

# Chester in the Dark Ages

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**T**HIS paper imparts no new information on the subject but is merely an attempt to muster the evidence and parade it against the general background of the period and to draw certain general conclusions.

There is little evidence on the way the Roman military occupation came to an end. From the coins and pottery found in various excavations<sup>1</sup> it would seem that the site continued to be occupied until the end of the 4th century. The army went through considerable changes in the last century of the western Empire and this, no doubt, had great effect on the layout of the fortress and the life, both inside it and in the civil settlement.

The 20th Legion fades from the scene and its last actual dated inscription comes from Bankshead Turret on the Wall,<sup>2</sup> where its soldiers erected an altar to *Cocidio* about A.D. 262-6. The Legion appears on the coins of the usurper Carausius<sup>3</sup> but this is no indication that it was in Britain at this time. Its absence from the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a late 4th century army list, causes one to consider whether the Legion had by this time been withdrawn from Britain to help to stem the tide of invaders on the northern frontiers of the Empire<sup>4</sup>. This speculation acquires more credulity when considered in relation to Cunedda,<sup>5</sup> whose tribe the Votadini was moved bodily from the area beyond the Wall, round Berwick-on-Tweed, into north Wales. This was common practise in the later years of the Empire, when tribes of proven loyalty were used to reinforce the crumbling frontier system and were moved about extensively for this purpose.

Whatever may be the truth of this matter, it seems very unlikely, in the general break-down of the central authority in the early 5th century, that any survivors of the garrisons and their families would have remained long in Chester, because the position at the end of the estuary was too exposed to attack from the Irish raiders. It would have been far safer to have joined the Welsh tribes in the hills, where raiders and settlers were not likely to follow for loot. Intensive occupation of many of the north Welsh hill-tops at this period<sup>6</sup> seems to indicate a drift of population to this kind of refuge.

<sup>1</sup> Reported in *C.A.J.* and *Liverpool University Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*.

<sup>2</sup> *C.I.L.* vii, 802.

<sup>3</sup> *R.I.C.* Carausius, nos. 82 and 275.

<sup>4</sup> On the other hand this document which is a patchwork of lists of varying dates may have serious omissions.

<sup>5</sup> As already suggested by Mr. C. E. Stevens. *C.A.J.*, xxxv, p. 51; see also *A.A.* (4th S) xxv pt. 1; *Antiquity* xx 201.

<sup>6</sup> *Arch. Camb.* lxxxv pt. 2 "The Native Hill Forts in North Wales and their Defences" Presidential Address by Dr. Willoughby Gardner.

The process was one of slow disintegration and some kind of urban life may have survived into the 5th century, as it was probably hoped, at the time, that the Roman mobile field force would once more cross the Channel and restore the Province to the Empire. This hope was maintained at least until A.D. 442, when the piteous appeal to the "Consul Agitos" failed,<sup>7</sup> to the despair of the Britons.

That the site of Chester remained derelict throughout the succeeding five centuries cannot be proved, as the interpretation of this period at present has grave archaeological difficulties, but certain events recorded by Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles do give substance to this belief. About the year A.D. 615 the Venerable Bede<sup>8</sup> relates how Aethelfrith, King of Northumbria, led a southward sweep of his army into British territory. His advance was met by the tribes who gathered on the south bank of the Dee, opposite the Roman fortress. The King was able to see before him the whole of the Welsh army, and to one side, a little way off, a small group, which included the Celtic monks of Bangor-on-Dee. If the Welsh army had attempted to defend the ruined walls of the Roman fortress, Aethelfrith would not have seen them in the position Bede describes. The monks, it appears, were in a place of greater safety some distance from the main body. Bede makes a great point of Aethelfrith's alleged remark on learning that the monks were praying for a Welsh victory:—"That if they cried to their God against us, in truth, though they do not bear arms, yet they fight against us because they oppose us in their prayers." He attacked this smaller body which sheltered the monks before turning against the main army and putting it to flight.

This strange story survives in the pages of Bede, only as an example of the avenging hand of God against the stiff-necked Celtic priests, who refused to bow in submission to the Roman Church, when commanded to do so by Augustine. It can best be interpreted by supposing that the main Welsh army held the ford by the old Roman bridge over the Dee, the wooden superstructure of which we must presume to have crumbled away, or been hacked down, and that the smaller body guarded the ford further up the river at a point such as Heron Bridge. Between these two points the river curves round until it reaches what would then have been a swampy morass, now known as the Earl's Eye (fig. 17). The Welsh would, no doubt, have considered it adequate protection to have this on their right flank, but Aethelfrith, with the keen eye of a tactician, saw here a weakness in the defence and no doubt with a sudden

<sup>7</sup> Gildas *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*.

<sup>8</sup> *Historia Ecclesiastica*.

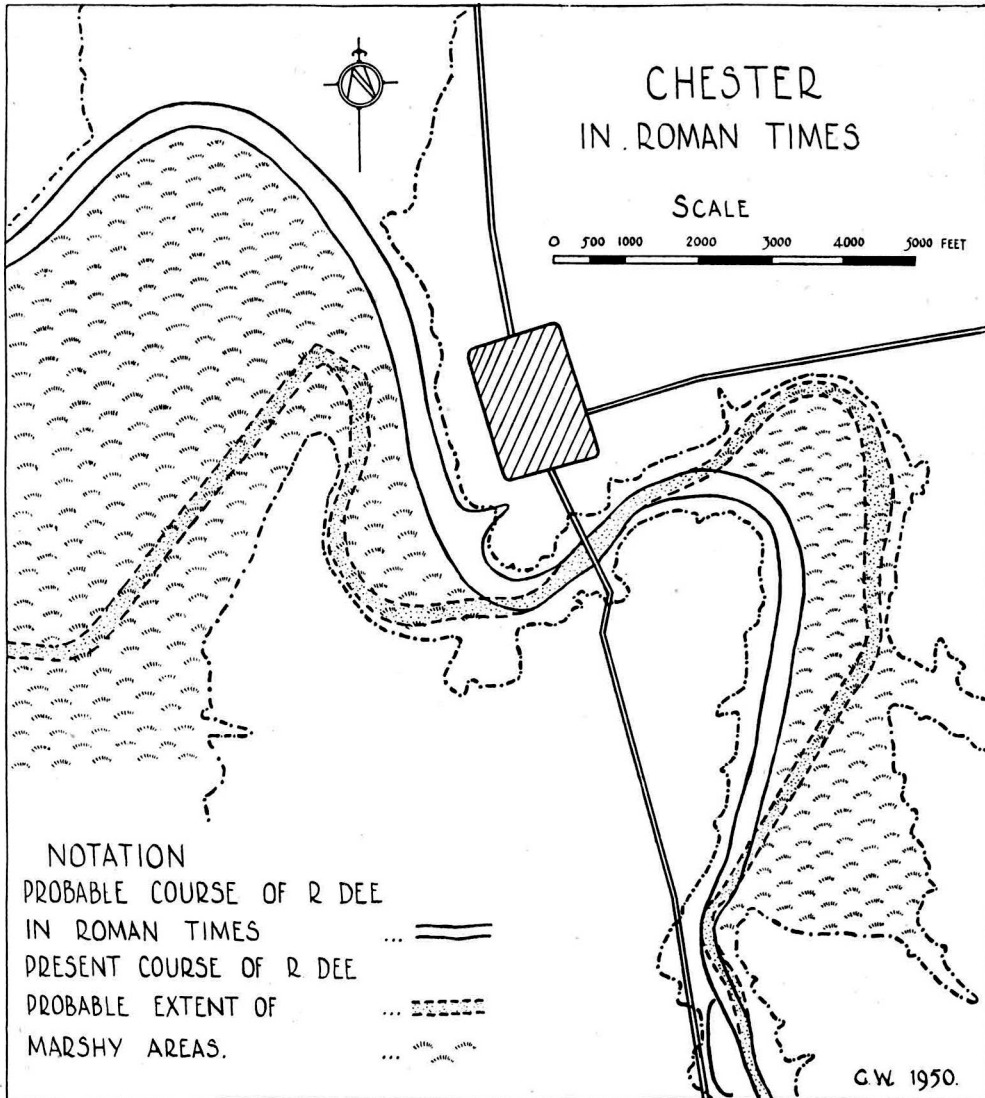


FIG. 17.

surprise, overwhelmed the small company at the ford, which happened to contain some monks of Bangor; and how indeed were the pagan Northumbrian people to distinguish between Celtic priest and warrior?

At Heron Bridge there is an extensive Roman site, the exact purpose of which is at present unknown. In the excavations of 1930, carried out by Mr. Petch,<sup>9</sup> a series of burials was uncovered and was considered, by the excavators, to have been of Roman date, but no evidence to support this conclusion is given in the report. These burials show well defined characteristics. They are all male adults and most of them are battle casualties. Furthermore, they are laid out on an east-west axis, and quite clearly laid above the ruins of the Roman buildings. They might well, of course, be the result of an affray in the locality of any late or post-Roman date, but it could be said that they fit well into the story of this battle. If only a piece of clothing or equipment could be recovered from one of the burials, which would date the interment to the early 7th century, one could turn speculation into possibility.

The Northumbrian occupation of this area was short lived and the Welsh tribes soon regained the ground they had lost.<sup>10</sup> During the 7th century the Mercians were steadily pushing their way through the thickly forested midlands into Cheshire, towards the Welsh frontier. They settled on the land as they came, in self-contained family and tribal units, held together in loose bonds of loyalty to their over-lords. With such a dependence on agriculture and almost a complete lack of external trade, it is little wonder that the site of Chester should remain at this time unoccupied and neglected, a heap of desolate ruins, probably regarded by the new comers as the haunts of evil spirits. The Mercians pressed steadily forward into north Wales and when at length they attained a degree of political unity, under the vigorous rule of King Offa, a frontier was established, which we know as "Offa's and Wat's Dykes."<sup>11</sup> A very noticeable feature of this boundary line is that Chester plays no part in its scheme; from its general line and evidence of adjacent contemporary agriculture, it is clear that it marks an agreed political boundary rather than a defensive earthwork incorporating into Mercian territory the rich lands of the Clwyd foothills.

It is unfortunate that there is such a lack of Mercian Chronicles, for it means that we are left in a state of uncertainty over the events of the 9th century, but it seems clear, from Welsh sources,<sup>12</sup> that the Mercians had managed to penetrate as far west as the mouth of the Conway, after which their Kingdom suffered a decline and the Welsh once more regained ascendancy.

<sup>9</sup> *C.A.J.*, xxx.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd *History of Wales* 185-6. Stenton *Anglo-Saxon England*, 78.

<sup>11</sup> Reports by Sir Cyril Fox of a survey of Offa's Dyke appeared annually in *Arch. Camb.* from 1926-31 inclusive, and of Wat's Dyke in 1934.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd, *op. cit.*, 325.

Indeed by the middle of the 9th century the King of Mercia was asking Aethelwulf, King of the West Saxons, for military assistance against the Britons of Wales<sup>13</sup>—but soon after this a new threat appears on the horizon—the coming of the Danes.

In the advent of these new-comers and in the complex series of events at the end of the century, we can detect both the elements of raiding and those of settlement. The Danes engaged in both occupations gave each other support and in A.D. 894, we find Chester appearing dramatically in a strange episode, the events of which tend to show that the site was deserted at this date.<sup>14</sup> A large force of Danish raiders had been defeated on the shore of Brittany and they decided to make an attack on the southern coast of England. But King Alfred had, at that time, organised a Saxon militia, the *fyrð*, with which he was able to shadow this invading army, but without having the strength to come to a decisive encounter. The policy of the Danes seems to have been to leave their ships, stores and families with their kinsmen who had previously settled in East Anglia, and for the warriors to march across England to the west coast, where they could spend the winter at a point selected for security and live off the neighbouring English country-side. This would also enable them to secure supplies from Ireland and draw the English army from the vulnerable Danish bases, on the eastern seaboard. If this was indeed the policy worked out by the Danish army chiefs, in consultation with their more settled kinsmen, Chester would seem an obvious choice for such a bold manoeuvre. Whatever may have been the factors in the situation, considered or otherwise, it is certain that in A.D. 894 the Roman ruins were occupied by a Danish force. But the English, alive to the scheme, rapidly surrounded them and destroyed all the cattle and grain in the neighbourhood and so, by this means, so reminiscent of modern total warfare, they managed to starve the Danish army out of their stronghold and force them to move elsewhere. The account of this episode clearly implies that the site was a waste and deserted ruin, in which a desperate army could find temporary security.

The great struggle between the Danes and the English left the country divided. The north and east remained in Danish, the south and midlands in English hands, but a new feature entered the situation, which was to have a great effect on the site of Chester. The Scandinavians, who had not only colonised England and parts of the Continent but had also established themselves on the east coast of Ireland, had by the end of the 9th century made themselves so undesirable to the Irish that the latter made a concerted effort to oust these settlers. The Northmen were unable to maintain their foothold and

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 325.

<sup>14</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: O.H.E.*, II, 264-5.

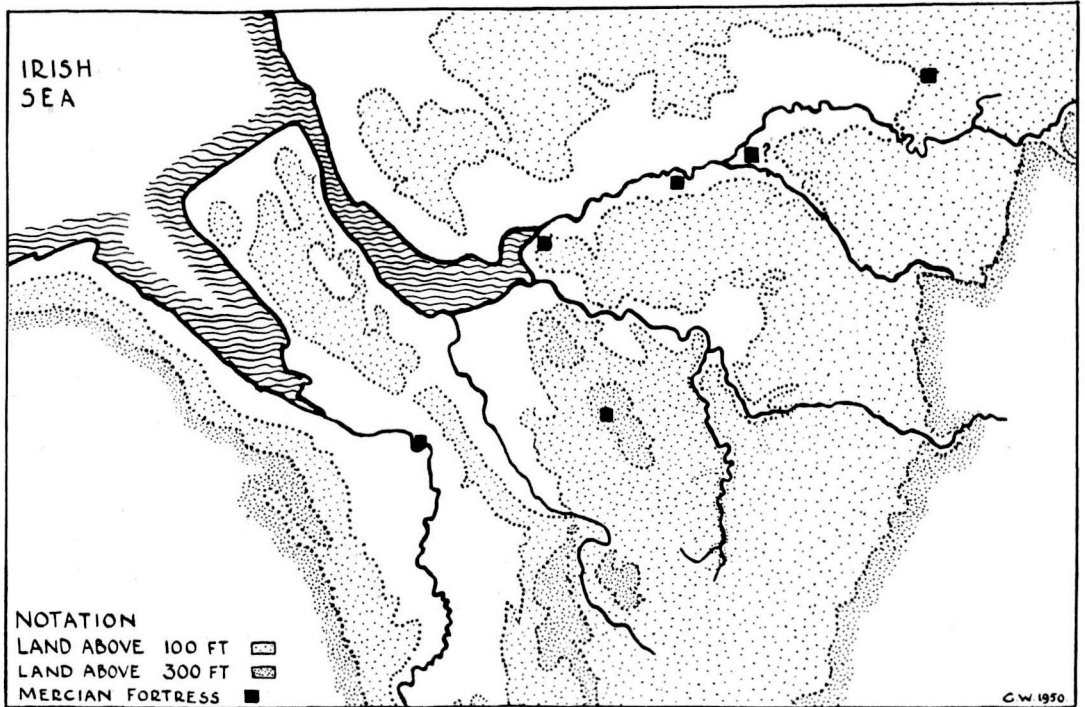


FIG. 18. Map of Mercian strongholds

were forced to cross the Irish sea and try to settle in Wales. The Welsh tribes proved too hostile and the would-be immigrants were turned in their course northward and found better haven on the north-west coast of England. Here they were able to link up with their kinsmen in Yorkshire and before long the whole of the north-west coast and its hinterland were overrun by these Norse settlers, who had, in their stay in Ireland, acquired certain Irish characteristics.

The English kingdom of Mercia was at that time governed by Aethelred,<sup>15</sup> but he was either a weak or sick man, for the dominating influence was undoubtedly his wife, Aethelflaed, a daughter of Alfred the Great. The Mercians saw clearly that if this new invasion remained unchecked, there was a danger that the Norsemen would overrun the north-western part of their kingdom. To counteract this a system of defensive posts was established along the frontier<sup>15a</sup> (fig. 18).

<sup>15</sup> Stenton, *op. cit.*, 257.

<sup>15a</sup> These other points are stated in the A.-S. Chronicle (A.D. 913) to be Eddisbury (see Varley "The Hill Forts of the Welsh Marches" *Arch. J.*, *cv.*, 65), Warburton and Runcorn. Later (A.D. 923) Edward fortified Thelwall and Manchester.

One of the sites chosen for this purpose, was that of Chester and it is probable that the Mercians constructed a strong point by the river on the site of the later Norman castle. It is stated, simply, that in 907 Chester was rebuilt<sup>16</sup> but this has been expanded by later writers to imply that Queen Aethelflaed refortified the City, extending the wall from the Roman fortress to include the castle area.<sup>17</sup>

At this time there was no standing army and the fighting men consisted of the farmers and citizens of the Kingdom who could be called out for military service when necessary, so it is possible that in deciding to establish here in Chester a strong fortified point to protect the lower Dee estuary, whole families would have had to be settled on the land in the vicinity. There is in existence a detailed story of one of the leaders of the Norse invaders called Ingimund. Unfortunately this story comes from a very late Irish source<sup>18</sup> and must be regarded with some suspicion, especially as the details of the story are very reminiscent of 13th and 14th military siege-craft. However, it may preserve a small element of truth. The chronicle tells how Ingimund asked Aethelflaed's permission to settle in the Wirral and this was granted, but after he had brought over his men and was well established, he attacked Chester in strength but failed to capture the City.

Whatever may be the truth about the situation, it seems fairly clear that at this period, about A.D. 910, Chester once more regained its importance as a military centre from which it has never looked back. The problem of the actual area fortified by Aethelflaed remains one which can only be solved by excavation, and it is doubtful if even this method will produce any positive results, as it is very difficult to recognise and date work of this period. There is no doubt that lengths of the walls of the Roman fortress were still standing, as indeed they do today, and it is not impossible to think of the vigorous Queen supervising the repair of the gaps, with the liberal use of timber and earth. In the excavations carried out in 1945 on the site of the west Roman defences, just north of Princess Street,<sup>19</sup> traces were found in the Roman rampart of what the excavators considered to have been post-Roman fortifications, but the evidence is not satisfactory enough for any conclusion to be drawn, and the absence of this feature in the 1949 section,<sup>20</sup> to the south, inclines one to regard the 1945 discoveries as purely local and probably of later date.

<sup>16</sup> *A.-S. Chronicle*, A.D. 907.

<sup>17</sup> *Chetham Society*, Vol. xv., 157.

<sup>18</sup> *Irish Arch. and Celtic Soc.*, Dublin 1860; for full consideration of evidence see Wainwright *E.H.R.*, LXIII no. 247.

<sup>19</sup> *J.R.S.*, xxxvi, 136-140.

<sup>20</sup> Report forthcoming.



Even if one accepts the proposition that Aethelflaed refortified the Roman fortress, there is still the problem of how the line of the Roman fortress walls was connected to the castle area. It is probable that it followed the course we know today on the east and south sides, but the west side is more problematic. The presence of a creek, north of the castle, which served in Roman times as a dock area, might suggest that any wall or palisading linking the south-west corner of the Roman fortress to the castle area, would have run along its southern edge; it is doubtful if the present line of the western defences was established as early as this, as it would have enclosed so much waste ground, but this at present is very conjectural.

Nor can any light be thrown on this difficult problem by the study of Saxon buildings and remains in the City area. Some of the churches are undoubtedly of Saxon origin. These include St. John's, St. Olave's, St. Bridget's, and the churches which preceded St. Peter's and St. Werburgh's. Their distribution suggests that the focus of the Saxon settlers was the strong-point by the river, rather than the later Market Cross. The only other hints of occupation at this period are the finds of coins<sup>21</sup> in various parts of the City, but coin hoards are not always placed in or near occupied areas, so evidence of this kind cannot be used for defining the area of settlement. If only we could recognise the pottery of this period in our excavations, an approach might be made to the problem, but so far not a single piece of recognisable pottery of the Dark Ages has been noted from any of the extensive excavations in the City.

There exists another interesting group of archaeological evidence of the period in the form of the sculptured stones but unfortunately none of these are inscribed and they add very little to our historical information. The series of cross-heads at St. John's Church<sup>22</sup> and fragments found nearby<sup>23</sup>, clearly point to this spot as one of religious importance. Several more fragments of late Saxon work have been found at St. Werburgh's.<sup>24</sup>

Once Chester had been reoccupied its name appears more frequently in contemporary documents. It seems, for example, that in A.D. 924 the garrison of Chester allied itself with the Welsh in revolt against Edward, for which treachery the force was replaced.<sup>25</sup>

A more noteworthy occurrence is associated with the story of King Edgar, who was crowned at Bath in A.D. 973, after which, he sailed with his fleet to

<sup>21</sup> *C.A.J.* (O.S.), II, 289-308; *C.A.J.*, xxxvi pt. II, 154.

<sup>22</sup> *C.A.J.*, v, adjacent to 157.

<sup>23</sup> Fragment from City Wall at Newgate, *C.A.J.*, xxxvi pt. II, pl. VII fig. I. Fragment of late work from Amphitheatre, *Ibid*, fig. 2.

<sup>24</sup> *B.M. Quarterly*, vol. XIV, no. 2. These stones are now in the British Museum.

<sup>25</sup> Stenton, *op. cit.*, 235



Chester to receive the submission of the tributary kings, six or eight in number, according to different versions. This story has been subject to much romantic nonsense and the status of Chester much elevated in consequence. This was the obvious point on the borders of his kingdom for Edgar to choose for this demonstration of loyalty. The story that he was rowed up the river by the kings themselves to St. John's Church, is difficult to believe. Unless he received these kings on board his warship in the river first, and also that there happened to be an exceptionally high tide on that day, his boat would have been unable to cross the rock bar and moor below St. John's Church, where the tokens of loyalty received solemn sanctification.

With Edgar we have our first document concerning a gift of land to the monks of St. Werburgh,<sup>26</sup> the early history of which is very obscure. The statement by Bradshaw,<sup>27</sup> that the relics of the Saxon Saint were translated from Hanbury in the late 9th century, when Chester must have been a derelict site, has to be regarded with suspicion. It is more likely, as Tait suggests,<sup>28</sup> that these precious relics were transferred when Hanbury became the property of the Saxon collegiate church, but this involved a complex of re-dedications. It would seem that prior to the translation, St. Werburgh's was dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul and the latter saints transferred to the Church by which they are known today, but what exactly was the dedication of the church by the Cross before this, and how the dedication of St. Oswald's comes into being, remain a difficulty.

In the rest of the 10th century, before the Norman Conquest, although Chester does not appear in any spectacular event, it is probable that it had developed into a place of wealth and importance.<sup>29</sup> As the City had been occupied scarcely a hundred years, this can only be explained by the development of trade probably with Ireland and further afield, and the appearance in Domesday of regulations governing shipping seems to bear this out. Unfortunately the only articles of trade mentioned are martens' pelts. It is possible that Chester became a manufacturing centre, receiving in exchange raw materials such as meat, hides, flax, etc., from Ireland, for only on a supposition such as this can we base the important position that Chester held in the early part of the Middle Ages. The earliest document in the City Archives<sup>30</sup> is a grant by Henry II protecting the City's trading rights with Ireland, a privilege shared with Bristol.

<sup>26</sup> Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, III, no. 1041.

<sup>27</sup> *Chetham Soc.*, xv, 131, 142-3.

<sup>28</sup> *Chetham Soc.*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> An attempt to equate the wealth of the city with others of the Kingdom is made difficult by its exclusion, as a principality, from the tax returns.

<sup>30</sup> Published in Morris, *Chester during the Plantagenet and Tudor Periods*, 480.

An increase of Danish influence, evidence for which can be found in Domesday Book, may have been another result of the opening up of trade relationships on a wider scale. Not only do we find an abundance of Scandinavian names,<sup>31</sup> which may have been the result of extensive colonisation dating from the time of Canute, but Danish legal forms and standards of measurement. For example, it is stated that at Handbridge there were three carucates of land, the Norse term which stands out among the Saxon hides.<sup>32</sup> It also appears that Chester was governed by twelve *iudices civitatis*, or Law men,<sup>33</sup> a form of local Government which is only otherwise found on the eastern side of England.

The moniers of Chester at this period also include many Scandinavian names,<sup>34</sup> but it is not clear if this was a monopoly held by local citizens.

#### SUMMARY.

It will be clear that the sound evidence for this period is very limited and it seems unlikely that much new material will ever be added, apart from potential archaeological sources as yet unperceived.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the evidence set forth above is the great significance of the local topography when applied to military strategy on a wider scale. Only when there is political or economic cohesion are the port facilities and the river-crossing used to effect. In the anarchy which followed the withdrawal of the Roman legions, the site, untenable by a small force, was neglected and left derelict, its true value only fully appreciated in the military reorganisation of the Mercian Kingdom at the beginning of the 10th century. Chester became once more a frontier town, a gateway to Ireland as well as Wales, and its streets have never to this day ceased to echo the tramp of armed men, nor, until perhaps more recent years, have its peaceable citizens ceased to complain of the unwarranted liberties of the lawless soldiery.

<sup>31</sup> *Chetham Soc.*, LXXV, 10; Stenton, *op. cit.*, 407; O. von Feilitzen, *The Pre-Conquest Personal Names of Domesday Book*; and Wainwright, "North West Mercia" *Lancs and Ches. Hist. Soc.* 1942.

<sup>32</sup> *Chetham Soc.*, LXXV, 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Chetham Soc.*, LXXV, 32. cf. Lincoln, Stamford, Cambridge, York. The Latin term is of course that applied by the Norman compilers of the Domesday Survey. *Vide*, Stenton, *op. cit.*, 525.

<sup>34</sup> *Cheshire Sheaf*, IV, no. 73 (Taken from the B.M. Guide to Anglo-Saxon Coins).