

The Church in the Ninth Century

By far the best examination of this subject is that provided by John Blair in The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society (OUP 2005). The wealth of evidence and the thoroughness of its examination makes Blair's work of the first importance when studying the Anglo-Saxon church. The following short summary owes a great deal to Blair's work, but should not be used as a substitute.

The changing position of minsters in Anglo-Saxon society

The Anglo-Saxon Church was a very different place in the year 900 compared to 800. Changes in the course of that turbulent century altered the landholdings, wealth, independence, composition and culture of minster churches. Various causes for this transformation have been suggested, most notably the effects of Viking raiders and the growing power of West Saxon kings.

The presence of both women and men in Anglo-Saxon minsters was (by Continental European norms) unusual. These 'double monasteries' of both women and men were often ruled by abbesses from powerful royal or noble families. The majority of our evidence for them derives from Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History' and from charters recording land-grants. Of the forty-odd 'double monasteries' identified in the seventh and eighth centuries, few have any evidence for the presence of women by the early tenth century. Charters refer to men in charge or describe the community in male terms (often referring to priests and clergy). By the end of the ninth century a small number of nunneries (for women only) existed in Wessex, founded by and supported by the royal family, remaining as retreats for royal women.

This is not the only visible change; by c. 900 charters still describe 'the servants of God' and 'the holy foundation' but no longer refer to 'abbots' or 'monks'. The 'Life of King Alfred' written by the Welsh bishop Asser observes that, though there were churches and religious communities serving them, they were not 'monastic' in the way that the Welsh church would understand it. In the introduction to his translation of Pope Gregory's 'Pastoral Care', Alfred describes the ruinous state of the Anglo-Saxon church when he became king – it had fallen to the point that he felt he needed to bring in foreign clergy to revive standards of life and learning. If pre-Viking minsters had been a blend of monastic and pastoral duties, the monastic aspect proved far more fragile in the face of turmoil, and it was pastoral care which survived the ninth century as minsters' primary responsibility.

Although the ninth century was not kind to the Anglo-Saxon church, John Blair's detailed survey of the evidence throughout England shows that a network of minster churches survived from Devon to Northumbria – though the evidence for uninterrupted survival is hard to find outside the southern shires of 'greater Wessex' and western Mercia. There is unequivocal evidence for unbroken continuity in the west Midlands (Gloucestershire and Worcestershire), particularly stemming from the survival of the archive at Worcester – the only example of an episcopal archive stretching to the pre-Viking period. The 'home counties' of Wessex likewise suggest that their minsters survived largely intact – albeit with their landed estates diminished, largely as a result of interference by the West Saxon kings. Minsters in Kent and the south coast may have suffered more from Viking raids, but there is plentiful evidence for continuity throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

Within the 'Danelaw' region (east midlands, East Anglia, Yorkshire, Northumbria and the north-west) evidence is less plentiful and of a different variety. There are virtually no surviving charters from prior to c. 950 and the only bishops known to be active were the

archbishops of York (though it is possible that the West Saxon kings allowed 'their' bishops to perform essential duties such as consecrating priests in the Danelaw, ensuring ecclesiastical sovereignty). Archaeology suggests that pre-Viking minster sites were again in use in the tenth century, but in many cases the evidence for uninterrupted occupation is ambiguous. Throughout the Danelaw region pre-Viking minsters are found with stone sculpture (crosses and grave-markers) decorated in styles consistent with both pre- and post-Viking art, suggesting that the sites remained in use, at least as the burial-places of the newcomers. Although it is likely that a number of minsters were abandoned for a period of time, the evidence suggests that continuous occupation was more normal. However, though the churches of the Danelaw survived the arrival of Viking settlers, they did so at the cost of a great deal of their wealth. The endowments of the minsters were vastly reduced, and the numbers of clergy serving them must have fallen proportionally.

If the Anglo-Saxon minsters survived the turbulent ninth century it was with their wealth substantially reduced and their 'monastic' function lost. In the Danelaw the collapse of the old political order, the dislocation of the old royal and aristocratic families and the arrival of new settlers shook up the old land-holding patterns, and minster institutions suffered the consequences.

Minsters and Kings: exaction and patronage

The south saw the survival of the West Saxon kings and the strengthening of their hold on the regions south of the Thames, particularly through the military and economic reorganisations led by Alfred. Nonetheless, minsters' wealth was also reduced through the exactions of the kings of Wessex. Alfred gave bishop Asser the minsters of Banwell, Congresbury and Exeter together with their estates, a silk cloak and a man's weight in incense as a gift, and allowed him to depart for his new acquisitions together with his retinue. There is no hint that this was at all unusual – minster communities owed loyalty to a secular lord of some sort, and it was a king's prerogative to bestow gifts to his servants. As institutional landowners in their own right, minsters were wealthy, valuable and important.

There is evidence that many West Saxon 'royal villis' were originally minsters, with a royal manor added which gradually took over as the site's most important feature. The will of Alfred asks that the community at Cheddar should 'choose' his son Edward as their lord on the same terms that they had chosen him (presumably when he built a hunting lodge there), and Edward the Elder was indeed involved in land transactions with what appears to be a mixed community. By 940 an assembly was held at the *villa* at Cheddar and by 956 it was described as a *palatium regis*; at Domesday, Cheddar was a royal manor, with no reference to a church, let alone a minster.

Kings were not the only ones to possess or reshape minsters. Earl Odda (died 1056) divided the minster precinct at Deerhurst into two, leaving one half for the community and building his residence in the other half. A number of bishops were closely involved in the affairs of minsters, presumably ones which they owned, as they leased out parts of minster estates or even paid to have royal exactions removed. Bishop Wulfwig of Dorchester, when reviving the minster at Stow (Lincolnshire) c. 1053x6 kept control of two thirds of the minster's food-renders, leaving only a third for the community. The wording of the document, requiring that a copy be kept by the bishop at the foundation, suggests that Wulfwig expected to spend a substantial amount of time at Stow with his *familia*, in effect turning it into an episcopal residence.

The context for donations to religious houses is worth remembering. In early medieval society, gifts were exchanged not just given, with both parties expected to offer something of comparable value. If individuals gave land, money or privileges to a churches, it was part of

a reciprocal exchange. The church benefitted materially, but undertook to pray for the benefactor. Tempting as it is to dismiss the pious preamble to a charter, we should remember that the grantor was buying perpetual remembrance and prayers for his (or her) soul rather than making a charitable gift.

Minsters and Vikings: destruction and conversion

The effect of the Vikings on Anglo-Saxon England has been the subject of lengthy debate. Scholarly consensus is being reached that the settlement of the 'Danelaw' involved relatively large numbers of incomers, causing considerable disruption to earlier Anglo-Saxon society and institutions. Evidence for the effect of the Vikings on the English church is rather harder to come by. Later tenth-century sources, especially those associated with the 'monastic reform' movement and Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester, frequently describe minster sites as 'deserted' or 'destroyed by the pagans' (though archaeology or grudging references in the texts often admit that there was some continuity at the site). Because of the polemic purposes of such documents, it is inevitable that they would play down elements of continuity and stress the destruction – and the laxity of any surviving clergy. Such evidence, often a century after Viking activity, is dangerous to rely on.

Direct evidence for the destruction of minsters by Viking raiders is conspicuously absent in Anglo-Saxon England. A post-Conquest legend at Minster-in-Thanet remembered the slaughter of many of the community at the hands of the heathen, but there is no corroborative evidence. The 'Codex Aureus' (a gospel-book) was ransomed from Viking raiders and given to the church at Canterbury. There is a conspicuous absence of martyrs, curious as the Anglo-Saxon church had no reluctance in proclaiming the sanctity of its members or narrating the miracles effected at their tombs; St Ælfheah, the archbishop of Canterbury taken hostage and murdered by a drunken hall of pirates (who may have been Christian) in 1016 and the East Anglian King Edmund are the only notable martyrs created by Viking attacks. Even the evidence from the Mercian royal minster at Repton, where the 'great army' wintered in 873-4, does not suggest the destruction of the church. The opposite is true – a series of male burials, including one obviously pagan man with boar-tusk amulets killed by a sword-blow to the head, are found around the church nave. Clearly the Vikings considered the place appropriate for the burial of their dead. The cult of St Wigstan continued at Repton, and the body of the saint remained there until it was moved by Cnut.

It may be unrealistic to expect to find minster churches destroyed and their communities slaughtered. Viking raiders stood to gain little by devastation, particularly when compared to the enticing prospect of considerable material wealth and a significant concentration of people who could be taken as slaves or to be ransomed. There is some evidence that Viking raiders deliberately allowed churches in Ireland several years to recover, attacking again when there were enough people and wealth to be worth taking.

Perhaps the most significant losses of the ninth century were in ecclesiastical books. Bede's library at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow has been shown to be very extensive, including a wide range of Patristic authors and pre-Christian classics. Alcuin's poem on the church at York lists a similarly rich quantity of literary works. Around a hundred Anglo-Saxon manuscripts survive from the pre-Viking period, out of about a thousand surviving pre-Conquest manuscripts (by contrast, some seven thousand manuscripts survive from Frankish Gaul), within which there is a disproportionate number of gospel books. The library created by Benedict Biscop, expanded by his successors and copyists and used to such great effect by Bede, disappeared.

King Alfred lamented that, on his accession, there was hardly anyone south of the Humber (and scarcely more north of the Humber) capable of translating a letter into Latin. The

archive of Christ Church, Canterbury, contains some ninth century documents in the most execrable Latin imaginable. Alfred's comment is found in the introduction to his translation of Gregory the Great's 'Pastoral Care' which he ordered to be sent to all of his bishops – an unsubtle gesture indeed and a pointed comment on the inability of the episcopacy to read Latin. Anglo-Saxon book production does not appear to have revived until the end of the ninth century and the early tenth, when manuscripts were imported in large numbers from Ireland, Brittany and Gaul and copied. As many of these manuscripts were fundamental liturgical texts (the Mass, prayers and special offices for priests and bishops, Gospels), if it is inferred that the imports were intended to replenish the Anglo-Saxon church, the late-ninth century gaps in its liturgy must have been immense.

It is in this context that we must consider the lack of surviving charters from the 'Danelaw' region. Throughout the ninth century the number of vernacular wills increases, suggesting that the decline in Latin learning did not reflect a decline in writing or interest in legal documentation (particularly relating to property). Anglo-Saxon secular charters or other documents do not survive outside an ecclesiastical archive, so we cannot make a judgement on the presence or absence of written documents in the Danelaw. However, the astonishingly low survival rate before the mid-tenth century suggests that old archives were either destroyed, rendered so obsolete (for example by the upheaval in land-holding) that they were not preserved, or that the skills to maintain and use an archive of documents were lost. All of these circumstances are likely, given the utter absence of written evidence, suggesting a significant trauma for the church.

The effects of the ninth century on Anglo-Saxon minsters

By the end of the ninth century Anglo-Saxon minsters had changed substantially from the large, wealthy communities closely linked to aristocratic families which were found in the seventh and eighth centuries. A variety of factors contributed to this change. Viking raids inevitably caused damage and disruption, but there are few places in which long-term abandonment can be suggested, let alone proved.

The most significant changes to minsters were caused by the changes to the political landscape. The conflicts of the later eighth century within Northumbria, between Mercia and southern England, and between Wessex and Mercia in the early ninth century all took their toll on noble families. The destruction of the Northumbrian and East Anglian nobility and the serious damage done to the Mercian kingdom greatly reduced the position of aristocratic families, leaving many minsters, particularly those in the Danelaw, without any single noble patron or patron-family. Minsters seem to have adapted to the new political geography created by the influx of Viking settlers, but the process involved considerable upheaval in which minster estates were lost. The circumstances of the Danelaw south of the Humber encouraged a fluid land-market where there were few families with deeply entrenched estates and assets, a situation not conducive to minsters acquiring large bequests from individual patrons; rather, minsters had to survive on the estates they had held on to, and acquire small parcels of land or money where they could.

In 'English' Mercia and Wessex the picture was rather different, as strong state structures survived. The Mercian rulers were enthusiastic patrons of the Church, Ealdorman Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd founding a number of new minsters and giving new estates to existing churches. The West Saxon kings kept a tight grip on the church, regarding minsters as other subjects, making individual agreements about loyalty and personal relationships, and granting minsters to other magnates when the situation arose. New minsters were founded, including a number of nunneries closely associated with the royal house (for example the Nunnaminster at Winchester, founded c. 901 by Alfred's widow). The minsters of Wessex emerged from the ninth century with their independence reduced and their landed estates diminished, but

they remained wealthy and important by comparison with the impoverished churches of the Danelaw.

Pre-Viking minsters had been diverse places, containing a mixture of monastic and pastoral elements and frequently housing men and women together. A small number of royal nunneries had been founded by the West Saxon royal family, but the 'double houses' had largely disappeared before the end of the eighth century. By the end of the ninth century the monastic element had been lost, leaving minsters as the homes of communities of priests and clergy with a particular responsibility for pastoral care in their area.

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