

THE PRE-CONQUEST BURGH OF DERBY

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Summary

This paper outlines the presently available historical and archaeological evidence for the development of Derby in the Saxon, Viking and Anglo-Scandinavian periods. Particular attention is devoted to the possible complexity of defences that may be encountered, and emphasis is laid on viewing the town in conjunction with others in the group known as the Five Burghs.

Over half a century ago, Sir Frank Stenton commented that, of the Five Burghs (that is Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford), Derby is the one whose history is most obscure (Stenton 1920, cxviii). At present, Derby is still a prime contender for this dubious distinction. However, as future archaeological work, which can only increase to keep pace with the tempo of redevelopment, must be planned to complement what little knowledge we have at present, it seems apposite to summarise here the current state of knowledge concerning the town's development up to the Norman Conquest.

Recent excavations have added considerably to our knowledge of Roman occupation in the vicinity of Derby; indications of first-century activity in the Strutt's Park area have been confirmed, and work has also been undertaken at Little Chester. At Strutt's Park, the period of occupation seems to have ended not later than the reign of Vespasian (Brassington 1970, 25), although there is slight evidence for second-century activity, while at Little Chester the earliest recorded pottery is of the Flavian period (Webster 1961, 109). The reason for this shift of occupation across the River Derwent is uncertain, but it may possibly have been due to some strategic consideration. Occupation is attested at Little Chester throughout the Roman period, and it continued to be a focus for settlement in the immediately post-Roman centuries, as is shown by the recent discovery of pagan Saxon graves within the area of the fortifications. There is, however, no evidence for the presence of a Germanic yeomanry force operating in the late Roman period, as there was at other Midland sites, including, for example, Leicester (Hawkes and Dunning 1961, 52), and there appears to have been a period of desertion preceding the pagan Saxon occupation.¹

With the exception of the graves at Little Chester, no pagan Saxon burials have been recorded from the vicinity of the town, and objects which could be assigned to the Early and Middle Saxon periods are equally scarce. A pilgrim flask from the shrine of St. Menas at Karm Abu Mina on the edge of the Libyan desert was found in Nuns' St. (SK 3444 3667) in 1949 (O'Ferrall 1951), but while it has a possible date range of the fourth to seventh centuries it is perhaps more likely to belong to a Roman than a Saxon milieu. Other examples in England are known from Meols in Wirral, Cheshire (Journ. Chester & N. Wales Architect., Archaeol. & Hist. Soc. 1956, 48) and from York (Waterman 1959, 61). Furthermore, the possibility of its being a recent importation cannot be dismissed. The so-called 'Derby' runic inscribed bone mounting, which is ascribed to the period 700-1000, has no firmer connection with the town than that it first came to general notice whilst in the possession of a local resident, and thus must also be discounted here (Bately and Evison 1961).

¹I am grateful to Mr. C. J. S. Green for allowing me to make use of evidence gained during his recent excavations at Little Chester in advance of his forthcoming publication.

However, although there is as yet no archaeological evidence for it, the Middle Saxon period must have witnessed the growth of a settlement of some importance, for when it makes its earliest recorded appearance, in the chronicle of Æthelweard for the year 871, it is as the final resting place of the Berkshire *ealdorman* Æthelwulf, who had been killed in battle against the Danes at Reading. Æthelwulf was already an *ealdorman* in 843 or 844, when the Mercian king Brihtwulf granted him land at Pangbourne in Berkshire (Birch no. 443), and he continued to hold office under the West Saxon dynasty. Æthelweard records that the removal of his body into Mercia was done in secret, presumably for fear of Danish intervention, and he also gives the information that the English name for his burial place was Northworthy, although the Danes call it Derby. This does not mean of course that the Danes were taking any special interest in Derby in 871: Æthelweard wrote towards the end of the tenth century (Campbell 1962, xiii note 2) and is recording a change of name which must date at earliest from after the Danish partition and settlement of Mercia in 877. What Æthelweard's passage does illustrate is that there was an English settlement on the site before the town achieved national significance as one of the Five Burghs. In all probability it was the seat of a Mercian noble family; this seems the most likely explanation for the relatively long journey made under difficult circumstances with the *ealdorman's* body. Even if this is not a correct surmise, there must have been a compelling reason for such a trek, and it can be assumed that, whatever this may have been, the settlement at Northworthy must have been of more than local importance.

The area's first serious visitation by the Danes was probably in 874 when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that they took up winter quarters at Repton, drove out the Mercian king Burgred, and conquered all Mercia. It is inherently likely that the settlement of Northworthy, which exercised sufficient magnetism to draw back the body of Æthelwulf from Reading, also attracted the attention of the Danes based only six miles away. There followed a two-year respite until in 877 the Danish army returned to Mercia and settled in its eastern part. When the town next appears in contemporary sources, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* entry for 917, it is as a centre of Danish resistance, captured by Alfred's daughter Æthelflaeda in the course of the joint campaigns with her brother King Edward which resulted in the recovery of the whole of the Mercian area to English rule. Derby was the first Danish stronghold to be attacked in this series of campaigns, although there had been several previous English victories in the field: the English success evidently had a salutary effect on other Scandinavian garrisons, for in the next year Æthelflaeda was able to take Leicester peacefully, and received a promise of surrender from York.

It has generally been assumed that the Danish occupation of Derby took place immediately after the Mercian settlement of 877; Kendrick's belief that the Five Burghs were specially fortified towns, established deliberately as an act of Danish policy after the settlement, is typical of the received opinion (Kendrick 1930, 236 f.). This assumption is however open to debate, since four of the Five Burghs are not mentioned as *foci* of Danish resistance until varying dates within the second decade of the tenth century, while Lincoln is never specified as a predominantly military centre, although its inclusion in the list of the Five Burghs recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* entry for 942 pre-supposes that it had at least a military aspect. Thus while to Kendrick, Alfred's burgh building policy was imitative of Danish fortified centres, the silence of contemporary writers gives the impression that it may well have been the other way round.

It must however be recognised that the building of fortifications by the Danes in the immediately post-settlement period might be either unknown to a contemporary annalist writing in the Wessex heartland, or might not appear worthy of inclusion in his records when more stirring events were taking place nearer home. The fact that these centres are not mentioned until they actually figure in the campaigns of Æthelflaeda and Edward does not rule out the possibility of their pre-existence. But it could perhaps

be argued that before Edward's victory at Tettenhall in 910 and his subsequent succession to London and Oxford, there would have appeared to the various Danelaw leaders little necessity for the construction of defensive works within their new domains. This hypothesis, linked with the silence of the chroniclers, suggests that the long-accepted view, as promulgated by Kendrick and others, may be a misconception fostered by frequent repetition.

Other references to the town in pre-conquest sources may be rapidly summarised, as they add little to our knowledge. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* entry for 942 records, in a burst of unusual lyricism, that the Danish population of Mercia and five burghs were recovered from the domination of heathen Norsemen by the prowess of King Edmund. The part, if any, played by Derby and its inhabitants in this episode is unknown. The burgh is not mentioned again until 1048, when along with Worcester and Droitwich it is singled out for mention as one of many places in England affected by an earthquake.

The most detailed information about the town at any time during the Saxon period comes of course from Domesday Book, with its contrasting accounts of the town in the time of King Edward the Confessor, and in 1086, after 20 years of Norman rule. Even so, the facts about the state of the town in 1066 have been described by one recent commentator as 'only fragments of information which do not constitute an ordered survey' (Holly 1962, 322). In 1066 there were 243 resident burgesses, of whom 41 had shares in the 12 carucates of land which belonged to the borough. The king owned two collegiate churches, which had seven and six priests respectively, there were 14 mills, and the town rendered £24 to the king. From the details given about individual holdings in 1086, it seems that four other churches were in existence by the end of the Saxon period, as they are each recorded as having one previous owner. None of the churches is named, but from evidence in the cartulary of Darley Abbey, compiled c. 1275, the two collegiate churches are known to have been St. Alkmund's and All Saints (Darlington 1945, 164 f.). On the basis of its dedication, St. Werburgh's is also likely to have been a Saxon foundation.

The tantalising historical background summarised in the preceding pages, and the paucity of objects belonging to the post-Roman – pre-Norman period, underline the importance of pursuing other avenues of enquiry as fully as possible. There are two main and inter-dependent branches of study still open, excavation and topographical analysis, and in both these fields it is important to take fully into account the fragments of information which are gradually being gleaned from the other Danelaw towns.

The most pressing problem is to determine the limits of the defended area, to provide a framework within which it may be possible to assess the course of the town's development. In this respect, Derby is certainly the most enigmatic of the Five Burghs. At both Leicester and Lincoln, on the evidence of find-spots of objects of the period, the pre-Norman settlement apparently made use of the Roman walls for defence. At Leicester, both the early and later Roman ditches were cleaned out and in use in the medieval period (Mellor 1969, 4). This presupposes that their line was still visible in the intervening centuries, and if visible they may have formed part of the defensive system along with the Roman wall. The same would seem to apply at Lincoln, where again the Roman walls appear to have determined the continuation of occupation, and medieval clearances of the Roman ditch systems are attested.

At Nottingham, three sides of a line of pre-conquest defences can be traced, forming a self-contained unit encapsulated within the medieval street pattern, and this has frequently been proved by excavation (for example, Stevenson 1912; Wildgoose 1961). The remaining burgh, Stamford, is most comparable with Derby in that the core of the medieval town is not contained by Roman walls and there is no clear indication of its boundaries within the street system, but recent excavations in St. George's Street and High School Yard have produced evidence for a possible turf-and-brushwood bank with a timber palisade, and also a ditch, both of pre-conquest date (Wilson and Moorhouse 1971, 127).

At none of these towns, however, can the defences detailed above be shown to date to the period of initial Danish settlement, that is to the period before the various military centres were regained for the English crown. To avoid confusion, this initial period of the establishment of fortified nuclei by Scandinavians is best described as the Viking phase of their existence, whereas their development after the English resurgence under Edward and Æthelflaeda until the Norman conquest will here be termed the Anglo-Scandinavian phase. It has generally been assumed, for instance by Lee in his pioneer study of Northampton (Lee 1953, 169), that the Viking and Anglo-Scandinavian defences of these places were co-terminous. In the cases where pre-existing Roman walls were a determining feature, this is quite likely, although the expansion of Viking and Anglo-Scandinavian York beyond the walls of the Roman legionary fortress, in the Ousegate area, shows that this is not an inviolable rule (R.C.H.M. 1972, 8 f.), but elsewhere it must be questioned whether a fortification apparently devised as a headquarters and rallying point by a Viking army would have been suitable to contain urban population of the size encountered in Domesday Book.

Discussion of this hinges on assessing the strength of the individual Viking armies, and whether or not the proposition of a migration by Scandinavian settlers is accepted. Views contrary to the established doctrine that both armies and migration were numerically large have been proposed by Sawyer (1958), who has since maintained his position (1971, 121 f.) despite criticism (Sawyer *et al.* 1969). It is not proposed even to attempt a summary of the respective arguments here; the comments below are based on the writer's belief, which coincides with that of Loyn (1962, 54), that, as Sawyer originally suggested, the Viking armies which invaded England were probably to be numbered in hundreds rather than in thousands, but that, contrary to Sawyer, substantial migrations did take place after the original military settlement.

If, as Lund suggests (Sawyer *et al.* 1969, 196), the Viking burghs were built simply to hold a military aristocracy who did not engage in agriculture, then it might be expected, in view of the small size of the original armies, that the capital of any smaller sub-group would need to be correspondingly compact if it was to be capable of defence by that group alone. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* reference to the partition of Northumbria for agricultural purposes in 876 makes no mention of such an aristocracy, but, against this, a later reference to a change of base by the Viking army of Huntingdon to Tempsford in 917 does perhaps indicate that the typical Viking fortification of this period was small and simple, easily built and casually abandoned. Alternatively, if they were designed to act as a refuge for an immigrant population as well, then obviously their size would have to be substantially greater.

Reconsideration of these points is necessitated by the discovery in Nottingham of part of a defensive system *within* the area of the Anglo-Scandinavian burgh, and dated to the Early-Middle Saxon period (Young 1971; Young 1972). While it would be premature to suggest that this could be part of a separate Viking-period defence, which is itself purely conjectural, it is a possibility to be borne in mind. Equally, it could be part of a defence for the pre-existing Anglian settlement which gave the town its name, and which is referred to by Asser under its Welsh name *Tigguocobauc*, meaning 'cavy dwelling' (Stevenson 1904, 231). If the latter, it would emphasise the special nature of that settlement, suggesting that it was of importance *before* its Viking occupation, as Derby seems to have been. Whatever its final attribution, it is a tangible demonstration of the multiplicity of diverse and expanding fortifications which may be encountered within the Five Burghs and beyond.

The possibility that several unrelated phases of defence may be uncovered in excavation is particularly pertinent to Derby, where even the line of the medieval defences is unknown; these probably consisted of simply an earthen rampart and ditch, since there are no records of a stone wall. There could in fact be anything up to four different defensive systems at Derby — firstly of the Anglian settlement of Northworthy, secondly of the Viking fortress, thirdly of the Anglo-Scandinavian settlement, and finally the

medieval defences. Of these, only two are *known* to have existed in some form as they are mentioned in contemporary sources: the medieval town's ditch is referred to in the Darley Abbey cartulary (Darlington 1945, 38), while the account of the Æthelflaedan attack of 917 contains the information that four of her *thegns* were killed within the gates of the fortification. As for the other two periods, it may be that Anglian Northworthy was undefended, although the recent discoveries at Nottingham referred to above suggest that this may be unlikely. In the case of the hypothetical Anglo-Scandinavian expansion, this depends largely on the size and population of the Viking settlement; if it was just a small military nucleus, then it could not have housed the population of 1066, which must have totalled at least 800 people and may have been several hundred more. If, however, the fortification of 917 was designed to provide semi-permanent refuge for an immigrant population who in turn would strengthen its garrison, there is the possibility that the enclosure would be sufficiently large to contain the town as it developed both up to and immediately after the Norman conquest.

One feature of the topography of pre-conquest Derby and its vicinity which warrants further consideration is the role of the Roman camp of Little Chester, which was probably still defensible in the Viking period, since Stukeley, who visited the site in 1721 and 1725, records that stone robbing was still being carried out at that time (Haverfield 1905, 216). Both here and at Nottingham, in some ways a successor to the Roman camp at *Margidunum*, eight miles to the east, it is difficult to explain the change of position, when Roman work was utilised so readily at, for example, York, Lincoln and Leicester. The *Margidunum*-Nottingham change can be seen as a move to the River Trent, access to the waterway being more important than overland communication by the Fosse Way. However, the Little Chester-Northworthy/Derby move was a matter of only half a mile, and as both sites are directly beside the Derwent this was not an important factor.

Although the site of Northworthy cannot be precisely defined, the position of St. Alkmund's church indicates the general area of settlement. Excavations, of which only preliminary notices have as yet appeared, have demonstrated that the church was in existence by about 800 (Wilson and Hurst 1968, 155; 1969, 231). This makes it 50 years older than was previously estimated on the basis of surviving sculptural fragments (Routh 1937, 23 f.), and circumvents the need for a discussion here on the dating of the fragment portraying a series of animals, which have been variously categorised as representing either an immediately pre- or immediately post-Viking phase of Mercian sculpture (Wilson and Klindt-Jensen 1966, 114; Kendrick 1938, 208).

The lack of information about the area throughout the eighth century makes it impossible to establish whether the foundation of St. Alkmund's was responsible for a movement of population from Little Chester, or whether the church was sited to minister to a community who had already settled west of the river. Æthelweard, although not perfectly explicit, implies that a Scandinavian name was given to the actual settlement of Northworthy, not to something replacing it, and when he was writing, at the end of the tenth century, the Anglo-Scandinavian burgh seems, from the evidence of the churches, to have occupied the same general area as Northworthy. The importance of St. Alkmund's as a long-established religious centre, as exemplified in the magnificent early-ninth-century sarcophagus recently discovered, which must have contained the burial of a notability, ensured that after the conversion of the Danes, settlement continued in its environs.

This apparent continuity of settlement is not, however, sufficient warrant for the unquestioned assumption that the Viking settlement was in the same area, meaning as it would that the newcomers were content to overlook the stone defences of Little Chester in preference to occupying the Anglian settlement whose defences, if any, could not have provided as strong a basis for refortification as the Roman work so short a distance away. The focal point of Northworthy, its church, would not have drawn Scandinavians to its vicinity with the same magnetism which it exercised over a Christian

population who had a tradition of worship there. Thus it may be worth considering the possibility that when the chronicler referred to Æthelflaeda's *thegns* being killed within the gates, he was in fact referring to the refortified gates of Little Chester. The lack of any confirmatory material from within the site cannot be held to rule out this possibility, since little is known about the interior even during the Roman period, previous work having been concentrated on sampling the defences. However, the recent investigation has indicated that work was carried out on the defences within the late Saxon or Saxo-Norman period, at a time when St. Neots and Thetford wares were reaching the area. While the precise date of this work is unknown, there are now indications, both from this and from a mixed cemetery of unaccompanied, oriented inhumations (Clews 1927, 376) that Little Chester was utilised at least occasionally in the pre-conquest period. Until a defensive system, or a destruction level which can be equated with Æthelflaeda's attack, is recognised within the area of the Anglo-Scandinavian burgh, the hypothesis that Little Chester was used by the Vikings as their fortified centre remains at least plausible, with the continued existence of St. Alkmund's ensuring that the Christian, Anglo-Scandinavian population settled in its vicinity.

Discussion of the layout of the Anglo-Scandinavian burgh is equally tentative, although, as mentioned above, the siting of the probable pre-conquest churches gives an indication of the general area involved. All Saints and St. Alkmund's occupy a relatively elevated position with potential for defence, and the River Derwent of course forms an effective barrier to the east. It is not known whether there was a bridge over the river in the late Saxon period, and the ford, known later as the Causey, which was situated just south of the present St. Mary's bridge, may have been the only route across the river at that time. Indeed, the decay of the Roman bridge thought to have existed north of Little Chester (Brassington 1970, 30) may have been a prime factor determining the move of settlement to a position in control of the easiest available crossing point of the Derwent.

Water could also have provided a defensive barrier to the west and south, where the Markeaton Brook and its subsidiaries curve sharply to define a promontory before entering the river. With or without the addition of a rampart, the burgh would thus be protected on three sides, and would perhaps only require the erection of an earthwork across the neck of the promontory to defend it against assault from the north. The position of St. Werburgh's, if the evidence of the dedication be taken at face value, demonstrates that the western part of the promontory was occupied, but lying as it does just outside the present main stream of the Markeaton Brook, it raises problems concerning the course of the brook in the late Saxon period. As at Leicester, where the River Soar may have undergone a major change of course since the Roman period, bisecting the town and cutting off the western defences from the remainder (Mellor 1969, 6), the position of Derby's western defences may be difficult to estimate due to a comparable change. All that can be said of the extent of the Anglo-Scandinavian town is that it did not extend over the whole of the promontory, as excavations in the south-east corner of this area, on the site of the new Civic Centre, have demonstrated that this part of the town was not occupied in the pre-conquest period (Hall 1972).

During the later pre-conquest period, the town appears to have occupied a position of national importance subsidiary to its neighbour Nottingham, which twice entertained the *witan*, whereas Derby, so far as is known, never did (Stenton 1971, 350). This emphasizes the pre-eminence which accrued to Nottingham on account of its position on the main road to York. However, in 1066 Derby's population was larger than its neighbour's, demonstrating that, despite the royal attention which Nottingham received through its important strategic position, Derby was just as important a centre from the regional point of view. The discrepancy by which the Domesday survey of the borough occurs at the end of the entries for the shire, on the same folio as that for Nottingham, instead of at the beginning of the entries for the shire, may be due to no more than a mistake in the compilation, although it may be an indication of a post-Norman decline

of importance which saw a French borough established at Nottingham in preference to Derby, which was not even intimidated by a Norman castle as were most other urban centres of comparable importance.

On the numismatic evidence alone, comparison of the numbers of moneyers operating at the two boroughs in the Anglo-Scandinavian period shows that slightly more moneyers were striking at Derby until the reigns of Edward the Confessor and Harold II, when Nottingham gained a slight ascendancy. These figures, it must be admitted, are taken from the latest general survey (Brooke 1950), which is badly in need of revision. However, they can be taken to demonstrate that while clearly not in the class of importance of York or Lincoln, Derby was a centre of equal standing to Nottingham or Leicester.

Its function as a major servicing point for a broad hinterland was crystallised by the eponymous creation of the shire, probably in the early years of the 11th century (Taylor 1898, 39). While the chances of identifying the administrative and official element in the archaeological record are slight, a further major objective of excavation must be to sample all areas within the Anglo-Scandinavian burgh in a bid to discover whether there was an industrial quarter within the town. Following the recognition at Barton Blount of pottery akin to the late-Saxon group of wares thrown on a fast wheel, and its recovery in post-conquest contexts at the Civic Centre site within the burgh, the sampling of likely pre-conquest sites should clarify whether or not it was in production in the pre-Norman period. It may indeed have been manufactured within the confines of the town, since the discovery of a Saxo-Norman kiln at Southgate Street, Leicester, which has been boldly dated to the second half of the tenth century, demonstrates that in the territory of the Five Burghs, as in the East Anglian towns, pottery making could be an urban industry (Hebditch 1968). It may be expected that other industries will be identified — while there is no comparison of scale to be made, the evidence from York for bone, glass, metal, leather and textile working illustrates the variety to be expected (Radley 1971, 48 f.).

Further selective excavations will undoubtedly elucidate many of the points referred to above, and will probably refute some of the hypotheses advanced. However, these are offered for consideration with a view to formulating a research policy which will not only uncover important evidence for the history of Derby itself, but may also advance understanding of urban development on a broader scale within the area of the Five Burghs.

NOTE

Since this paper was written, Mr. C. E. Blunt's paper, 'The Coinage of Athelstan, 924-939: A survey', *British Numismatic Journal* 42 (1972) 93, has presented the evidence for the pre-eminence of Derby amongst the Midland-Mercian group of mints in the second quarter of the tenth century.

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