Before Sutton Hoo
By Christopher Fern

In 2000, a second early Anglo-Saxon cemetery was found at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, 500m north of the famous royal burial-ground. The new burial-ground probably began as a 'folk' cemetery where the rites of cremation and inhumation were practiced. Nevertheless, the findings suggest a wealthy local population in the period just prior to the founding of the mound cemetery at Sutton Hoo. A small Bronze Age barrow and part of an Iron Age field system were recorded. It is argued that these earthworks survived to at least the time of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery, and that they influenced its location and layout. Just over thirty early Anglo-Saxon graves were recorded, including thirteen weapon-burials. Grave-goods from the inhumation burials and a programme of radiocarbon dates for the cremation burials indicate that the majority date to the second half of the 6th century just as the earliest, ritually-related funerals started at Sutton Hoo. Ultimately, this raises the possibility of an ancestral connection between the buried populations of the two cemeteries. Thus, the findings present a key new episode for our understanding of the origins of Sutton Hoo, and potentially therefore of the kingdom of East Anglia and its dynasty.