
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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for 2006



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Editor Alison Taylor

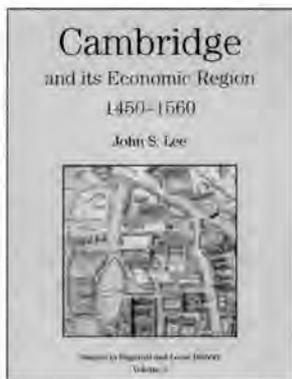
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Town-gown relationships, Dr Ley suggests, were less-polarised in this period than later: he notes the close links between them in parish church rebuilding (especially Great St Mary's) and gild membership. However, other evidence he adduces – for example over market tolls – might suggest the contrary.



There remain unanswered questions. The role of Barnwell Priory remains elusive. The impact of the Reformation is not explored in any detail: the empty (ex-monastic) spaces on the Lyne map of 1574 suggest the urban crisis was far from resolved by that date, and what gaps were left in social welfare provision by the dissolution of the Friaries?

The illustrations, other than those drawn from documents of the time, are rather uninspiring and interpretation of the important maps in the scene-setting Chapter 2 ('Population and wealth') is made difficult by the absence of any key enabling individual rural parishes to be identified. And by restricting themselves in the south to the county boundary and in the north to a rather arbitrary line drawn from Ely to Sutton they perhaps serve to mask, rather than illuminate, the basic question of what the Cambridge region actually was at this time. What was happening, in terms of population and wealth, in such places as Littleport and Fenstanton?

The book is not an easy read. It shows its origins as a PhD thesis a little too clearly and lacks those sharp and sympathetic insights into the everyday lives of individuals that mark Margaret Spufford's *Contrasting Communities*. But it would be churlish to finish on such a note. Overall, Dr Ley's work must rank as one of the most important contributions to our knowledge of late medieval and early modern Cambridge of at least the past half-century, ranking with the RCHM's work on its topography and architecture and Nigel Goose's on its social structure. Furthermore it is handsomely produced and a tribute to the fledgling University of Hertfordshire Press.

It remains for others to carry the work forward: how has Cambridge's region been transformed by the agricultural, industrial and transport changes of later centuries? A theme for a future CAS Conference, perhaps?

Tony Kirby

***Liber Eliensis* A history of the Isle of Ely from the seventh century to the twelfth**

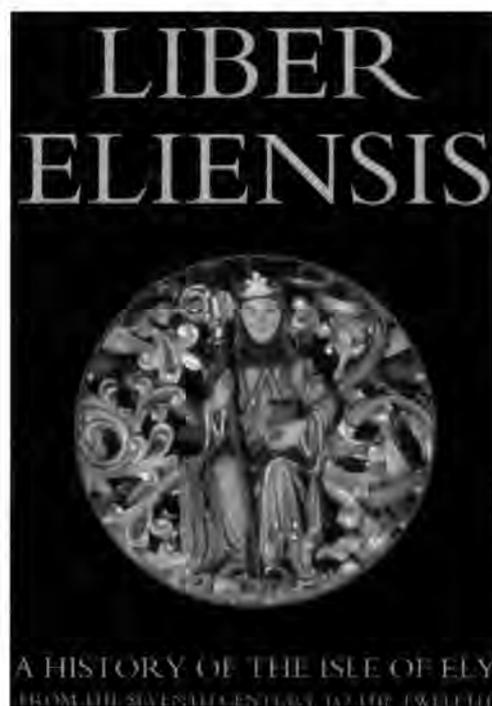
Translated by Janet Fairweather 2005

Boydell and Brewer 627 pp £30 pb

'for Ely...is magnificent in its wealth and its towns; equally praiseworthy for its woods, vineyards and waters, exceedingly rich in all fruit, livestock-breeding and crops...it is of the greatest beauty and renown, famous for its miracles, glorious for its relics. It is recognised as providing a satisfactory, peaceful dwelling place and... is guarded by a garrison of strong and warlike men'.

Here, tremendously to be welcomed, is the first English translation of the massive *Liber Eliensis*, a work that has been much quoted but one suspects little read even after the first printed edition in Latin was published by EO Blake in 1962.

Compiled towards the end of the 12th century, it aims to give the history of the monastery at Ely from its foundation by St Aethelthryth (more commonly known as Etheldreda) up to the compiler's own time, and much that is of interest to historians, archaeologists, ecclesiologists and art historians is included. Though some of the later parts in particular become a barely-concealed legal justification for the huge number of estates the monastery owned and over which many law-suits were waged, it includes data on social organisation, economics and the national and local government, some from eye-witness accounts even if embroidered by later hands. It includes entries that were lifted wholesale from other sources, local hagiographical works, a mixed bag of anecdotes, and Ely's own archives (these forming much of the rather tedious legal texts and wranglings). The latest local



event recorded was the death of Bishop Nigel in 1169, the exhausted author then extending his text to include the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170.

As an historical work, the first of its three books concentrates on Aethelthryth herself and on the foundation and subsequent destruction of the monastery, much of it drawn from Bede's stories. There are dramatic accounts of attacks by Danes, when nuns were killed and the monastery and city looted and burned. Book II moves on to restoration of the abbey under Edgar, and subsequent bequests that allowed Ely to build up a massive estate. This includes interesting asides on urban origins and how legal settlements were made, including purchases and agreements 'in the place called Cambridge, in the presence of the better people of the district'. By the bridge at Cambridge is given as a specific place for settling disputes, and we hear that 'Cambridge, Norwich, Thetford and Ipswich were possessed of such great freedom and liberty that, if anyone bought land there, he did not require sureties'. In the 12th century there were Jews in Cambridge to whom Bishop Nigel pawned a cross and gospel book.

In the 10th century Abbot Byrtnoth rebuilt the church and the Abbey was enriched by Ealderman Byrtnoth who, in gratitude for hospitality denied at Ramsey, left estates in Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Suffolk and Essex to Ely when he died at Maldon soon afterwards. In the 11th century Cnut too became a friend to Ely, helping the Abbey set up a system of food-rents, whereby villages became responsible for feeding the monks and staff for one or two weeks, with lists of all the villages concerned. Of course we hear the tale of Cnut joining in singing which he heard on his boat as he approached Ely, and also how, when stopped from visiting Ely by snow and frost, he ventured over the frozen mere at Soham in a wagon.

After the Norman conquest there are dramatic accounts of Hereward's campaigns, including instructions to build the Aldreth causeway, the siege works of peat blocks, William's blockades, and details of how William ordered wood and ballast to be thrown in the marshes, covered with sheep skins, and filled with sand. Despite this, the army that tried to cross drowned. This is but the start of Williams's long campaign, its details compiled from varied sources. Plentiful details on Hereward include the account of how he disguised himself as a potter to spy on the king's stronghold at Brampton, an interesting insight into how lowly pots were traded by potters themselves, carrying them to households who might be interested in a purchase.

Important local details too are supplied about the civil war between Stephen and Matilda, the castles occupied and taken at Ely and Aldreth, siege engines, battles and royal visits. Other aspects of the Abbey's interests provide detail for the local historian. We hear for example of the creation and endowment of a religious house at Eynesbury (St Neots), the later expulsion of the monks under the Normans and their replacements from Bec, of the woman who was given Coveney where, with young girls, she did gold

embroidery and tapestry weaving for religious purposes, and how Chatteris nunnery was annexed by Bishop Hervey, complete with charters that even this Ely chronicler admits were highly advantageous to his abbey. Book III concentrates on charters etc, with lists of estates and sometimes the produce they sent to the monks: eels from the Isle parishes, salt from Terrington, timber from Bluntisham and Somersham, and 30,000 herrings from Dunwich in addition to normal farm produce. Local detail comes too with a spy's report to William, with a description of the Isle, the richness of its soil, loveliness of its fields and pastures, 'well-known for the hunting of wild animals, a productive breeding ground for farm animals and beasts of burden....equally praiseworthy for its woodlands and vineyards', and with a dream of an Exning farmer who was told by St Edmund to build a causeway to Ely. Following this, one monk measured out the land from Soham 'through trackless expanses of marshland', cutting a swathe through the reeds and building two bridges.

Not surprisingly, given the ecclesiastical background of the work, it is a particularly rich source on burials and reburials. We get the full account of Aethelthryth's first reinterment by her sister Seaxburh, with all the ceremonies of lifting, washing, re-clothing, wrapping, singing and festal dancing. In the 12th century we hear of the translation of bodies that had been buried 'deep down and long ago', all with unambiguous marks of identification. We also have the shameless story of how Abbot Byrtnoth, 'a pirate in the cause of the faith', lead a raid to steal the bones of St Wihtburh from her resting place at Dereham. This involved the Abbot entertaining the townspeople with 'convivial festivities', prising open the coffin to steal her body at night, and escaping by wagon and water pursued by a furious army of townspeople. St Wihtburh appears again in the text when she had to be translated when the church was rebuilt. Her body and clothes were still incorrupt, her cheeks rosy and her breasts upstanding.

As she states, the translator is a classical scholar, not a medieval historian, and so the numerous footnotes are mostly concerned with problems in the Latin text rather than providing more than minimal historical or archaeological background or critique, and the text is rather frustrating without such annotations. However, that would be another work which may be produced one day. As evident from accounts referred to above, a modest taste derived from its 627 pages, this is a work for historians and archaeologists to raid with gratitude, both to Janet Fairweather and to the patient monks who set down the texts compiled here.

Alison Taylor