

Reflections on “The Archaeology of Inland Markets, Fairs and ‘Productive Sites’ c.650-850”, Worcester College, Oxford, 15th-17th December 2000

Stuart Brookes

Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

Current interest in Middle Anglo-Saxon (c. CE 650-850) settlement topography, economics and archaeology is being reflected in a number of recently published papers. Former archaeological and theoretical foci on the large semi- or proto-urban trading settlements, known generically as either *wics* or *emporia*, such as have been located at London (*Lundenwic*), Ipswich, Saxon Southampton (*Hamwic*) and York (*Eoforwic*), have shifted to include the regional hinterland beyond these specialised settlements. In part, this change in emphasis has come about in order to model the effect of urbanisation, specialisation and monetisation throughout a region. Arguably of more important influence however, are the increasing number of sites currently being identified by metal-detector clubs and the active need for archaeologists to address the issue of regional settlement hierarchies including these settlements.

Given these trends, it is unfortunate that an important conference addressing the issue of Middle-Saxon markets, fairs, and so-called ‘productive sites’, ended with a general call for definitions. The failure of the well-attended conference to either redefine the archaeological nomenclature or to actively theorise the nature of these sites, may however have as much to do with the nature of most of the presented data, as it does with current trends away from simplistic characterisations of Anglo-Saxon economics. If anything, the pan-European, multi-disciplinary perspective presented in the broad range of papers, detailed the wide variety such micro-economic case-studies can take. Contributions from colleagues from throughout northern Europe provided a useful reminder of the Early Medieval world-system, in which developments in rural integration and socio-economic intensification can be paralleled from regions as far apart as Italy and Norway. It is just a pity that the large and detailed excavations of settlements such as that by Lake Tissø, Denmark (Dr Lars Jørgensen, National Museum, Copenhagen), Gross Strömkendork, Germany (Astrid Tumuschheit, University of Kiel) or even smaller excavations such as Wijnaldum, in the Netherlands (Caroline Tulp, University of Groningen) cannot be matched by similar investigations in this country. Indeed, the emphasis on ‘productive sites’, settlements generally identified by metal-detector enthusiasts and defined as potential inland markets on the basis of the large number of coins and other non-ferrous metal artefacts found, calls into question whether the functional characteristics of a settlement can be defined without further excavation.

This point formed the thematic basis of most of the first day of papers; “Markets, Fairs and Productive Sites in England”. Examples from West Norfolk (Dr Andrew Rogerson, Norfolk Field Archaeology); Suffolk (John Newman, Suffolk Archaeo-

logical Unit); Lincolnshire (Kevin Leahy, North Lincolnshire Museum); the Isle of Wight (Dr Katharina Ulmschneider, Worcester College Oxford); western Britain (Dr David Griffiths, University of Oxford) and East Yorkshire (Dr Julian Richards, University of York) established, amongst other issues, the important role that the new Portable Antiquities Scheme and metal-detector clubs can play in site identification. In contrast, the lack of any regional synthesis from areas in southern mainland England reflects badly on those authorities still struggling to establish useful links with local detecting groups. The presented focus brought together for the first time since the 12th Oxford Coin Symposium current views on a site-type often associated with Richard Hodges' type A emporia; primarily seasonal (or annual) fairs for obtaining luxury goods (1982). The identification of a number of these settlements suggests that they may also have functioned as central-places for economic activity during this phase of intensive international trade. As was evident from Richards' paper however, there are inherent dangers in characterising sites solely on the basis of non-ferrous metalwork find-spots. Follow-up archaeological excavation of the Cottam B productive site for example, revealed the broad range of features one would expect from other Middle Saxon rural settlements, such as the contemporary phases at Wharram Percy. Additionally, it drew attention to the selective artefact sample from which many of these sites are defined. The focus on coins, pins and strap-fittings may well mask differentiation in other artefactual categories and corresponding socio-economic characterisations (Richards 1999, 79).

A recurring theme apparent throughout the first day of case-studies and revisited on the last, 'The nature, problems and future study of markets', was the concept of restricted economic access. Site hierarchies were identified particularly in terms of geographical location and state organisation. Thus, from the presented data, it is becoming abundantly clear that productive sites are to be found commanding nodal places on the routes of communication, as indeed minsters and other secular estate centres. This point was most effectively demonstrated in Newman's paper on the Suffolk productive sites. Through an interpretation of the settlements of Coddendam and Barham within a geographically-defined hinterland for the *wic* of Ipswich, the importance of the Gipping Valley as an economic channel was effectively demonstrated. His suggestion that these channels are also the zones where alienable coin-use had replaced inalienable gift-exchange mechanisms must surely form a stimulus for much future research into Middle Saxon economics and artefact distributions. It is just unfortunate that the conference lacked a synthetic analysis of the spatial dimension of these settlements along the lines of Hodges' analysis of Middle Saxon *wics* (e.g., Hodges 1982). Ben Palmer's summary of the evidence for hinterlands to the *emporia* at Ipswich, London and *Hamwic* came closest to defining the spatial criteria underlying the location of inland markets, yet questions of network morphology, space/time utility and modes/media of exchange remain unasked. Tantalising hints linking the restricted distribution of some artefacts, *wic*-gateways and the geographical extent of the emergent kingdoms of the period were suggested by many of the speakers, but these issues remain as yet essentially unexplored.

This critique is beyond the control of individual researchers in two important respects however. Primarily, the reliance on metal-detecting groups for data-collection presents important methodological difficulties to be confronted before

such broader issues can be addressed. In addition to the lack of contextual information, sites, in many cases are neither located properly, nor metal-detected in any systematic fashion (Ulmschneider pers. comm.). Secondly, although these sites are now being touted in an increasing number of papers, the publication of the first 'productive sites' conference is still pending over a decade on. Without either a synthetic work or the publication of the vast majority of regional case-studies, researchers will continue to be unable to address overarching themes (ibid.). Perhaps the largest contribution to the debate in the current state of research will continue to be the importance of numismatic evidence, as was ably demonstrated by Drs Blackburn and Metcalf in their respective papers. The distinct impression gained from Metcalf's retrogressive analysis of *sceatta*-types is, in keeping with some of the other papers, how different Wessex was in comparison with the other kingdoms of the seventh to ninth centuries. This evidence offers much weight to a required re-evaluation of the period's socio-economic and socio-political geography, so long obscured by the shadow of Saxon Southampton.

More contentious was John Blair's paper on "Minsters in the Mid-Saxon economy", which sought to link the origins of towns with ecclesiastical establishments. In a typically well-argued case, Blair defined Early Medieval conceptions of urbanism within cultural and legal, rather than commercial, definitions. Indeed, from the point of view of urban criteria, this line of argument has been much discussed by German historians for a number of years, and is in itself, not in direct conflict with archaeological models of urban development. More problematic is the view that the origins of towns must be sought within the patterns of Mid-Saxon ecclesiastical estates. Although it may be true, as Blair has effectively demonstrated, that in more cases than not, the nucleus for urban development was an ecclesiastical, rather than secular foundation, his only contradictory example, that of Lyminge in Kent, can surely be matched by other settlements. In Kent alone, the case for Early Anglo-Saxon activity at later *villae regales* such as Eastry, Milton Regis, Wye or Aylesford is persuasive (cf. Everitt 1986) as is true also of so many of the presented productive sites. Thus, although it may be true that it took an ecclesiastical foundation for a settlement to claim urban status, this argument downplays both the importance of the pre-existent settlement topography and the role local kings took in assigning ecclesiastical lands.

Unfortunately, due to problems with the Oxford Tube, I was unable to attend the contribution to the conference by our historian colleagues, though I understand that Professor James Campbell's paper on "Consumption and production" deftly summarised the available documentary evidence underlying economic historical analyses of the period. The useful reminder from these sources, of bulk commodity movement supporting ecclesiastical liturgy for example, makes clear why so much of the Anglo-Saxon economy is archaeologically invisible. Equally important is the insight to be gained from written sources regarding the location and use of periodic markets. Professor Sawyer's presentation of pre-13th century Scandinavian law-codes and sagas instructively demonstrated potential social and ethnic divisions included in the organisation of labour, sources of conflict arising from illegal trading operating outside regulated markets and the embedded significance of times and places for periodic exchange.

Conflict and location appear to have been equally important in the development of Merovingian and Carolingian markets. M. Le Maho's paper on the changes visible in the Seine valley as a result of Viking incursions, appear to parallel the centralisation of previous dispersed production and exchange visible in England with the *burghal* reorganisation associated with Alfred. Rather than 'economic take-off' therefore, the late ninth century sees the radical reorganisation of the economic framework of North-West Europe. The lessening importance of the *wics* and many of the 'productive sites' must be seen in this light. Herein lies one of the critical questions to be asked of the 'productive site' terminology however. As the primary characteristic of these settlements is the mode of their identification, their distribution will always be biased firstly to areas of deep ploughing, secondarily, to regions where metal-detector/archaeologist/numismatist liaisons have been established, and thirdly, to those sites that were subsequently abandoned. In addition, the emphasis on a hierarchy of settlements on the basis of coin finds may well be misleading. If 'productive sites' are defined as places where specialised exchange takes place, then we should not be surprised if on excavation these settlements prove to be monasteries, royal villas, villages, shire courts or anywhere else where people traded. 'Productive sites' may well operate as central-places, but so too by definition do ministers and royal villas. Trade was only one aspect of a specialised landscape. Using the numismatological criteria, Lambeth would class as a 'productive site', yet no one would see it operating independently given the proximity of the specialised trading settlement of *Lundenwic* and the seat of political and ecclesiastical power within the city walls. Maybe, as Richards has pointed out, the term 'productive site' is simply "meaningless and should be abandoned" (1999, 79), yet it begs the question of what one could, or should, put in its place.

The Oxford conference succeeded on a number of important levels. The investigation of disparate strands of evidence and a broad geographical perspective has paved the way for wider theorisation on the nature of Middle Saxon economics. Equally, the fostered spirit of co-operation between archaeologists, numismatists and metal-detectorists appears slowly to be bearing fruit in terms of a wider understanding of the economic landscape, so long dominated by the urban excavations of a handful of *wics*. More critically however, it is becoming apparent that a growing understanding of the sources of evidence demands both broader theoretical frameworks and more archaeologically tested examples. The organisers of the conference, Drs Pestell and Ulmschneider must be applauded for bringing so many of the original 'productive site' contributors together and for finally assembling the collected views together in long-awaited print. It is just hoped that 11 years from now, a similar conference on Middle Saxon economics will prove to be equally productive.

References

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