Wessex in the Early Middle Ages

Barbara Yorke

Studies in the Early History of Britain Series

STUDIES IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF BRITAIN

General Editor: Nicholas Brooks

Wessex in the Early Middle Ages

This page intentionally left blank

Wessex in the Early Middle Ages

Barbara Yorke

Leicester University Press
London and New York

LEICESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS
An imprint of Cassell Publishers Limited
Wellington House, 125 Strand, London, WC2R 0BB
215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003

First published 1995

© Barbara Yorke 1995

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means or process, without the prior permission in writing of the copyright holders or their agents. Except for reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, photocopying of whole or part of this publication without the prior written permission of the copyright holders or their agents in single or multiple copies whether for gain or not is illegal and expressly forbidden. Please direct all enquiries concerning copyright to the publishers at the address above.

Barbara Yorke is hereby identified as the author of this work as provided under Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library

ISBN 0 7185 1314 2 (Hardback)
0 7185 1856 X (Paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Yorke, Barbara, 1951–
Wessex in the early Middle Ages / Barbara Yorke.
p. cm. – (Studies in the early history of Britain)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–7185–1314–2 (hc). – ISBN 0–7185–1856–X (pbk.)
1. Wessex (England) – History 2. Anglo-Saxons – England – Wessex – History 3. Great Britain – History – Anglo-Saxon period, 449–1066.
I. Title. II. Series.
DA152.Y673 1995
942'.01–dc20 95–14446
CIP

Typeset by Mayhew Typesetting, Rhayader, Powys
Printed and bound in Great Britain by SRP Ltd, Exeter

Contents

Foreword		vii
List of Illustrations		ix
Acknowledgements		xii
Introduction		1
1	**A Period of Transition, Wessex *c.* 400–*c.* 600**	8
	The end of Roman Britain	8
	Western Wessex: the testimony of Gildas	12
	Dumnonia	15
	Somerset and Dorset	19
	Western Wessex: regional and foreign links	24
	Eastern Wessex 400–600: British rule and the Saxon *adventus*	25
	Anglo-Saxon sources for the early history of Wessex	32
	The political geography of eastern Wessex in the sixth century: the Saxons of the Thames Valley	34
	The Jutes of Wight and Hampshire	36
	Regiones	39
	Britons and Anglo-Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries	43
2	**The Creation of Wessex, *c.* 600–802**	52
	Sources	52
	Expansion to the south and west	57
	The northern borders of Wessex	61
	The nature of conquest	64
	The West Saxon subkings	79
	Shires and boundaries	84
3	**Wessex and England, 802–1066**	94
	Egbert and the expansion of West Saxon power	94
	The Wessex heartlands and the kingdom of England	96
	The Viking wars of the ninth century: Alfred and the written sources	103
	The Viking attacks of the late eighth and ninth centuries	107
	The Viking impact on Wessex	112

Developments in royal administration 123
The reign of Æthelred II and the renewal of Viking attacks 132
Royal government in the eleventh century 141

4 The Spread of Christianity, 400–800 149
The Christian legacy from Roman Britain 149
The conversion of Dumnonia 153
Christianity in western Wessex in the fifth and sixth centuries 155
Monasteries 160
Christianity in eastern Wessex in the fifth and sixth centuries 164
Non-Christian religion in Wessex in the fifth to seventh centuries 166
Conversion of the West Saxons to Christianity 171
The Anglo-Saxons and the British Church 177
Minster churches in Wessex 181

5 Renewal and Redirection: the West Saxon Church 800–1066 192
Decline in the ninth century 192
Revival in the ninth century 197
Royal patronage and the Church in the first half of the tenth century 203
The monastic reform movement 210
Minster and local churches 225

6 Social Structure and Rural Life 240
Domesday Book and the study of Anglo-Saxon Wessex 240
Lordship, nobility and the ownership of land 243
The peasantry 256
Slavery 261
Settlements and fields 264
The family 276
The status of women 280
Class and social mobility 285

7 Trade and the Growth of Towns 291
Trade and the transfer of commodities *c.* 400–650 291
Trade and trading-places in mid-Saxon Wessex 299
The growth of towns in later Anglo-Saxon Wessex 309

Epilogue 325
Abbreviations 329
Bibliography 331
Index 358

Foreword

The aim of the *Studies in the Early History of Britain* is to promote works of the highest scholarship which open up virgin fields of study or which surmount the barriers of traditional academic disciplines. As interest in the origins of our society and culture grows while scholarship becomes ever more specialized, interdisciplinary studies are needed not only by scholars but also by students and laymen. This series will therefore include research monographs, works of synthesis and also collaborative studies of important themes by several scholars whose training and expertise has lain in different fields. Our knowledge of the early Middle Ages will always be limited and fragmentary, but progress can be made if the work of the historian embraces that of the philologist, the archaeologist, the geographer, the numismatist, the art historian and the liturgist – to name only the most obvious. The need to cross and to remove academic frontiers also explains the extension of the geographical range from that of the previous *Studies in Early English History* to include the whole island of Britain. The change would have been welcomed by the editor of the earlier series, the late Professor H.P.R. Finberg, whose pioneering work helped to inspire, or to provoke, the interest of a new generation of early medievalists in the relations of Britons and Saxons. The approach of this series is therefore deliberately wide-ranging. Early medieval Britain can only be understood in the context of contemporary developments in Ireland and on the Continent.

Barbara Yorke contributes the fourth regional survey in a series which aims to provide brief, well-illustrated and up-to-date syntheses of the settlement and history of all the principal regions of early medieval Britain. Since Wessex was the source of the dynasty that unified the English kingdom in the tenth century, parts of its history are familiar both to students and to scholars, and Dr Yorke has had a particularly challenging task to disentangle national from regional history. But as with Pauline Stafford's companion volume on the East Midlands and Margaret Gelling's on the West Midlands, there prove to be enormous benefits in concentrating upon local themes and contexts. Dr Yorke's own research into the early history of the West Saxon kingdom and see have equipped her superbly to reassess the fundamental changes – ethnic, political,

religious and social – that turned southern Roman Britain into late Anglo-Saxon Wessex. It is a privilege to welcome this stimulating analysis to the series.

N.P. Brooks
University of Birmingham
July 1994

List of Illustrations

Cover Cross-shaft from Codford St Peter (Wilts), showing a dancing man, perhaps David dancing before the Lord [photograph: British Museum]

1. The geology of the six shires of Wessex 2
2. Roman *civitates* in the Wessex region 4
3. Roman Wessex 5
4. Germanic burial sites in Wessex 13
5. Distribution of memorial stones in Devon and Cornwall 17
6. Plan of South Cadbury hill-fort (Som) 20
7. Plan of Cadbury Congresbury hill-fort (Som) with excavated sub-Roman features 21
8. Selwood and the major dykes of sub-Roman Wessex 23
9. East Wansdyke at All Cannings (Wilts): aerial view 28
10. Fifth-century belt-set from Dorchester-on-Thames 30
11. Distribution of early fifth-century Germanic women's brooches in England 31
12. Rich female burial from Chessell Down cemetery (I of W) 38
13. *Regiones* in southern England 41
14. Female burial with pair of saucer brooches from Portway cemetery, Andover (Hants) 45
15. Courtyard walls of the Roman villa at Meonstoke (Hants) cut by early Saxon pit 50
16. West Saxon battle sites which can be identified from *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* annals for seventh and eighth centuries 54
17. Estates owned by Sherborne before and after *c.* 900 56
18. British river-names 70
19. Memorial stones from the church of St Mary, Wareham (Dorset) 71
20. Seventh-century high status sites at Cowdery's Down (Hants) and Foxley (Wilts) 77
21. Hall C8, Cowdery's Down (Hants) under excavation 78
22. Genealogical table of early West Saxon kings 81
23. Bokerley Dyke and Grim's Dyke and their relationship to modern shire boundaries 86
24. Ealdormen of Wessex, 871–1016 100

25. The itinerary and will of King Eadred 102
26. Burial places of the kings of Wessex 103
27. The 'great heathen army' in Wessex 871–78 110
28. The burhs listed in the Burghal Hidage 115
29. The hidages of the West Saxon burhs 117
30. The burhs at Cricklade (Wilts) and Lydford (Devon) 119
31. Lyng and Athelney (Som): aerial view 120
32. The component parts of Micheldever hundred 128
33. Estates owing ship-scot payments to the bishop of Sherborne 129
34. Gravecover and footstone of Gunni, Winchester 144
35. Panel from a late Saxon frieze, Winchester 145
36. Pendant with chi-rho from Shepton Mallet (Som) 151
37. Late Roman temples and early Christian churches at Brean Down and Lamyatt Beacon (Som) 153
38. Sequence of religious structures at Wells (Som) 156
39. Holy well in churchyard at Cerne Abbas (Dorset) 157
40. Occupation on Glastonbury Tor (Som) 163
41. Place-names in eastern Wessex incorporating names of Germanic gods 167
42. Cremation urn from cemetery at Portway, Andover (Hants) 168
43. Bronze Age barrow and ditch cut by Anglo-Saxon burials, Christchurch (Dorset) 170
44. Pin-suite from Roundway Down barrow burial (Wilts) 175
45. Glastonbury Tor and abbey: aerial view 180
46. Minster churches in southern Hampshire 183
47. Titchfield church (Hants) 184
48. Stone-by-stone drawing of Anglo-Saxon features of the west front of Titchfield church (Hants) 189
49. Old Minster, Winchester, in seventh and eighth centuries 191
50. East jamb of the north *porticus* of Britford church (Wilts) 200
51. Fragment of wall-painting from New Minster foundation trench, Winchester 202
52. Late Saxon churches in the eastern sector of Winchester 204
53. Nunneries in late Saxon England 207
54. The late Saxon phases of Old Minster, Winchester 217
55. Entries for Wessex in the late Saxon lists of saints' resting-places 219
56. The late Saxon church of Bradford-on-Avon (Wilts) 222
57. Late Saxon rood, Romsey (Hants) 223
58. Skeleton and mortuary cross of Bishop Giso of Wells 228
59. The late Saxon timber church and baptistery at Potterne (Wilts) 231
60. St Mary's, Tanner Street (Lower Brook Street), Winchester 234

61. The inscribed archway to the southern *porticus* of Breamore church (Hants) 237
62. The bounds of Alresford and Bighton (Hants) 250
63. The late Saxon tower of Portchester (Hants) under excavation 252
64. Two phases of the late Saxon manorial complex at Faccombe Netherton (Hants) 253
65. Reconstruction of second late Saxon phase at Faccombe Netherton (Hants) 254
66. Two phases of late Saxon occupation of the royal palace at Cheddar (Som) 255
67. Saxon settlement sites in the parishes of Chalton and Catherington (Hants) 265
68. Saxon 'halls' under excavation at Church Down (Hants) 267
69. Estate of Hardwell (Berks) 270
70. Shapwick and adjoining estates (Som) 272
71. East, West and Middle Chinnock (Som) 273
72. Distribution of population from Domesday Book entries for Wessex 275
73. Roundel from satchel in barrow burial, Swallowcliffe Down (Wilts) 282
74. Distribution of amethyst and amber beads from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries 292
75. Distribution of imported pottery finds of fifth and sixth centuries in south-west England 295
76. Buckle from Alton cemetery (Hants) 297
77. Sceattas from Hamwic 301
78. Mid-Saxon Hamwic 303
79. Fragments for the assemblage of a bone comb, Hamwic 304
80. Distribution of primary and secondary sceattas in Anglo-Saxon England 306
81. Mints, burhs and Domesday boroughs in Wessex 311
82. Marginal towns in late Saxon Wessex 312
83. Langport (Som): aerial view 314
84. Pennies of reign of King Edgar minted at Lydford and Totnes (Devon) 317
85. Local and imported pottery from late Saxon Exeter 318
86. The ranking of mints in late Saxon England 321
87. Eleventh-century Exeter 322
88. Tanning pit, Tanner Street (Lower Brook Street), Winchester 324

Acknowledgements

A book of this type does not get written without the help of a large number of individuals and I would like to thank all those who have been so generous to me with their time and expertise. In particular I would like to thank the following for providing me with details of work which was unpublished or in press and for discussing many problems of interpretation with me: Steve Bassett, John Blair, Bruce Eagles, Harold Fox, Patrick Hase and David Hinton. Others have been extremely helpful in tracking down illustrative material and providing me with additional background information. I would like to thank especially John Allan, Mick Aston, Martin Biddle, John Crook, Barry Cunliffe, Chris Gerrard, Michael Hare, Tony King, Alan Morton, Ian Riddler, Edward Roberts, Warwick Rodwell and Leslie Webster. I owe particular thanks to Kay Ainsworth and David Allen of Hampshire County Museum Service for much hard work in the archives and for producing so many fine photographs for me. Peter Jacobs of the Audio-Visual Aids Department, King Alfred's College, kindly undertook a number of photographic assignments for me and I am also grateful to Paul Stonell for photographing the Romsey rood. I have a major debt of gratitude to Harry Buglass of Birmingham University who drew all the maps and line-drawings and so brilliantly transformed ghastly scribbles from me into something intelligible.

The book has been longer in its genesis than I had originally intended and has been squeezed into the interstices between other professional commitments, but I am grateful to King Alfred's College for providing me with a term of study leave which hastened its completion. Parts of it have been tried out before a wider public at lectures and seminars and I am grateful for opportunities provided by the Hampshire Field Club, Birmingham University Medieval History Seminar, Leicester University Department of Local History and the Department for Continuing Education, University of Oxford. Discussions at such conferences and seminars have been extremely valuable in extending ideas and alerting me to new sources of information. Throughout I have been guided by the series editor, Nicholas Brooks, who has waited patiently for the completion of the manuscript and provided me with much valued advice and support. Finally, I would like to record my deep

gratitude to my husband Robert, who has provided much encouragement and accompanied me on visits to many sites, as well as using his expertise to track down elusive publications.

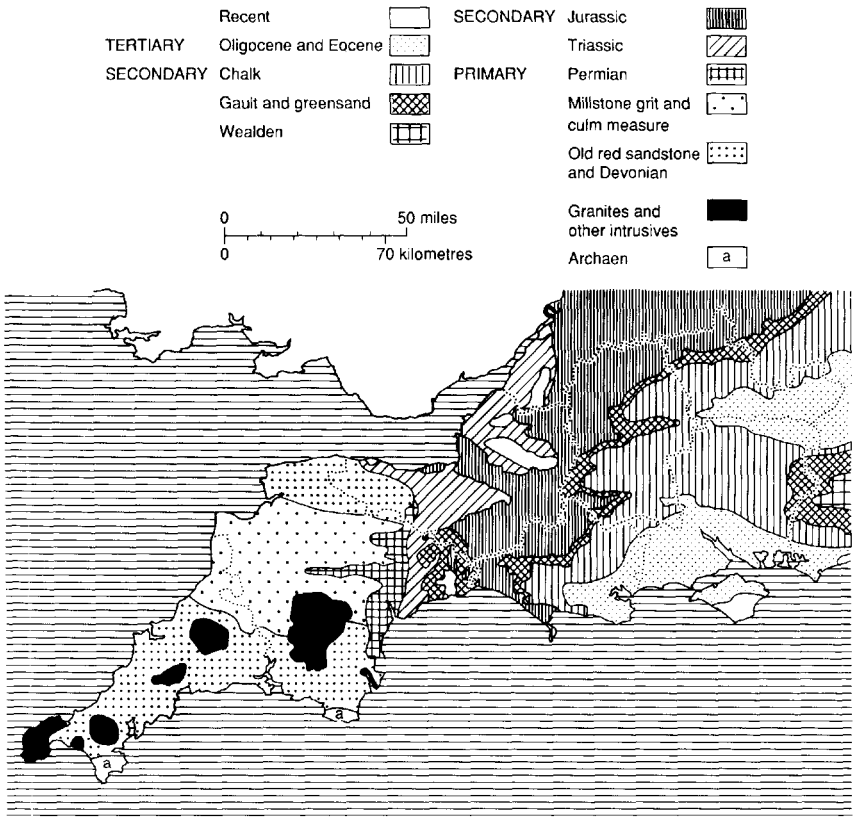
This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

The main focus of this volume is on the six historic shires of Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Hampshire (including the Isle of Wight) during the period 400 to 1066. A poll of Anglo-Saxonists would probably reach some consensus that this area could be designated as 'Wessex', in the context of the early Middle Ages, and that it was the heartland of the West Saxon kingdom. However, although all of the region was dominated at some point before 900 by West Saxon kings, control of certain areas was intermittent and the whole of the six shires did not come securely into the hands of the West Saxon royal house until the ninth century, by which time they also controlled other areas of southern England. Some of the key sources covering the early history of Wessex, such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, were produced in the ninth century and can give an impression that West Saxon dominance of the region was more straightforward and inevitable from an early date than was in fact the case. The six shires of Wessex were neither a natural region in terms of their physical geography nor one which was suggested by earlier political and administrative divisions.

Although between them the six shires are very variable in terms of their geology and resultant physical geography, the dominant landscape is chalk downland stretching from the Berkshire Downs in the north through Wiltshire to the coastal plains of Hampshire and eastern Dorset (fig. 1).[1] Rivers rising in the chalk divide the downlands and, in the south, make their way to the sea through the poorer, younger soils of the Hampshire Basin, while the northern downlands are bisected by tributaries of the Thames. Other parts of Wessex are in terms of their geology part of regions which extend beyond the boundaries of the six shires. In the east, within Hampshire, is the western extremity of the weald, while eastern Berkshire links with the sandy and clay soils of western Surrey. To the west of the chalklands lies the southern portion of the great Jurassic limestone ridge, which runs from the cliffs of Lyme Bay in Dorset up through Somerset to the Cotswolds and beyond. Western Somerset and Devon are dominated by older rocks which form a 'highland' region within Wessex; the carboniferous limestones of the Mendips and the Quantocks, separated by the low-lying Somerset

1. B. Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000* (1993), 1–4, 326–8.



1. The geology of the six shires of Wessex [after D. Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (1981), fig. 5]

levels, the Devonian rocks of Exmoor and the granite of Dartmoor. In geological terms Exmoor and much of Devon forms a distinct entity with Cornwall.[2] South-eastern Devon, however, is more closely allied with the mixed soils of neighbouring Dorset.

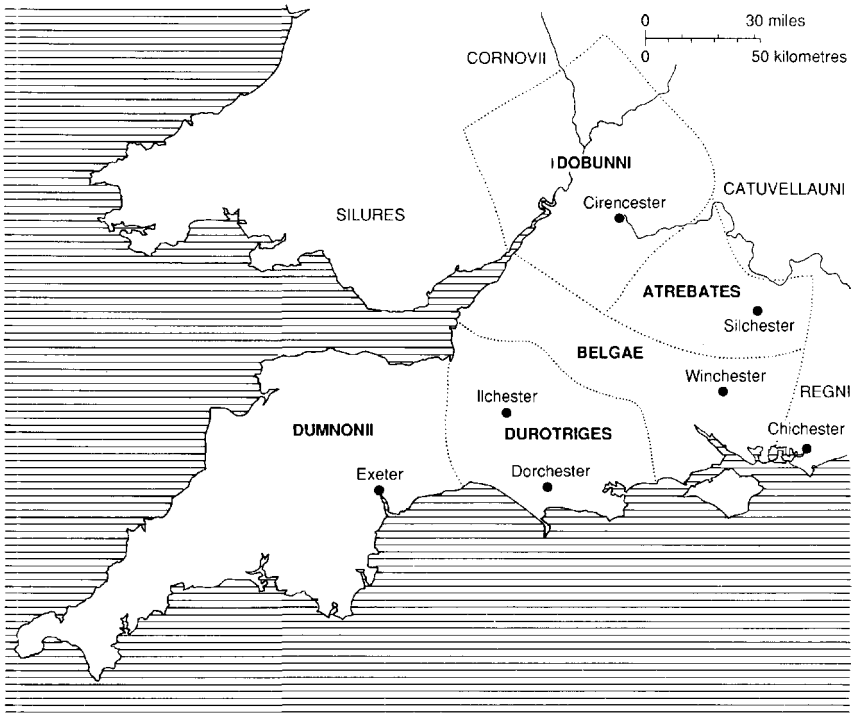
About half of the land in the six shires can be reckoned as good farming land even if little of it is of the highest quality.[3] The chalklands had been much favoured by prehistoric farmers, as the large number of surviving prehistoric monuments suggests, but on the upper slopes the soil is relatively light and by AD 400 was no longer ideal for crop production. The river valleys divide the chalklands into natural territories which contained within them a mixture of the resources necessary for mixed farming and were a natural focus of settlement. In the Iron Age many of these

2. E.A. Edmonds, M.C. Mckeown and M. Williams, *British Regional Geology. South-West England* (1975); M. Todd, *The South-West to AD 1000* (1987), 1–6.
3. D. Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (1981), 7.

downland blocks were dominated by a hill-fort.[4] Intermittent belts of clay supported more woodland in the Anglo-Saxon period than has survived until today, particularly where the chalklands gave way to younger rocks. Notable expanses of woodland occurred between the chalklands and the low-lying areas of the Hampshire basin, between the western area of the chalklands and the limestone Jurassic ridge (Selwood) and to the north of the chalklands in northern Wiltshire and eastern Berkshire.[5] Some of the most distinctive regions were those with poor agricultural land whose inhabitants were obliged to develop particularized modes of farming and ways of life, though it is unlikely that they ever supported large populations. These areas include the heathlands of Hampshire (the New Forest) and eastern Dorset, the Somerset levels and the moors of Devon and Somerset. However, some of the areas with poorer farming lands had the compensation of resources which were scarce elsewhere in Wessex. The resources available to the coastal communities need not be spelt out, though the importance of salt production should be mentioned. The Mendips and Dartmoor were exploited for respectively their lead (and silver) and tin deposits from the prehistoric period onwards.

By the late Iron Age Wessex was divided between tribal kingdoms which formed the bases of the Roman *civitates*.[6] Although the core tribal areas can be recognized from coin and pottery distributions, it is more difficult to reconstruct the exact extent of their boundaries and, indeed, such certainty can hardly be expected without written records delineating bounds. Figure 2 shows a suggested reconstruction of the Roman *civitates*. It can be seen that the whole of the territory of the Durotriges and Belgae was encompassed within the six shires of later Wessex, and most of that of the Atrebates. However, the western part of Somerset and Devon belonged with Cornwall to the territory of the Dumnonii, while the northern part of Somerset was probably in the territory of the Dobunni, whose *civitas* capital was at Cirencester. The extension of Belgic territory to the region of Bath is based principally on Ptolemy's statement that *Aquae Sulis* was in the territory of the Belgae, but as there are no other clear indications of this it may be that Ptolemy was mistaken.[7] It is also possible that the territory of the *civitas* of the Regni which was administered from Chichester extended a little way further west than the present boundary between Hampshire and Sussex, while that of the Atrebates extended beyond northern Hampshire into part of Sussex and Surrey. In the early fourth century, when Britain had been divided

4. Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000*, 165–200.
5. O. Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (1976).
6. P. Salway, *Roman Britain* (1981), 40–61, 573–88; M. Todd, *Roman Britain 55 BC–AD 400* (1981), 44–59, 122–8; M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain* (1990), 9–39, 65–9, 104–33.
7. Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000*, 235.

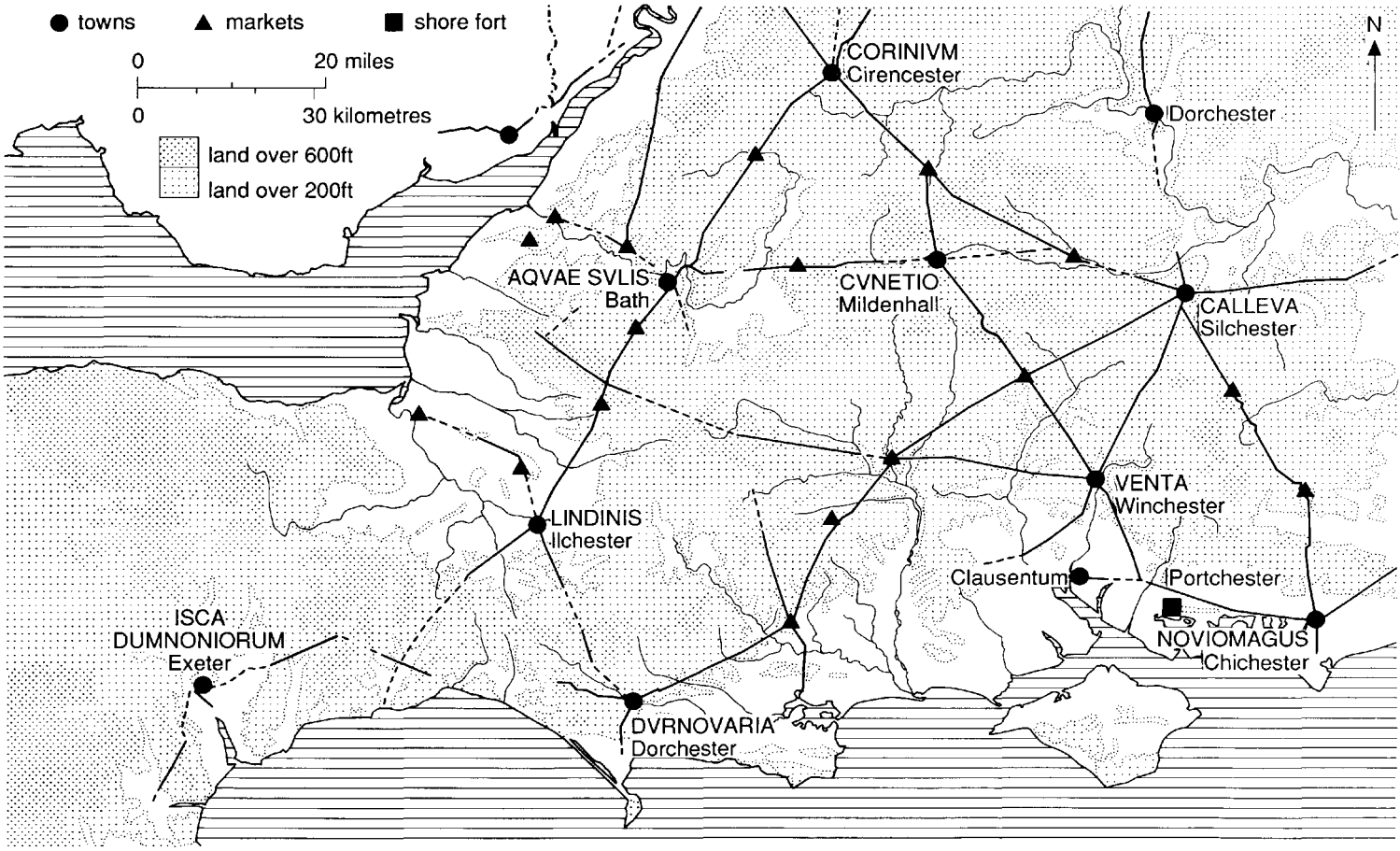


2. Roman *civitates* in the Wessex region: hypothetical boundaries [after M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain* (1990), 67 and M. Todd, *Roman Britain 55 BC–AD 400* (1981), 125]

into four dioceses, all of the later territory of the six shires of Wessex (except the small part that may have belonged to the *civitas* of the Regni) lay in *Britannia Prima* which was administered from Cirencester. It will be observed that none of the reconstructed boundaries of the Roman *civitates* corresponds exactly with later shire boundaries, with the possible exception of part of the boundary between the Durotriges and the Belgae.

The territory of the Dumnonii has produced far fewer signs of Romanization than the other areas of Wessex (see fig. 3).[8] Its only town was the *civitas* capital at Exeter and the few villas which have been identified lay in the area between Exeter and the border with the Durotriges. Elsewhere native forms of settlement persisted and penetration of Roman material culture was slight, though forts and other military installations show that the Romans had been anxious to establish their authority within the province. At least one major Roman road extended westwards from Exeter, which the modern A30 follows for much of its route, and some of the numerous small

8. A. Fox, *South-West England* (2nd edn., 1973), 136–57; S. Pearce, *The Archaeology of South-West Britain* (1981), 132–64; Todd, *South-West to AD 1000*, 189–235.



3. Roman Wessex [after B. Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000* (1993), fig. 7.1 and M. Todd, *The South West to AD 1000* (1987), fig. 7.1]

ports of Devon may have been visited by Roman merchants; a port on Plymouth Sound to ship supplies of tin from Dartmoor is particularly likely. Exeter itself was the main port, with ships coming from north-west Gaul and, possibly, direct from the eastern Mediterranean, as suggested by finds of Greek coins from the city and elsewhere in the south-west.

The rest of Wessex is marked by far greater signs of change as a result of the Roman conquest with the construction of greater and lesser towns, villas for the aristocracy and widespread circulation of Roman goods (fig. 3).[9] A network of Roman roads connected the *civitas* capitals and lesser centres, and supplemented the existing trackways along the ridges of hills and river valleys. Several centres of pottery production were established, including Poole, Savernake (Wilts), Alice Holt (Hants) and in the New Forest, and new industries, such as the provision of building stone, were stimulated. Fieldwork suggests that Wessex was intensively farmed, with new areas opened up for crop production, probably to meet not only the demands of Roman authorities, but also a rising population which may have reached a peak in the fourth century not to be attained again for several centuries.[10] However, development was not completely uniform within Wessex. The greatest concentrations of villas lay in the vicinity of towns and these were not regularly distributed throughout the region. There was a dearth of towns in central Wessex and a corresponding lack of villas; one explanation has been that much of Wiltshire may have been administered as an imperial estate. In contrast there is an unusually dense distribution of villas in Somerset around Bath and Ilchester, many of which seem to date from the late third century or later. The area is one of good agricultural land, but it has been suggested that the villas may have been built by rich incomers from Gaul fleeing barbarian attacks during the third century.[11]

The eventual emergence of Wessex and its shires could not have been predicted from the administrative configurations of the late Roman period, nor, it will be argued, from the political alignments of *c.* 600. Wessex was created by the conquests of the royal house of the Gewisse, largely within the seventh and eighth centuries, and its subdivisions were structures they imposed upon the countryside, even if there were various factors outside their control which helped decide where boundaries were to run. A major task of the historian of Anglo-Saxon Wessex must be to trace the processes by which its various regions become part of one political entity. However, to do

9. S. Applebaum, 'Roman Britain', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales AD 43–1042*, I.ii, ed. H.P.R. Finberg (1972), 3–277; Millett, *Romanization of Britain*; Cunliffe, *Wessex to AD 1000*, 201–65.
10. D. Benson and D. Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (1974); Millett, *Romanization of Britain*, 181–6.
11. K. Branigan, 'Villa settlement in the West Country', in *The Roman West Country*, ed. K. Branigan and P.J. Fowler (1976), 120–41.

so is complicated by the fact that parts of what became Wessex really need to be viewed in the context of regions outside the allotted six shires, especially for the fifth and sixth centuries. There are also problems with nomenclature. It was not until the ninth century that the shires took on the forms they possessed, give or take some minor adjustments, until the 1974 local government reforms. However, it is convenient to use the shires as reference points before then, especially in the absence of earlier regional names or ones that can be easily interpreted. When this is done a general area is being indicated rather than one rigidly contained within later shire boundaries. All references are to shires in their pre-1974 form, when the Christchurch area was part of Hampshire, the Avon formed the northern boundary of Somerset and the Thames the northern boundary of Berkshire.

From the ninth century the problems for the historian of Wessex change. Wessex becomes part of a larger unit, at first embracing all of the country south of the Thames, but then in the course of the tenth century extending to most of England as it would be defined today. It will be argued that Wessex retained a certain distinctiveness because of its administrative organization and the patronage of the royal house which, in certain respects, was concentrated in the region. The emphasis will be on how events affected Wessex itself, though sometimes these need to be viewed in a broader context. It is also the case that because Wessex is one of the regions of the country best provided with written records for the early Middle Ages its material has been much used to suggest a general picture for Anglo-Saxon England as a whole especially for various social and economic matters. Thus, when writing on a topic such as the position of women in Wessex, one is in danger of producing something which will sound all too familiar because much of it has been seen (not necessarily correctly) as being typical of all Anglo-Saxon regions. Unfortunately there is not the space to draw extensive contrasts with other areas – a task which will in any case become much easier once the series of regional histories of 'Britain in the Early Middle Ages' has been completed!

1 A Period of Transition: Wessex *c.* 400–*c.* 600

The period 400–600 was a momentous one in the history of Wessex for it saw the rapid decline and disintegration of the Roman way of life, the advent of Germanic settlers and the evolution of new polities with concomitant results for many facets of life within the area. However, one unfortunate characteristic of the time is that few written records were kept, although subsequently some of the regimes whose power originated in the period developed the desire to record what they thought – or wished to think – had occurred. The usual practice has been to approach the history of these two centuries through the scanty written material even if this has meant stretching the few contemporary sources beyond what they can bear and ignoring the shortcomings of those written at a later date. As the corpus of archaeological evidence has gradually expanded, it has become increasingly difficult to accept that the written sources can provide an adequate narrative of what occurred throughout the region. Recent archaeological analysis has begun to suggest new strategies through which the period can be studied and, as more excavations are written up and the theoretical framework is refined, so will the period cease to appear such a 'dark age'.

THE END OF ROMAN BRITAIN

For much of the fourth century AD Wessex appears as prosperous and outwardly Romanized. The higher ranks of society in particular seem to have enjoyed a time of considerable prosperity reflected in the erection or refurbishment of substantial villas.[1] When administrative or social reasons called them to town the aristocratic villa owners would have occupied the large town houses which have been discovered away from the main streets in many of the *civitas* capitals.[2] The aristocracy by the fourth century seems to have

1. A.S. Esmonde Cleary, *The Ending of Roman Britain* (1989), 105–10; M. Millett, *The Romanization of Britain* (1990), 186–201.
2. Esmonde Cleary, *Ending of Roman Britain*, 64–8.

preferred to spend its money on the aggrandizement of private residences rather than on civic responsibilities and public buildings were no longer kept up in the way that they once had been.[3] The public baths at Exeter had fallen into disuse by the late third century and at Silchester the basilica had been given over to metalworking.[4] But the pattern was not consistent throughout the region. Although Exeter may have housed a relatively small population and been dominated by private estates, Winchester seems to have been something of a fourth-century boom town with large town houses demolished to make way for industrial activities and less substantial buildings which presumably housed the workers.[5] Martin Biddle has interpreted these developments as support for the theory that the imperial *gynaeceum* at *Venta*, mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, was located at Winchester. Both Winchester and Dorchester (Dorset) are surrounded by substantial cemeteries dating to the fourth century which may not only reflect the size of their urban populations, but also their roles as central places for the surrounding countryside.[6] Small towns also flourished and may have been more significant than some of the *civitas* capitals as economic and trading centres.[7]

However, there are signs of a downturn in the prosperity of the most Romanized sectors of the community in the last quarter of the fourth century. Economic problems have often been seen as having been exacerbated by increasingly severe 'barbarian' raids, but recent studies have thrown doubt on whether apparent references to attacks by Franks and Saxons on the 'Saxon shore', which included eastern Wessex, have been correctly interpreted.[8] The possibility of raids by Irish on the western shores of Wessex remains and signs of destruction in a number of villas in the vicinity of the Bristol Channel in the fourth century have been attributed to them; some of the villas seem to have been abandoned

3. D.A. Brooks, 'A review of the evidence for continuity in British towns in the 5th and 6th centuries', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology, 5: 1* (1986), 79–84; Esmonde Cleary, *Ending of Roman Britain*, 71–2, 108–10.
4. P.G. Bidwell, *The Legionary Bath-House and Basilica and Forum at Exeter*, Exeter Archaeological Reports, *1* (1979), 122; M. Fulford, *Guide to the Silchester Excavations 1979–81: Amphitheatre and Forum Basilica* (1982).
5. M. Biddle, 'The study of Winchester: archaeology and history in a British town', *PBA, 69* (1983), 93–135, at 111–15.
6. D.E. Farwell and T.L. Molleson, *Excavations at Poundbury 1966–80. Volume II: The Cemeteries, DNHAS* monograph, *11* (1993); G.N. Clarke, *Pre-Roman and Roman Winchester, part II; The Roman Cemetery at Lankhills*, Winchester Studies, *3* (1979).
7. Millett, *Romanization of Britain*, 143–51; M. Millett and D. Graham, *Excavations on the Romano-British Small Town at Neatham, Hampshire, 1969–1979* (1986).
8. P. Salway, *Roman Britain* (1981), 374–444, for traditional interpretation; P. Bartholomew, 'Fourth-century Saxons', *Britannia, 15* (1984), 169–85, and J. Cotterill, 'Saxon raiding and the role of the late Roman coastal forts of Britain', *Britannia, 24* (1993), 227–40, for revisionist interpretations.

sample content of Wessex (Studies in the Early History of Britain)

- *read online Fresh Vegetable and Fruit Juices: What's Missing in Your Body*
- Macroeconomics (3rd Edition) book
- *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Global History, Volume 2 (14th Edition) pdf*
- click Dragonflight pdf

- http://www.experienceolvera.co.uk/library/Counterterrorism-and-Identities--Canadian-Viewpoints.pdf
- http://damianfoster.com/books/Antrobus-Complete.pdf
- http://chelseaprintandpublishing.com/?freebooks/Pedal-Zombies--Thirteen-Feminist-Bicycle-Science-Fiction-Stories-.pdf
- http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/Dragonflight.pdf