VI: William the Conqueror and Chester — The Making of a Myth: William the Conqueror's assault on Cheshire in 1070

by Stephen Matthews

This article explores the growth of a myth. It is now popularly accepted history that William the Conqueror invaded Cheshire and ravaged it so thoroughly, particularly in the east, that normal economic life was impossible for decades to come.[1] Not only that, but the fortresses of Macclesfield and Stockport were destroyed and Chester itself was severely damaged. In this article, I try to show where the story started and how it has grown, so that it has become an accepted fact with which the history of Norman Cheshire begins. This is related to the wider national picture, particularly in the north-east of England, with which scholarly attention has been more concerned. I do not set out to support, deny or quantify the extent of the damage that was caused to the county by William's incursion of 1070, nor to explore whether it occurred during the fighting or as a deliberate act of reprisal afterwards. That is a separate study. What I have sought to do is to remind the reader of what the original sources said and show how the story has evolved. What did happen to Cheshire's economy between 1066 and 1086 remains to be explored.

Introduction: Chronicle Sources

We need to look as briefly as possible at the sources to establish what there is. There are two: chronicles and Domesday and we will see how each has been used, independently or together.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

This is the most contemporary account of William's movements. It gave an account of the campaigns in Yorkshire and the north-east, but made no mention of any activity west of the Pennines. The account of the king's eastern campaign ends with 'and the King was in York on Midwinter's Day, and in the land thus all the winter, and came to Winchester at the same Easter [1070]. And Bishop Æthelric, who was in Peterborough was accused and led to Westminster, and his brother, Bishop Æthelwine, was outlawed.'[2] That extract was from text D, the Worcester manuscript, the most likely version to know of any military activity to the immediate north. Importantly, it also sets the time frame: William had from Christmas 1069 to Easter [5 April] 1070 to mount a campaign in the Tees, ravage Chester and return to Winchester.

Orderic Vitalis

Orderic's account of William's movements is the longest and most detailed that we have, giving far more information than any other Anglo-Norman historian. His *Ecclesiastical History* was printed in the seventeenth century and used by Thierry in 1825, as we will see later. His account of William's campaigns was rather muddled, for which he can hardly be blamed for he wrote sixty years or so after the events and was based in Normandy. He did, however, have connections with England which make his account more credible, for he himself had spent the early years of his life near Shrewsbury, being born at Attingham, had visited England at least once, and may well have heard news from Chester via St Peter's church there, which was owned by his monastic house. He reported two campaigns that related to Cheshire. The first is the uprising in the Welsh Marches by Edric the Wild, when the men of Cheshire (or just Chester) joined the attack on Shrewsbury. The other is William's campaign two years later in 1070, when he crossed the Pennines from the north-east and crossed to Chester. They were separated by accounts of warfare in other parts of the country. These passages have been omitted in what is given below, which is otherwise complete.

> The Welshmen and men of Chester besieged the royal stronghold at Shrewsbury, and were assisted by the native citizens, the powerful and warlike Edric the Wild, and other untameable Englishmen. The men of Devon were attacking Exeter in the same way, allied with hordes from Cornwall. This most westerly part of Britain, lying towards Ireland, is called the 'horn of Britain', or Cornwall, The citizens of Exeter took the king's side, for they were not likely to forget the hardships that had once endured. As soon as the king had word of these happenings he sent two earls, William and Brian, to help the hard pressed defenders. But before they could reach Shrewsbury the enemy had burned the town and scattered.

[Then comes a long description of the north-eastern campaign.]

> *Then he undertook an expedition against the Welsh and the men of Chester, who had recently crowned their many lawless acts by besieging Shrewsbury. His army, which had already endured great hardship, feared that even greater trials were in store in this journey They feared the wildness of the region, the severity of winter, the scarcity of food, and the terrible ferocity of the enemy.* The men of Anjou, Brittany and Maine loudly complained that they were grievously burdened with intolerable duties, and repeatedly asked the king to discharge them from his service. They urged in defence of their conduct that they could not obey a lord who went from one hazard to another and commanded them to do the impossible. The king, however, maintained a calmness worthy of Julius Caesar in this crisis, and did not deign to attempt to hold them with prayers and promises. He continued on the venture he had so boldly undertaken, commanded his faithful troops to follow him, and counted any who chose to desert him as idle cowards and weaklings. He promised that the victors should enjoy rest when their great labours were over, assuring them that they could not hope to win rewards without toil. And so he pushed on with determination along a road no horseman had attempted before, over steep mountains and precipitous valleys, through rivers and rushing streams and deep abysses. As they stumbled along the path they were lashed with rain and hail. Sometimes all were obliged to feed on horses which had perished in the bogs. The king himself,

> remarkably sure-footed, led the foot-soldiers, readily helping them with his own hands when they were in difficulties. *So at last he brought his army safely to Chester and suppressed all risings throughout Mercia with royal power.* He built a castle at Chester and another at Stafford on his return, garrisoning both and supplying them with abundant provisions. Then going on to Salisbury he distributed lavish rewards to the soldiers for all they had endured, praised those who had shown prowess, and discharged them with warm thanks. But in his anger he kept back those who had wished to desert him for forty days after the departure of their comrades, and in this way punished a crime that had deserved far more.[3]

For the moment, we can ignore the fact that I have italicised some passages, but we will return to them later.

The Evesham Chronicle

In the first quarter of the twelfth century, the chronicler wrote an extensive eulogy of his hero, Abbot Æthelwig, in which we have the following passage:

> So [the abbey] was entrusted once more to the care of Abbot Æthelwig who ruled it for a long time afterwards as his own. He was the holy father of the poor, the protector of widows, orphans and wayfarers, and the comforter of all those in sorrow, and caused liberal alms to be distributed generously to everyone wherever he went. Now, in the first part of his reign, King William caused certain counties in these parts, namely Yorkshire, Cheshire, Shropshire and Derbyshire to be laid waste on account of the exiles and outlaws who were hiding everywhere in the woods and doing great harm to many people. From these areas a great multitude of old men, youths and women with their hungry little children came here, despondently fleeing from the desolation, to all of whom this man, in pity, gave succour to the best of his ability. Many died, nevertheless, consumed as they were with bitter hunger, while they were being given food a plenty… Many wanderers came from Aquitaine, Ireland and many other counties, often came here in those days, all of whom he received and whose wants he supplied.[4]

These three sources supply effectively all that we now about Cheshire in this campaign. One northern writer who was well placed to give us a precise account is Simeon of Durham, but his account is disappointingly vague. In neither his *History of the Church of Durham*, nor the *History of the Kings of England* did he give anything more than generalities. The closest reference to Cheshire was that in his dramatic account of the ravaging of Yorkshire he added that ‘in consequence of the Normans having plundered England, — in the present and following year [AD 1069, 1070] almost the whole realm, yet principally Northumbria and the adjacent provinces, — so great a famine prevailed that men, compelled by hunger, devoured human flesh…’[5] Last of these historians, William of Malmesbury, writing later and further south but well informed all the same, provided a competent account of the ravaging of the North-East but gave no indication that the campaign extended west of the Pennines.

In passing we may note two more references. The first is a passage in the Life of St Wulfstan of Worcester who objected to making a visitation of the north west because ‘the region which consists of the three counties of Chester, Shropshire and Staffordshire had not yet

been approached by the Normans because it was so remote, and remained unpacified because of its savageness.'[6] That was about 1070. There is a major difference between being lawless or unruly, and insurrection. The second is that John of Worcester did not mention any flood of refugees although one would have expected starving multitudes in Evesham to have been noticed in Worcester.

That is the material upon which the story is based.

Domesday

The text of Domesday is far too long to be reproduced in this article and we will see later the use that has been made of it by historical geographers. For the moment a few general remarks may benefit the reader. It included an area greater than the historical county of Cheshire, including parts of south Lancashire and eastern Wales. These provide useful comparisons with 'core' Cheshire as does the Domesday record for Staffordshire. Most importantly, and in direct contrast with Staffordshire, Cheshire Domesday does give all three values that should theoretically appear for all counties: the value in King Edward's time (TRE), when the Domesday occupier acquired it, and in 1086. This was one of the requirements of the *Inquisitio Eliensis*, which set out the terms of the survey. Staffordshire rarely gave the middle value and this may have induced commentators to draw inferences about Cheshire that were not drawn to the south. Although we will return to these values below, it is worth pausing to make some general comments about one of the common entries, 'waste', in the Latin, *wasta*. Historically this has been taken to mean that the property was derelict, useless, incapable of supporting normal life, 'leaving most of Cheshire desolate for many a year' as Sylvester put it.[7] In recent years this interpretation has been questioned, with alternative meanings and causes proposed and we will return to this below. For the moment, all we need note is that the Cheshire Domesday contained many entries for waste and these have formed the basis for the belief in William's savage treatment of the county.

The developing story

Chester produced two medieval chronicles, the *Polychronicon* of Rannulf Higden, and the *Annales Cestriae*, both dating from the thirteenth century.[8] As with John of Worcester, their most significant feature is silence: they retained no memory that Cheshire had been ravaged. This is worthy of note, for medieval monastic chroniclers found it hard to forgive those who had stolen or damaged their property, and if the, as yet unreformed, abbey of St Werburgh had been injured by William's forces in 1070 they would no more have forgotten than had the monks of Waltham Abbey. The chronicler there was full of grievances, listing all the property which he claimed that William had taken.[9]

Having considered the medieval sources, we must now turn to the treatment by post-medieval historians. Although Orderic's text was never unknown, and a full text was published in 1619, it was surprisingly little used, partly because of its sheer bulk. He influenced medieval chroniclers like Robert of Torigny, but had little discernible influence upon early-modern writers.[10]

We will first consider those writing either national or local history before the middle of the nineteenth century. Of national historians, the earlier were apparently ignorant of Orderic,

as apparently was David Hume who published his *History of England* from 1754 onwards. He spent some time on the attack on the north-east but he made no mention of the subsequent campaign in the north-west, limiting himself to the general assertion that William 'resolved to proceed to extremities against all the natives of England, and to reduce them to a condition in which they should no longer be formidable to his government.'[11]

The first who seems to have used Orderic as a source for Cheshire was Sharon Turner, in 1814. He quoted both him and William of Malmesbury extensively for the harrying of the north, but was quite muted when describing Cheshire. After noting the difficulties of the Pennine crossing, his treatment of the county, like Orderic's, was something of an anticlimax: 'But his perseverance attained its end. He reached the Midland provinces of Mercia, and cleared them of the disaffected; and after building more castles for the subjugation of the country, he retired to enjoy a temporary repose.'[12] Apart from its mild tone this passage is notable for his use of Orderic's term *Mercia*, rather than Cheshire, and the plural of *provinces*. This is a wider area than just Cheshire.

Turner was followed by the Frenchman Augustin Thierry who published his *Histoire de la Conquête d'Angleterre* in 1825. He introduced the theme of patriotic Englishmen fighting a foreign invader, presenting the diverse uprisings as a nationalistic resistance, especially along the Welsh Marches. His narrative followed Orderic closely. After describing the campaign in the midlands and the north-east — extending in his account into Cumbria and north-west Lancashire — he dealt briefly with Cheshire. William's troops were tired and had to be bribed to cross the mountains. Then

> He crossed by routes virtually impassable for horses, the chain of mountains which extend from south to north all the length of England, entered as conqueror into the city of Chester, and, following his custom, built a castle. He did the same at Stafford, at Salisbury, in his return south.[13]

This was by any standard a mild interpretation of Orderic's words and made no suggestion of ravaging.

Lingard, in 1837, followed Orderic closely and without emotion. After repeating his account of the difficult crossing of the Pennines, he continued:

> At Chester he built a castle, pacified the country, and received Edric the Wild into favour. Thence he proceeded to Salisbury, where he rewarded and disbanded the army. The only punishment inflicted upon the mutineers was, that they were compelled to serve forty days longer than their fellows.[14]

This followed Thierry in its mildness. Neither Macaulay (1848) nor Ranke (1875) had anything to say on Cheshire, though to be fair, they only covered the early history of the country as a preliminary to their main themes. It is fitting to note that Ranke, although German, had a quite different view of William to the views set out in the next paragraphs. In his view, William was a great constitutionalist:

> It would have been altogether against William's plan, to treat the Anglo-Saxons as having no rights. He wished to appear as the rightful successor of the Anglo-Saxon kings: by their laws he would abide, only adding the legal usages of the Normans to those of the Danes, Mercians and West Saxons.[15]

Whilst that view would not prevent him from inflicting severe punishment when due, it limits the image of unrestrained ruthlessness that he has subsequently acquired. One popular historian, J. E. Doyle, writing in 1864, continued to play down events in Cheshire. He wrote that 'in his first paroxysm of rage' William 'ordered the complete extermination of the Northumbrians and the devastation of their country.'[16] Despite this savagery, taken from Orderic, he said nothing of Cheshire, not even the crossing of the Pennines.

Local historians

We will now move back to see how this development was reflected in the works of local historians. Sir Peter Leycester, at the end of the sixteenth century, made no mention of any campaign. This is not surprising because his attention was directed more to the histories of the Cheshire families and their holdings, than to narrative history as we know it. In addition, he could not have been aware of Orderic's account, and although he might have used the *Evesham Chronicle*, the generalised terms in which that was cast can only be taken to apply to Chester in conjunction with Orderic.

Next of the county histories, and in much the same tradition, was the *History of Cheshire* published, and probably written by, J. Poole in 1778. He seems not to have known of Orderic. His work was also parish based but he touched upon the arrival of the Normans in two places, albeit almost by accident. He made no mention of any ravaging of county or city and gave an unexpectedly laudatory description of Earl Hugh:

> this earl was of most excellent parts for rule and government, both in war and peace, and by his princely carriage obtained great honour and dignity as well in the affairs of the kingdom in general.

Later, Poole was more critical of William, but he made no charge of ravaging, cruelty or wanton destruction specifically in Cheshire or against its ordinary population.

> For the Conqueror, perceiving the minds of the English to be very adverse to his yoke, and on every occasion subject to raise new broils, he cut off some of the nobility, imprisoned others, and seized their lands…[17]

Next, George Ormerod was the first within the county to use Orderic's account (1819) and here we have to return to the italicised passages in Orderic's account given above. These were the words that Ormerod reproduced but when they are compared with the complete narrative, we can see that by quoting only the victorious passages and omitting the physical difficulties that had to be overcome, Ormerod made William's campaign a more convincing, if easier, triumph. His analysis was ambiguous. In the general passage cited, he used Orderic, the main literary source, and played down the military aspects, but his later passages, on Stockport and Macclesfield, explicitly accepted that there had been severe damage.[18] This

is important because he was arguing from Domesday and this is the first occasion that I can trace of its use in this context. Even so, he did not indicate a belief that there was widespread devastation in the county as a whole or in Chester itself.

Later historians (1860 onwards)

'Then Edward Freeman came,' and the development of the myth.[19] The great shift in interpretation came in Freeman's *History of the Norman Conquest of England*, published between 1867 and 1879. Freeman was a very great scholar, though one perhaps as much of the classical world as of England, and he combined two traditions, the Germanic concept of the freeborn Teuton, with his blond-plaited wife, clearing a space in the virgin forest, subject to no man, and the well established view of 'the Norman Yoke' dating back in English thinking to the Civil War.[20] In Chibnall's words, '[he] saw English history as a progress towards the triumphant emergence of 'the English nation' with its free Parliamentary institutions. His heroes were Earl Godwine and his son Harold, the champions of freedom against the Norman oppressors.'[21] To a large extent, these concepts still condition whatever popular interest there is in the period. The political theme, within which these images were embedded, was that the Anglo-Saxon centuries were ones of peace, liberty and order, when wise kings ruled with the advice and consent of the *witan*, 'a proto-parliamentary element in the late Anglo-Saxon polity' as Campbell put it.[22] This utopia had been brought to an end by the Norman Conquest, seen in contrast as arbitrary, cruel and oppressive, crushing opposition with the jackboot. There was some important disagreement as to whether this happened at the Conquest or before. Freeman saw it as essentially a Norman tyranny but for J. R. Green, writing in 1885, the process of constitutional decay had started even before the Conquest, for geography and royal power had gradually eroded the capacity of the popular vote. Originally, he asserted, 'In the 'great meeting' of the Witenagemote or Assembly of the Wise lay the rule of the realm. It represented the whole English people … it could elect or depose the King.' From the death of Eadred in 955, the power of the Witan declined, so that by the time of the Conquest, 'the old English democracy had thus all but passed into an oligarchy of the narrowest kind.'[23] Harold had been the last hope, and Green, in another work, sang his praises. Harold 'rose in some points above his father's level; he was gentler in mood, more tolerant of opposition, more prone to forgive; he had far greater sympathy with English religion and English culture. He had inherited from Godwine an equal capacity for council and for war …'[24] Harold had become the defender of ancient English liberties, but was defeated by the brute force of a usurper, and adulation for him found pictorial as well as literary form as can be seen by Ford Madox Brown's painting of *The body of Harold brought before William*, painted between 1844 and 1861 (Ill. VI.1). Harold is its centre, dignified, almost resplendent in death, a giant requiring immense effort to carry him, and, significantly, barely damaged by the trauma of a day's hard fighting.[25]

In this context, William could do no right. He was the ultimate destroyer, stamping viciously on anyone who opposed him. His savagery destroyed Exeter, Leicester, the north east of England and Cheshire. Although J. H. Round pointed out in 1895 that Freeman's accounts of the destruction of Exeter and Leicester were as flawed as his description of the battle of Hastings itself, there can be no doubt that William hit the north-east hard, though modern scholarship has begun to question its lasting effect.[26] For Cheshire, Freeman let fly:

Ill. VI.1: The body of the dead Harold brought before William, by Ford Maddox Brown. Reproduced by courtesy of Manchester City Art Gallery

> The work which had begun at Pevensey was brought to an end at Chester, and we can see that it was not brought to an end without hard fighting. William had to put down by force the hostile movements of what was now specially the Mercian land. We do not know whether the city surrendered or was taken by storm; we do not know by what means the shire and the adjoining lands were conquered.
>
> And we know that the resistance that William met with in this his last conquest was enough to lead him to apply the same stern remedy which he had applied north of the Humber. A fearful harrying fell on city and shire and on the lands round about. From Cheshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire, men young and old, women and children, pressed southwards in search of a morsel of bread.[27]

Having connected with the Evesham chronicler, Freeman then went on to a eulogy of Abbot Æthelwig, exaggerating even the chronicler's dramatic tale. At this point we must compare Orderic's account with what the Evesham chronicler said, for although Freeman married the two versions, their respective details do not accord, nor do their purposes in writing. Having admitted that he did not know what happened, Freeman proceeded to build a structure upon the Evesham chronicler's rhetoric. If he exaggerated, or got it wrong, the tale collapses and there are grounds for doubt. Neither source mentioned serious fighting

and if we are to accept what the Evesham chronicler said about hordes of refugees, we must accept also his explanation that the northern counties were merely lawless, not in open rebellion.

Freeman's rhetoric was not universally accepted. Green, who, it will be remembered had dated the decline of English democracy to before William's arrival, wrote emotively of the ravaging of the north east, repeating Orderic's claim that as many as 100,000 people perished. When it came to the north-west, however, he made no mention of serious fighting or subsequent devastation. He described the hard crossing of the Pennines, but ended with 'as the army descended upon Chester the resistance of the English died away. For two years William was able to busy himself in castle building and in measures for holding down the conquered land.'[28] After Yorkshire this was simple anti-climax. Goodwin Smith also seems not to have accepted Freeman's rhetoric. He referred simply to 'the rising in the north' and William 'put it down forever' by laying the whole district waste. His hero of the resistance was Ely, where Hereward made 'the most heroic stand.'[29]

In 1908, F. M. Stenton, for later decades the arbiter of Anglo-Saxon history, published his life of William in the 'Heroes of the Nations' series. His account of the campaign in Cheshire was muted. After describing the difficult crossing of the Pennines, he ended with a simple surrender: 'Chester would appear to have surrendered without daring to stand a siege, and with its submission, guaranteed as usual by the foundation of a castle, the Conqueror's work was done at last in the north.'[30] Nowhere did Stenton even imply that there was a widespread campaign of devastation.

Over thirty years after his life of William, Stenton, in 1943, published his monumental *Anglo-Saxon England*, a work which was to dominate Anglo-Saxon studies for years to come. In it he gave an account of the Cheshire campaign, which had considerably hardened. He followed and developed Freeman's line: he was, after all, a product of the same school of thought.[31]

> A march across the central hills of northern England, in which many of his soldiers came near to mutiny, enabled [William] to reach the Cheshire plain before his enemies were prepared for him. The last traces of the Mercian rising were crushed without any general engagement; castles were built at Chester and Stafford, and he was free at last to return to Wessex. … Any campaign of this length would have desolated the country in which it was fought. But the operations of 1069–70 were distinguished from ordinary warfare by a deliberate attempt to ruin the population of the affected districts. From the eleventh century onward historians have noted the sustained ferocity with which the king set his men to destroy the means of life in northern England. Their generalities are abundantly borne out by the evidence of Domesday Book which shows that within the country ravaged at this time vast areas were still derelict after seventeen years. It is in Yorkshire that the desolation is most evident. But the oldest account of the harrying states that it also extended over Cheshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire, and Domesday Book proves that the devastation in those parts, though less complete than in Yorkshire, was on the same general scale.[32]

The change in tone and assertion between Stenton's account in 1908 and that of 1943 demonstrates how so differing interpretations have been drawn from the same original material. At this point, another ambiguity begins to emerge. Was the economic damage to the county incurred as part of the military action or was that relatively quick but followed by a deliberate spoiling? Freeman tended to the first view, Stenton, in 1943, to the second though neither was too clear. Charles Oman in 1905 reckoned that the harrying followed a minor campaign, an approach most recently taken by Ann Williams. This ambiguity has remained ever since, though all agree that the damage was appalling.[33] Oman threw in an added piece of drama, that 'It is small wonder [that Gerbod left] or that for some time after William's march no Norman priest dared show his face in those harried and resentful regions'. It is true that there was a vacancy in the diocese of Lichfield at the time, but the Norman priests were certainly back when Bishop Peter moved his See to Chester in 1075.

In 1993, Higham accepted the 'systematic wasting' but based it upon an observation by Orderic, that the 'population was reduced to great wretchedness by the disturbances'. He himself admitted that this was 'probably only an oblique reference to systematic wasting of Cheshire', but if that is all that it was, it is a poor base for an assertion which needs other evidence.[34] In fact, the lament of which it is a part comfortably precedes the reference to the invasion of Cheshire and follows an account of William's campaigns in 1068 in Somerset, Devon, Dorset and Shrewsbury and immediately after a mention of Stafford. It was followed by an account of the security measures taken in Lindsay and Nottingham. There is nothing to link it directly with Cheshire, other than Orderic's distress over the state of the country as a whole. We must also understand the limits of Orderic's later assertion that William's cruelty left 100,000 dead of hunger. That is sometimes taken to apply solely to the north. It is too many to apply to Cheshire alone or even Cheshire and its neighbouring counties, but must refer to the whole of England as Orderic himself said.[35] Such a wider meaning is plainly false because the evidence from Domesday and literary sources makes plain that all of England was not cruelly ravaged — yet the whole of it would have to be affected to produce such a large number of dead people, representing a substantial fraction of the whole population. What we are reading is moralistic hyperbole.

Historical geography

Interestingly, although Stenton mentioned Domesday he did not use it in detail as evidence, even though he was familiar with the text, having started his career in Domesday studies. At this point it would be well to remember his overwhelming authority both in his lifetime and for a while, beyond. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that a proposition of his, once stated, became a fact. Against this background it may well be that historical geographers, and later historians, have used Domesday to prove what they thought to be true, rather than looked at it impartially.

Many recent commentators have drawn conclusions from 'waste' manors. In 1916 Tait attributed the fall in land values in 1070 to 'the fearful harrying to which the county was subjected by the Conqueror in 1070.'[36] He pointed out that nearly 200 manors were 'waste' at that date and that many more had lost value. Interestingly, he noted that 200 manors were only 'five-ninths' of the whole and that the total of the 1086 values was not far short of that for 1066. What he did not explain were the manors that were already 'waste' in

1066. Although he did not quote them, he must have known of the original literary sources, and must presumably have accepted devastation on Freeman's authority.

Some writers have attempted to trace William's path through 'waste' manors in Domesday, as did Sylvester and Nulty.[37] One difficulty is that the posited routes are contradictory. Sylvester had William entering the county through the 'panhandle' but Oman, presumably taking his cue from the Evesham chronicler, had him ravage Derbyshire as well, which puts his route to the south.[38] One secondary history portrayed a very different picture. Kelsey, in 1911, moved the damage to the centre of the county.

> (William) made a dash upon Chester, the one great city of free England that had not yet bowed to the might of the Norman invader … William captured the city and received the submission of Edric the Forester and other Saxon leaders. Chester was put in charge of a Flemish noble called Gherbod, who, however, in the following years, returned to his native land. Then, leaving a trail of fire and sword through mid-Cheshire, William marched southward to Salisbury, where he held a grand review of all his followers and distributed to them their rewards.[39]

The condition of the county was considered again by I. B. Terrett who accepted devastation as a fact, citing Stenton.[40] He did not plot William's route, but recognised that some manors were waste in 1066, due to Welsh raiding or other causes. However, these were tacitly merged with later waste so as to leave the reader with the impression that it was all due to William's incursion. Husain concluded that 'the great majority of the entries are concerned with manors which were wasted by enemy action.' His terminology still reflected the nationalist tone — patriotic English against the foreign invader — adopted first by Thierry.

Some local historians have further dramatised events. In the same passage, Husain expanded in highly coloured terms

> One can visualize a typical Norman raid; the men too surprised to offer much resistance, the abduction of the women, the flight to the woods, the slaughter of those who stayed behind. Some manors were completely abandoned by their inhabitants, and within a year or two became derelict, the huts of the peasants falling down and the cultivated fields gradually reverting to the wild from which they had been so laboriously won. Others, however, made a slow recovery, though many were still waste in 1086.[41]

These interpretations all depend upon the meaning of 'waste', and much has been written on this both for Cheshire and for the country as a whole. Its relation to William's incursion was considered in my 2003 contribution and although there is no need to rehearse the arguments at length again, the more important points can be restated.[42] The most significant are, first, that contradictory interpretations have been adopted within the same county, so that Welldon Finn explained the waste entries in Cheshire west of the Dee as meaning that the properties were 'of no profit to the English', i.e. that they could yield no profit to a landlord, whereas in Cheshire east of the Dee it meant devastation. There is no apparent justification for the difference, and in reality either interpretation could apply to either area.

Next, waste areas are recorded all over Cheshire in 1066 (TRE) as well as later and in 1086, and these must have some other explanation. Hill attributed them to Welsh raiding, but that can hardly apply to the extreme east of the county.[43] Another cause could be a lack of firm management following the battle of Fulford which took place before Harold's success at Stamford Bridge and led to a slaughter of Edwin's Cheshire army. We must remember that we can only assume the intermediate value to be c1070 but the requirement was to give the value at the date that the 1086 occupier took possession. Any decrease in value could have occurred at any time between January 1066 (TRE) and possession: it could even, theoretically, have occurred later than *c.*1070 if the occupier had obtained the property later. Much argument has been founded on shifting sand — or Cheshire mud.

Attempts to see waste as markers for William's route are undermined by inexplicable contrasts in value. If for example, William entered through the 'panhandle' and ravaged everything in sight, how does one explain the contrasting values of two adjacent properties, Romiley and Bredbury, set out in Table VI.1:

Place	*1066 value*	*Intermediate value*	*1086*
Romiley	Not given	Waste	Waste
Bredbury	10 shillings	?	10 shillings

Table VI.1: Comparative values for Romiley and Bredbury

It is hard to prove the passing of a ravaging army from these figures. Moving west, Wincham, close to the old Roman road, was waste at 1066, waste at the intermediate date, but worth ten shillings in 1086. What was the impact of William's army? Barrow, further along, was worth thirty shillings TRE, waste c1070, but worth exactly thirty shillings again at Domesday. Both there and at Bredbury, the return to the exact TRE value suggests that the intermediate value was a blip or even a reporting error, rather than a sign of utter devastation.

Last, the author of the Domesday chapter in the Staffordshire VCH specifically discounted any devastation in that county, pointing merely to its general poverty: that leaves us with the absurd conclusion that William's ravaging army suddenly put on its best behaviour at the county boundary. The furthest that the evidence takes us is that Cheshire's was also a fragile economy, easily disrupted by any adverse events, of which William's incursion was only one. The extent and cause of Cheshire's waste properties needs study — all I wish to do here is repeat the argument that it does not support the charge that William reduced the county's economy to ruins.

Associated details

Along the way, certain local campaigns have emerged, centring on the destruction of Stockport and Macclesfield in the east, and Chester in the west. These claims reached their climax in Dorothy Sylvester's words:

> [William entered] Cheshire via the 'pan handle' north-east of Stockport. His routes to Chester and Shrewsbury were strewn with 'wasted' manors, still traceable across the

> county by plotting the waste recorded in 1086 in the Domesday Book. The strongholds of Stockport and Macclesfield lay in ruins, and those of the eastern plains who were not killed fled westward for safety, leaving most of east Cheshire desolate for many a year.[44]

This is emotive stuff, but it is hard to find evidence in support, and it illustrates the dangers of using Domesday to prove a particular point. For Macclesfield, Stella Davies a decade earlier had gone no further than to suggest that there was 'probably an earthwork and a wooden stockade running in a semi-circle from Jordangate to where Derby St now is'.[45] That is a far cry from a fortress but much nearer the truth. In fact, Sylvester's interpretation hardened with time, for in the earlier Historical Atlas (1958) she and Nulty had merely suggested that 'It is probable that Stockport and many lesser places like Prestbury were wasted on this march.'[46]

Interest in what happened to the eastern towns seems to have started with Ormerod who suggested that Domesday failed to mention the churches at Prestbury and Stockport because they had been destroyed in the ravaging following the Norman arrival.

> The opinion of Mr Whitaker relative to the Saxons having continued the fort which the Romans established at Stockport, have been already given, and there are stronger reasons for supposing Prestbury to have been a place of some importance under the Saxon government. … It is probable that both these churches had perished in the devastation which the connection of earl Edwin with this hundred, appears to have brought down upon it.
>
> … but the ravages of the invaders had reduced the value of the manor [of Macclefield] from £8 to 20 shillings; and in those ravages the ancient church of 'Maclesfield', for reasons mentioned in the introduction to the Hundred appears to have perished, and is consequently un-noticed.
>
> In a short period Macclesfield was restored to its former consequence …[47]

Though not explicit, the implication in the earlier passage is that the devastation was limited to Macclesfield Hundred because of its connection with Edwin, a suggestion that later historians should perhaps pursue.

Ormerod was concerned with the fate of the churches and apart from a passing mention of Whitaker's suggestion that the Roman fort at Stockport had continued in use into late Saxon times, he did not suggest that any of the places mentioned were military strongholds. As he pointed out, Macclesfield was a valuable manor belonging to Earl Edwin of Mercia but there is no suggestion in contemporary sources that there was anything there of a military character. The belief that these were strategically important strongholds probably sprang from nineteenth-century urban pride. The resulting argument is neatly circular: there is no Domesday record of their importance (especially their churches), therefore the devastation must have been so severe that the sites were utterly destroyed and that is why they were not mentioned in Domesday.[48] Heginbottom, the late Victorian historian of Stockport, shows this romancing clearly:

> After the Romans had left this country, the position of their fortification at Stockport was selected as the site of a castle, in the earliest period of the Saxon rule. Its name was derived from two Saxon words, *stoc*, a stockaded place or a castle, and *port*, a wood; thus meaning, literally, a castle in a wood. Hence arose the name of the town, Stockport, which subsequently grew around its precincts. There is no doubt, that this castle continued to exist until the Norman Conquest, and that it perished during the destructive changes and troubles of that eventful period. The Norman authorities, however, seeing the natural advantages of the place, from both its elevated position, and its guarding the passage of the Mersey, soon followed the example of their predecessors, and rebuilt the stronghold.[49]

Heginbottom's argument was seriously flawed, not only in the origin of the name, but in the whole concept of a castle beside which a town would develop. That is a post-Conquest style: the Anglo-Saxon *burh* was a fortified town without a discrete castle. Further, *burhs* only date from the early tenth century, possibly a few in the very late ninth, not from the earliest Saxon period.

The likely cause of so much destruction in Chester as reported in Domesday was the building of the castle and this does not imply any particularly savage treatment. Most major Saxon towns suffered from the building of a castle.

Recent interpretation

In recent years a number of approaches have questioned the use of Domesday to trace William's route. Two articles in particular addressed the evidence from Kent and from the north-east.[50] It is hard to resist their arguments both in assessing the severity of the damage caused and any particular route that William may have taken, but remarkably none considered Cheshire, despite the earlier prominence given to his campaign. The only attempt has been my own contribution in 2003 which tried to assess the likely events against the chronicle and Domesday evidence systematically set out. I will do no more than summarise the conclusions: that systematic ravaging was difficult if not impossible in such thinly populated terrain, as William had earlier found in Brittany, and that he had insufficient time to do it anyway; that the chronicle sources do not warrant the interpretations put forward; that Domesday does not show any pattern of ravaging consistent with the movement of a marauding army, while other explanation are possible. Higham's *A Frontier Landscape* took a more cautious line, pointing to the difficulties of assessing Domesday waste when data is lacking from other counties and offering alternative explanations of which 'the actions of Norman soldiery' were only a part. It is too recent to say whether those views expressed have been commonly accepted.[51]

Conclusion

Since the Civil War William's reputation has been inextricably linked to interpretations of the respective roles of King and Parliament. 'The Norman Yoke' passed from seventeenth-century disputants through 'The Glorious Revolution' to Freeman who placed the late Saxon monarchy upon a democratic ideological pedestal.

> We must recognise the spirit that dictated the Petition of Right as the same which gathered all England round the banners of the returning Godwin, and remember that the 'good old cause' is truly that for which Harold died on the field.[52]

English patriotic resistance was expressed first by Thierry in milder form but after Freeman's *History of the Norman Conquest* was taken further by nineteenth-century civic pride, and by those who saw a terrible onslaught on Chester and its county as an inevitable retribution for being the last outpost of English Liberty. In the words of Sylvester and Nulty Chester was 'one of the last important towns to hold out against the Norman rulers.'[53] Nothing less than devastation could be its due.

It is through this that the myth of Cheshire's tragedy entered into the national story. Once established there by the authority of two powerful and justly revered historians it survived safe from question or revision until recent research has undermined their arguments.[54] The poverty of Cheshire in the eleventh century and the lack of archaeological and demographic evidence made it inevitable that the questioning should start elsewhere.

What route did he take? 'Waste' manors existed all over Cheshire, and one of the inconvenient features in their distribution is that many of the eastern ones were also wasted in 1066 and therefore their state was nothing to do with William. All sorts of routes have been traced from 'waste' and there is no conclusive evidence that he came through the 'panhandle'.[55] To add confusion, although the opinion is cautiously expressed, the author of the Domesday section of the Staffordshire VCH makes us believe either that William's marauding troops inexplicably started to behave themselves at the Staffordshire border, or that the Cheshire picture has been too heavily coloured. She thought that 'The evidence of the Survey, however, is not in complete agreement with the statement of the chronicler.'[56] She considered that there is no evidence to support a trail of devastation, and her conclusion was that the poverty of Staffordshire as shown in 1086 was due to its slow economic development in the late Saxon period, rather than to any action by William.[57] Whilst it has not been the purpose of this article to prove the case one way or another, but to set out how the story has grown, the same may well have been true of Cheshire.

References

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23 J. R. Green, *A history of the English people*, (1885), I, 93–4.

24 J. R. Green, *The conquest of England* (1883), p. 555. The tone is taken from the eulogy in the *Vita Haroldi* of *c.*1215 (Swanton, fn. 6 above).

25 It is unfortunate that the painting has not been more precisely dated. I incline towards a later date in the range given, because there was generally more interest in the Conquest as the century wore on. Bulmer Lytton's historical novel, *Harold, the last of the Saxon kings,* was not published until 1891.

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