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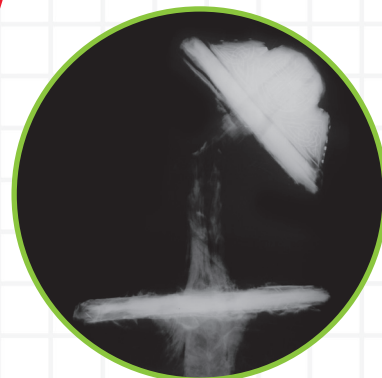
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Check out the Towns

by Denis Sukhino-Khomenko

illustrated by John Gordon-Swogger



Pictured here is an Anglo-Saxon earth and timber wall, as seen from the inside.

The survival and the prosperity of any community are both closely tied to the economy, social structure, politics, religion, and customs of the community. England's early medieval towns are no exception. Therefore, to understand them, we must understand the forces that affected them.

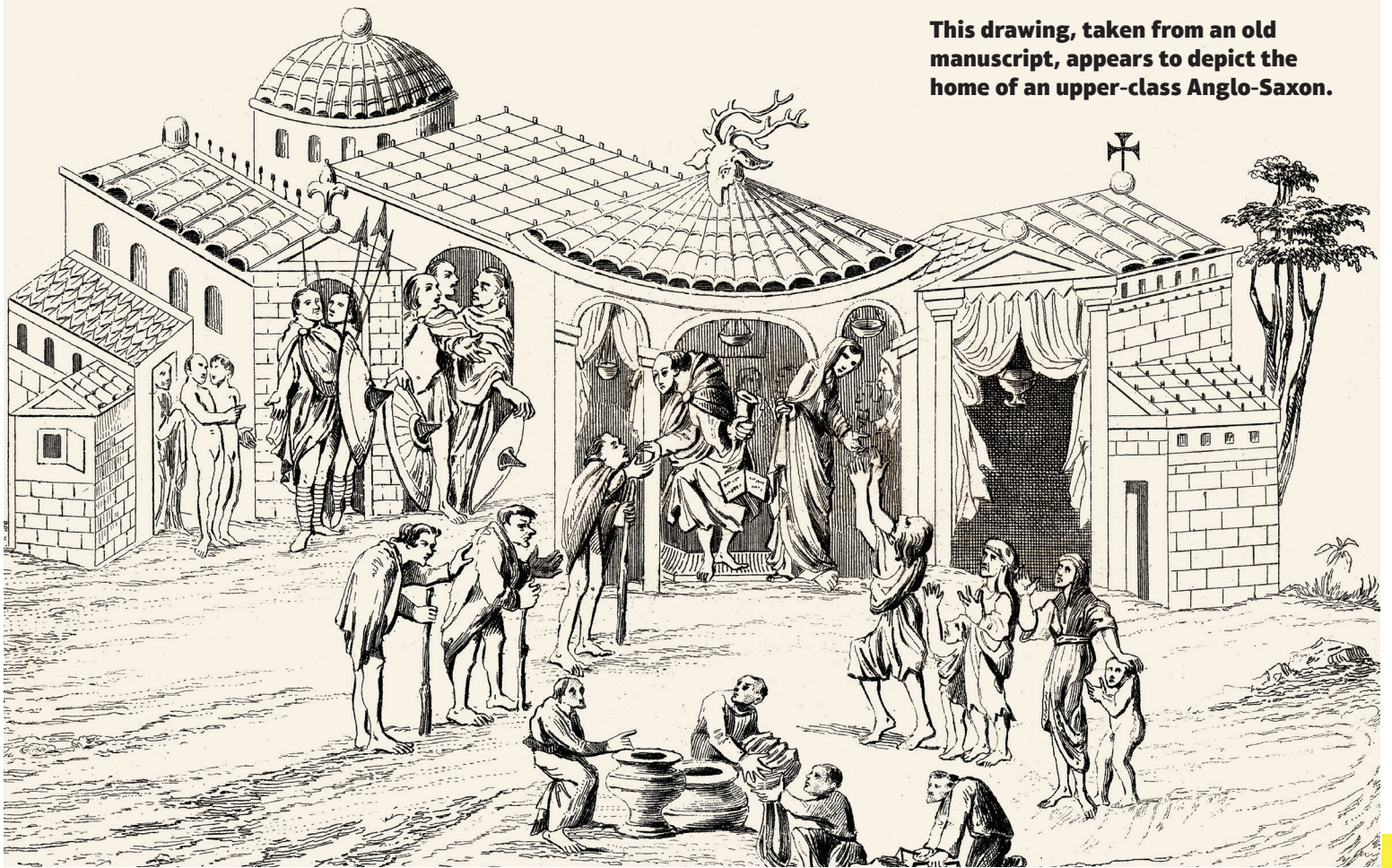
Enter the Romans

If we look at Britain before the Romans took control and then after, we see that urban development was one of the greatest changes that took place. While the significance of this change is major, the areas affected were limited to only a few sites. At the height of Roman Britain, when the population was roughly 2.5 to 3.5 million inhabitants, no more than 10 percent — perhaps some 250,000 — of the people lived in towns. The countryside and the people living there remained largely unaffected during this period.

Let's take a closer look at these urban settlements. The largest were the *coloniae*, whose inhabitants had full Roman citizenship. These included Colchester, Lincoln, Gloucester, and later York. The next largest were the *municipia*. Only St. Albans in Hertfordshire was in this category, and its inhabitants also had full Roman citizenship. The third group, the *civitates*, usually consisted of areas that had once been major tribal centers. Among these was Caistor-by-Norwich. The fourth group included the *vici*. These smaller settlements bordered larger settlements such as garrisons and forts. There were also the *villae*, or estates, that lay just outside a town, where members of the nobility often lived.

Excavated finds tell us that the decline of the Roman towns in Britain began long before the administrators and the legions withdrew from the island. By the 360s, in fact, many businesses were failing. So, would continued Roman presence have stopped the downturn? The answer is unclear. The decline of the towns in the fifth

This drawing, taken from an old manuscript, appears to depict the home of an upper-class Anglo-Saxon.



century was not abrupt. The imperial forces and staff did leave Britain for good at that point, but there had been other similar departures in the past. So, for several decades, the Romano-Britons expected the Roman masters to return just as they had after previous downturns. How do we know this? Finds of early fifth-century silver coins that were clipped on the edges offer some evidence. The practice of clipping made it possible to keep the coins in circulation while, at the same time, getting from them some raw material for **bullion**. By the 470s, however, this practice had stopped. With no imperial protection of the lowlands, Britons chose to hire Germanic mercenaries, a practice the Romans had observed in other provinces of their empire.

Change Arrives

The migrating Jutes, Angles, Saxons, and Frisians (another Germanic group) were essentially agricultural peoples and not accustomed, for the most part, to city life. As a result, most of the

already shrunken or abandoned Romano-British towns saw little development until the seventh century. There were some small fortified royal centers, such as Bamburgh, Dunbar, Edinburgh, and Yeavinger in Northumbria. What changed all this was the Church.

The Church played a role not only in the economy of the area but also in converting the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity. By doing so, it slowly drew these areas into relationships with mainland Europe. At the same time, a new trade network was emerging in northwestern Europe, and it used the new coinage that the Anglo-Saxons called *sceattas*. Today, we call towns involved in this network *emporia*, but the Anglo-Saxons knew them as *wicas* (plural of *wic*).

London and York Grow

Some of these towns were newly built, while others recycled Roman structures. Still others had some of both. During the seventh century, Roman *Londinium* became an example of the town that

had both newly built structures and recycled Roman structures. The walled Roman settlement, known as *Lundenburh*, mostly overlapped with the historic and main business section of present-day London. The area was seen as royal, church-oriented, and ceremonial. To its west lay the new *Lundenwic*, which was mostly commercial. The revival of trade probably led to conflicts about who controlled the new *emporium* (singular of *emporia*). As a result, by the end of the seventh century, *Londinium* had a king from Mercia and not from East Saxony. In turn, to compensate for the loss in this struggle, the West Saxon kings founded their own trading site, *Hamwic*. And, just about when London became the East Saxon church center, a new church center was established in York.

From the early 700s on, York had been the single most important city in all of England's North. Its organization resembled that of London. What had once been a Roman fort was now reserved for the bishop and the king. The *colonia* probably featured a monastery, and an *emporium* occupied the eastern bank of the River Foss. East Anglia's new-founded *emporium* was Ipswich. Many Roman locations were being resettled, which is why some Latin words, such as *colonia* ("colony"), *castrum* ("camp"), and *strata* ("paved roads") are still present in many English place names. Examples are: Lincoln, Worcester, and Chester-le-Street.

The Changes Continue

It is unknown if kings were directly involved in the urban revival that happened during the seventh



An aerial view of a walled Anglo-Saxon town

NOTE: Today, the word "emporium" refers to a large retail store selling a wide variety of goods.



These buildings are all part of a reconstructed Anglo-Saxon village in eastern England.

and eighth centuries. What is almost certain is that kings did support and benefit from trade opportunities. Following the collapse of Mercian rule in the 820s and the violent Viking raids across Western Europe that took place a little later, the *emporia* network in England saw disruption and decay. The changes, however, had begun earlier. Not all sites stopped functioning as commercial centers. Excavated finds and the written record offer evidence that Canterbury, for example, was quite prosperous. Yet, many sites did have to be abandoned or relocated. *Hamwic's* population left for the better defended Southampton nearby, *Lundenwic* slowly died by the mid-ninth-century, and York's *emporium* on the River Foss was never rebuilt after the 860s.

Surprisingly, the invasions in the 860s and 870s by what history recorded as the “great heathen army” spurred further development of towns throughout England. Looted wealth allowed the newcomers to invest in new settlements, such as present-day Derby. The capture of York by Healfdene in 866 gave the town a new birth. The old *emporium* **Shires** is another name for counties and is used especially in England.

area was not revived. Rather, trading took place on a low spur of land between the rivers Ouse and Foss and the Roman fort. Previously, York used to be the northernmost link in the trading chain in the North Sea area. With Haelfdene's arrival, York joined the Scandinavian trade networks that reached from Dublin, Ireland, in the west to the Volga River in modern Russia in the east.

Meet the *Burh*

King Alfred's strategy of defense relied on a system of well-defended *burhs*, the root of our word “borough.” The document known as *Burghal Hidage* was drafted under his successor, Edward the Elder. It lists 33 *burhs* in Wessex and Western Mercia. Some were completely new, while others were built on older towns, some even on Roman fortifications. By the mid-10th century, many *burhs* had developed into full-grown towns. Some had even become capitals of the newly created **shires**. Examples are Chester in Cheshire and Stafford in Staffordshire. Before 850, it is thought that there were only six active **mints** in England. A century later, their

Mints are places where coins, medals, or tokens are made.

number was six times greater. Further, one of King Athelstan's legal regulations, called "Grately Code" by modern historians, granted the right of minting coins only to towns.

Now, let's take a closer look at three towns. Winchester lay in the West Saxon heartland and had been occupied since pre-Christian times. After King Alfred's reforms, its *burh* saw a tremendous construction boom, including some 4.7 miles of new streets. Unfortunately, Winchester was omitted from the **Domesday Book**, but, luckily, there exists a survey that was made around 1110. From it we know, for example, that, in the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–1066), the town had about 1,130 tenements that were occupied by various artisans. Winchester functioned almost as a political and religious capital, but its economic growth was hampered by its inland location. Its neighbor, Southampton, was the main West Saxon port in the

south. It had connections with France and with Flanders in present-day Belgium, but lacked renown and was remote from the rest of country.

London It Is!

London enjoyed several major advantages. The town saw some decline in the mid-ninth century, but after Alfred recaptured *Lundonburh* from the Danes in 886, it developed quickly. Well-located and easily defendable, it had access to both land and sea trade routes. It also enjoyed a prominent cultural position. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, London was being seen by many as the country's capital. In fact, the Danish kings Sweyn Forkbeard and Cnut considered the town important enough to lay siege to it in 1013 and 1016. And, on Christmas Day in 1066, William the Conqueror was crowned King of England in London.

Part of the 'Foundation'

By 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, southern England was heavily urbanized by the standards of its day. In fact, most of the peasants in that area lived within 10 to 18 miles of a town or market. Most towns were rather small. Bridport had 120 houses in 1066; Hertford, 146; and Stafford, 154. Only major towns such as York, Lincoln, Oxford, and London counted their buildings in thousands.

Hygiene in these towns left much room for improvement. The crowded conditions offered the perfect environment for the spread of disease and parasites. Proof of this has been uncovered during excavations in York. The main reason for the drive to create townships was the desire of royals to reinforce their power. It is these townships that lay the foundation for economic growth in the centuries that followed.

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Just imagine Anglo-Saxons sitting on these benches around a warm open hearth (all reconstructions)! Wonderful — don't you think?

Domesday Book is a record of a survey of English lands and landholdings made by order of William the Conqueror about 1086.