EARLY MEDIEVAL URBAN CENTRES IN BRITAIN: A COMPARATIVE TYPOLOGICAL MODEL FROM A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

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Introducing the material

Problem:

- Insufficient interest for the Anglo-Saxon urbanism on the part of historians
- Prevalence of the case-by-case principle of study
- Insufficient comparison with foreign urban structures

Aim of the paper:

- To sketch out a possible framework to collate the data against

Scope of the paper:

- Geography: England (south of Hadrian's Wall, east of Offa's Dyke)
- Period: *c.* 450–1066

Anticipated results:

- A meta-analytical tool for further research on both micro- and macrolevels
- Introduction to possible cross-disciplinary comparisons

Framework's composition

Origins:

- Roman urbanisation (1–5th centuries C.E.)

- Early Anglo-Saxon *wīcas*/*emporia* (7th century C.E.)

- Viking-age urbanisation: West Saxon *brughal* system/Scandinavian hubs (9th century C.E.)

Functions:

- Royal and/or ecclesiastical centres (cultural/political)

- Commercial focal points (economic)

- Territorial capitals (administrative)

Regionality:

- Wessex (the densest urbanisation; all overlapping origins and functions)

- English Mercia (far fewer *burhs*; weaker royal presence)

- The Danelaw (late integration into the kingdom)

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Roman heritage (1–5th centuries C.E.)

Simplified map of Roman Britain (ad 43–c. 410) showing major roads, towns, forts, frontiers and other sites (after: R. Hobbs & R. Jackson. *Roman Britain: Life at the Edge of Empire* (2010). P. 10)

- 4 *colōniae* (Colchester, Lincoln, Gloucester, York);
- 1 *mūnicipium* (St Albans);
- 13 *cīvitātēs* (Silchester, Winchester, Aldborough, Canterbury, Leicester, Wroxeter, Cirencester, Exeter, Caistor St Edmund, Chichester, Dorchester, Ilchester, Brough on Humber);
- + smaller *vīci*, legionary fortresses, aristocratic *vīllae*

Roman Cirencester (property of the Corintium Museum)

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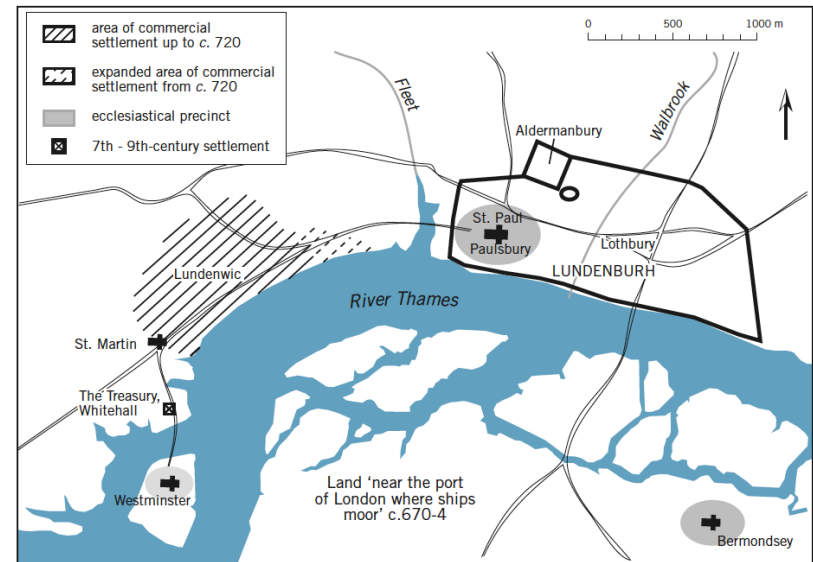- Territorial capitals (administrative)

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Early Anglo-Saxon contribution: *wīcas*/*emporia* (7th century C.E.)

- **Major trading hubs**: York, London, Ipswich, *Hamwīc*
- **Settlement origins**:
1. recycled Roman structures (Ipswich);
2. fully new (*Hamwīc*);
3. the combination of the two above (London: *Lundenburh* and *Lundenwīc*)

Wīcs, or *emporia,* and 'productive sites' (after: N. Higham & M. Ryan. *The Anglo-Saxon World* (2013). P. 146)

Lundenwic, in relation to the Roman city of *Londinium* and to major ecclesiastical sites (after: J. Blair. *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (2018). P. 169)

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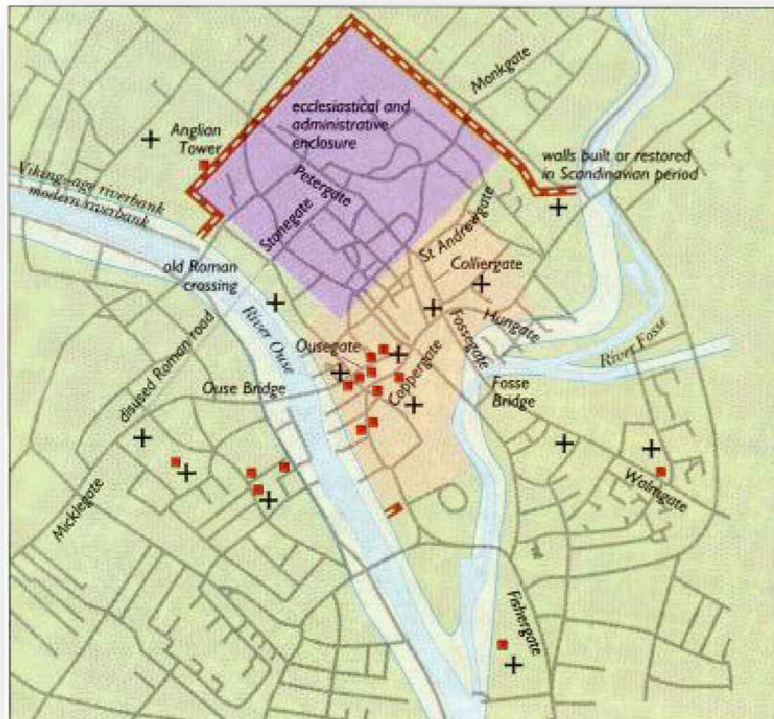
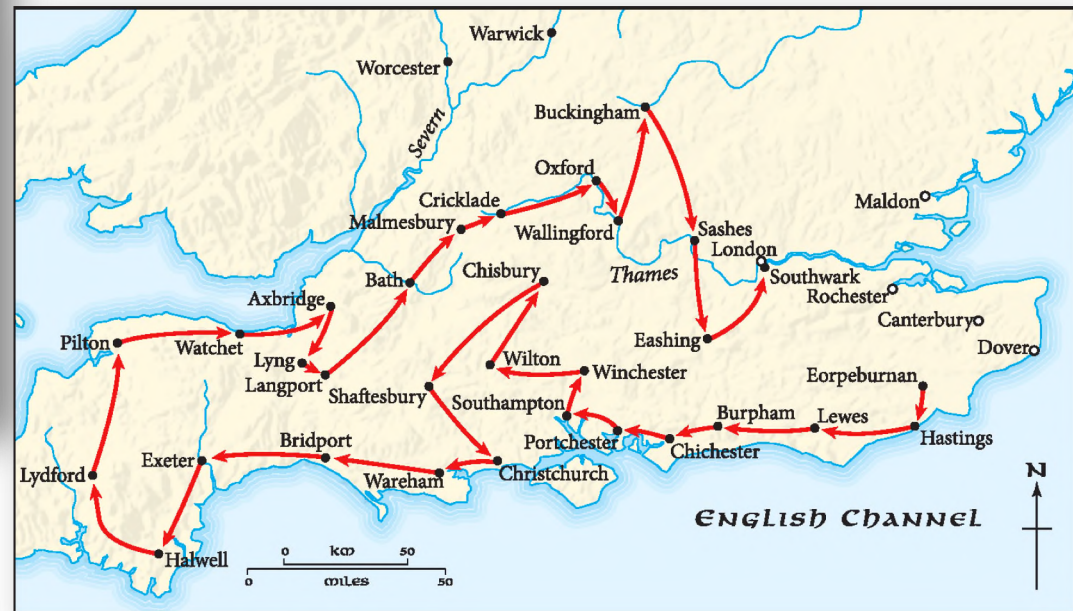- The Danelaw (late integration into the kingdom)

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Viking-age urbanisation: West Saxon *burghal* system/Scandinavian hubs (9th century C.E.)

Viking Jorvik, 886–954 (after: J. Haywood. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* (1995). P. 70)

New towns:

- Scandinavian re-occupation of the former (post-)Roman sites;
- West Saxon *burghal* defensive network (33 fortresses in total)

The Burghal Hidage (after: N. Higham & M. Ryan. *The Anglo-Saxon World* (2013). P. 279)

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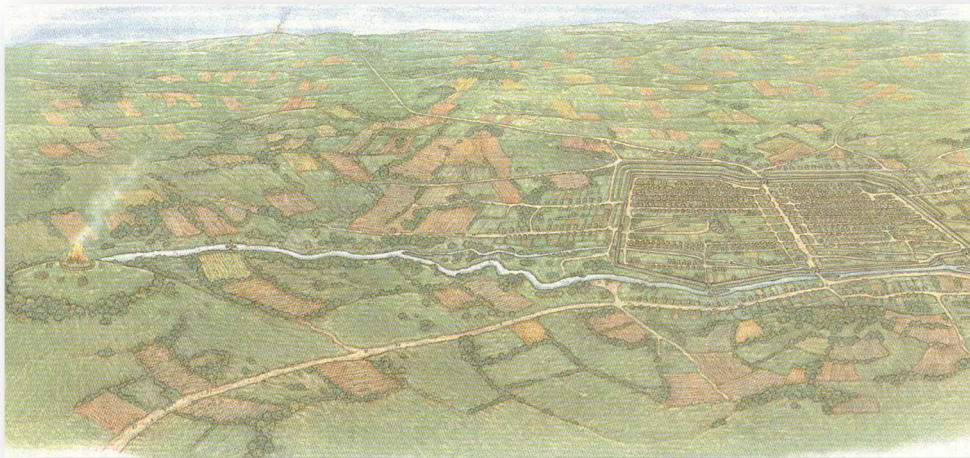
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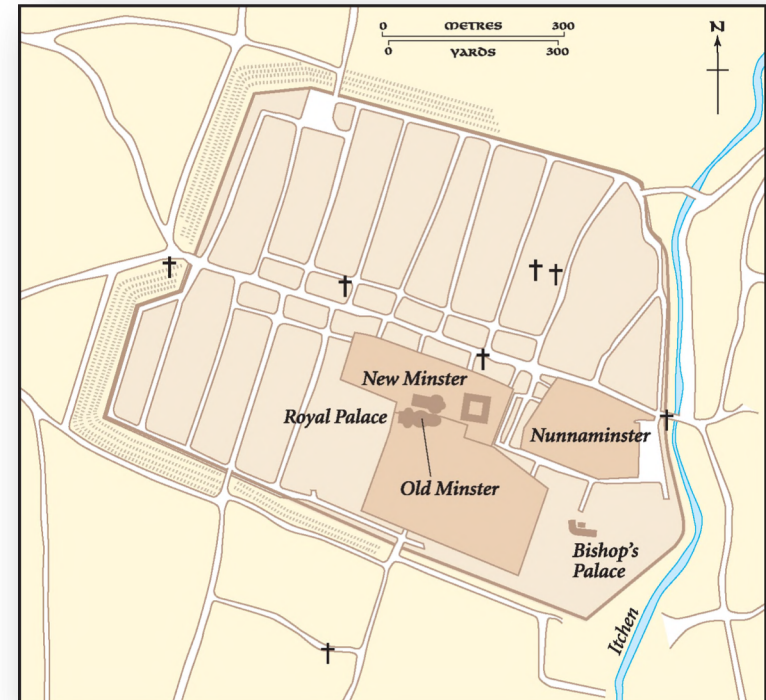- The Danelaw (late integration into the kingdom)

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Royal and ecclesiastical centres

Winchester (after: Lavelle, Ryan. 2003. *Fortifications in Wessex c. 800–1066* (2003). P. 34)

- **Examples**: Chester, Wilton, Dorchester, Winchester, etc.
- **Common/frequent features**:
1. (pre-)Roman occupation;
2. Ecclesiastical significance;
3. Fortified under King Alfred;
4. Assosiation with the government.

Winchester. A new capital for the West Saxon kingdom in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, Alfred and Edward re-used the Roman walls but reorganised the interior (after: after: N. Higham & M. Ryan. *The Anglo-Saxon World* (2013). P. 280)

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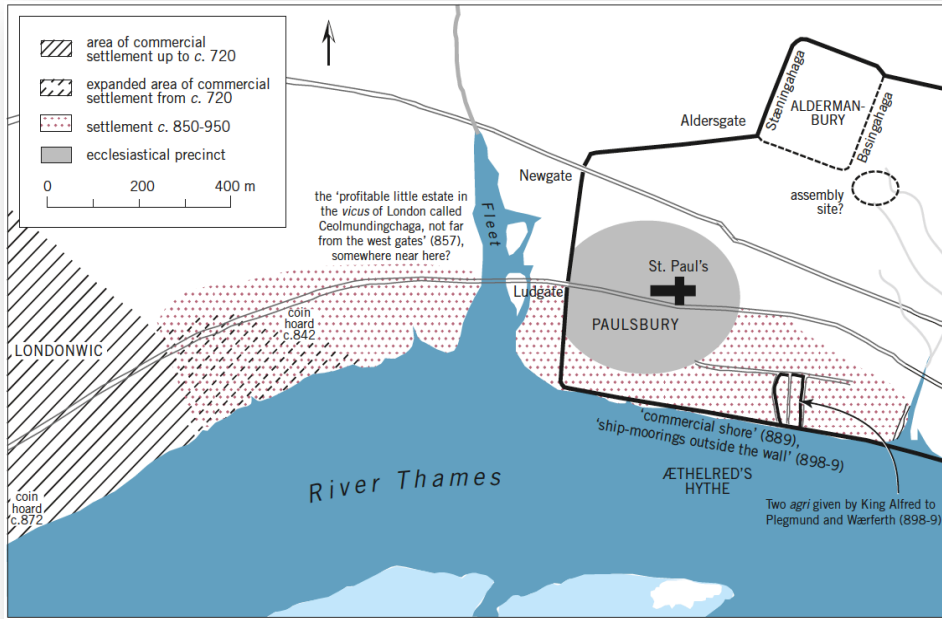
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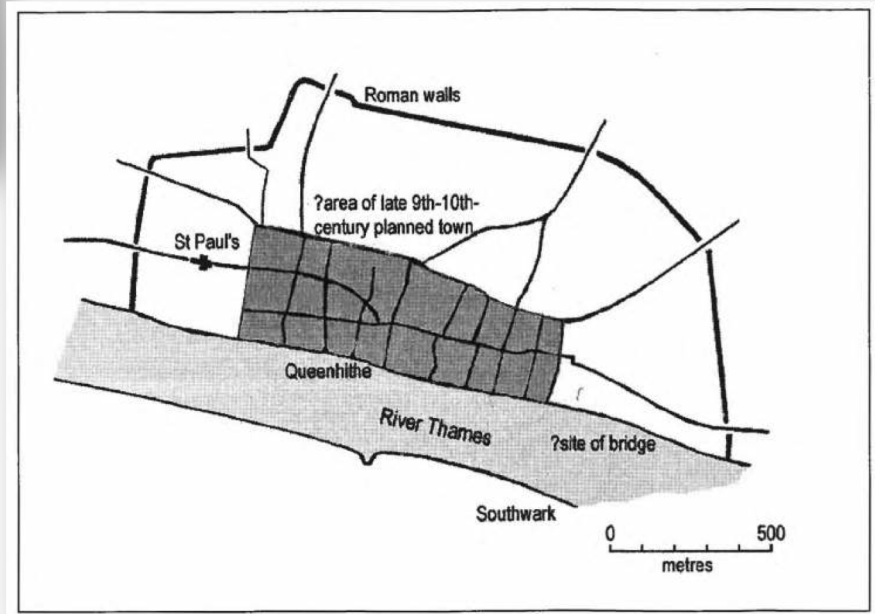
Commercial focal points

London circa 850–900, illustrating its eastwards drift from the collapsing emporium of *Lundenwic* to proto-urban aristocratic enclaves around Saint Paul's (after: J. Blair. *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (2018). P. 271)

London <u>before 886</u>: "royal, ecclesiastical, and ceremonial" (M. Biddle. *Towns*. In *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England* (1976). P. 114).

London <u>by 1066</u>: *de facto* the economic capital (besieged by Kings Sweyn and Cnut in 1013 and 1066 respectively); later the political capital as well (hosted William I's coronation in 1066).

A map of London in the eleventh century, this shows the defences of the former Roman city and the importance of Thames waterfront (after: R. Lavelle. *Aethelred II: King of the English 978–1016* (2002). P. 120)

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Traditional English shires (before 1066; after: R. Lavelle. *Aethelred II: King of the English 978–1016* (2002). P. 17)

The territorial division into *shires* had been complete by 1066, but the units were of **various roots**:

- Wessex – naturally formed shires;
- The Danelaw – naturally formed (predominantly) Scandinavian districts;
- West Mercia – artificial shiring after the West Saxon annexation.

$\Rightarrow$ **various origins of the** respective **capitals**, *e.g.*:

- Winchester (Wessex) – a royal site;
- Warwick (West Mercia) – a former *burh*;
- 'the five boroughs' – Danish urban hubs

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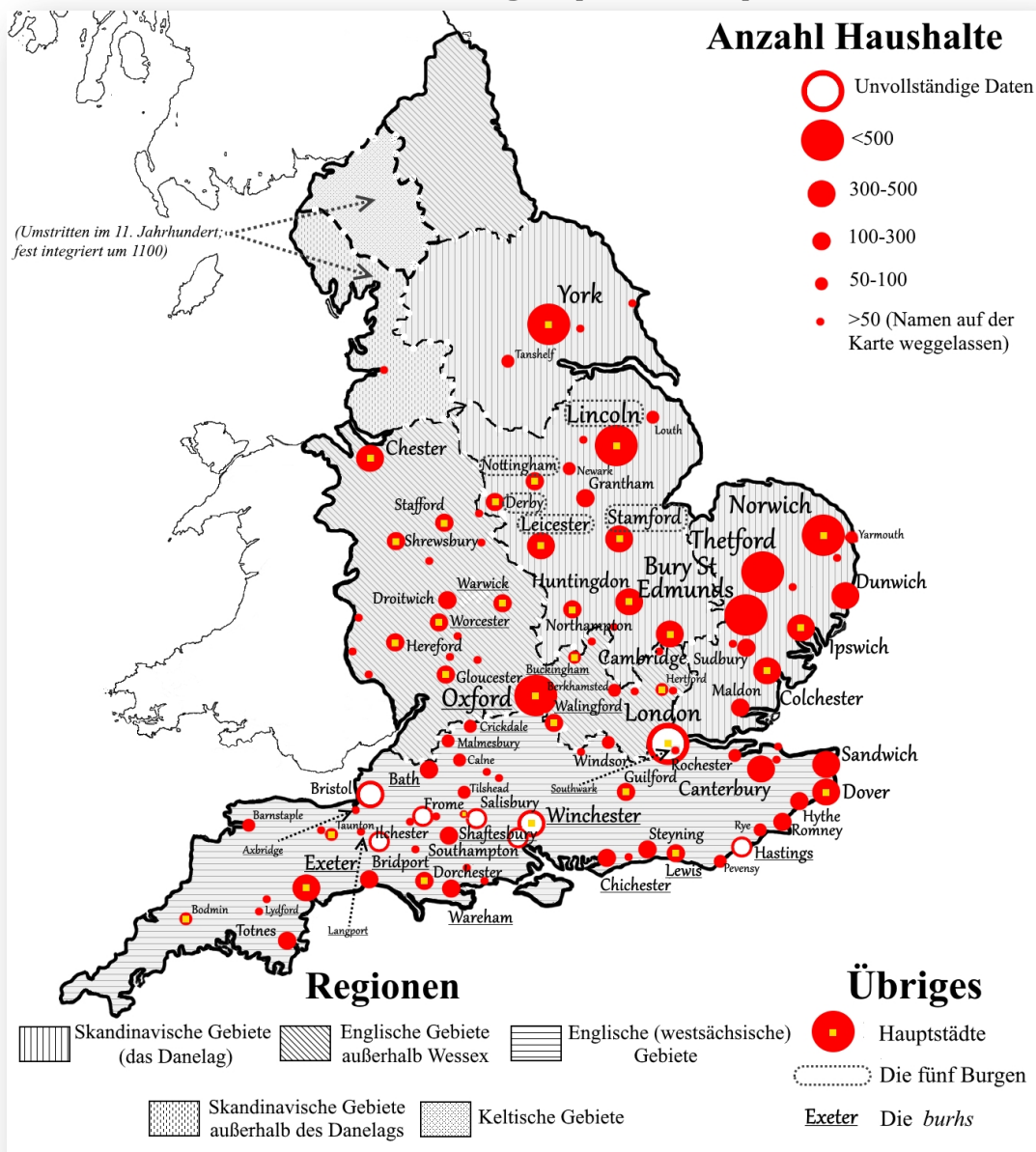
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Regionality at the time of the Domesday Survey (1086)

West Saxon characteristic features:
- the densest urbanisation;
- all overlapping origins and functions;
- the least interruption with the Roman urbanism.

Mercian characteristic features:
- far fewer *burhs*;
- weaker royal presence.

Scandinavian characteristic features:
- fewer major towns;
- absence of *burhs*;
- weaker royal presence.

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Further application

Town	Winchester	
Origin	(pre-)Roman	
Region	Wessex	
Burh	yes	
Functions	royal	yes
	ecclesiastical	yes
	shire capital	yes
	commercial	no

A possible formal assessment chart

1. Formalise the results for each town.
2. Aggregate the statistics.
3. Compare the results with other regions.

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THANK YOU!

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