

THE FRANKISH ORIGIN OF THE HASTINGS TRIBE

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It has long been realised that the name of Sussex, first applied to the whole County when it was still a kingdom, conceals the amalgamation of tribal elements originally distinct.¹ While the Saxon settlement of West Sussex is recorded, though briefly, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, no doubt because the story was well known to the adjacent Wessex Court where that Chronicle was begun, there is no early historical reference to East Sussex, except for the capture of Pevensey in 491; while except for Henfield in 770 no place east of the Adur is mentioned in any surviving charter until Offa's grant of 772. By this deed the Mercian conqueror, no doubt with a view to consolidating his own power over the *Gens Hestingorum*, which the northern chronicler Simeon of Durham relates he had conquered in 771, bestowed Bexhill upon the Bishop of Selsey, together with outlying dependent lands including Icklesham which reached up to the boundary of Kent. Long after this the Hastings area was regarded as somewhat distinct from the rest of Sussex; for as late as 1011 the A.S. Chronicle includes it in a list of eighteen areas of which all the seventeen others are counties.

The clay Weald and marshy estuaries between the chalk headlands of Eastbourne and Folkestone presented an unwelcoming coast to any invaders. On the other hand, it lay so near to the Saxon colony around Boulogne that small parties of refugee-settlers or seafarers driven off-course could well have constituted this as part of the 'Saxon Shore', along which the forts of Pevensey and Lympne were established to keep guard. In these circumstances it is proper to search for any signs showing whence the settlers may have come. Such signs may be found in some of the place-names.

In three charters dating 689-692² whereby two kings each styled Rex Suthsaxonum conferred lands in West Sussex, 'Wattus rex' signs as a witness. As there is no place name of a 'Wat' or 'What' type in West Sussex, while in the Hastings area several such are found, it has well been suggested that Wattus was a dependent chief there, and therefore that the Sussex kingdom had annexed Hastings by that date. The places in question—Watland in Udimore, Watcombe in Beckley, Watts Hill and Wattle Hill in Ewhurst, Whatlington and Wattleswysch on the north side of Battle—lie in an arc about eight miles inland from Hastings, and beyond the Brede river. They could mark either a westward extension of

¹ A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton. *The Place Names of Sussex* (1929), (abbreviated hereafter to P.N. Sussex), pt. 1, pp. 22ff.

² P.N. *Sussex*, loc. cit. The three charters are set out by E. Barker, 'Sussex Anglo Saxon Charters', in *Sussex Arch. Coll.* 86, 42ff.

a small settlement starting inland from Watland or, if the family was of the Hastinga tribe, a fanwise pushing forward of the Hastinga frontier into the dense Weald between the Brede and the Rother.

Our theme here is that both Watt- and Hastinga and other local names we are about to consider emanate from the extreme north of modern France.

THE BOL-/BUL- NAMES. First, *Bolintun* (or *Bollintun* or *Bulintune*), *Bulwarahethe* and *Buland*, all of which we associate with Boulogne. *Bolintun* is the Domesday name of a large manor within the eastern border of Bexhill.¹ A detached portion of *Bolintun* lay within the Battle Abbey estate, i.e. within 1½ miles of the Abbey.² The Domesday spelling of this is *Bollintun*, but the Abbey Chronicle's version (now perhaps to be dated as early as c. 1090) of the Domesday list gives the name as *Bulintune*,³ and all other references show a single 'l'. Almost certainly this detached portion with its 225 cultivated acres lay in the south-east quarter of the Battle estate, reaching to the slope of Senlac: for otherwise there would have been insufficient open land for the deployment of the Norman forces in 1066. Thus placed, this portion would be closer to, and more easily accessible from, *Buland* (which we discuss below) than to the main *Bolintun* manor to which it belonged before the Norman conquest.

Bulwarahethe was the haven of the *Bulwara* or *Bul-folk* (c.f. the *Baexwara* of the deed of 772 quoted above, meaning the people of Bexhill) which lay at the mouth of the Asten, perhaps a mile further east than today, in a position now submerged opposite the St. Leonards sea front. A footnote to the Domesday record⁴ shows that the twenty burgesses the Count of Eu had there must have belonged to the Burgh of Hastings; though, dwelling on the west bank of the Asten, they were correctly included in *Bolintun*, in Bexhill.

Buland in the late 12th century was the site of two holdings lying two miles east of Battle in the fork between the Brede and Line streams, an attractive position for early settlers if, as seems probable, it was at the head of water attainable by boats. By 1649 it had deteriorated to two parcels of brookland called *Bowland Brook*⁵ but before the inundations of the 13th century it was important enough to be noted in 1218 by Alice Countess of Ow (Eu) in her confirmation of all previous grants to the Abbey of land lying within her father's rape.⁶ Today the property is called 'the Bowlings', the last syllable of which may be thought to reflect, in view of what

¹ *P.N. Sussex Pt. II*, 491 and note.

² V.C.H. *Sussex*, vol. 1, p. 395.

³ M. A. Lower. *Chronicle of Battle Abbey* (1851), p. 14.

⁴ V.C.H. *Sussex*, vol. 1, p. 397.

⁵ T. Thorpe. *Catalogue of Deeds of Battle Abbey* (1835), p. 156.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 43. Previous grants appear on pp. 20, 37.

is shortly to be said, an original name 'Buling', corrupted only in Norman and later documents into 'Buland'.

BOULOGNE. The Gallic name latinised by Caesar as *Gessoriac-um* gave place to *Bononia* before A.D. 343, when the emperor Constans is shown on a medal as returning there after subduing the Picts and Scots in the western seas.¹ Camden in the Kentish section of his *Britannia* records the change of name and adds the interesting statement 'But the Britons called it *Bowling Long*'.² 'Long' may refer to a reach of the sea providing the harbour, or may be a British corruption of *-lond* (= land), but Camden's statement, whatever his source, is evidence that at a very early stage the town bore the tribal name of Bōlung or Bōling. In Latin documents *Bononia* remained the name, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the Danish Great Army sailed in 892 to the Rother (Limen) estuary from *Bunnun*. But the Count of Boulogne of 1052 and 1066 was Comes *Boloniae*, and although the first record giving the name in French as *Bolungne* is of the 12th century,³ the presumption is strong, in view of Camden's remark and the fact that Boulogne was the centre of a very early area of Saxon settlement, that *Bolungne* (?Boling-ness, elided) was the local spoken name from the late 4th century.

In support of its Saxon origin the root *bol*, *bul*, *boul* or *bohl*, usually as a suffix, is very common in Jutland and Schleswig, meaning a *building* constructed with planks (c.f. our 'bulwark') i.e. most houses or barns. Some writers consider it a Danish root⁴ but Danish place names can hardly be identified in that area before the deserted Old Anglia was resettled c. 1000, and the root 'bo' or 'bau' is common to all Germanic peoples. The Danish vikings occupied Boulogne more than once, but neither long enough nor early enough to permit of their having imposed the name of *Bolungne* upon the Saxon town.

Bowling or Bouling was probably therefore the submerged but continuing name of Boulogne from 380 to c. 1130. In Sussex we have noted a 12th century *Buland*, a bare two miles from the Bolintun settlement by Battle, respelt *Bowland* in 1649, and for the last hundred years or more called 'the Bowlings'. Was this merely a folk-corruption, by association with a game which could hardly have been played on this uneven ground; or can it be that in popular speech there was no corruption, but a continuous spoken use of 'Bowlings' as the name of a group of settlers—the only

¹ C. Jullian. *Gallia* (1919 edn.), p. 105.

² W. Camden (edit. R. Gough, 1789). *Britannia*, vol. 1, p. 221.

³ A. Longnon. *Les Noms de Lieu de la France*, (1929), p. 87.

⁴ O. Clausen. *Flurnamen Schleswig-Holsteins* (Rendsburg, 1952), 21.

corruption being that from Buling, or Bulingland, to Buland, contained in Norman documents?¹

SENLAC is the name given to the battlefield of 1066 by Ordericus Vitalis, a chronicler who wrote in Normandy about 1125. In the 'street directory' and 'terrier' sections of the Battle Abbey Chronicle, sections now dated back to c. 1116, it appears as Santlache;² and is found later as Sandlak (1248) and from 1260 as Sandlake. From the local details it clearly formed the eastern end of the new town built 1075-1110 to house the dependents of the Abbey, and the name extended down the slope to the springs now covered by the filling of the railway goods-station. Here before 1066 the hamlet presumably lay, in which lived the tillers of the farmlands belonging to Bolintun and two other remote manors. It does not figure in the battle, for it would lie just clear of the advance of William's right flank.

The usually accepted derivation of 'Santlache' is *sand-lacu*, sandy stream;³ but there is no sand about the station or ridge, and at the site indicated there were only springs. But we do find⁴ in 1457 'Sandpettes' a mile downstream towards Buland. This suggests that in the course of several centuries expansion up the valley had carried the name up to the station site.

SENLECQUES. Senlac in the French form in which Ordericus⁵ spelt it appears closely paralleled by Senlecques, a village sixteen miles east of Boulogne, high upon the chalk ridge which, until severed by the Channel, prolonged our North Downs. It lies upon the border between French and Flemish place-names. It is found as *Senleces* in 1199, *Sanleches* in 1298, also as *Senleke* in 1287 and also as *Senleque*. According to A. Longnon, all the names in *-ecque* or *-ecques* represent a germanisation, in the time of the great invasions, of the romanised Gallic ending *-iac(um)*, the final *s* being a nominative ending dating from the 16th century (the date for this last change is surely too late in view of Senleces and Sanleches above).

¹ Bulinga street near the Tate Gallery and Bulinga Fen, the site of Buckingham Palace, suggest a similar settlement from Boulogne with a hythe at the mouth of the Tyburn stream (W. Besant, *Westminster* (1902), p. 11).

² Lower, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 24.

³ W. H. Stevenson. 'Senlac and the Malfossed' in *Engl. Hist. Review* 28 (1913), pp. 292-301.

⁴ Thorpe, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

⁵ Ordericus has been considered 'unreliable' by some English writers for three reasons: (a) he gave a fantastic figure for the size of William's forces—but so did William of Poitiers; (b) he alone among the Chroniclers gives the name of Senlac, which because of the French pun, *sang-lac*—lake of blood—has even been thought to be an invention of his; but the Battle Abbey Chronicle (above) shows that this was in fact the local name; (c) he grafted into one the two distinct accounts of the Malfosse episode—given by other chroniclers—but, so far from this being a stupidity on his part, it has lately been shown (*S.A.C.*, vol. 101, p. 3) that both accounts were true of incidents which occurred alongside. (b) and (c) suggest that this Shropshire-born Norman monk may well have visited Battle.

He instances six names with endings of this type; but two of these, Senlecques and Éperlecques, contain an *l* which his explanation does not cover.¹

Éperlecques stands on a lower ridge, fifteen miles north-east of Senlecques and six miles north-west of St. Omer. It has a hamlet called *Ganspette* a mile to its north-east. It was Spirliacum in an 11th century deed and *Sperlake* in 1140—the latter presumably the vernacular form.² This last is of particular interest to us, as showing that *-lake* was also a Flemish form, and when found in Senlac-Sandlake was not necessarily either a word of English origin or an anglicisation of the French spelling, Santlache, of the Battle Abbey Chronicle.

Now all three places with this final syllable, Senlecques and Éperlecques in France, Senlac in Sussex, stand on the top of a ridge, or as near to the top as the need to be close to a spring allowed. In this situation *-lacu*, stream, is hardly a suitable explanation of the last syllable of these names, and an alternative should be sought.

As such alternative, the root *laag* or *lach*—the *ch* being guttural—is now put forward. Broadly through North Germany and Holland this ending, akin to 'lager,' signifies a situation taken-up, a camp or village; but in the area with which J. Schmidt-Petersen deals, the western coast of Schleswig,³ he finds various special meanings such as (a) a hamlet or section of a village, (b) a group of farms in the form *börlagh*, which latter came also to mean 'a small piece of communal land, a sandpit or the like'. Relying on the idea of a communal sandpit or a group of farmers sharing such, a derivation of Senlac-Sandlake from *-lagh* seems far more probable than from *-lacu* (stream).

HASTINGA. The theory, last put forward in 1952, that Hastings was founded by a Jutish or Danish forebear of Haesten, the Danish viking leader of 892, cannot be supported. There is no place in Jutland or Schleswig with this root—Hasted was Hattasted in the Middle Ages. Members of the Haesten family are found only in the eastern islands—the original Denmark, at Soro in Zeeland, 12th century, and in Falster in 1231.⁴ The Danes had not completed their absorption of Jutland until c. 600. In England the Hastingas had settled early enough to take root and spread their outposts twenty miles out to Hastingford near Hadlow Down and Hastingleigh beyond Ashford, and to become dominant in Eastern Sussex before Offa subdued them in 771. The earliest recorded Danish raids are in the late 8th century, and the Hastingas must have settled here 200 years earlier.

¹ Auguste Longnon. *Les Noms de Lieu de la France* (1929), p. 87.

² *ibid.*

³ J. Schmidt-Petersen. *Die Orts- und Flurnamen Nordfrieslands* (Husum, 1925), 44, 45, 175.

⁴ *ex info.* I. Wohner, *Stednavnendvalget*, Copenhagen (1958).

The case is however far stronger for a Frankish origin of the Hastings. The Franks—the name may mean ‘fierce’ or ‘proud’,¹ were an association of inland tribes originating in the upper basins of the Weser, Ems and Lippe rivers, east of the Rhine; whence they spread into Belgium and later into Northern France. Between Hanover and Hamelin—an area where names in *-lage* are also found—lie *Haste* and *Hastenbeck*. Next, just west of the Ems, we find *Hastehusen*, a *Hastenrath* (Haste’s clearing) on the Lippe near Wesel; and west of the Rhine a second *Hastenrath* near Aachen. Here the chain ends, for though ‘Hastedun’ the contour fort by Namur, and Hastière further up the Meuse, look promising, the Belgian philologists give these a Gallo-Latin derivation, meaning a plantation producing poles (c.f. Latin *hasta*).² But the German names above suffice to suggest the westward advance of the Hastings as one of the Frankish warrior tribes to the threshold of the North Belgian plain, all of which they came to occupy.

The advance across Belgium brought the Franks into close alliance (c.f. *Beowulf* l.2910) with the seafaring Frisians on the coast, who indeed may have provided the Franks with their king Merewioing (l.2921) or Meroveus, for his name means sea-fighter.³ Turning south towards Gaul he captured Tournai in 446; his son Childeric attempted to expand further but was driven back into Flanders, though leaving many Frankish settlers in northern Gaul. It was left to the grandson Clovis, who succeeded in 482, to establish the kingdom of the Franks throughout northern Gaul before his death in 511.⁴

WATTUS. When the capital was at Tournai the River Aa, issuing at Gravelines, would provide a strong western border for the coastal area. Six miles downstream from St. Omer, and facing west across the Aa, stands a hill 240 feet high dominating the marshes to the north, and having a wide view to the south west, where fifteen miles away stands Senlecques ridge. In the forefront lie Ganspette and the Éperlecques spur behind it. The name of that commanding hill and of the village beside it is *Watten*.

It is submitted as probable that this place was the home of a Watt or Watting who was an ancestor of the ‘Wattus Rex’ of 689, for whose origin no plausible theory has yet been put forward. *Ganspette* too seems reflected here in Sussex, for the origin of Gensing, a very early hamlet overlooking Bulverhythe and today in St. Leonards, has not so far been explained. Two of the three earliest forms of this name are in *Ganes-* and *Gans-*.⁵ Incidental note may be taken too of *Pett* as a place-name just east of Hastings.

¹ J. M. Wallace Hadrill. *The Barbarian West* (1952), p. 46.

² A. Carnoy. *Origines des Noms des Communes de Belgique* (Louvain, 1948), p. 289.

³ J. M. Wallace Hadrill, op. cit.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *P.N. Sussex, Pt. II*, pp. 6, 535.

If cumulatively the study of all these resemblances carries conviction, at what date should we place the supposed migration? 'Bulings' from Saxon Boulogne could well have been among the earliest Saxon settlers. On the other hand the name Bulwarahythe so near to Hastings may suggest that later settlers were permitted to establish a trading quay, not far from the Hasting tribal capital, which then lay at the junction (long since submerged) of the Bourne and Old Roar streams. But the name of Senlac, clearly from Frankish Flanders, found here so close to Buland, as also Gensing by Bulverhythe, coupled with the likelihood that the Hastings were Frankish, and the resemblance of Wattus and the Watt names in East Sussex to the Watten so close to the comparable villages in Flanders—all these tend to suggest that Bulings and Hastings alike formed part of one invasion or infiltration occurring after the earliest layer of purely Saxon settlements.

As to dating, the death of Clovis in 511 would set the early limit for their arrival, for before then all Franks would be too profitably engaged in conquering Gaul. The marriage of Ethelbert of Kent and the Frankish Bertha, c. 590, would set the date after which any incursion of Franks into eastern Sussex would be unlikely to pass unrecorded. Possibly c. 550, when younger Franks living around Watten, Senlecques and Boulogne would find no Gaulish estates left for them to seize, and no comparable outlet at home, would be the likeliest date for the occupation of the Hastings area by the Hastinga tribe of Franks, including Bulings and the forefather of Wattus Rex.