories. Scandinavia is very often used to understand and frame the socio-economic realities and development of England after Late Antiquity.[14] In the case of metalworkers, the most famous result of this approach is probably the stress on the figure of Wayland, the mythical smith of the *Vǫlundarkviða* in the *Poetic Edda*, who is also famously depicted on the early eighth-century Franks Casket. However, even comparisons between post-Roman England and Scandinavia run the risk of not considering the historical contexts of the two regions, especially the fact that the former had a Roman past, whereas the latter did not. This is often not taken into account but is likely to have had some role in the development of craftsmanship.

In England, the model of the itinerant metalworker responsible for the introduction of new stylistic developments found an early realisation in the idea of the »Kentish master«, proposed by Egil Bakka in the late 1950s. This master craftsman, from Denmark, was said to be responsible for the introduction of Salin's Style I in England, and it was further claimed that it should be possible to identify the brooches which were the product of the »Kentish master's« workshop on stylistic grounds.[15] In other words, stylistic developments moved with the people capable of realising them in practice, allowing scholars to trace the movement of metalworkers accordingly. This is an example of the movement of craftsmen in the

11 Wright, Crafters of kingship.

12 Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*, esp. 7-10. Tobias considers the ethnographic perspective but notes that it is not possible to extrapolate general models and statements about the status of the smiths. On this point and the difficulties of ethnographic comparisons, see also Rowlands, Archaeological interpretation, which is based on a wide-ranging set of cases, from Africa to Indonesia.

13 See e.g. Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, ed. Mayhoff and von Jan, esp. books XXXV-XXXVII; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XVI, ed. Lindsay. On stones in medieval times, see recently Buettner, *Mineral*.

14 On smiths and metalworking, see e.g. Pollington *et al.*, *Wayland's Work*; Wright, Crafters of kingship. For instance on state formation: Escalona, Towards an archaeology.

15 Bakka, On the beginning, see also Suzuki, *Anglo-Saxon Button Brooches*, esp. 284-287.

broader context of migrations from Scandinavia. However, as Nancy Wicker noted in the case of Scandinavian bracteates (thin single-sided gold pendants, whose decoration likely originated from imperial portrait medals), the identification of objects as the product of the same workshop is rather difficult, even in the case of bracteates for which the same punch tools have been used. Instead, various possibilities can be imagined: they may be the work of the same artisan, or of multiple artisans who used tools passed on to later generations, or – quite simply – it may well be that it is the objects which moved, not the artisan(s).[16] Beside stylistic grounds, the recovery of only a small quantity of production debris is a further element that has been indicated as evidence that craftspeople were itinerant, as the small size of these deposits would be less than those produced across an entire year of activity. This was suggested for comb making at Viking Age Baltic sites by Kristina Ambrosiani, who proposed seeing it as an activity carried out by specialised itinerant craftspeople and not by artisans working on comb making part-time. However, inferring the logistics and mobility of crafts from the size of deposits of debris has been criticised: issues include unknowns about the relative scale and production dynamics.[17]

The model of an itinerant smith, who would have enjoyed a particular social status, has had various ramifications in the scholarship on the early medieval period. A strong strand of studies has focused on the identity of the metalworkers, in particular in relation to the idea of the smith as a liminal individual.[18] Although this perspective falls outside the scope of the present contribution, some words should be included on this concept of liminality, as it has repercussions on how smiths have been viewed from a socio-economic perspective. As mentioned above, scholars generally base the smiths' liminality on ideas on the power of stones and metals, and the skilled and »mysterious« knowledge that metalworkers were required to master. Apart from comparisons with non-European communities (often in modern times), evidence is usually taken from literary-mythological models: from the powerful and vicious Wayland from northern Europe, to Continental folklore of underground smiths, up to Hephaestus, whose lameness set him apart from the other gods, and whose distance is even stressed in a spatial sense, as he was hurled down from Olympus at birth.[19] From a Christian perspective, one should also consider sources that represent smiths possessed by demons or as pagans in need of conversion – as in some Continental hagiographies, where we find, for instance, the *faber* Godolaicus of Limoges who, taken by a demon, verbally abuses the man of God calling him *latronem, falsatorem, inpostorem*, or the demonic smiths who throw huge burning slags at Brendan and his companions.[20] However, to use literary figures as a mirror of what society believed in respect to the everyday figure of the smith remains highly

16 Wicker, On the trail. Comparable ambiguities in respect to the possible logistics of metalworking apply to the recovery of moulds: see e.g. Hinton, Anglo-Saxon smiths, 5-6; Hinton, *Gold and Gilt*, 36, with references.

17 See Ambrosiani, Viking Age Combs; critique: Ashby, With staff, 20-22, with further references.

18 See e.g. Hinton, Anglo-Saxon smiths; Pollington *et al.*, *Wayland's Work*, 124; Wright, Tasting misery; Birch, Living; Tormey, Magical; Wright, Crafters of kingship.

19 On Continental folklore on smiths, see Motz, *Wise One*.

20 *Vita Pardulfi abbatis Waractensis* 11, ed. Levison, 32; *Navigatio sancti Brendani*, ed. Orlandi and Guglielmetti, 23. See also Eucherius of Lyon, *Passio Acaunensium martyrum* 17, ed. Krusch, 39: a *gentilis faber* converted by the martyrs. For the liminal smith from a Christian perspective, see Wright, Crafters of kingship.

problematic – and all the more so when such connections are made over large areas and across centuries.

Liminality has been taken as a key component of the identity of early medieval smiths, but it is of course not all there is to it. Regarding their social identity, much research has analysed the primary sources that tell us about their social status – in particular the legal sources and the *Vita Eligii*. The *Vita Eligii* will be considered in the next section; here it is sufficient to note that this is the preferred source to observe the case of the free, mobile high-status goldsmith. The legal sources instead show us that slaves were also involved in metalworking; in some regions unfree smiths had a different wergild than the slaves who carried out other kinds of works, while in other cases, we do not see a distinction. For example, in the *Lex Burgundionum* (*Liber constitutionum*) an unfree »select goldsmith« (*aurificem lectum*) has a wergild of 200 solidi, while it is 100 for a silversmith (*fabrum argentarium*), and 50 for an ironsmith (*fabrum ferrarium*).[21] Here, the wergild of goldsmiths is comparable to that of freemen.[22] In the *Lex Romana Burgundionum*, however, the goldsmith is worth 100, and the blacksmith 50.[23] By contrast, in the *Pactus Legis Salicae* goldsmiths and ironsmiths have the same wergild as household slaves, swineherds, and slaves involved in other activities.[24] In England, the Laws of Æthelberht only list the case of the killing of an *ambihtsmiþ*, that is an »official smith« in the royal service.[25]

Beyond the focus on social identity and liminality, the figure of the metalworker plays a crucial role in our general picture of social relationships in early medieval north-western Europe. This is particularly the case for hierarchical relationships. The current understanding is that, during the earliest post-Roman period, portable wealth played a major role in the construction of social status and in the shaping of social hierarchy. Within this framework, precious metal objects (among other kinds of luxuries) were exchanged through non-commercial mechanisms in order to cement social relationships. This system fostered the structuring of social hierarchies: those who could amass portable wealth and donate it with largesse gained social status. This is a very brief sketch of a complex model that takes gift-exchange as central to the shaping of social hierarchical relationships in the earliest medieval period.[26] In this model, the skilful smith lay at the very heart of the system: quite simply,

21 *Leges Burgundionum*, *Liber constitutionum* 10, *De interfectione servorum Burgundio et Romanus una conditione teneantur*, ed. von Salis 50-51.

22 *Leges Burgundionum*, *Liber constitutionum* 2, *De homicidiis*, ed. von Salis 42-43.

23 *Leges Burgundionum*, *Lex Romana* 2, *De homicidiis*, ed. von Salis, 125-127.

24 *Pactus legis Salicae* 35, *De homicidiis seruorum uel expoliationibus*, ed. Eckhardt, 128-132.

25 *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings, Laws of Æthelberht* 7, ed. Attenborough, 4-5. On the social status of smiths, see Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*, 184-185, arguing that: »Discussions have tended to centre on whether the smith was itinerant and ›free‹ or bound to a lord: the situation, in fact, is unlikely to have been so clear-cut« (p. 184).

26 See e.g. Härke, Early Anglo-Saxon; Scull, Social transactions; Nicolay, *The Splendour*; Richardson, Farfetched treasures. On gift-exchange in the peasant mode of production, see Wickham, *Framing*, 535-547; Bavuso, Peasant mode.

smiths make the objects that will then be exchanged and used to build social relationships, elites and power. They are thus essential and strongly connected to the elites.[27]

The skilful metalworkers have enjoyed a long and rich history of studies. Often taking a comparative and cross-disciplinary approach, scholars have concentrated on social identity and status, and – in connection to the latter – on mobility. The following section will consider in detail the evidence for mobile/settled smiths. Then, starting from crafts treatises, the article will discuss some of the broader consequences of our understanding of metalworkers on the socio-economic sphere.

Mobile and Immobile Smiths: Written Sources and Archaeology

It is well known that skilled early medieval metalworkers could have strong connections with the central powers, even at the highest levels. We do not have written sources for such cases in early post-Roman England, but on the Continent, Eligius (c. 588-660) is the most famous example. From his *Vita*, we are well informed about his mobile career.[28] Probably coming from Aquitaine, he completed his apprenticeship under the goldsmith and moneyer Abbo of Limoges. After that training, thanks to the patronage of the court's treasurer Bobo, Eligius became a member of the court of Chlothar II, and then of Dagobert I. He ended his life as bishop of Noyon, a position which he held from the 640s. Before Eligius, a less famous example is Leo, a sixth-century bishop of Tours, who is said by Gregory of Tours to have practised craftsmanship, including goldsmithing.[29]

While the life and career of Eligius was surely not the norm, it is perhaps safe to generalise on certain points regarding the mobility of metalworkers (and other skilled artisans). First, they needed an apprenticeship period, and this being a craft that required precise and specialised skills, the apprentices might need to move in order to work under a master. Yet the master, in this case Abbo of Limoges, was settled. Then, skilled metalworkers may have travelled to conduct work upon request. As for the apprenticeship, it is important to clarify that this kind of mobility is not a prerogative of the metalworkers: for instance, glassmakers too most likely needed to move to work on specific requests.[30] Eligius has often been taken as the example of the real-life itinerant goldsmith.[31] However, »itinerancy« may be too broad a category here, and one prone to ambiguity – it encourages the image of an artisan always on the move. Instead, from the *Vita* it appears that Eligius gravitated around specific places and his

27 See e.g. Coatsworth and Pinder, *Art*, 242, on the inclusion of the itinerant smith in elite entourages; Pesch, Goldsmith, 39, on the »ambivalent relationship« between the goldsmith and the elite; Fern and Butterworth, *Warrior Treasure*, 57, arguing that »the smith was in effect the king's man«. See also below n. 80.

28 *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis*, ed. Krusch.

29 See Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* X.31, ed. Krusch and Levison, 532: *Leo ex abbate basilicae sancti Martini ordinatur episcopus. Fuit autem faber lignarius, faciens etiam turres olocriso tectas, ex quibus quaedam apud nos retinentur. In aliis etiam operibus eligans fuit*. […]. See also Roth, *Kunst*, 41.

30 For example, they may need to move to work on window glass during the construction of churches. In England, we have the case of Glastonbury Abbey, where furnaces have also been found; glassmaking for windows and vessels there is dated to the late seventh century: see Willmott and Welham, Late seventh-century glassmaking; also Willmott and Welham, Saxon glass furnaces.

31 E.g. Wicker, Elusive smith.

own properties, from which he would travel (thus, similarly to the common elite movement). The same is likely to have been the case for other metalworkers. The fact that skilled artisans attached to political and ecclesiastical power travelled for work clearly fits the broader social environment: royal courts moved, and a high level of mobility was a characteristic of high-status people in general (including work-related mobility, since, for instance, they moved to fulfil their duties, to participate in court life, or to control their possessions).[32] In the early medieval period, specialised craftsmanship could foster social advancement, as has been pointed out in the case of Eligius, and this relationship might even have been more widespread a phenomenon than it appears from the specific cases illuminated by the written sources – as evidenced by the eighth-century »smith-peasant« of Miranduolo (Chiusdino, Siena).[33] A further important point that needs to be highlighted is that, as in the case of the elites just mentioned, *spatial* mobility may have been key in fuelling the *social* mobility of skilled metalworkers. Eligius moved within a network and was helped by it: this network of people and institutions, both lay and ecclesiastical, facilitated further spatial mobility and, ultimately, social advancement.[34]

Leaving Eligius aside, the mobility of smiths connected to elite power could also take different forms: the forced displacement of metalworkers appears, for instance, in a story of the *Vita Severini*, written by Eugippius at the beginning of the sixth century, which mentioned metalworkers taken prisoner.[35]

An important degree of mobility is arguably inherent in metalworking in general, and not only in the early medieval period: while the first phases of metal extraction must happen *in loco*, the later stages of manufacturing vary and can be performed at places far away from the initial source.[36] A recent model to describe different mobility patterns proposes defining the movement of travelling smiths as a form of »repeated (cyclical) mobility« (»movements between two or more locations followed by short stays«); this kind of mobility is the same as that which characterised transhumance, or people involved in trade or seasonal activities. In the case of the travelling smith, this model is built on modern ethnographic examples.[37] Nonetheless, the »repeated (cyclical) mobility« might be a useful pattern to bear in mind for some medieval smiths as well – although it must be stressed that generalisations are risky. In the case of early medieval north-western Europe, Steven Ashby's research has highlighted the many possibilities regarding craftsmen's mobility, which form a spectrum ranging »from pure sedentism to perpetual movement«.[38]

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32 Cf. Pazienza and Bavuso, Moving jobs.

33 On specialised craftsmanship as an opportunity for social advancement and Eligius, see Claude, Handwerker, 257. On the »smith-peasant« of Miranduolo, see Valenti, Miranduolo; Anguilano *et al.*, Paesaggi minerari.

34 Economic aspects and the consequences of royal patronage and gift-giving in Eligius' case have been highlighted by Visintini, Gift-giving.

35 Eugippius, *Vita sancti Severini* 8, ed. Sauppe, 11-12.

36 On a different area and period, see Georgakopoulou, Mobility and early Bronze Age: metal production is »inherently mobile« (p. 49). See also Knappett and Kiriatzi, Technological mobility, giving insights that can also be of use for the medieval period.

37 Reiter and Frei, Interpreting (quotation p. 458).

38 Ashby, With staff, 18.

We now need to consider what other evidence exists for travelling smiths beyond the case of the goldsmith attached to kings exemplified by Eligius. Given the scarcity of written sources, archaeological remains are essential here; however, the picture they provide is far from conclusive. The fortune of the itinerant smith model in the case of England has much to do with the scarcity of excavated metalworking workshops pertaining to the early post-Roman period there. Yet this scarcity should not be taken as proof of the actual absence of settled workshops, not least given the notorious issues associated with early settlement sites in England: among others, settlements have been excavated to a much lesser extent than cemeteries, their nature may be difficult to ascertain, and they are dispersed and do not present precise borders.[39] In addition, while Wright suggested that metalworkers' workshops at elite residences occupied a precise space (also associated with the ritual sphere), sites involved with the initial phases of metalworking like the smelting of iron tend to be outside of the inhabited settlements; as a result, some of them may simply not have been identified.[40] Regarding goldsmiths, moreover, what a workshop would look like is not fully understood, and the remains might just consist of the furnace, production debris, and perhaps some tools.[41]

Further archaeological evidence comes from the so-called »smiths' burials«. This label is used for burials spanning centuries between prehistory and the Middle Ages and found throughout Europe, which are characterised by the deposition of metalworking tools.[42] »Smiths' burials« have received much attention in scholarship and have fed an important debate on the status and characteristics of smiths: for instance, whether metalworkers were free or not, if they were itinerant or settled workers, and how their link with elite power was shaped. However, direct identifications of smiths on the basis of grave goods have been proven to be problematic: weapon burials have been extensively discussed in this sense, and the same goes for burials with tools. In general, grave goods are now understood as symbolising the social status of the deceased and their family. A classic argument in favour of this interpretation for burials with weapons and tools is their recovery in graves of children, showing that the choice behind the deposition of objects did not follow linear connections with practical use during the deceased's lifetime.[43] Apart from children, a further argument comes from the recovery of tools in royal burials, which strongly speaks for the custom of burying tools as a symbol of social standing.[44] Notwithstanding the growing literature

39 Hamerow, *Rural Settlements*.

40 See Birch, Living, on iron-working sites; Wright, Crafters of kingship.

41 Aufderhaar, What would a goldsmith's workshop.

42 See Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*, for an up-do-date state of the art on the subject and for a terminological discussion (pp. 1-3).

43 On weapon burials, see Halsall, *Cemeteries*; Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology*. On burials with tools, see Capelle, An insight, 22, who, however, seems to assume that women could not be smiths; yet this is not substantiated by evidence that women were not employed in metal- and goldsmithing (though see Capelle and Vierck, Modeln, 77). On female burials with tools, see Ježek, Disappearance; Tănase, *Craftsmen*, 262-264; on female smiths, see Pesch, Goldsmith, 43; Wicker, Elusive smith, 34. See also Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*, esp. 51-58, noting that, in any case, the human remains have mostly not been examined (p. 52).

44 See Ježek, Disappearance. On metalworking tools in graves as symbols of social standing, see Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*.

that has severed the link between the objects buried and the occupation of the deceased during their lifetime, tools buried in graves have continued to be used to understand the early medieval smith.[45]

In Francia, important graves with tools for metalworking have been recovered at Hérouvillette and Frénouville, in Calvados. At Frénouville, two graves contain items associated with blacksmithing (grave 331, dated to the middle of the fourth century) and goldsmithing (grave 452, from the early fifth century).[46] Grave 10 at Hérouvillette, dated to the sixth century, is a remarkable find, as it contains a large variety of tools together with scrap metal, glass, and weapons. Although the professional identity of the person buried in grave 10 cannot be ascertained, in the context of Hérouvillette this appears to be a high-status burial, as shown by the number of weapons, including a sword, that were buried with the deceased.[47] There is thus a clear connection between metalworking tools and high status, a link that can be identified in many other »smiths' burials« from the early medieval period.[48]

A famous »smith's burial« in post-Roman England is the one at Tattershall Thorpe (Lincolnshire), which has been dated to the seventh century. This is generally regarded as the grave of an itinerant metalworker. Much attention has been paid in this regard to the isolated position of the grave, which would have set it apart from the local population. This would fit the image of both the metalworker as a liminal figure and that of a travelling smith, who happened to die in a foreign land and was then buried as an outsider. In the 2000 publication of the Tattershall Thorpe finds, David Hinton states that »it will (…) be assumed that its occupant was the user of the tools«, while regarding the questions about itinerancy and permanency, he regards the material to be »ambivalent«.[49] The bell found among the assemblage is hypothesised to have been used by the travelling smith to signal their presence. The need for a stranger to signal their arrival can be found in the late seventh-century Laws of Wihtred of Kent, where strangers were required to make their presence known by shouting or blowing a horn.[50] However, as Hinton noted, the bell appears to have been buried without the clapper – so it could not have had a practical use at the time of deposition. Hugh Willmott and Adam Daubney have recently proposed a rereading of the brazed handbells, including the one found at Tattershall Thorpe. They suggest that these handbells should be understood as having a precise religious significance (as this type of bell appears to have had in areas of Insular Christianity), and dismiss a practical use such as in animal husbandry or for

45 See Wright, Crafters of Kingship; although the author acknowledges that the identification of smiths on the basis of grave goods is problematic (p. 284), he builds some of his arguments on this premise.

46 See Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology*, esp. 144. The publication of the cemetery is Pilet, *La nécropole de Frénouville*; see esp. vol. 1, 147-150 on these two burials: *La pince de fondeur montre sans ambiguïté que son possesseur était un forgeron* (p. 147, in relation to grave 331); grave 452 contains a balance with weights (p. 148).

47 See Decaëns *et al.*, Nouveau cimetière. On the high-status character of grave 10, see also Capelle, An insight, 25; Tobias, *Frühmittelalterliche Gräber*, I, 121-144, arguing that this individual was the head of the village (pp. 143-144). On this burial, see also Ježek, Disappearance, 131; Bavuso, Trade.

48 Cf. Ježek, Disappearance.

49 Hinton, *A Smith*, 112.

50 Hinton, *A Smith*, 44-47.

signalling one's presence. Thus, they should not be seen as »functional« items for the smiths; but in any case, smiths may have been considered to have an important role in their creation, both symbolic and ritual.[51] If this was so, the case for attributing an itinerant character to the »smith« at Tattershall Thorpe would be much diminished. The interpretation of »smiths' burials« is therefore not straightforward: a linear association of grave goods and profession in life is highly problematic; and this is probably even more true when it comes to hypothesising a mobile character of the profession itself.

There are some elements that may point to a stronger sedentism of smiths than generally admitted. First, the fact that their legal status varied may be telling in this sense. The Laws of Ine of Wessex, issued in the late seventh century, state that elite persons that are moving residence are allowed to bring their smith with them.[52] This is a case of mobility connected to that of the elite household – although whether this law shows that the smith was attached to the lord and not to the estate may be doubted.[53] Regarding unfree smiths, it seems reasonable to suggest that at least some of them were also settled.[54] The laws in England do not regulate the work of these smiths – thus, there is no certainty regarding whether smiths attached to aristocrats had to work exclusively for their household or not. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the *Lex Burgundionum* regulates the case of unfree smiths who have been permitted to work for others, *in publico*.[55]

In other areas of western Europe such as the Frankish kingdoms and in Italy, smiths appear to be settled in towns, monasteries, and on royal estates.[56] For Ostrogothic Italy, Cassiodorus provides information on the top-down state organisation of the *armifactores* (weapon-makers), who were supervised by the *primicerius fabricae*; the organisation was overseen by the praetorian prefect.[57] The *fabricae* (statal factories) appear to have been in towns, as was the case in earlier centuries.[58] In England, however, the landscape of settlement is different from that in the Frankish kingdoms or Italy, as towns were in harsh decline during the fifth

51 Willmott and Daubney, Of saints; they also note that the finds at Tattershall Thorpe may be a depositional hoard and not pertain to a burial (p. 351). Hinton, *A Smith*, 4-5: there is a record that bones were found, but they are not preserved.

52 *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings, Laws of Ine*, ch. 63, ed. Attenborough, 57.

53 Differently Pollington *et al.*, *Wayland's Work*, 124: »The naming of the smith among the close servants implies that the duty of the smith was to his lord personally and not to the estate where he resided.« Noble, Itinerancy, 69, suggests that while some smiths could have followed the courts, others could stay settled.

54 Driehaus, Zum Problem, 404, argued that the Merovingian goldsmith was largely unfree and immobile, although mobility was possible (while Werner, Zur Verbreitung, favoured an interpretation of the smith as a free craftsman).

55 *Lex Burgundionum*, *Liber constitutionum* 21, *De servorum contractibus*, ed. von Salis, 60: 2. *Quicumque vero servum suum aurificem, argentarium, ferrarium, fabrum aerarium, sartorem vel sutorem in publico adtributum artificium exercere permiserit, et id, quod ad faciendam operam a quocumque suscepit, fortasse everterit, dominus eius aut pro eodem satisfaciat aut servi ipsius, si maluerit, faciat cessionem*.

56 See Pinar Gil, La quotidianità, 11-12. Pinar Gil proposes that the relevance of monasteries in this sense is especially visible from the seventh century. However, metalworking connected to monasteries in the Frankish kingdoms is also attested in an earlier period; see Bully *et al.*, Des traces d'artisanat.

57 Cassiodorus, *Variae* 7.18 and 19, ed. Mommsen.

58 Christie, Ostrogothic Italy, 134.

and sixth centuries, and monasteries only started to be founded later, from the seventh century onwards. Evidence for metallurgical *production* during the earliest post-Roman period is particularly scanty too.

Hinton, among others, has provided a more balanced picture of smiths in early post-Roman England. He assumes the presence of travelling goldsmiths, but also of workshops based on the scanty surviving evidence, such as that from Spong Hill (Norfolk) and Kent.[59] In Kent, the survival of the Latin toponym Faversham, derived from *faber* (OE **fæfer*, »smith« + *hām*, »village, homestead, estate«), is often highlighted – and Faversham is a place connected with a strong royal presence.[60] Lyminge is likewise a case where metallurgy, including iron smelting, was performed in a high-status centre.[61] Notwithstanding these examples, as mentioned above, there is a remarkable absence of excavated metallurgical workshops for the fifth and sixth centuries. Thus, an important perspective from which archaeologists have tried to disentangle the question of the mobility of smiths has been that of the distribution of particular types of brooches. Working on cruciform brooches – a form which started to appear in England in the early fifth century –, Toby Martin noticed that the distribution of the different typological groups of these brooches is regional, or even micro-regional. Martin concluded that, if itinerant, these smiths worked within small circuits, but the patterns are also consistent with the work of individual metalworkers or workshop traditions. In any case, »although it appeals to our romantic sense of the period, an entirely independent, roving smith, carrying with them the sum of their tools and supplies, presents an unlikely prospect«.[62] Close connections between items in terms of their design and appearance have also been used to identify the works of specific goldsmiths. For instance, this has been proposed in the case of three garnet-inlaid disc brooches from seventh-century Wessex, for which the goldsmiths appear to have worked in the context of elite patronage.[63] The two sites where these three brooches were found are rather close to each other, in the Upper Thames Valley; however, the finds tell us nothing about the possible mobility or sedentism of the goldsmiths themselves. A further difficulty is exemplified in the case of the fifth- and sixth-century square-headed brooches, namely, they are essential items to the creation and representation of the elite, and this role has a structural effect on their distribution and the networks it created.[64]

59 Hinton, *Gold and Gilt*, 36-38; Hinton, Anglo-Saxon smiths, for further cases. See also Pollington *et al.*, *Wayland's Work*, 129-133.

60 On royal presence there, see e.g. Tatton-Brown, Towns of Kent. On place-names connected to »smith«, see Pollington *et al.*, *Wayland's Work*, 130.

61 On Lyminge, see Thomas and Knox, *Lyminge Interim*; Thomas, Life; Thomas, Monasteries.

62 Martin, *Cruciform Brooch*, esp. 130-132 (quotation at p. 130).

63 Hamerow *et al.*, Early medieval garnet-inlaid metalwork.

64 On this, see Martin, Casting the net wider, noting at p. 882 that the itinerancy of artisans, gift-exchange, and movement of women are possible explanations for how these brooches moved, but we cannot be certain.

Treatises and Specialised Knowledge, Settlements and Power

As mentioned above, metalworking involved highly specialised knowledge and skills. While in early post-Roman England we can presume that the smiths were illiterate, and thus the knowledge was passed on orally in a master–apprentice relationship, a small group of treatises from the Continent tells us much about the technology, craft, and materials involved in metalworking production. Crucially, they may be used to complicate the picture of smiths' mobility.

The best-known technological treatises of the Western European Middle Ages pertain to later centuries, such as the twelfth-century *De diversis artibus* by »Theophilus« and *De coloribus et artibus romanorum*, a twelfth-century composite treatise which includes parts that may be dated to the early medieval period.[65] Yet we also have much earlier treatises, such as the *Mappae clavicula* and the *Compositiones variae*. The former is a miscellaneous compilation of recipes which took shape in Late Antiquity: the core appears to come from fourth-century Egypt, and to be related to earlier Greek texts known from the papyrological tradition. The Latin translation was seemingly produced in the fifth century, although the earliest manuscript is a tenth-century one.[66] The *Compositiones variae* are included in a manuscript dated to the late eighth/early ninth century.[67] These texts provide invaluable information on the different phases of production of metal objects, including items that must have been made by goldsmiths. Besides the primary metals that formed the objects' main base, the goldsmiths needed access to diverse materials. For instance, they needed mercury – a material that had to be imported – in order to perform the fire-gilding technique.[68] This was the common gilding technique in use in England in the earliest medieval period, where the gilding of personal items appears to have been a widespread practice and one not restricted to the elite.[69] The fire-gilding process as described in the *Mappae clavicula* involved many phases needed to produce a mercury–gold amalgam and then to apply it to the specific object that required gilding. In one of the final phases, the artisan needed access to *aqua melanteriae* (produced with a metallic sulphate, generally of iron or copper), which the text describes as *aqua caligariorum qua denigrantur coria* (»the shoemakers' water which is used to blacken the leather«).[70]

65 Theophilus Presbyter, *De diversis artibus*, ed. Brepohl; Heraclius, *De coloribus et artibus romanorum*, ed. Merrifield; Garzya Romano, *I colori*; Tosatti, *Trattati medievali*.

66 See *Mappae clavicula*, ed. and trans. Baroni *et al.*, with a discussion of the manuscript tradition and of the relation with the Greek papyri. See also Clarke, Earliest technical recipes; *Mappae Clavicula*, trans. Smith and Hawthorne.

67 Lucca, Biblioteca Capitolare Feliniana, Codex 490. Other names for the *Compositiones variae* are *Compositiones Lucenses* and *Compositiones ad tingenda musiva*. See Burns, *Compositiones Variae*.

68 See Bavuso, Trade.

69 On fire-gilding, see e.g. Oddy, Gold in antiquity; Aufderhaar, From the goldsmith's point of view; on non-elite access, see Bavuso, Trade.

70 *Mappae clavicula* LX, *Deauratio omnium si velis deaurare sive argenteum sive aereum vas*, ed. Baroni *et al.*: [...] *Cum itaque tibi color placuerit, primum calefac vas et mitte in aquam melanteriae, id est aqua caligariorum qua denigrantur coria, et tunc terge.* [...].

The connection between the use of mercury and leather workshops in the context of gilding may complicate the idea of itinerant goldsmiths, because it brings to the fore a picture of a *réseau opératoire*.[71] Different artisans and crafts were needed in order to carry out a certain activity: this fact tips the scales in favour of a picture in which sedentary workshops and centres were crucial. This does not necessarily imply that the smiths themselves were always sedentary; but it seems at least more likely that there were specific centres in which different activities were carried out simultaneously. The idea of a link between the operational network and permanency of sites and communities has already been stressed in the case of the eighth-century *emporium* at Ribe in Denmark. In that context, it has been proposed that the need for a *reseau opératoire* would represent a fundamental driving force – a bottom-up one – toward the establishment of permanent urban communities.[72] In terms of urbanisation, there are obvious differences between Denmark and England that need to be considered: only the latter already had an urban past before the early medieval period (though the early medieval urbanisation in England rested on other bases too). Leaving this aspect aside, it is nonetheless clear that the need for a collaboration between different crafts adds an important element of permanency to the issue of the mobility of smiths. In England, there is no dearth of evidence for metalworking performed close to other crafts from the late seventh/eighth century at the *emporia*; however, the picture is much less clear when it comes to the previous centuries.[73] The *emporia* in England have often been regarded as the earliest permanent sites devoted to production and trade after Late Antiquity: »permanency« has been a central category for distinguishing them from earlier sites involved in long-distance exchange that have left no archaeological evidence – precisely due to their temporary character.[74] Crucially, however, goldsmiths who wanted to use the fire-gilding technique had to carry out the same production phases in the sixth century as they did in the eighth and ninth (since the gilding was, as noted above, performed using the same technique). This may have wider socio-economic implications.

Looking at the landscape of settlement is important to understand mobility better, as well as to frame the relationships between the smiths and power. In terms of settlement, one should look at various places – not only places where sedentary production within workshops may have been carried out but also centres that may have been conducive to exchange of knowledge and ideas. For the earliest post-Roman period in England (thus, before the major monastic foundations and the flourishing of the *emporia*), elite and royal centres are some of the best candidates in this sense. Among recent archaeological research,

71 On this concept, see Croix *et al.*, *Réseau opératoire*.

72 Croix *et al.*, *Réseau opératoire*. On Kaupang, see McGraw and Mjærum, Tools.

73 See e.g. Bayley and Russel, Making gold-mercury amalgam, on gold working; Bayley, *Anglo-Scandinavian*, on non-ferrous metalworking at Coppergate. On *emporia* in England and craft activities, see e.g. Malbos, *Ports*; Crabtree, *Early Medieval England*, 86-137; Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England*, 165-174.

74 See e.g. Lebecq, England and the continent, 51; Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: A New Audit*, 101. The classic model on the evolution of trading sites is that by Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: The Origins*, 50-52, which is also based on the category of permanency; but see now Scull, Ipswich; Loveluck and Tys, Coastal societies; Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: A New Audit*. For permanency as a fundamental category in the transformation of settlements and the economy, see e.g. Skre, Post-Substantivist towns; Skre, Markets.

metalworking has been uncovered at the elite sites of Lyminge in Kent (as mentioned above) and Rendlesham in Suffolk, both of which were inhabited from the earliest post-Roman period.[75] Other contexts are more difficult to identify, but the sites of assemblies, as well as landing and trading sites, are likely to have been important for providing access to the necessary materials (such as gold, silver, mercury, and garnets) and to the exchange of knowledge and ideas – although not in a year-round way. Indeed, as Torsten Capelle noted: »Settlement in one place was only possible (…) if sufficient raw material was available locally or could be made available, and when there was sufficient demand for his [the craftsman's] products«.[76] In the sixth century, landing and trading sites are often found at a rather short distance from royal and elite centres – at least in south-eastern England –, thus implying important connections. However, in this period these links did not translate into top-down control over long-distance goods and traffic by kings and elites.[77] The itinerant metalworker model, and its fortune, is anchored in the strong socio-economic decline of the fifth and sixth centuries – which was then followed by economic growth from the seventh and eighth centuries. In the early period, smiths would have travelled because there would not have been socio-economic structures strong enough to support permanency. However, high-status centres, landing and trading sites, and sites of assemblies should all be considered, as they may have been part of a web of places that allowed for some stability. The massively widespread distribution of metalwork that required a goldsmith's knowledge (even if only for gilding), moreover, suggests that several types of places may have been part of such a web. The wide distribution of these objects also runs counter to the idea that the goldsmith's products were mostly used as part of a gift-exchange system. As mentioned above, a pillar of broad models of north-western European smiths in the earliest medieval period is the idea that these artisans were pivotal in the gift-exchange system, which was based on portable wealth and was essential for the building and functioning of hierarchical relationships. Wright, for instance, suggested that this situation only changed with the broader transformation of kingship during the seventh and eighth centuries: from that moment, »Society gradually lost dependence on smiths for the production of the high status goods that had previously been central to reciprocal gift-exchange«.[78] Yet if gift-exchange was only one of the ways through which items circulated, this would mean that the smiths should not be considered exclusively in their connection with the elites. This becomes clear as soon as we start having the evidence of metalworking in the *emporia*; but it could have been the case in the earlier period too.

A related issue which is worth addressing, albeit briefly, is: how did the smiths obtain the materials that they needed? This is a question that cannot be answered with certainty for

75 On Lyminge, see above n. 61. On Rendlesham, see now Scull *et al.* (eds.), *Lordship and Landscape*; the excavation uncovered evidence of two working areas but no workshop, and they suggest either a permanent presence of metalworkers or a periodic one (p. 187).

76 Capelle, An insight, 17. Yeavering, Northumberland, is an important example of a royal and assembly site for which there is also evidence of metalworking: see Wright, Crafters of kingship, on metalworking. On assemblies, see e.g. Semple et al, *Negotiating the North*, with further references on Yeavering.

77 For a rejection of the idea of a monopolistic trade controlled by the kings, see e.g. Fleming, Movement; Bavuso, *Sixth and Early Seventh Centuries*; Bavuso, Balance of power.

78 Wright, Tasting misery, 134, with reference to Hinton, *A Smith*.

early post-Roman England.[79] However, the idea that they obtained their materials directly from the kings and elites (which is in turn linked to a model of top-down control of long-distance goods and luxuries) remains rather problematic.[80] As shown by the craft treatises, a goldsmith was required even just to know which material was needed for a particular technique. This is the case for mercury, which is invisible to the naked eye on the final product. The same might be the case for garnets, as there are instances of very luxurious metalwork – such as objects in the Staffordshire Hoard and in the Sutton Hoo ship burial – in which it appears that the goldsmith chose garnets with different shades of colour for aesthetic purposes.[81] Admittedly, this is metalwork of the highest quality, but in any case, it shows that smiths (at least the highly skilled) could have had access to a variety of materials that could hardly have been chosen and provided by the elites themselves in all cases, since selecting them required the specific knowledge of the artisan. Although the question of access to the materials remains open, and numerous possibilities are likely to have coexisted, this question is worth asking, as it complicates the relationship between smiths and elites/patrons.

Conclusions

A degree of mobility was inherent in metalworking in the early medieval period, and, through inclusion in a social network, spatial mobility appears to have been capable of fostering upward social mobility. However, in the case of early post-Roman England, the model of the itinerant smith may be more problematic than useful. As already noted in the existing reserach, the archaeological evidence is not conclusive, and more complex patterns of mobility may have been in place. This article has shown that technical treatises demonstrate the need for specialised skills and knowledge, access to specific materials, and an operational network, which may have included different crafts, artisans, and traders. This circumstance is self-evident as soon as we have the written sources in the period of the *emporia* (when we see the archaeological evidence of different crafts being carried out at the same location), but, given the continuity of techniques, it may have been the case even before that. Thus, a higher degree of sedentism than currently assumed may have been in place in the period before the *emporia*. Early elite and royal centres are attested cases, and they should be considered in their wider landscape, also taking into account landing and trading sites, and perhaps sites of assemblies as moments of exchange of knowledge and ideas. A main point of the present contribution is that the figure of the travelling smith, connected to elite patrons, is inextricably tied to a certain, specific model of the functioning of social hierarchical relationships in early post-Roman England – a model that one should not necessarily take for granted. From this perspective, a reconsideration of the smiths might have larger repercussions and contribute to how we understand that system. Many questions remain open; but the specialised

79 See, tellingly, Hinton, *Gold and Gilt*, 36: »the smiths who made the jewellery must have had their own ways of getting at least the latter [i.e. mercury].«

80 Hinton, Anglo-Saxon smiths, 10, assumes a top-down model, in which elites wanted to control access to prestigious items; in turn, this would reflect on a need to control the smiths. On royal control, see also Fern and Butterworth, *Warrior Treasure*, 57.

81 See Fern *et al.* (eds.), *Staffordshire Hoard*, 131, with reference to Sutton Hoo.

knowledge, the access to highly specific materials, and the overall distribution of the final products complicate the theoretical model of gift-giving and the shaping of hierarchies – showing that the strong link between smiths and their patrons may not be the full story.

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Abbreviation

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

Manuscript

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