Danes in Wessex : the Scandinavian impact on southern England, c.800-c.1100

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The 13 essays in this book are the outcome of a conference (with the addition of a few other papers) held at Winchester University in September 2011. I don’t know whether the long gestation period before publication has been intentional, but it has served to ensure that this has appeared 1000 years after the second Viking age was permanently established with the accession of Cnut to the throne of England. The essays represent a series of multi-disciplinary approaches to the engagement of the Scandinavians with Wessex in the two Viking ages in the later ninth and early tenth, and the later tenth and early 11th centuries. My comments on these inevitably reflect, in a far from even-handed way, my own concern with various aspects of landscape development in these periods, but there are points of interest in all of them, which, as Barbara Yorke points out in her ‘Foreword’, should provide all students of the period with material to ponder and enjoy.

In their introduction, ‘Danes in Wessex’, Ryan Lavelle and Simon Roffey explore the realities of the presence of Scandinavians in Wessex – not all of them hostile – and their input on the landscape and on institutions. They point out that, in some senses, late Anglo-Saxon Wessex was a direct product of the Viking Age; themes relating to the assertion of control within West Saxon political frameworks and by ruling elites, often in response to violent incursions, are at the heart of the book as a whole.

Lavelle’s and Roffey’s contribution as chapter two, ‘West Saxons and the Danes: negotiating early medieval identities’, usefully explores ideas of pre-Viking Wessex, of the impact of the Vikings on it, and of sometimes complex overlapping identities between Danes, Vikings, Norse and ‘pagans’ in different contexts. They go on to explore these themes in the context of the later Viking incursions in the late tenth and early 11th centuries, and provide an interesting discussion of evidence for considering Winchester as an important ceremonial and symbolic centre for King Cnut and his followers after 1016 – a theme also explored in the Biddles’ chapter on the royal burials in Winchester’s Old Minster (ch. 12).

It could be pointed out, however, that their brief mention of the Alfred-Guthrum Treaty boundary in Essex and points north-west is one of the few references to this part of England in the book as a whole. This rather
draws attention to differences between the ‘Wessex heartlands’ and Alfred’s kingdom (the ‘kingdom of the West Saxons’) and, after c.880, the ‘kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’, which from this time encompassed London and southern / western Mercia, but with which neither they nor their fellow contributors engage to any meaningful degree. Alfred’s ‘kingdom of the West Saxons’ (which included the area of the later shires of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire) experienced the impact of the Scandinavians no less forcibly than did ‘Wessex’. The Burghal Hidage, for instance, arguably records the imposition of a system of burhs at this time as bulwarks against Viking advance and the means of control over a political entity which was somewhat larger than the Wessex of Lavelle and Roffey, but which was nevertheless still part of the same polity. (1)

In chapter three, ‘The place of slaughter: exploring the West Saxon battlescape’, Thomas Williams makes an evocative exploration of the West Saxon landscape to understand how some ‘violently-contested landscapes’ were ‘charged with powerful symbolic significance for the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers’. In doing this he reacts against traditional historical narratives of warfare as arising from a consideration of battle landscapes as ‘terrain’. He instead explores how the symbolic points in the landscape demonstrate a ‘stratum of ritual performative action which has been largely suppressed’ in previous discussions. Battles, for instance, are regarded as ‘rituals through which social, religious and cosmological ideas are referred to or expressed’.

There is, however, a tendency in Williams’ discussion for the mythology and symbolism of battles and their associations with various landscape elements – royal sites, barrows, hills and hillforts, etc – as perceived by chroniclers to be taken too readily as embodying the understanding and/or the motivations of the contestants themselves. In several of his discussions of examples, historical realities or probabilities morph into mythological or symbolic constructs in ways which are far from clear. They seem to be based on assertion rather than tangible evidence; the realities of site and situation, and of political motivations for battle, are often obscured in the attempt to give landscapes of conflict a symbolic meaning. There are obvious exceptions, such as the utilisation of Roman fortified sites by King Alfred for the sites of new burghal foundations in order to appropriate a significant past to legitimise royal authority; or the somewhat futile occupation by Æthelwold of Wimborne, the burial place of his father King Æthelred, to underline the perceived legitimacy of his claims to the throne. (2)

It would, however, seem more realistic to see the battle of Wirtgernesburg (Vortigern’s fortress), supposedly at Bradford on Avon in 652, not as a symbolic emphasis of West Saxon royal authority associated with a hillfort – even though possibly presented as such by the Chronicle – but rather as a conflict conducted at the point of intersection of two contrasting zones (the highland Cotswolds and lowland to the south) at a point towards which routeways were funnelled where the river Avon was most easily fordable (hence its name: Bradanforfa be afne) – factors doubtless appreciated in the Iron Age as well. Similarly, Asser’s description of the fortification of cynuit as ‘ramparts thrown up in our fashion’ is not necessarily a statement that hillforts were ‘connected with an ongoing British tradition’; he was, rather, merely describing what he saw: the ramparts of the hillfort built as a familiar ‘cornish hedge’. (3) I doubt, too, whether King Æthelred’s occupation of Badbury Rings to confront Æthelwold in his doubtless refortified monastic precinct (which has determined the topography of the place to this day), has much to do with the symbolism of an Iron-Age hillfort as a bastion of royal authority, one which ‘recalled the triumphant conquests of mythical ancestors’. It was just a very good defensive position, and in the right place. It was not the hillfort and the power of its associations which sent Æthelwold packing, it was Edward’s siege tactics. On the other hand, the development and in some cases the refortification in the later 10th century of hill-fort citadels by King Æthelred as symbolic, if not actual, royal power bases (at for instance Daws castle near Watchet (4), Cadbury Castle, probably Bradford on Avon, Shaftesbury, Old Sarum, Carisbrook Castle, Cissbury, Dover and Hastings, amongst others) is a significant and unrecognised aspect of the Viking / West Saxon powerplay in the period which Williams – and other contributors to the volume – could well have discussed. One should also not forget that the stone walls of Alfred’s burhs, which replaced turf revetments, as well as their refurbished equivalents in the later 10th century, must have appeared to outsiders as highly-visible symbols of state power and control.
An interesting discussion of the landscape and circumstances of the battle of Ethandune against Guthrum’s forces in 878 (complementing Baker and Brookes’ valuable treatment of the logistics of the movements of the contingents of Alfred’s army in chapter five) touches on some of the ways that Williams sees battles within certain landscapes as embodying memories or perceptions of a mythological past. The way in which Williams interprets this battle as being ‘deliberately constructed as a theatrical manipulation of the associations of a place’ – the mustering at Ecbert’s stone, the open area around Bratton camp as being a ‘landscape touched by the wild’ (echoing the fear of such places in Beowulf), and the associations of the battle with a ‘royal’ hillfort and ancient burial sites – leads almost inevitably to the assertion that these meanings ‘were related fundamentally to the West Saxon understandings of the past and of the local landscape’. But it would arguably be equally valid, with only a slight shift of emphasis on to the importance of the terrain itself (the importance of which Baker and Brooks emphasise in chapter five), to see the battle of Edington as an orchestrated encounter on convenient open downland which had good visibility (no Beowulfian monsters here), and near a royal centre where Alfred’s men could perhaps grab a few sandwiches. It was also significant in that it was probably at a point on the boundary between north Wiltshire, which was controlled by Guthrum’s army from its base at Chippenham, and the southern part of the shire, which was not. In other words, the mythological and symbolic associations are as likely to be a construct of a more recent past (even possibly of the 21st century!), rather than underlying, or playing any part in determining, the events and even strategies in the minds of the protagonists themselves. It is after all only through the eyes of the chroniclers, who do the mythologizing, that we get any view of the past at all.

It may even be, following Williams’ earlier observations about the chroniclers’ tendency to invent battles to suit sites and vice versa, that the mustering point of the shire contingents of Alfred’s army at the so-far unidentified Ecbert’s stone (Ecgbryhtes stan) is a deliberately-constructed fiction. The coincidence of the loaded significance of the name and the crucial role of this mustering point in the trajectory of Alfred’s advance severely tests credibility. (Did any other mustering points with known royal associations have name-forms based on those of kings?) It could well be an invented addition to the account of the battle by the chronicler to emphasise Alfred’s victory as standing in the traditions of, and indeed matching or even exceeding, that of his illustrious royal forebear. To go one step further, it is conceivable that this naming could even have been a celebratory myth which originated with the protagonists themselves after they won the battle, and incorporated as such by the chronicler. If this is so, it is as good an example as any of the power of the myths created or reported by the chroniclers in determining how we think historically about these kinds of events.

In chapter four, ‘A review of Viking attacks in western England to the early tenth century: their motives and responses’, Derek Gore discusses the Viking attacks on western England in the eighth and ninth centuries and the responses of the Saxons to them, by way of the annals. His detailed examination of the early Viking raids suggests that the Norse Vikings played a prominent part in the raiding of the earlier ninth century. The progress and conquests of the micel here is charted in some detail; and Guthrum’s adventures around Wessex, establishing positions at Wareham and Exeter, is discussed in illuminating detail. Gore is not the first, however, to suggest that Wareham’s West Walls were either already in existence in 875, or were constructed by the Vikings during their occupation. I don’t for a moment buy into these ideas; it seems much more probable that Guthrum’s army took possession of an existing monastic / minster precinct, creating a possibly enlarged D-shaped fortification facing the river, Repton style. This would have given them relatively secure access to both the surrounding countryside for food, and to Poole harbour for a safe anchorage and access to the sea. Similar reservations are applicable to the army’s occupation of Exeter. Once again, however, the Burghal Hidage is described as an ‘early-tenth century document’ – a falsifiable proposition – without acknowledging other and more plausible contexts for it. This illogical thesis really is entrenched so deeply in the collective psyche of Anglo-Saxonists as to inhibit any constructive thinking out of this very constricted box.

One inexplicable gap in Gore’s account, however, is any reference to the aftermath of Guthrum’s defeat by Alfred at Edington in 878 – notwithstanding the discussions of this encounter in the chapters by both
Williams and Baker & Brookes (chapters three and five). The dealings of the two protagonists at Aller and Wedmore, the geographical contexts of these places, the political and strategic consequences of Alfred’s victory which led to a renewed hegemony over the central Thames region (both to the north and the south of the river) and, I would argue, the construction of the burghal system, are passed over in silence. Since one could argue that these developments stayed any prospect of further Viking gains, and laid the foundations for the subsequent ascendance of Wessex over the Vikings in Mercia, including London and its territory, this gap is rather noticeable. Maybe it is the complexity of the subject, or the fact that the story has been told so often before, which has deterred Gore from entering the fray. Maybe, however, this could merely be put down to the fact that King Alfred’s interests outside the Wessex heartlands unfortunately go beyond the remit of the volume as a whole (see comments above).

In chapter five, ‘Landscapes of violence in early medieval Wessex: towards a reassessment of Anglo-Saxon strategic landscapes’ (there aren’t many short and pithy titles in this volume), John Baker and Stuart Brookes examine the themes of trackways (herepaths and the like) and look-out stations as essential strategic elements in the landscapes of conflict. They concentrate on three themes: ‘infrastructure’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘mobilisation’ as three fundamental aspects of West Saxon military planning and organisation, choosing not to examine an obvious fourth, the role of burhs or strongholds. As they rightly point out, these latter have often been assumed to be the primary components of the strategic landscape in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, to the detriment of the complete picture. They are anyway discussed more fully in their larger book, research for which was completed before the conference of 2011, but published after it. The end product of this study is to illustrate ‘social relations and obligations ... economic arrangements … the rise of powerful centralised kingship … and the emergence of the industrialised state’.

The key elements of the infrastructure as the basis for of late Saxon are the use of rivers and roads (including herepaths) as ‘vectors of movement’. The analysis of the functional importance of routeways in relation to physical landscapes, over for instance the Marlborough Downs, gives a new perspective on military organisation, including the way that military forces were assembled at muster points. Burhs are briefly mentioned as being able to control movement along the Thames (Southwark, Sashes) or across it (Oxford, Wallingford and Cricklade). Missing from this analysis, however, is any mention of the fact that burhs controlled territories, or that burhs were structurally, functionally and strategically associated with bridges and causeways – key components of Baker and Brookes’ ‘vectors of movement’.

Under their heading ‘intelligence’ the authors discuss beacons and look-out points comprising early-warning systems. Field-work, place-name evidence and excavation suggest the importance of the connectedness of observation posts and beacon chains as strategic elements of the military landscape. ‘Mobilisation’ includes those strategies which enabled armies to be at the right place at the right time, and includes a discussion of the importance of mustering points, often associated with hundred meeting places. Their comments on the preparations for Alfred’s battle with Guthrum’s forces at Ethandune in 878 usefully complement those of Williams, noted above (chapter three). At one point the authors come near to articulating my own view that a regular system of muster points existed in tandem with the formation of the burghal system in the late 870s (though they will deny that this was a system) – developments which perhaps went hand in hand with the formal establishment of the hundreds, in some form, over southern England.

It is, however, at this point that I for one part company with Baker and Brookes’ confident assertion that all of these disparate elements evolved over time. From evidence relating to the cadastral organisation of the kingdom into burghal territories it can be deduced that the burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage formed a single system imposed on the landscape at one moment in time (7) – contrary to Baker and Brookes’s assertions that this was not the case. It would be reasonable, therefore, to at least acknowledge the possibility that systems of mustering points, of lines of beacons and look-out posts, and of other aspects of the modified landscape (including perhaps the hundreds themselves) were newly created or reorganised at particular periods (albeit based on or incorporating earlier elements), as acts of state which were designed and put in place by royal fiat to further specific strategic ends.
In chapter six, ‘Scandinavian-style metalwork from southern England: new light on the first Viking age in Wessex’, Jane Kershaw pulls together the evidence concerning the function, background and parallels of finds of metalwork, most of them recovered through the Portable Antiquities Scheme. These comprise a somewhat heterogeneous collection of dress accessories, bullion, ingots and weights. The distribution of these finds can in some cases be associated with the use of forts such as Wareham by the Vikings, and others with the probable use of routeways, such as that leading from Poole harbour to Chippenham. All these show how the spread of Scandinavian artefacts into Wessex can illuminate cultural contacts in a way which is not shown in the historical record.

In chapter seven, ‘Death on the Dorset Ridgeway: the discovery and execution of an early medieval mass burial’, Angela Boyle describes in vivid detail both the context and the contents of the burial of at least 51 individuals, all of them decapitated, found in a single pit in 2009 on the Dorset Ridgeway. The C14 dating suggests that this event occurred in the late tenth or early eleventh century, and isotope analysis shows that these men were originally from Scandinavia. Boyle introduces the idea that these men could have been the victims of the edicts by King Æthelred for the extermination of the Danish population in 1002 and 1004, but also entertains the possibility that they were, literally, ‘just off the boat’. This latter context is explored later in illuminating detail in Lavelle’s chapter eight, below.

In chapter eight, ‘Law, death and peacemaking in the ‘second Viking Age’: an ealdorman, his king, and some ‘Danes’ in Wessex’, Ryan Lavelle addresses the ‘personal and interpersonal aspects of Anglo-Scandinavian relations’ in Wessex, and how ealdormanic interests played a role in these processes. An illuminating and revealing section on the life and role of ealdorman Æthelweard and his dealings with the Danes focuses on his role as interpreter of late-ninth century chronicles, and his part in the Treaty of Andover in 993–4. It also explores in some detail the plausible connection of the ealdorman with the episode of the execution on the Dorset Ridgeway of the Scandinavian individuals, described in chapter seven. His arguments skilfully combine documentary and landscape evidence to argue that these represent a boat load of men, caught and despatched in a ritual execution.

In chapters nine and ten, ‘Thorkell the tall and the bubble reputation: the vicissitudes of fame’, and ‘A place in the country: Orc of Abbotsbury and Tole of Tolpuddle, Dorset’, Ann Williams tells the stories of individuals, many of whom must have played a part as Anglo-Scandinavian newcomers in the wake of the accession of Cnut to the English throne. She traces Thorkell’s movements in the historical sources, discussing, amongst other aspects, the location of his ship base in the Thames estuary (possibly at or near Rochester), but leaving the location of his base in the Isle of Wight open. It could be suggested here that this could well have been an erstwhile Æthelredian stronghold at Carisbrook (see comments under ch. 3 above). In the second paper, Williams looks in considerable detail at the landholdings of Orc and Tole in Dorset.

In chapter 11, ‘Danish landholders in Wessex in 1066’, Chris Lewis examines evidence of the 81 families in Wessex at the time of the Conquest, suggesting as a strong probability that these, or their forebears, came from Denmark in the reigns of Cnut or Harthacnut between 1016 and 1040. The wide geographical and social divisions between them are argued as the outcome of a range of processes in the acquisition of landed wealth, which developed in this period from a situation in which the ‘growing integration of landed society at supra-regional and even national levels’ had begun well before the arrival of new Danes in the early 11th century.

In chapter 12, ‘Danish royal burials in Winchester: Cnut and his family’, Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjolby-Biddle examine the evidence, based on their excavations at the Old Minster, for the burial of Cnut (1035), Harthacnut (1042), Earl Beorn, Cnut’s nephew (1049), and Emma, Cnut’s wife (1052), as well as Edmund Ironside (1032). The site and layout of the Old Minster are examined afresh to determine the positions of the tombs and their associated works. Of considerable interest is their examination of the great narrative stone frieze, a ‘Bayeux tapestry in stone’, which was erected around the interior or the exterior of the Old Minster, and which appears to have celebrated ‘the shared ancestry of the English and Danish royal houses’. A new
interpretation is presented for the arrangements of the tombs in the new Norman Cathedral, which replaced the Old Minster in the 1090s.

In chapter 13, ‘Some reflections on Danes in Wessex today’, Lillian Cespedes Gonzalez examines how the ‘northmen’ in Britain have become part of the British cultural identity. Translations of the sagas and other works, especially from the 19th century onwards, have given the British people a sense of entity, the awareness of which is brought out in, for instance, a ‘modern survey of the perception of Vikings’ of 2013.

Notes

8. Baker and Brookes, Beyond the Burghal Hidage. Back to (6)

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