

DARK AGE MERSEYSIDE

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Introduction

The period under discussion stretches from the 5th century AD to the 10th, that is from the period of the so called end of Roman Britain to the Scandinavian settlement in England. This is often described as the Dark Ages (Collingwood and Myres 1949, 5) because of the problematic nature of its evidence. Research, both historical and archaeological, in the last two decades has brought new information and new interpretations which question the term Dark Ages (Alcock 1983, 57). 'Early Historic' (Alcock 1983, 50) and 'Migration' (Laing 1975, 3), are terms which have been used to describe this period, and all have their value. For the purpose of this report, however, the term Dark Ages will be used since it is familiar, and recognises the special difficulties presented by the nature of its evidence. This will be discussed more fully below.

Merseyside, as has been noted elsewhere in this volume, is an area arbitrarily designed to serve modern administrative needs. Regional boundaries during the Dark Ages were constantly fluctuating and it would be unrealistic to consider Merseyside in isolation. Natural features, the Mersey and the Dee, the Pennines and the Irish Sea played a part in defining the political and social development of the region, and in deciding whether Merseyside should be involved in political developments in north or south Britain. It is, therefore, intended to consider Merseyside in the context of the shifting politics of British and English kingdoms in north and west Britain. In particular the development of the kingdom of Rheged will be examined together with its implications for Merseyside. The importance of Chester will be stressed, particularly its British and Scandinavian connections.

Consideration will be given to the historical concepts which underlie the history of Merseyside, to the extent to which the region represents an area of continuity with Roman Britain, and indeed with the preceding Iron Age, and to how far this continuity was disrupted by the *adventus saxonum*.

Evidence

There are no local literary sources relating to Merseyside in this period, but the major British, Irish and Anglo Saxon sources can throw a certain amount of light on the history of the northwest, and in this context Merseyside can be set.

The main British contemporary or near contemporary sources give a gloomy picture of strife and disorder, where the British faced hostile Anglo Saxon neighbours

with whom they were in constant conflict –

'... the ferocious Saxons ... hated by man and God, should be let into the island like wolves into the fold,'..

(Winterbottom 1978, 26)

Anglo Saxon sources paint a somewhat similar scene

'473 In this year Hengest ... fought against the Welsh and captured innumerable spoils, and the Welsh fled from the English like fire'

(Garmonsway 1978, 14).

Irish sources, particularly the Irish Annals, have perhaps been under used in discussions on British history. Recently they have been re-examined (Smyth 1984, 25) in the light of events in north Britain in the 7th and 8th centuries, and useful inferences have been made.

Archaeological evidence, in contrast to literary, tends to concentrate on the material development of a people and to give a picture of events at once more gradual and more restrained than the battle image of the chronicles. The invasionist – diffusionist debate, so eloquently summarised by Renfrew (1973, 272ff), illustrates the point. On Merseyside the archaeological evidence for settlement is scanty. Something can be gained from a scrutiny of early churches; cross fragments of the early Christian period exist, small finds have been recovered. Together with the historical record, a picture of developments on Merseyside can be made, and new questions can be posed. Place name evidence is useful for this period, and much reliance will therefore be placed on the work of place name scholars.

Post-Roman Britain from the 5th to the 6th centuries

The term post-Roman Britain, or perhaps more accurately, sub-Roman Britain (Thomas 1981, 274) is often applied to these two centuries. Alcock (1973, 99), on a more positive note, describes it as Independent Britain. During these centuries, much of the social, economic, administrative and political structure of Roman Britain gradually gave way to native institutions, and to the newer political developments under the incoming Germanic peoples from northern Europe (Salway 1984, 16 and 446-87).

The phrase *adventus saxonum* used by Bede (Sherley Price 1982, 55-6) to describe the coming of the Saxons to Britain, conveniently summarises a series of events covering the first half of the 5th century. Although the English sources concentrate on the Saxons, it is possible

to see that the British, not only in the southeast but also in the west, were involved either in negotiations with, or warfare against, the Saxons. Archaeological evidence suggests that Saxon advance in Britain, was confined during the pagan period, ie till about 597, to the south and east of Britain. The period map (OS 1966 *Map of Britain in the Dark Ages*) graphically presents the evidence of the distribution of pagan Saxon burials in Britain which do not go beyond a line running from Flamborough Head in the northeast, through York and the Peak district to Portland Bill in the south. It might thus be possible to infer that major Saxon advance into the west did not take place until the early 7th century, as indeed much of the literary and place name evidence also suggests.

Saxon incursions into the west did occur, however, as early as the 5th century. In 429 Germanus, Bishop of Auxerre visited Britain (Morris 1980, 26) and as an ex-soldier successfully led a British force against a combined army of Picts and Saxons. The location of the 'Alleluia' victory has been much debated (Thompson 1984, 52) but it is possible that it took place at Maes Garmon near Mold (Bu'lock 1972, 11-3).

In 434 the *Annals of Ulster* (Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887, 5) record the 'first prey of the Saxons in Ireland'. These episodes were little more than forays into the Celtic world and were successfully repulsed. From them however, it may be possible to infer a fairly vigorous British presence in the Irish Sea area.

Towards the close of the 5th century pressure upon the British increased from the Scots from Ireland, Picts from the north, and Saxons from the east. This is the period when individual Britons took over leadership and organised resistance but often failed to make this coherent among their own people. Vortigern, following Roman military policy, found himself in conflict with Ambrosius Aurelianus, the Emrys of Welsh legend (Morris 1980, 29-30). Arthur, assuming leadership probably a generation later, possibly came nearest to uniting the British against the enemy. His twelve battles, enumerated by Nennius (Morris 1980, 35-6), may well have been located as widely apart as north of the Humber to the Severn. His ninth battle was fought at the city of the Legion, which, if accepted as Chester (McPeake 1977, 43), suggests that British resistance in the Mersey region was vigorous and successful in the years around AD 500.

The fate of the Britons

The fate of the Britons after the *adventus saxonum* has been much debated. Gildas' account of the misfortunes of the Britons is one of violence and slaughter,

'All the major towns were laid low ... fragments of corpses, covered ... with a purple crust of congealed blood...'
(Winterbottom 1978, 27).

This image coloured the thinking of historians of this period until the past few decades, when archaeology began to moderate the view. In the 1930s Myres was still able to write that great numbers of places inhabited in the Romano-British period were deserted (Collingwood and Myres 1937, 316). Archaeological evidence for the survival of towns and villas in Roman Britain recovered in the post-war period has changed this view (Frere 1974, 420-22). Chester is a case in point where occupation of some sort continued into the 4th and 5th centuries (McPeake 1977, 43; Laing and Laing n.d., 26; Salway 1981, 446-501; Thomas 1981, 244). These authorities tend to favour the notion that, despite flight, plague and famine, many British stayed where they were in the latter part of the 5th and early 6th centuries. Saxon settlement seems often to be located alongside Romano-British rather than to be overlying it (Salway 1981, 500; Frere 1974, 422). Jackson has further shown that although Anglo-Saxon gradually replaced British and Latin as the spoken language of southeast Britain, Cumbric, a form of British, was spoken in the west, in Cumbria, north Lancashire, Westmoreland and Strathclyde until the early 11th century (1971, 6 and 9). Thomas, pursuing this theme, stresses the part played by Christianity in establishing a long continuity between Roman and sub-Roman Britain (1981, 59).

Against the background of this thinking must be put the survival of the British on Merseyside, and there seems little reason why a settled British community would not have been living in the region in the 5th and 6th centuries.

Political Developments in relation to Merseyside: 5th to the 10th century

During this period the evidence for events in Lancashire, both literary and archaeological is meagre indeed, but if Lancashire is considered in the wider context of the emerging kingdoms of the Celtic west and the Saxon south and east, then some developments can be seen. Those kingdoms whose history most impinged upon Merseyside are probably Rheged in the north, Gwynedd in the south, Northumbria in the east and later Mercia.

The Welsh genealogies (Wade-Evans 1938, 101-107) indicates that the origins of Rheged, like that of its northern neighbour Strathclyde, lay with the shadowy Coel Hen of the late 4th and early 5th centuries, the later 'Old King Cole' of legend (Morris 1977, 54). This evidence does provide a tenuous link between the later stages of Roman Britain and the barbarian world of the post-Roman period.

The boundaries of such a large and sprawling kingdom are not easy to define precisely, but at its greatest extent it may have included Galloway, Cumbria, Lancashire and the Pennines (Smyth 1984, 3). In the 6th century Rheged seems to have split into northern



Figure 1: Dark Age Kingdoms of Britain

Rheged centred on Cumbria and Westmoreland, and south Rheged which included, as Morris suggests (1977, 214), Lancashire within the old Roman province of Valentia. The name of Rheged may well have survived in such place names as Dunragit near Stranraer, and Rochdale, Lancashire (Bromwich 1961, 518). It is therefore suggested here that Merseyside formed part of Rheged and was involved in its development. The Roman centres of Carlisle, Lancaster, Catterick and York remained as *foci* in the post-Roman period (Salway 1984, 378, 412 and 463). A Romano-British population can therefore be postulated as surviving in and around these centres which by the mid 5th century may or may not have been functioning as towns. Literary evidence certainly supports this view. Even as late as 678 church lands in the Pennine area were still in British hands as Eddius the biographer of St Wilfrid describes (Webb and Farmer 1983, 123-4).

Relations between Gwynedd and the northern British kingdoms seem to have been close, if somewhat turbulent, throughout the 5th and 6th centuries, as an episode commemorated in Welsh legend shows (Bromwich 1961, 109-116).

In the mid 6th century the two sons of Maelgwyn of Gwynedd achieved considerable power, Rhun becoming king of Gwynedd while his brother Bridei Macmaelcon became king of the Picts. At some stage during his rule his brother-in-law Elidir sought unsuccessfully to seize power from Rhun. The importance of the story for the purpose of this review is that Elidir was of the Coel dynasty, and may as Morris suggests (1977, 213), have been king of south Rheged and Lancashire. Elidir sailed 'from Penllech in the North to Penllech in Mon'. Although Penllech in the north is now a lost place name (Bromwich 1961, 114), Benllech in Anglesey looks northeastwards towards the Lancashire coast and may be considered to be 'Penllech in Mon'. A sea passage from some point perhaps on the Wirral and hugging the coast of Gwynedd would be feasible for those times.

The sequel to the story may also have a bearing on Merseyside. A contingent of north British leaders, anxious to avoid an alliance between the two Macmaelcons, launched an expedition of revenge against Gwynedd. This, too, was unsuccessful and the north Britons retreated. Rhun, a worthy successor to his father, thereupon mustered his army and marched northwards to his brother. Again Merseyside may be involved. Rhun's route overland would be as Morris (1977, 216) suggests, either by way of York or more likely by Carlisle. In any case Rhun must have passed through Lancashire, if not Merseyside.

Rheged probably reached its greatest strength under its king Urien, who ruled from about 570 - 590. He is described in the poems of Taliesin as a great warrior in the heroic sense and, more importantly, as the ruler of Catraeth (Skene 1868, 345). Catraeth is generally accepted as being located at Catterick (Smyth 1984, 20-21), although this view has recently been challenged

(Alcock pers. comm.). On the grounds of its strategic importance (Bromwich 1961, 516-520) Catraeth will be accepted as being located at Catterick for the purposes of this paper.

Urien of Rheged seems to have had considerable political skill since he was able to form an alliance among the British kings to fight against the Angles of Bernicia. Unfortunately the alliance was bedevilled by the inability of the British to maintain it and Urien was treacherously assassinated by one of his rivals (Morris 1980, 37-8).

Very shortly after this, in about 600, another British alliance was defeated by the Angles at Catterick and thereafter the power of Rheged gradually declined, although it was still considered sufficiently important to provide a princess for Northumbria in the 7th century (Morris 1980, 36). The battle of Catraeth is commemorated in the very early British poem the *Gododdin*. In addition to describing its defeat, the poem also sheds some light on the composition of the British army. It was organised by Mynyddog of Gododdin in southeast Scotland and included contingents from the Picts, from Ayrshire, from the British kingdom of Elmet near Leeds, from Gwynedd and Anglesey (Jackson 1969, 4-8). One verse is of particular interest in this context: 'Isag the distinguished man from the region of the South, his manners were like the sea-flood for graciousness... and pleasant mead-drinking...' Jackson (1969, 128) points out that to a Gododdin man, the south could mean Rheged or Elmet. It is tempting to see a mead drinking Merseysider in this 6th century Christian.

The alliances formed at Catterick and the disunity among the leaders during Rhun's campaigns demonstrates the strength and the weaknesses of the British. They could unite under pressure, but lacked the political development to sustain it. They also demonstrate that communications among the British were close enough for the armies to muster from quite considerable distances. This surely suggests a fairly widespread population in the sub-Roman parts of Britain, and a population which was neither refugee nor isolated. The implication is that the threat from the Northumbrians was not serious until after the battle of Catraeth.

Anglian penetration during the 7th and 8th centuries

Anglian advance westwards both from Northumbria in the northeast and Mercia in the south is discernible in the written record from the 7th century.

In about 547 Ida of Northumbria established himself as king and built a fortress at Bamburgh (Garmonsway 1978, 16-17). This date forms a traditional and convenient starting point from which to consider the growth of Northumbria and its relationship with the

northwest, although it need not be taken as the date for the first arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Northumbria (Wainwright 1975, 1-6). Around 592 Ethelfrith succeeded to the kingdom of Bernicia and by a skilful marriage to a princess of Deira, consolidated his position.

Ethelfrith's growing strength was perceived as a threat by his northern neighbours and in 603 a British alliance under the king of the Scots of Dalriada was defeated by Ethelfrith at Degsastan. As at Catterick, the British army drew allies from a wide area. A northern Irish contingent of the UiNeill was present, as was possibly a Bernician prince (Jackson 1969, 10). Although the site of Degsastan is not known for certain it is suggested that it took place at Dawston in Liddesdale (Stenton 1971, 77). Such a location would give Ethelfrith a strategic advantage in the north since he was thus able to separate the Britons of Strathclyde from the Britons of Lancashire (Wainwright 1975, 1-6). Bede's comment on the battle has, in this context, the ring of truth; 'From that day until the present, no king of the Scots in Britain has dared to do battle with the English' (Sherley-Price 1982, 92-3).

Strengthened by these victories, Ethelfrith turned his attention to the Britons centred around the Mersey and the Dee. Both Bede and the Anglo Saxon Chronicle record the battle of Chester in about 614, where Ethelfrith defeated a large number of Britons, supported by the monks from Bangor-is-Coed. Although Ethelfrith clearly aimed to attack the Britons, it is not clear to what extent this was part of a plan of conquest in south Lancashire and north Wales. Both Ekwall (1922, 231) and Wainwright (1974, 6-7) regard the outcome as a major step forwards in the Anglian colonisation of Lancashire. Jackson on the other hand is inclined to see it merely as an excursion (1971, 214), a view supported by Hunter Blair (1983, 36-7). However the battle may be viewed, there is no written evidence to suggest that Ethelfrith made much of an effort to consolidate this victory. Furthermore the British kingdom of Elmet, despite its small size, survived intact until the reign of Ethelfrith's successor. This in itself would act as a bar to prevent Ethelfrith's full conquest of Lancashire.

The penetration of Lancashire and Cumbria by the Angles gained in strength during the reign of Ethelfrith's successor, Edwin 617-632. He occupied Elmet (Morris 1980, 38) and brought Anglesey and Man under his rule. It is reasonable to infer from this, as does Ekwall (1922, 232) that the land opposite Anglesey and Man also came under Edwin's control. Jackson (1971, 214) again sounds a cautious note, stressing that there is inadequate place name and no archaeological evidence for English occupation west of the Pennines during the pagan period. This gains support from Sylvester (1962, 16) working on Cheshire place names.

The campaigns of Penda and Cadwallon against Edwin

in 632-3 formed a temporary setback to Northumbrian advance westwards. It did enable the Mercians in their turn to move northwards into south Lancashire (Thacker 1987, 243). Ekwall (1922, 230) suggests that the Mercian elements in the Lancashire place names supports the idea of a colonisation of Lancashire in this period.

Penda continued his Northumbrian campaigns until his own death in battle in 655. Like other leaders of his time he set up alliances, which in 654 included the King of the East Angles, a number of British princes, and the king of Gwynedd (Morris 1980, 38). The route northwards taken by this warband is not known, but it is likely to have followed the old Roman system via Chester and Manchester, or even Wigan where place name evidence suggests the survival of many British communities (Fig. 2; Ekwall 1922, 225ff).

The reign of Egfrith (670-685) is seen by some authorities, and Jackson (1971, 214) in particular, as being the period when Anglian settlement in Lancashire increased in intensity. A famous passage in the 8th century *Life of Wilfrid* is taken to illustrate this. Wilfrid is described as reading out a list of lands lately deserted by the British clergy (Webb and Farmer 1933, 123-4). Although it may be inferred that Anglian penetration of Lancashire had increased, it should be noted that the British clergy had maintained a presence there at least until 670 (Hunter Blair 1983, 48). During his reign, Egfrith also granted land at Cartmel in Lancashire to Cuthbert, a grant which included all 'the Britons with it' (Arnold 1882, 200). Thus at the end of Egfrith's reign it is clear that north Lancashire and Cumbria, Carlisle and Cartmel were in English hands. Bede (Webb and Farmer 1983, 79) describes how Cuthbert visited Egfrith's wife there, and received news of Egfrith's defeat and death at the hands of the Picts at Nechtansmere 685.

Smyth (1984, 24-5), like Jackson, supports the idea that English inroads into the northwest did not gain momentum until the reign of Egfrith. He points to the marriage of Rieinmelt, great granddaughter of Urien, to Oswy of Northumbria 642-55 (Morris 1980, 36) as evidence of British strength in the northwest. He draws attention to the fact that Bede makes no mention of the establishment of English churches west of the Pennines in his own day. He furthermore points to entries in the Irish Annals which tell of British warriors fighting in Ireland between 682-709 (Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887, 131-159). This last piece of evidence suggests that the British were active in the northwest and in Ireland until the early 8th century, and Smyth himself suggests the possibility that 'the region from the Wirral to the Solway may have been in British hands almost up to Bede's own day' (1984, 25).

Relations between Britons and Mercians became more clearly defined towards the end of the 8th century with the building of the great marcher earthwork known as Offa's Dyke. This delimited English and British territory

in the Marches, leaving in British hands some English held lands north of the Wye.

By the late 8th century, however, it must be presumed from the evidence above reviewed, that English settlement in Merseyside was established and secure. The extent to which this was achieved by fighting or by peaceful penetration is debatable. The written record presents a picture of bloody but sporadic warfare. Placename and archaeological evidence on the other hand may not support this.

The Scandinavians in Merseyside

The written evidence for the Scandinavian settlement of England and its implications for Merseyside may be set against place name and archaeological evidence. This written material is not English, but Irish and Welsh. For this reason Wainwright suggests (1975, 86) that the coming of the Scandinavian to the northwest was relatively peaceful, and certainly that they came from Ireland rather than from the eastern parts of England. Their initial arrival was not however, peaceful. The *Annals of Ulster* (Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887, 366-7) and the *Brut y Tywysogion* (Williams ab Ithel 1860, 13) record the 'devastation of Anglesey in 853 by the Black Gentiles'. This was followed in 855 (Hennessy and MacCarthy 1887, 367) by the coming of Orm, leader of the Black Gentiles who was slain by Rhodri Mawr. These attacks do not seem to have been followed up, but by about 892 a Danish campaign directed against East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia led to the arrival of the Danes at Chester. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Garmonsway 1978, 88) records that Chester was at that time a 'deserted Roman site in Wirral' and Wainwright suggests (1975, 65-6, 75) that this may have been caused by unrecorded Norse raids from Ireland. Recent archaeological work in Chester however (McPeake 1977, 41-44), suggests that desertion of Chester was not total, and this may be supported by the now familiar story of the coming of Ingimund from Ireland to Wirral in 907. The story discussed by Wainwright (1943, 15-22) can in summary be said to describe how Ingimund and his followers settled in Wirral and attacked Chester, which had recently been refortified by Ethelfleda, Lady of Mercians. Place name evidence certainly confirms an extensive settlement of Hiberno-Norse in Wirral and southeast Lancashire (Fig. 2).

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle, although it says little about the Hiberno-Norse in the northwest, nevertheless indicates that a series of burhs was built by Ethelfleda and her husband to create a division between the Scandinavian settlers in the northwest and in Mercia (Garmonsway 1978, 95-105). As far as Merseyside is concerned the burhs at Chester, Runcorn and Thelwall are perhaps the most significant. It is tempting in this connection, to associate the moated site of Bromborough Court House, Wirral with part of the reconstruction campaigns of Ethelfleda. Its location at

Bromborough Pool gives easy access to the mouth of the Mersey. Documentary evidence suggests that the site was occupied in the 13th century (Chitty and Warhurst 1979, 7-8) but limited excavations of the moat in 1979 (Freke 1979, 47-52) gave little indication of occupation prior to the 18th century.

The English position was further consolidated during the reign of Edward the Elder 899-924. In 923 he received the submission of Welsh, English, Danes and Scots, the Strathclyde Welsh, and 'all the inhabitants of Northumbria, both English and Danes, Norwegians and others' (Garmonsway 1978, 104). The position of Merseyside illustrates the conflicting power politics of the period, indeed in 922/3 the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* refers to 'Manchester in Northumbria'. Thus by the 10th century Merseyside was being drawn slowly into national politics, but its northwestern position continued to form both a strength and a weakness. Its isolation as an area remote from mainstream politics was not total. Merseyside may be seen as a crossroads, where conflicting power shifts are reflected.

The debate associated with the Battle of Brunanburh illustrates this. Various sources, including the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* and the *Annales Cambriae*, have recorded the defeat by Athelstan of a combined force of Scots, Britons, and Hiberno-Norse at a place called Brunanburh about 937. Its location is not known, and places as far apart as the Humber, and Burnswark in Dumfriesshire have been proposed (Kirby 1975, 26 and Anderson 1922, 429). On linguistic grounds, Dodgson (1972, 238-40) has suggested Bromborough, Wirral. While this is not certain there is much to support his argument (Bu'lock 1972, 54-5) and were it so it would emphasise the position of Dark Age Merseyside as a region much involved in the political struggle between Britons, Angles, and Vikings.

Place Name Evidence

In the absence of very detailed and specific written or archaeological material, place names provide a useful source of information for the survival of the Britons as Anglian and Scandinavian settlement proceeded.

When Ekwall pioneered the work of place name study in Lancashire in the 1920s, he drew certain conclusions from their distribution. He suggested that the British presence in Lancashire at the time of the coming of the Angles, was fugitive or at best subordinate. This population he considered, was gradually absorbed by the Anglian incomers (Ekwall 1922, 224-7). Wainwright pursuing these lines of thought in the 1940s saw this conclusion as perhaps too generalised. He pointed out (Wainwright 1975, 21-28) that about half the British place names in Lancashire are situated not in inaccessible forest, hill or marshland but on the better land between 100-500ft OD, and indeed often lie close to later Anglian settlement. He argued that the distribution of British place names is related to the

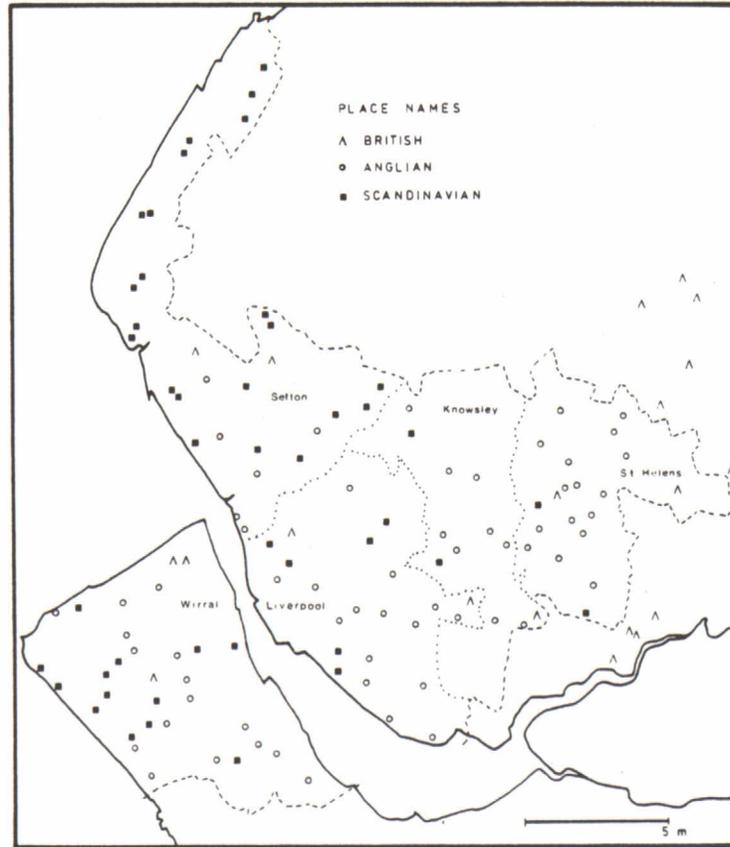


Figure 2: British, Anglian and Norse settlement in Merseyside and further, selected sites referred to in the text.

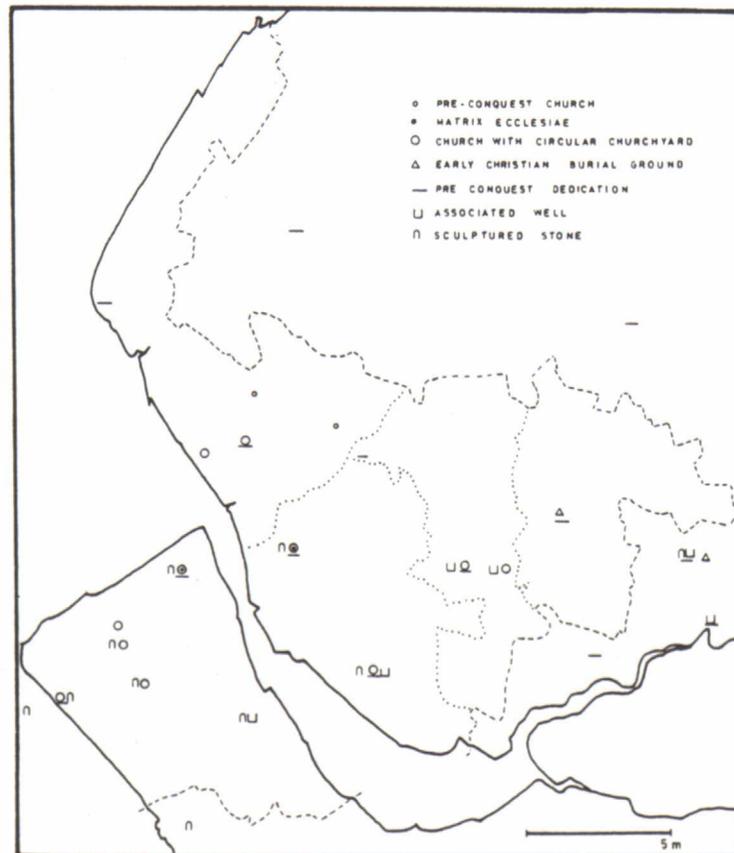


Figure 3: Evidence for early Christianity in Merseyside and further selected sites, referred to in the text.

Roman road system and indeed lists thirty-three British place names situated close to, or on Roman roads (Wainwright 1975, opp. page 1; see Fig. 2). He further indicated that the proportion of British river and smaller stream names is above the average for the rest of England. From this he concluded that a longer period of contact between Britons and English occurred in the country and elsewhere.

As early as the 1930s Myres (Collingwood and Myres 1949, 427) pointed out that many place names which appear to be 'thoroughly Teutonic' are basically Celtic. He gave the example of York, derived from the British *Eboros* - yew, Latinised as *Eboracum*, adopted into English as *Eofor* - boar, Norse as *Iorwik* and then Anglicised again as York. Sylvester (1962, 8-9) pursuing the same theme, extends the arguments to include Cheshire, Shropshire and Herefordshire. Arroe in Wirral (ON - *erg*, MIr - *airge* - shelter, Dodgson 1972, 262) might provide a similar example. More recently Gelling (1984, 109) has indicated that a fruitful area of place name study lies in topographical settlement names such as *clif*, *hill* and *denn*, which may well prove to be the earliest indication of Anglo Saxon settlement. This in turn may lead to a consideration of continuity between Briton, Saxon and Scandinavian place names at a very local level. Although Ekwall (1922, 230) and Wainwright (1975, 7) supported an early Anglian colonisation in Lancashire, Jackson (1971, 214) took a more cautious view arguing that the evidence for early Anglian place names in Lancashire is not sufficient. Smyth, considering the evidence of the Irish Annals rather than place names, supports Jackson and sees Anglian colonisation in its initial stages as very gradual and piecemeal.

Place name evidence suggests that Scandinavian entry into Lancashire appears to have been two pronged. A Danish presence moved from the east while the coming of the Hiberno-Norse from the west probably made the greatest impact on Merseyside as both Ekwall (1922, 234-8) and Wainwright (1975, 105) suggest. The distribution of Norse place names in Merseyside tends to be coastal (Cowell 1983, 16; Lewis 1982, 27). Such a distribution supports the notion of a peaceful westward penetration of Norsemen, ready to settle on and develop less attractive land. Even the somewhat contentious coming of Ingimund can be seen as part of a more prolonged and peaceful penetration of Wirral (Wainwright 1975, 161).

Thus it would seem that place names provide one of the most useful forms of evidence for settlement during the Dark Ages. The relatively peaceful account it appears to present in contrast to that of the heroic literature is likely to be nearer the truth of what actually happened in Merseyside during the 5th to 10th centuries. Increased work on place names, particularly at the level of local and field names, needs to be done to throw further light on settlement patterns during the period.

Evidence of Christianity

Place names have indicated areas of settlement on Merseyside, which are not evident from archaeology, and some support from such settlement comes from the presence of churches and associated sculptures.

The antiquity and continuity of use of circular churchyards in Britain particularly in the west, is discussed by Thomas (1971, 66-9). In this context Merseyside, both north and south of the Mersey, is well represented (Fig. 3). Of these, Walton-on-the-Hill was the *matrix ecclesia* of a very large parish, which included part of Sefton. The circular churchyard encloses a church in which there is now little evidence of pre-conquest fabric, although the font is a relic from an earlier church. The church of All Saints of Childwall with its earlier dedication to St Peter had a similar status. The association of Childwall with a well, known as the Monk's Bath, is also an indication of early origins. Incorporated in the wall of the south porch is a fragment of carved sandstone showing interlace which would seem to be of pre-conquest date. The font is also of some antiquity, but has been rechiselled. Two crosses were associated with Childwall, but they may be of medieval date (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 103-4). Childwall parish church may be linked to the church of Walton-on-the-Hill by Childwall Lane and Score Lane, which were known in the 14th century as the Portway and which ran southwards along the western boundary of Halewood through Speke. It is likely that this trackway, now much widened, is of pre-conquest date (Cowell 1983, 34). There were priests at Walton and Childwall at the time of Domesday (Morgan 1978, 269c) and it is plausible to project backwards from this and infer a long Christian presence in the area.

Other *matrices ecclesiae* are Huyton, with its chantry well and dedication to St Michael, and St Mary's Prescot. The raised circular churchyard of St Mary's is particularly distinctive, and is associated with a holy well and possibly the site of a cell related to the earliest church (Davey 1978, 9-11).

Kirkby with its Mercian dedication to St Chad is certainly a pre-conquest parochial chapel. Its red sandstone font is, however, Norman (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 50-341).

On the southeast just outside the boundary of Merseyside are several churches whose dedications suggest early origins. St Elphin's at Warrington, with its associated St Elphin's Well is an example. Despite Taylor's (1906, 217-9) assertion that the name refers to a local benefactor or to a fairy, it was a common Roman name in 4th and 5th century Britain (Salway 1984, 340 and 480). A church of some standing, St Elphin's is described in Domesday as having one carucate of land (Morgan 1978, 269d). St Luke's at Farnworth was originally dedicated to St Wilfrid, and St Mary's at Leigh to St Peter, which might perhaps give them both Northumbrian associations. The

dedication to St Oswald at Winwick, together with the nearby St Oswald's Well recalls the battle of Maserfelth in 642, when Oswald of Northumbria was slain by Penda of Mercia (Sherley-Price 1982, 156). Maserfelth may be identified with Makerfield (Taylor 1906, 224), although Stenton prefers Oswestry (1971, 82). The centre and cross arms of a pre-conquest cross of Irish type (Romilly Allen 1894, 9) survive at Winwick. The east side is carved with panels of interlace, and the west carries traces of biting beasts. Panels on the ends of the cross are thought to represent the dismemberment of Oswald at the hands of Penda (Taylor 1906, 219-223). The site of an early Christian chapel and burial ground was identified during excavations at Southworth, Winwick in 1980 (Chitty 1981, 21; Freke and Holgate 1990). Such a discovery is a reminder that early Christian churches were often built of wood 'after the Scots manner' (Sherley-Price 1982, 185) and that more of these sites may well be identified in the future.

Taylor's list of pre-Reformation chapels highlighted a number of early sites. Although the dedications are unknown and the fabric is post-conquest, the chapels at Melling and Maghull have possibly a very early foundation. Dedications to St Cuthbert, again with Northumbrian associations, are found at North Meols and Halsall, and to St Helen at Sefton, where there is an associated mill. St Helen is also commemorated at Hollinfare (Taylor 1906, 139).

In Crosby a pre-conquest chapel may have existed as the place name Harkirk (ON grey or hoary) suggests. In 1611 a hoard of coins dated to about AD 915 was discovered at the supposed site of the chapel, and excavations in 1953 and 1971 revealed stone walling of some relevance to the site (Lewis 1982, 28-9). The association of holy wells with church sites is not unusual, and Taylor (1906, 125) has drawn up a useful list for south Lancashire. By their very nature wells are difficult to date but the element of sanctity and of healing with which so many pre-conquest and post-conquest wells have been invested suggests that many may be of great antiquity. A survey of wells recently undertaken in Merseyside, suggests an area of further fruitful research (Byrne *et al.* 1987-8, pers. comm.).

Thomas (1981, 264) has drawn attention to the importance of the element *eccles* in relation to place names. He points out that churches at such sites had the status of a *matrix ecclesia* of an area which, although large, was smaller than a modern county, and that the five hundreds of Lancashire each have an *eccles* place name element. Although no structural remains exist for instance at Eccleston, St Helens, there is a small disused burial ground and according to tradition there was once a chapel on the site (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 362). In addition a cross used to stand in the old school yard. The associated field name Burying Hill has some significance here (Chitty 1981, 11 and 21). Similarly, Eccleston in Cheshire may have been the *matrix ecclesia* for Chester in the 6th century (Thacker 1987, 239).

This evidence suggests that Christianity was well established in the northwest from Romano-British times. Bede's account of the two conferences held between St Augustine and the British bishops of Bangor-is-Coed lends weight to the argument (Sherley-Price 1982, 102).

The extent of settlement and population during this period is difficult to assess from archaeological evidence. The ecclesiastical remains indicate that the head churches served very large areas, later to become parishes. Place names suggest a steadily increasing population (Fig. 2) but its density remains uncertain.

Circular churchyards are well represented on Wirral. The dedication to St Bridget at West Kirby probably reflects Hiberno-Norse influence from the coming of the Scandinavians (Bu'lock 1972, 80). When however it is noted that St Bridget is the Christianised form of the pagan British city Brigantia (Thomas 1981, 28), then a very long continuity and survival of native culture may well be indicated.

At West Kirby also are found fragments of two cross heads and two cross shafts probably dating from the 10th to 11th centuries while the fine hogback of grey sandstone probably dates from the 11th century (Thacker 1987, 289). It has a tile pattern on the spine and plait work along the sides.

Other fragments of similar sculptures have been found elsewhere on the Wirral. A broken circle head cross found at Hilbre Island is similar in style to one from St John's, Chester (Romilly Allen 1894, 9 and 30; Bu'lock 1972, 77). At St Barnabas' church at Bromborough, three fragments of a cross shaft are known. The interlace decoration and the fragment of a circle head indicate a 10th to 11th century date (Thacker 1987, 286; Romilly Allen 1894, 27-8). To the north of St Barnabas' is situated St Patrick's Well, the dedication of which carries overtones of Irish or indeed Romano-British influence. The church of the Holy Cross at Woodchurch, may originally have been the church serving Landican (OW *lan* - church of Tecan, Dodgson 1972, 266-7). In addition to its very distinct circular and raised churchyard, the church is enclosed by Woodchurch estate which was laid out during the inter-war period in a circular pattern. This in turn would appear to be dictated by an earlier circular road system, in particular, Arroe Park Road and Woodchurch Road which enclose its southern edge (OS 6" map Cheshire XVIII 1850). The topography of this area is reminiscent of monasteries of the Columban Church where a small circular enclosure is surrounded by a much larger circular area of land cultivated by the monastery. Examples are common in Ireland, as for example the 6th century monastery of St Finnian, Clonard, Co. Meath and Moyne Graveyard, Co. Mayo (Thomas 1986, 1 and 30-2). A fragment of a circle head cross, probably of 10th to 11th century date, was found at Woodchurch (Thacker 1987, 292). Occupying as they do a central position on the Wirral and lying between the 100-150ft OD, Woodchurch and Landican offer

some possibilities for further field work and aerial photography.

At St Mary's and St Helen's Church, Neston, five fragments of circle headed standing crosses have recently been redescribed and redisplayed in the church (White 1986). Four of the fragments have been stored in the church since they were found in the foundations in the 19th century. The fifth was incorporated in the lintel of the west window of the belfry. This has recently been removed with a view to displaying all five fragments in the church. The decorations include interlace and cable mouldings, and hunting and warrior scenes. A priest is shown on one fragment fully vested wearing a maniple, a second fragment shows a horizontal, winged figure. The Neston crosses, though showing influences from Irish, Pictish, Manx and Cumbrian sources, are strongly Viking in style, as is seen particularly in the use of running chain interlace and step line patterns. They may be the work of a local native workshop and on stylistic grounds may be dated to the 10th to 11th centuries. (Thacker 1987, 290).

St Hilary's Church stands on a hill top within a large curvilinear green in Wallasey village. A large sculptured cross, possibly Anglo Saxon, once stood in the churchyard, but was broken in the 17th century and used for steps for the churchyard style. The base of a possible socket stone was found when the rectory was enlarged (Thacker 1987, 292). Chitty (1978, 8) has pointed out that the circular green is much altered and it is difficult to be certain whether the hill top might have carried early defensive works.

A circular church site, marked as such in the 19th century (OS 1875, 6" Cheshire) at Moreton, Wirral, was investigated by the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside in 1987. Excavations revealed a large enclosure ditch, in the fill of which was found a silver penny of Eadwig, 955-959.

Of particular interest in this context, is the circular churchyard of the old church of St Mary at Overchurch. A recent survey of the site suggests that this circular enclosing bank is indicative of an early Christian presence in the area (O'Hanlon *et al.* forthcoming). The earliest church building known to have existed within the enclosure is of Norman foundation, but it is reasonable to consider the possibility of an earlier wooden structure. In the 19th century a stone bearing a Christian inscription in 9th century Anglo-Saxon runes, was found on the site, again suggesting a pre-conquest origin for the site.

Small Finds

In addition to the ecclesiastical evidence, small finds from both sides of the Mersey help to elucidate something of the settlement history of the region. By far the most numerous finds come from the lost site of

Meols at Dove Point, Wirral. Most of these were discovered during the 19th century by local antiquarians as the sand dunes covering the site were gradually washed away by the sea. Collections of this material are housed in the Liverpool Museum, the Grosvenor Museum, Chester, Warrington Museum and the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, Birkenhead.

Four penannular brooches of late Romano-British style suggest that the site was occupied in that period (Bu'lock 1959, 3-5), and further finds of Anglian, Mercian, Saxon and Hiberno-Norse material indicate continuity of occupation, which lasted indeed until the medieval period (Chitty and Warhurst 1977, 20-1). The quantity of middle and late Saxon metalwork, consisting of ring brooches, pins and strap fittings, suggests that a fairly thriving settlement existed during that time. The Hiberno-Norse material, which includes a number of bronze ring headed pins, is similar, its dating is in accord with historical evidence for the coming of the Norse to Wirral (Wainwright 1975, 63-128).

The coinage too, supports the evidence from the metalwork (Dolley 1961, 113). Two silver sceattas of 7th and 8th century date, and copper stycas from the 9th to the 11th century confirm that not only was the settlement thriving, but that trade was vigorous and continuous. Of particular interest in confirming the existence of overseas communications and of a Christian connection is the finding at Meols of a pilgrim's flask of 6th to 7th century date, from the shrine of St Menas in Lower Egypt (Bu'lock 1972, 35).

The site at Dove Point seems to have come to the end of its occupation during the 14th century, either by inundation or abandonment in favour of a site nearer the mouth of the Dee (Chitty and Warhurst 1977, 21). Stray finds have been recovered elsewhere and give some indication of British and Saxon activity in the region. These include a 6th century Anglo Saxon small long brooch of copper alloy, and a copper alloy strap end which can be paralleled from a group of strap ends, of the 9th century, from Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire. A head of a silver disc headed pin has parallels with objects from the Trewhiddle Hoard, Cornwall. It is of 9th century date and was found in the coastal region of the Mersey (Philpott 1988, pers. comm.). A copper alloy pin has parallels with an Anglo Scandinavian pin from the Midland Bank site at York, and with one of the Meols pins (Bu'lock 1972, 10, Fig. 3). Two coins found at Moreton, may be taken as indicators of trade. These are a much worn stray find of a 6th century coin of Justinianus I and the 10th century silver penny of Eadwig, mentioned above.

Though scattered and fragmentary, the recent finds tend to confirm that a fairly thriving trading system was operating in Merseyside during the Dark Ages, and that both the Dee and the Mersey became *foci* of this activity, which spread beyond the Irish Sea and into the Mediterranean.

Conclusions

A case can be made here for the continuity of culture, as Britons, Angles, Saxons and Scandinavians gradually came to terms with one another in the north west during the Dark Ages. Perhaps the problem that is least well known, or well understood, that of the survival of the British, is the area which might in the future be more widely explored. Linguistic and textual studies of British sources (Grabowski and Dumville 1984, vii) may argue for a prolonged British presence. It should be kept in mind that there may yet be evidence to be found at Camp Hill, Woolton. Excavations here in 1960 (Cowell 1985, 12 and 56) revealed the foundations of a rampart consistent with Iron Age construction. Bearing in mind that the Dark Age reoccupation of hillforts is now a well established phenomenon (Alcock 1989, 189-226), further excavations at Camp Hill may be rewarding. The cluster of Walton names south of Runcorn might be an indication again of a British presence. Redevelopment in the coastal area of the Mersey and the Dee, may, in the light of more refined archaeological techniques, be revealing. In this context, the discovery in the 19th century of wooden material in the Mersey/Sankey area of Warrington should not be forgotten (Madeley 1895, 97-106). Aerial photography, especially in the rural areas of Merseyside, may provide useful clues. Stray finds, isolated in themselves, have a cumulative value.

It is thus possible to take a positive view of the body of evidence for this period as it has gradually accumulated in the last ten years. The Merseyside region should certainly repay further investigation by archaeologists, both professional and amateur.

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