

### III: St John's Church and the Early History of Chester

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This speculative paper argues that the reference to Chester being 'waste' in 893, far from indicating its status through the 'Dark Ages', was merely temporary. In the sub-Roman period it was arguably the seat of a secular and religious authority straddling the Dee, supported by an estate at Holt-Farndon and the Cheshire salt industry respectively. After the imposition of Mercian rule the western boundary of this unit was delimited by Wat's Dyke. The traditional foundation date of 685 for St John's is to be accepted — indeed it may represent a re-foundation — and the church became the see of a *chorepiscopus* supported by some of the land west of the Dee. Chester's pre-existing importance led to the creation of the *burh* in 907 rather than *vice versa*.

#### Introduction

It is fortuitously fifty years since the late Graham Webster published his review of pre-conquest Chester (Webster 1951). Much has been written and excavated since then but, save some inscriptions, the body of written evidence remains the same. I have therefore to start by acknowledging that this paper presents no new evidence but puts together and develops themes considered by other writers whose work is acknowledged in the bibliography. It attempts to describe an historical context for Chester and the area immediately surrounding it from the end of the Roman period up to the foundation of the *burh* in the tenth century. Whilst it is primarily a review of the written evidence the archaeological record has dramatically improved, especially in recent years, but by its nature the latter cannot conclusively answer the questions that we want to ask.

As will become apparent, I believe that the role played by the church of St John was critical in the continuing existence and later development of Chester after the end of the Roman period, and in reviewing the evidence for the city itself we may note the number of recorded events that have involved or been dependent upon that church. This paper therefore falls into two parts. First, observations upon early Chester as a whole; second, a possible role for St John's church in the city's history. Inevitably, its conclusions are beyond proof but lie in that tantalising range of historical possibilities.

## Post-Roman Chester and its environs

### *Written sources*

#### Quality

There is no written record that is anywhere near contemporary, the earliest being Bede, who wrote in the early eighth century. He was a careful scholar with good sources, but he was extremely hostile to the Welsh church, which he saw as having spurned Augustine's mission. If ever there was a Mercian equivalent of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it has long since disappeared, though part of what has become known as the *Mercian Register* has been incorporated into the Abingdon MS of the *Chronicle*, covering the early tenth century. For most of the period, the *Chronicle* itself is hardly contemporary: it was first composed in the late ninth century from a variety of sources and was a production for the royal house of Wessex, whose interests it served. 'Florence' of Worcester wrote later still, dying about 1118, although he was a conscientious recorder of his sources and seems to have had access to some material now lost. Goscelin, who died about the same time, was a professional hagiographer, whose works often contain more invention than fact, as we can see if we compare his *Life of St Werburgh* with the more sober record of William of Malmesbury. William, who died about 1143, was another conscientious gatherer of records, many of which are now lost, and his narrative is generally considered reliable.

Nearer to the city itself are the *Chronicles* of Ranulf Higden and the *Annales Cestrienses*, attributed by its editor to Simon of Whitchurch. Both of these were written in the fourteenth century and drew upon earlier writers, not always accurately — the latter, for example, citing William of Malmesbury for probably 'Florence' of Worcester in the entry for 1057. Despite this error, Simon (or whoever) produced a sober and unromantic narrative and showed some critical ability by stating plainly that Harold Godwinson died at Hastings and ignoring the legend of his death as a hermit at St John's, which must have been known to him. He also ignored Goscelin's fanciful *Life of St Werburgh*. I believe that he recorded what he had read or heard rather than invented material to prove a contentious point or make a more interesting story. This becomes important when we consider the foundation of St John's. The story of Ingimund's attack on the city does not emerge until the seventeenth century, when it was claimed to have been copied from an earlier manuscript. This claim can neither be proved nor disproved but even though its details may be fanciful, authorities have accepted its basic truth. (For the most recent discussion of it see Cavill *et al* 2000, especially chapters 1 and 4, the latter being a modernised version of Wainwright's 1948 paper). Lastly, we have the Welsh sources, ninth-century in their written form, being incorporated in the text of the historian Nennius, dated to 828/9 (Morris 1973, 1, 44). We have to consider the strength of the oral traditions that underlie them.

#### The 'waste Chester' of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

Paradoxically we need to start at the very end of the period under consideration, to evaluate a statement that has dominated our interpretation of Dark Age Chester. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 893 recorded that the Danes, pursued by Alfred, turned west and came to 'a deserted (or 'a waste') Roman site in the Wirral, called Chester' ('*anre westre ceastre on Wirhealum, seo is Legaceaster gehaten*'). This has commonly been taken to mean that Chester was then an empty shell. For example, in their commentary to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Earle and Plummer observed:

p88 westre ceastre) Deva was the station of the XX legion 'Victrix' MHB pxxi; hence its name 'legaceater' 'legionis castra'. Its desolation probably dated from the battle of Chester; v BHE II.2 & notes. From this epithet 'west' = 'waste' comes the name Westchester, sometimes given to Deva. It has nothing to do with 'west' as a point of the compass. (Earle & Plummer eds 1892, 2, 106–7)

This is a harsh observation and invites us to believe that nothing had happened at the desolate site during the intervening 278 years, assuming both that the battle was fought in Chester rather than near it and that the site was totally devastated. However, 'waste' is not a necessary meaning: the context is military not demographic and it could simply mean that the site was deserted and undefended. *Westre*, from *westen*, means 'deserted' as well as 'waste' and is frequently used in a biblical context of people living in remote places. The desertion could be for a number of reasons but the most probable is that in trying to trap the Danes the Saxon armies had left the site unguarded. The narrative suggests that this was so by going on to say that 'the levies were unable to overtake them before they got inside that fort'. It is possible also that the annalist meant no more than that the city was decayed, only a shadow of its former self; *westen* can bear that meaning too. That statement would also be both true and in accord with the Anglo-Saxon tendency to see their ruined towns as a legacy of former greatness.

We return to the itself battle below but in this context we may note that Webster (1951, 40–2) created an elaborate interpretation of its site from Bede's words: *rex Anglorum fortissimus Aedilfrid collecto grandi exercitu ad civitatem legionum* (Colgrave & Mynors eds 1969, 140). However, it is hard to accept a reconstruction based upon the one word *ad*, translated as 'against' or to accept a battle front stretching down to Heronbridge. Neither argument is supported explicitly by the evidence, and battles frequently take their names from the nearest urban site or other feature without actually being at them.

Before leaving this description, one neglected statement of the obvious must be made. Viking raiding parties did not embark upon mystery tours, striking out in the hope that they might find something of value to plunder. They knew exactly where to attack, whether the target was commercially or politically important, and it seems likely that in 893 they were heading for Chester because there was something there worth having, either protection or loot. Equally, the defending army moved swiftly to try to stop them getting there first. Both behaved as if Chester was a significant place, and this is borne out by the fact that it took so long for the invaders to be ejected. The Vikings must have used existing defences, as they had no time to build anything new before they were themselves attacked.

Much of this is supposition, but in the context it provides can we accept Earle and Plummer's commentary? Is there enough evidence for us to believe that Chester did survive in some form and was a seat of local power, if nothing more, in the centuries leading up to the campaign of 893? What post-Roman evidence is there? At this point we must return to the accounts of the events of the early seventh century and review the evidence from the start.

**The Battle of Chester and the Synod of 601**

We have three accounts of this. The earliest is Bede's. As mentioned above, Bede was hostile to the Welsh church, and rather relished the slaughter of numerous clergy whose prayers were intended to help their army. We do not need his account in full; the relevant part reads:

For later on, that very powerful king of the English, Aethelfrith, whom we have already spoken of, collected a great army against the city of the legions, which is called *Legacaestir* by the English, and more correctly *Caerlegion* (Chester) by the Britons, and made a great slaughter of that nation of heretics. When he was about to give battle and saw their priests, who had assembled to pray to God on behalf of the soldiers taking part in the fight, standing apart in a safer place, he asked who they were and for what purpose they had gathered there. Most of them were from the monastery of Bangor, where there was said to be so great a number of monks that, when it was divided into seven parts with superiors over each, no division had less than 300 men, all of whom were accustomed to live by the labour of their hands. After a three days' fast, most of these had come to the battle in order to pray with the others. They had a guard named Brocmail, whose duty it was to protect them against the barbarians' swords while they were praying. When Aethelfrith heard why they had come he said 'If they are praying to their God against us, then, even if they do not bear arms, they are fighting against us, assailing us as they do with prayers for our defeat. So he ordered them to be attacked first and then he destroyed the remainder of their wicked host, though not without heavy losses. (Colgrave & Mynors eds 1969, 141)

Bede's description of Chester as a city, *civitas*, is important, for he reserved that word for places he thought were thriving settlements. It does not necessarily mean that at that date the place was alive and functioning as a town in the fullest sense; it may, and probably does, mean no more than that it was a military strongpoint, probably also the seat of local administration. For our purpose, the most significant fact is that the battle was known, at least from the time of Bede, as the 'Battle of Chester'. This must indicate that the place was of sufficient importance for it to serve as a landmark: nobody names a battle after a place that has so far ceased to exist that its name has no significance.

The next source, chronologically, is the Welsh version. Although the references are much shorter, the *Annales Cambriae* have two mentions of Chester, though under the wrong years. They record a synod there in 601, convened presumably to consider the failed negotiations with Augustine, and the later battle, under 613. There seems to be a consensus that the *Urbs Legion* and *Caerlegion* of the two entries refer to Chester and not the former Roman fortress at Caerleon. The location of the battle is clear, for a Northumbrian campaign in south Wales is most unlikely, but that of the synod a few years before is another matter, and only the apparent absence of activity at Caerleon makes us assume it was at Chester. If that is so, we must consider whether the martyrs Julius and Aaron met their fate at Chester, rather than Caerleon as is generally supposed. We will return to this below, when considering the church itself. The holding of the synod at Chester would support the assertion that the city was a site of some ecclesiastical significance, although it does not confirm that enough buildings still stood for a substantial conference to be housed there.

We know that at the Synod of Austerfield (702) the king was housed in a tent, and presumably others were as well. The site of a synod would presumably need ecclesiastical rather than domestic facilities, and this points to the existence of a significant church in Chester at that date.

J D Bu'Lock speculated that the young and exiled Edwin may have attended the synod with his protector Rhun ap Iuri of Anglesey (1962, 50). If this is so, it increases the likelihood of his having later launched his attack on Anglesey and Man from Chester (Bede *Hist Eccles* II.5 and 9), for all the coastline of the Dee and north Wales would then have been familiar to him.

Finally, the battle features in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The ninth-century compilers of the *Chronicle* were well aware of the existence of Chester, although the brevity of the entry suggests either that they knew little of the battle, or more probably did not want to give too much prominence to a major victory by a rival kingdom. They simply recorded that in 615 'Aethelfrith led his levies to Chester and there slew a countless number of Welsh.' This short account probably drew on Bede and, as noted above, specifically does not refer to any devastation in or even around the city.

#### **The twenty-eight British cities of Nennius**

Nennius also listed Chester (*Cair Legion*) as one of the twenty-eight cities (*civitates*) of Britain, but this probably reflects historical nostalgia rather than economic or military truth. Once more, however, the name lived on, unlike others which simply disappeared, and this simple fact of survival must be significant.

#### **English expansion**

We know that north-west England was of considerable importance to the Mercian kings, both as an area for expansion and as one to be protected against Welsh attack. Higham argued that Penda took the opportunity to annex part of Powys and thus separate Cheshire east of the Dee from Welsh territory (1993, 98–101; 1992, 1–15). If he is right, we must consider the implications of this for the city and in particular the foundation of St John's. Penda, a pagan, would not have founded the church. That would have followed later, but as his successors would have had to secure their grasp of the region first, it is quite possible that it took place as the medieval tradition had it, thirty or so years later, under Ethelred, to provide a symbolic Mercian as well as (Roman) Christian presence in the frontier zone.

Unfortunately there is no mention of Chester itself in the narratives, even though campaigns such as those of 796, 816 and 821 (when Gaymer said that King Coenwulf died at Basingwerk) may well have passed through the city or used it as a base (Harris & Thacker eds 1987, 248). Mercian activity on the English–Welsh frontier continued after the expulsion of Burgred by the Danes in 874 and the partition of the kingdom. Speculation is dangerous but military logic suggests that a ruinous Roman fort in the rear would have been put on a campaign footing to serve as a base for these various expeditions, especially if it included a major religious foundation. Whilst we must not overlook the obvious circularity of that argument, it is not automatically invalidated by it.

### The translation of St Werburgh

At some date the remains of Saint Werburgh were brought from Hanbury in Staffordshire to what is now the cathedral, formerly St Werburgh's abbey and, if tradition may be trusted, before that a minster church dedicated to SS Peter and Paul, both names frequently being very early dedications. The reason for the move is commonly and probably correctly given as being safety from the Danish raids. We do not know exactly when this was done. The traditional date of *c* 875 was first recorded in the *Annales Cestrienses* and then by Ranulf Higden in the early fourteenth century, and would fit with the great raids of those times. The *Annales* state the fact baldly:

In the same year, when the Danes made their winter quarters at Repton after the flight of Burgred, king of the Mercians, the men of Hanbury, fearing for themselves, fled to Chester as to a place which was very safe from the butchery of the barbarians, taking with them in a litter the body of S Werburgh, which then for the first time was resolved into dust. (Christie ed 1886, 13)

This assertion could have been based upon records held at the abbey but may alternatively (and we must say no more than that) be based upon long-standing oral tradition. Nevertheless, in 874 the Danes had driven Burgred of Mercia into exile in Rome and installed a puppet king; this could well have provided an occasion for moving to safety the relics of a saint said to be descended from no fewer than four royal houses.

We gain no more from other writers, for neither Florence of Worcester, who wrote a short but sober account of Werburgh's life nor Goscelin, her hagiographer, mention the translation to Chester directly. What they do and do not say is interesting. Nine years after her burial at Hanbury her remains were exhumed, found to be immaculate, and then re-interred in a new and more fitting coffin. She was then venerated for: 'a considerable time, that is, even up to the time of the Danes, the day of evils, when ... this country of the Angles was handed over to the swords of the heathen. Then and only then did the living remains choose to yield to the law of mortality and to disintegrate, lest the enemy ... should lay impious hands upon her'. (Goscelin's *Life of St Werburgh*: Munday ed 1974, 17)

For this disintegration to have been observed, the coffin must have been opened and the body examined; the occasion could well have been the move to Chester. The other feature of the passage is that neither Goscelin nor William explicitly mention the translation to Chester and this supports the implication in the *Annales* that the translation was an emergency measure. We can be confident that if Aethelflaed had made it as a symbolic political act at the establishment of the *burh* in 907 the monks of St Werburgh's would have publicised the fact widely; we may compare the well publicised removal of the remains of St Oswald to Gloucester by Aethelflaed in 909 (Thacker 1982, 209).

I have dwelt upon the date of the translation because if it was early, and I think the evidence points to its being so, it is an indication that Chester within the walls was regarded as a safe place. It was further from the eastern Danes, well within the rump of Mercia left under independent English rule, but that would not have been enough. It must have been the safest place in the area in 875. This sits badly with its being deserted and waste in 893.

### Archbishop Plegmund

Asser stated in his *Life of King Alfred* that amongst the foreign scholars whom Alfred brought to the West Saxon court was Plegmund, a Mercian who became Alfred's archbishop of Canterbury. We know relatively little about his early life other than that he was scholarly, most learned and a reformer. Gervase of Canterbury, writing long afterwards, added more detail but some is plainly wrong and his sources are uncertain. He says, for what it is worth, that Plegmund had been a hermit, living on an island in Cheshire or Chester. An island in what are now the Mersey flats is not impossible, but it is an unlikely site for scholarship of an orderly and academic kind, which is what Plegmund later imposed on Canterbury (Brooks 1984, 173–4). It is more likely that Plegmund had access to a well established scriptorium, which brings us back to Chester. The two most likely places for an island in Cheshire are Ince, which at Domesday belonged to St Werburgh's and, better, Plemstall, which has always been the site associated with the archbishop on the evidence of the place name. I think it more probable that Plegmund was attached to one of the churches in Chester and had access to a retreat in the marshes. His work as archbishop points to a degree of scholastic and calligraphic competence superior to that in contemporary Canterbury — a remarkable tribute to the capacity of the rump of the Mercian church.

### The story of Ingimund

Wainwright printed this account of an attack on Chester, which took place about the time of the foundation of the *burh* and therefore marginally within our period. Its description of the city is once more hard to reconcile with its being 'deserted' in 893. I follow Stenton and others in accepting its basic authenticity, though its details may be fanciful. The precise date of the attack is unclear but the story is that the Norse under Ingimund, expelled from Dublin in 902, wished to settle in the Wirral, whereupon:

Then Edelfrida gave him lands near Chester and he stayed there for a time. The result of this was, when he saw the city full of wealth and the choice land around it, he desired to possess them. He claimed it was 'right for them all to come to seize Chester and to possess it with its wealth and its lands'. (Wainwright ed 1975, 80–1)

They were eventually defeated by the release of all the bees in the city!

This episode must have taken place within twenty years of 893 and possibly even before the foundation of the *burh*, which was undertaken as a defensive measure against Norse aggression; either way it was hardly a long enough time for a deserted and sterile site to have developed into a desirable target. The city's prosperity must have had a longer gestation.

### St Germanus

Out of sequence but simply for completeness, we must look at the stories associated with St Germanus of Auxerre and the possibility of the 'Alleluia victory' being fought and won near Chester in 429. There is no credible evidence that St Germanus ever reached the north-west of England, and I follow Higham in dismissing the connection despite the arguments of Morris and the Laings (Higham 1993, 96–7; Morris 1973, 63; Laing &

Laing nd, 27). It is not impossible but, tempting though it is, it strains the evidence too far for us to learn anything certain from it about the state of Chester in the fifth century.

### *Non-literary evidence*

#### **The Viventius salt pans**

Higham speculated about the continuation of episcopal authority (1993, 66), and since he wrote some direct evidence for this has emerged in the fragments of two late Roman salt pans recently discovered at Shavington, near Crewe (Penney & Shotter 1996 and this journal). The earlier bears an inscription whose best reading is *Viventi (epis)copi*. The translation could be ‘overseer’ but is more likely to be ‘bishop’, even if only because Viventius is an adopted rather than a birth name. The second pan bears the name FL VIVENTIUS, which is presumably a reference to the same individual, here given an additional name Fl(avius). These finds may well indicate not only the existence of a late or post-Roman bishop based in north-west Cheshire but one who was controlling a substantial local industry. There is no need to repeat Shotter and Penney’s findings but merely to accept them fully. They inferred from the finding of a sixth- or seventh-century brooch nearby that activity may have continued to that date. The ecclesiastical character of the name is supported by evidence from Kirkmadrine in Galloway. There a chi-rho inscribed pillar, dating from not before the later sixth century, has an inscription: *Hic iacent s(an)c(t)i et praecipui sacerdotes id es(t) Viventius et Mavorius* (Collingwood 1927, 2). The context could not be more clear, and this undoubtedly ecclesiastical example of a very rare name suggests that the Cheshire use is also religious. There is additional evidence for fourth-century Christianity in the north west in the finding of a chi-rho engraved spoon at Biddulph (British Museum, catalogue PRB 1971.5-1.1), and we need not be surprised at the emergence of more artefacts between there and Chester. Finally, Thomas suggested Gaulish influence in the style of script, which throws open the possibility of continuing contact with southern Scotland (Thomas 1994, 201). If there was contact between the continent and southern Scotland, it is unlikely that Chester, in between, would have been excluded.

There is no reason why a late Roman episcopacy should not have survived the departure of whatever Roman military regime existed at the turn of the fifth century, for that would simply mirror Gaulish history, but as unfortunately we do not know for certain that there was a bishop in the city in the imperial period, the proposed continuation of a see in later times must remain speculative. It is nevertheless hard to find any other satisfactory context for such an inscription. Even if the reference is not to a bishop but to an overseer or some other administrator, there can be no escaping the fact that it represents some degree of organisation by someone.

#### **Wat’s Dyke**

There are reasons for believing that there was an administrative region based upon Chester, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to which we will return below, and I suggest that it ran side-by-side with that presumed by Nash-Williams to exist in north Wales, based upon Caernarfon or Bangor. This region is discussed by Matthews who sketched its bounds (Carrington ed 1994, 55), but I see no reason why the western boundary should not follow Wat’s Dyke. The common dating for that is late ninth century, built after Offa’s Dyke to the



west, but it is impossible to see any military or political context after Offa's time within which it could have been built. It is west-facing, so it is not a Welsh over-running of an earlier English frontier. It may alternatively be pre-Offan, and indeed one recent radio-carbon date puts the construction no later than *c* 600 and very possibly earlier rather than later (Worthington, pers comm). This is not sufficiently precise to be conclusive, and the most practical dating of the dyke is to put it before Offa's Dyke for lack of any reason for later construction. (For a recent general discussion of Wat's and Offa's dykes, see Hill 2000, 195–206). It has also been a fiscal boundary, marking the hundredal boundary, and could well record a long-standing division between the territory of Chester and that of the neighbouring Welsh. If we are pushed to giving an historical context, the most likely is the intervention of King Penda of Mercia in the middle seventh century, preceding the traditional date for the foundation of St John's. We may at this point speculate even further that the 'the land that lay beyond the water which is called Dee' considered below in the context of *Domesday* lay between the Dee and this earthwork. If there is any merit in this suggestion, it places both the dyke and the *Domesday* entry in a recognisable context.

#### **Place names and churchyards**

A number of British place names survive in north-west Cheshire around the city, and one, Eccleston, clearly indicates a pre-Saxon Christian site. Other sites (like Dodleston) may be indicated by the scattering of curvilinear churchyards (Harris & Thacker eds 1987, 240) though that is not as reliable a guide. We know from Bede and from elsewhere that there was a very large British monastery at Bangor-on-Dee, whose monks were slaughtered at the Battle of Chester. It is possible that this religious cluster had a centre at Chester, which would be consistent with the holding of the synod there; this would conform to the early practice of urban-based episcopacy. Snyder infers from the Llandaff charters that the Welsh church, unlike the Irish, gave a superior role to bishops in relation to monasteries and other churches, playing the same supervisory role as did their medieval counterparts (1998, 122), and although control could have been exercised from some other ancient site, like St Asaph, Chester is a more likely place.

#### **Excavations**

Excavations have told us relatively little about the Middle Saxon development of Chester. The artefacts found at Abbey Green have proved to be both later than originally thought and not necessarily ecclesiastical in character, so that no useful inferences may be drawn from them. In the eighth or ninth century there was agricultural activity stretching southwards towards the river along the line of what is now Lower Bridge Street (Mason 1985, 2–7) and there was pre-Aethelflaedan occupation at the junction of Northgate and Eastgate streets (Matthews *et al* 1995 64–5). The southern agricultural activity is probably more typical of Chester as a whole. On the other hand, we need to recall the silver brooch found during the Lower Bridge Street excavations, which was dated as probably belonging to the second half of the ninth century. Neither that nor the early development of the Chester mint, *c* 890 (see below), easily relate to an economically marginal society (Mason 1985, 35, 61). Moreover, more recently and dramatically, excavations in the amphitheatre have suggested that there was an insertion into the east entrance passage for which the best parallels are seventh-century crypts like those at Repton and Ripon (Matthews 2001 and pers comm; Taylor & Taylor 1980, 2, 510–18).

### Coinage

The origins of the Chester mint are obscure, but it seems likely that it was functioning well before the end of the ninth century and certainly before the establishment of the *burh*. Maddicott speculated that it ‘may well have been active as early as Alfred’s reign, when Chester, already a wealthy city, was probably the unidentified centre in north-west Mercia from which coins were being issued’ (1989, 41). This view has recently been reinforced by Stewart Lyon, who has pointed to the presence of a Chester coin in the Cuerdale hoard, deposited about 905. Even if placing the origin of minting in the reign of Alfred is rather too early, the coins point to significant pre-*burh* prosperity. Lyon presumed that the moneyers ‘worked in a *wic* outside the walls, as had been the case in London but since there is no archaeological evidence to show whether minting took place within or without the old Roman walls, it is equally possible that any moneyer might have sought whatever protection was available within them’. (Higham & Hill eds 2001, 75). Our conclusion must be that what Aethelflaed did in 907 was strengthen an already-active community by concentrating it within the walls rather than create a new structure from a long-abandoned site. The parallel with the presumed transfer of activity from Aldwyche into the walled city of London is most apt.

### St John’s church

Having reviewed the evidence for Chester as a whole we may now turn to the history of St John’s church and a possible role for it in the early history of Chester.

#### *The historical background*

##### Foundation

The traditional foundation date is late seventh century in the reign of King Ethelred c 675–704, deriving from Higden and the *Annales Cestrienses*, which state:

In the year of our Lord six hundred and eighty-nine, Ethelred, king of the Mercians, the uncle of St Werburgh, with the assistance of Wilfric, Bishop of Chester, as Giraldus (Cambrensis) relates, founded (*fundavit*) a collegiate church in the suburbs of Chester in honour of St John the Baptist. (Christie ed 1886, 11)

The problem immediately arises that no Wilfric can be traced in the episcopal lists of Mercia. However, at very much the relevant time Bishop Wilfrid of Northumbria was in exile in Mercia and is known to have been at Leicester (Thacker 1982, 200). *Legrecestre* (Leicester) could have been confused with *Legaceaster* (= Chester) as Thacker suggested, but neither that nor the slight miss-spelling are grounds for dismissing the connection in its entirety. We are told in his *Life* that whilst in exile, ‘Wulfhere, King of the Mercians, out of sincere affection for him, invited him into his realm to fulfil various episcopal duties (*ad officia diversa episcopalia in regione sua*). He granted our bishop many pieces of land in various places, on which he forthwith founded monasteries for the servants of God’. (Colgrave ed 1985, 31). Wilfrid’s interest in missionary work and the importance of a frontier zone may have drawn him to Chester. His prestige was such that his involvement may have been remembered long afterwards, albeit in garbled form. It is also possible that in the less well structured conditions of the seventh century some episcopal status was given to Chester, but we know far too little about the Mercian church to be sure.

It is nevertheless possible that there was a church on the site before the traditional foundation date. Unlike the minster of SS Peter and Paul it is outside the Roman walls and close to the amphitheatre. This proves nothing by itself, for its siting could have been related to a Roman *vicus* outside the east gate, stretching out along Foregate Street. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon in the Roman world for churches to be associated with amphitheatres as sites of martyrdom, one of the most dramatic examples being at Tarragona in Spain where it is in the centre of the arena, and in this connection Matthews' recent speculations become critically important. St John's could be an equally early site, commemorating the death of some long-forgotten martyr in much the same way as the cathedral of St Albans marks the spot where that saint was killed. Although the similarity of the early names makes it tempting to speculate that Julius and Aaron, early martyrs, met their deaths not at Caerleon but at Chester, there is no evidence in support, and two arguments against First, there are a number of dedications to those saints in south Wales, but none near Chester (Farmer 1978, 227–8). Second, Bede was quite clear on the separate identities of the two places. Although he referred to Chester as a *civitas*, his choice of name for the other 'city of the legions', Caerleon, was *urbs* (...*Aaron et Julius legionum urbis cives*...). This not only suggests that he saw Caerleon as a different kind of site from Chester, but indicates that he was not confused between the two sites. However, neither of these objections precludes the existence of another unknown martyr. Any original dedication could have been lost at the time of a putative refoundation by Ethelred or at the next refoundation as a cathedral.

### Edgar's triumph

Both the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Florence and, later, Higden carried another story, later than the period we are considering but relevant to it. In 973 King Edgar was rowed to St John's by seven subject kings. Leaving aside the political significance of this, what was the detail? As the three accounts cannot easily be reconciled it would be as well to quote them all, the *Chronicle* first:

Soon after this (May) the king led all his fleet to Chester, and there six kings came to him to make their submission, and pledged themselves to be his fellow workers by sea and land. (Swanton ed 2000, 119)

And now Florence:

Thence, after a short time, he sailed round the north part of Britain with a large fleet, and landed at Chester. Eight petty kings, namely, Kynath, king of the Scots, Malcolm, king of the Cumbrians, Maccus, king of several isles, and five others, named Dufnall, Siferth, Huwall, Jacob, and Juchill, met him there as he had appointed, and swore that they would be faithful to him, and assist him by land and by sea. On a certain day they attended him into a boat, and when he had placed them at the oars, he himself took the helm and skilfully steered it down the river Dee, and thus, followed by the whole company of earls and nobles, in this order went from the palace to the monastery of St John the Baptist. After having prayed there, he returned with the same pomp to the palace. As he was entering it, he is reported to have said to his nobles, that then his successors might boast themselves to be kings of the English, when, attended by so many kings, they should enjoy the pomp of such honours. (Thorpe ed 1848, 85)

Finally, Higden:

Thus king Edgar, in the twelfth year of his reign after being anointed king and consecrated by the blessed Dunstan and Oswald at Bath, sailed round the north of Britain to the City of the Legions, now called Chester. Eight underkings came to him, who getting into a boat with him on the river Dee, he taking the helm and they rowing downstream with great ceremony, came to the church of St John and coming to his own palace in the same way, observed that any of his successors might be proud to be treated to such service and ceremony. (Lumby ed 1876, 7, 16–18)

Surprisingly, the *Annales* do not have the story.

To dispose of one point first. This story need not mean that the fleet sailed around the north of Scotland: the ‘north of Britain’ was a term then commonly applied to Wales in distinction to the south-western peninsula. In addition I think it unlikely that Edgar would have made the voyage in person, as it would have been hazardous in the extreme, with the risk that if he had been forced to put to shore he himself might become the captive. His plight would then have been like that of Harold in Normandy, at William’s mercy. It seems more probable that, having been crowned at Bath, he moved north either overland or in part up the Severn to join his fleet at Chester.

The obvious reading of Florence’s words is that the trip was downstream to Chester and then back up. The Latin is: *ipse clavum gubernaculi arripiens, eam per cursam fluminis Deae perite gubernavit* (Thorpe ed 1848). Webster’s objection to an upstream journey is sound (1951, 46). We do not know the source for Florence’s statement, but he was a sober reporter not given to invention, although he could have been mistaken. If he was correct, this rules out any starting point in Chester, for all known settlement is downstream of St John’s. Thacker is surely right in suggesting that the trip was from Farndon, where the river was still navigable in medieval times, and, being a royal estate (Edward the Elder had died there), would have been a logical place for a diplomatic gathering (1982, 201). If so, perhaps the subject kings either rowed one way only, with the current, or did so symbolically with another stronger man on the oars to help (rather like modern symbolic pallbearers).

Why should the West Saxon kings acquire or inherit from their Mercian predecessors a palace near to but not in Chester? Does the answer lie in the survival as an estate of the old Roman industrial base at Holt, on the west side of the river? In the Middle Ages, as we shall see below, Holt ‘was linked with the mother church at Farndon, both being annexed time out of mind to the upkeep of the deanery of St John’s church Chester’. The combination of Holt and Farndon straddles the river, and this unusual feature supports the likelihood of an early formation, one possibly dating back to late Roman times. Such an estate could have been preserved as a unit after the collapse of imperial authority and exploited to support whatever power had taken over locally. If it was farmed out at the end of the Roman period, whoever had the use of it could easily have taken possession and perpetuated his tenure.

However they acquired it, the Saxon kings had spare land in the area to give away as is evidenced by Edgar’s gift in 958 of a number of estates around Chester to the community

at St Werburgh's, including, significantly, Hoseley, near Gresford (Hart ed 1975, no 121). We can follow Hart in inferring from the wording that it was not the first such gift. Farndon itself was presumably another such gift, as by 1066 it was held by the bishop of Chester.

The river episode also tells us something about the status of St John's in the middle of the tenth century. If the occasion had been simply religious, there was a minster church at Farndon which could have served the purpose just as well; in addition, Farndon has signs of being a planned *burh* and therefore a site of some importance. Although Florence only refers to the king having prayed at St John's before returning, there must have been something more like a formal ceremony to confirm the oaths of fealty that the kings had sworn before. It seems that after the foundation of the *burh* in 907 St Werburgh's was generally the favoured foundation. However, the fact that this journey was made to St John's strongly suggests that this site must have retained some sacramental or other symbolic importance from an earlier period that gave it primacy over the newer foundation. We will return to this below in considering the church itself.

### *Domesday and the Bishop*

#### **Early ecclesiastical estates**

One of the oddities of the Cheshire *Domesday* is that it frequently refers to 'the bishop' or 'the bishop of Chester' as holding land or having rights in 1066. Strictly speaking there was no 'bishop of Chester' in 1066 and it is possible that the *Domesday* commissioners were merely updating the record to reflect the situation in their own time when the see was based at St John's. However, it is also possible that there was someone who in 1066 was known as the bishop of Chester whose lands had, twenty years later, become amalgamated and confused with the lands of the actual bishop of Chester. As it seems that the lands in question were those that subsequently reverted to St John's (*see below*), then the pre-Conquest 'bishop of Chester' was presumably the head of that church, as argued by Thacker (1982, 201–2), following Sawyer. What evidence is there to suggest this idea?

Higden certainly thought that Chester was a see from the time of the foundation of St John's:

Wilfrid, having fled from Northumbria, succeeded at *Legecestriam*, which is now called Chester. However, within two years, on the death of Alfred, king of Northumbria, Wilfrid returned to his proper seat at Hexham... (Lumby ed 1876, 1, 130)

Bishop Tanner, writing in the seventeenth century, wrote in far more specific terms:

It is more certain that before the end of the seventh century, an episcopal see for part of the Mercian dominions was placed in this city. This was sometime under different, but for the most part, under the same bishop with Lichfield and to that at length was united; but, after the Conquest, Bishop Peter and his successor Robert de Limseye removing wholly from Lichfield, fixed their residence for almost thirty years at St John's church where bishop Peter was buried, till AD 1102 when bishop Robert, taking

greater liking to the rich monastery of Coventry, made that one of his cathedrals and left Chester. Though afterwards several of the bishops of Lichfield and Coventry wrote themselves and are styled by others, bishop of Chester. (Caley *et al* eds 1846, 370)

Third, there is the passage in *Domesday Book*, 263a, which reads:

King Edward gave to King Gruffudd all the land that lay beyond the water which is called Dee. But after the same Gruffudd wronged him, he took this land from him and restored it to the Bishop of Chester and to all his men, who had formerly held it. (Morris ed 1978)

I interpret this passage to refer to the *Domesday* hundreds of *Atiscros* and *Exestan* (as shown on the *Domesday* map in the Victoria County History), which Gruffudd would have been eager to control, thus pushing the English frontier back to the Dee. Sawyer noted the ambiguity of the words ‘and to all his men, who had formerly held it’ (Harris & Thacker eds 1987, 340–1, 344, n 17), observing that the ‘men’ could have belonged either to the bishop or to the king. If the land in question was both of these hundreds, the second reading is preferable, for it accords with the mixture of Earl Edwin and ‘free men’ shown to occupy *Atiscros* in 1066. By contrast, in *Exestan* a significant part of the holdings seem to have lain in ecclesiastical hands: at Eyton, Sutton and, at one time, part of Gresford. In addition, the bishop held Farndon nearby on the English side of the Dee. There was one substantial secular ‘free’ holder, Thored (at Gresford and Allington), while Rhys held a smaller property at Erbistock. However, ecclesiastical control could have been enhanced if the Thored was the same man who was associated with the bishop at Tarvin, Guilden Sutton and, possibly, at Wroxeter. This brings us to the speculation that Thored was in fact an episcopal tenant, who in 1066 held part of an original five-hide estate of some antiquity (Harris & Thacker eds 1987, 271–3). The ambiguity of the *Domesday* wording, noted above, makes it as possible for an individual to have been a tenant of the bishop as of the king, here more probably the former.

We may also note the careful distinction made in this passage between return of rights to the bishop of Chester (*reddit ep. Cestre*) and the repetitive use in the rest of the section of the simpler ‘*ipse eps*’. I am sure that the change in wording, here as elsewhere, is deliberate and important. The entry is generally presumed to refer to the head of St John’s (Thacker 1982, 201–2). As we have seen, later in the Middle Ages Holt, on the Welsh side, ‘was linked with the mother church at Farndon, both being annexed time out of mind to the upkeep of the deanery of St John’s Chester’. Holt, of course, was not founded until the late thirteenth century, but its link with Farndon and St John’s could derive from that of the *Domesday* ecclesiastical estates referred to above.

To summarise a tangled story, the proposition is that the ‘bishop’s’ lands in *Exestan* hundred had originally been held by St John’s. It is probable that Gruffudd acquired these and other lands as part of the settlement of 1058, at the instigation of his ally Earl Aelfgar of Mercia, lately in rebellion with him against Edward. Edward may have had no choice but to acquiesce at first in Gruffudd’s demands, but was probably able to regain them for their previous owners on his enemy’s betrayal and death in 1063. In 1075 the estates of St

John's were merged in the combined episcopal holdings. They remained merged until 1102 when on the removal of the see to Coventry they, and other holdings and interests, were re-allocated to St John's. The attribution of the church at Eyton to St Chad's probably reflected an ancient connection later overlain by possession by 'the bishop of Chester'.

When did St John's first acquire this territory? Can we posit an arrangement by which the church was given control of a block at the southern part of an early buffer zone on the west side of the Dee preceding the *burh* — for once that had been founded there would be no reason to create such a defensive zone. Ownership could indeed date back to the years following Penda's annexation of eastern Powys. On the other hand, the church need not have acquired all its lands at once, as witnessed by the implicit gift to it of royal land at Farndon in the tenth or eleventh centuries and by the parallel of the gift of Hoseley to St Werburgh's in 958.

### **A chorepiscopus?**

Why should the head of St John's be known as 'The bishop'? The answer may lie in the existence of a sub-bishop, a *chorepiscopus*. In canon law there cannot be two bishops in one diocese, but in practice a sub-bishop was sometimes appointed in missionary areas where an existing bishop was too infirm to perform his duties or where a diocese was too big for it to be satisfactorily managed by one person. Finberg suggested that Asser was made *chorepiscopus* in the vast diocese of Sherborne before becoming full bishop himself and evidenced two other *chorepiscopi* based at North Tawton, whose names are known (1964, 109). Eventually the diocese was divided and the practice ended. Is it possible that a parallel arrangement existed in the over-sized frontier diocese of Lichfield in which Chester lay? The sequence could be that St John's was founded or chosen to become the base for a succession of *chorepiscopi*, appointed to spread the faith, and with it political control, in a strategically important area. To support them ecclesiastical lands would have been separated from the cathedral at Lichfield and allocated to St. John's in exactly the same way as Asser was given the monastery at Exeter to support his activities.

This can only remain a model and a speculation; it is beyond proof, but a succession of assistant bishops on the frontier, with lands to maintain them, would be a logical step to ensure religious and political conformity. Their existence would help to explain the primacy of St John's in matters like Edgar's receipt of submission and later, the choice of the site for the Norman cathedral. We can, unfortunately, go no further than that.

### **A symbolic site?**

I have argued above for the church as being originally a cult site whose local or possibly regional importance was seized upon by successive regimes, and I suggest two possible demonstrations of this after our period. After the Norman Conquest, in 1075, the bishopric was briefly moved to Chester and the present church was constructed for the purpose. At first sight, this foundation would be outside the city and therefore uncanonical, but it may be that the late Saxon area had spread to the east of the Roman fort and included the new building. Nevertheless, it would still be a rare if not unique example of a Norman cathedral being erected outside the defended area of its city, and this can only be because there was some over-riding importance attached to the site. The placing is even more remarkable

given Chester's frontier position, which would normally require security for the new building. The second clue is fabulous but no less important for being so. In the *Vita Haroldi*, Harold, a survivor of the battle of Hastings and by now a pious hermit, was called by a divine voice to go to St John's and spend the rest of his life there (Swanton ed 1984, 31–2, 38–40). There were by then other churches that he could have gone to, including St Werburgh's, and the story is not connected to the building being upgraded as a cathedral, so why St John's? It was simply the most prestigious place for the legend to adhere to and so provides another royal connection.

I would very tentatively suggest that St John's was at first a martyrs' church which possessed sufficient symbolic importance by the seventh century for it to be taken over and refounded by the Mercian kings, used for some time as the base for a succession of *chorepiscopi* and then taken over in turn as a symbol of royal power by the West Saxon and finally the Norman monarchies.

### Conclusion

What can we say of Chester in these centuries? It most unlikely that the site ever ceased to exist in the sense that that there was no one there, inside or outside the walls. It still had most of its walled circuit intact and was easily defensible in 893. So long as there was political authority in the region it seems unlikely that such a site would be left unguarded, even if its activity simply shrank to maintaining a military presence in or near the circuit. As yet there is no archaeological evidence to suggest that the amphitheatre was adapted as a defensible strong point, as so often happened on the continent. Matthews' speculation that there was a post-Roman church on the site need not affect the issue, for whilst the church could have been built in the amphitheatre because it was defended, equally it could have been placed there precisely because the site was not military.

The possible archaeological evidence for the presence of an early church, supporting the string of documentary references, each weak on its own, builds up a picture of a place which either continued to be a centre of authority after the collapse of Roman rule or had been reinstated as one by the early seventh century and whose economy was more likely centred upon a trading area outside the old walls, as at London and York, before being concentrated again within them in the early tenth century. It may well have exercised spiritual supremacy, if not political control, over an area extending into Cheshire and what is now Flintshire, down perhaps to Bangor-on-Dee. We cannot determine whether the early authority was independent or whether for the whole or part of the period it was subordinate to some neighbouring state, such as Powys. Those questions have been considered elsewhere (Higham 1995, 130–43).

Three highly speculative conclusions are offered. The first is that there was by about AD 600 a British authority centred upon Chester controlling both sides of the River Dee, which was then not a frontier but an internal corridor for traffic and power. Its power probably sprang from inherited control of the former Roman imperial estates and was backed by a religious establishment which was the predecessor of St John's. The second is that after its annexation by Penda this territory was delimited to the west by Wat's Dyke and attributed, at least in part, to the re-founded St John's church. The third is that it was



Chester's economic prosperity, evidenced by the mint, and probably its religious standing by the ninth century which led to the foundation of the *burh* in 907 and its more critical importance in the century to follow. Far from it being 'wasted', its significance led to the foundation of the *burh*, rather than the other way round.

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