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Early Medieval Durham : the Archaeological Evidence

By M. O. H. CARVER

INTRODUCTION

The fame of the city of Durham as a centre of wide spiritual and military influence has justly persevered to the present day, when university colleges and departments share the precinct of the great cathedral and occupy the castle which once defended its peninsula. Such fame may, however, have partly obscured the character of the settlement's early years, and even, as will be argued below, the true circumstances of its foundation in the late Saxon period. Recent excavation of a finely preserved deposit at Saddler Street, on the hillslope between the castle and the market-place, prompts a review of the archaeological evidence for the early medieval city as a whole.¹ There is some need, too, for an estimate of the independent value of this evidence for the historian, together with the implications for future research to be conducted with the trowel.²

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE FOR THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CITY

The Victoria County History (and some later writers) have argued the case for *Elvet*, on the east side of the River Wear, being the earliest settlement at Durham — earlier than the clearing of the peninsula reported by Simeon (see below), although still within the Saxon period.³ This is based upon the attribution of the place-name *Aelfet Ee*, found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle *s.a.* 762, and the large size of the coincident parish of St Oswald's, together with its circular churchyard (with connotations of the early Celtic church), and its dedication.⁴ The idea appeared to receive some endorsement from an Anglo-Saxon cross-shaft recovered from the tower of St Oswald's church,⁵ which Professor Cramp, however, considers as belonging to the later Saxon period and associated stylistically with the first monastic community.⁶ This view would seem to make the insubstantial evidence for an early settlement at Elvet weaker still. Thus at present, in Elvet as elsewhere in the city area, there is no reliable evidence for Roman or post-Roman activity which can be dated securely before A.D. 995.

This is the year in which, according to Simeon, the Community of St Cuthbert settled in Durham. They first cleared the peninsula, finding it: '*natura munitum, sed non facile habitabilem . . . quoniam denissima undique silva totum occupaverat*'; and Simeon continues: '*Tantum in medio planities erat non grandis, quam arrando et seminando excolere consueverant*'.⁷ This last sentence has been asked to carry a heavy weight of inference about the unnamed people who were cultivating the small level clearing on this otherwise densely wooded but naturally fortified site. They do not have to be pre-monastic inhabitants resident at Elvet (it could scarcely be less convenient), and the passage could surely, in

the understandable uncertainty about these first years, refer to occupation on the peninsula, and even to the activities of the Cuthbertian Community itself. Another view, concerning the military significance of the site, is given below.

A temporary church, the *Alba Ecclesia*, presumably of whitewashed wattle-and-daub, was erected and remained in use for three years while Bishop Aldun's *Ecclesia Major* was being constructed in stone. Uhtred, Earl of Northumbria (and Aldun's son-in-law), impressed labour for this purpose from the Tees to the Coquet,⁸ a commitment which indicates that the development of the Durham site was scarcely the devotional exercise of a beleaguered convent, but a central political event. The stone church was taken into use in 998, and nearly 100 years later the building of the present cathedral was begun.

To these events, which principally concern the foundation of a famous clerical institution on the site, others can be added which reflect more secular activity. The city is not mentioned in Domesday Book, and Boldon Book (of 1183) 'affords us but little information with regard to Durham'.⁹ The settlement did, however, withstand a siege in 1040 implying the existence of fortifications of some kind at that date.¹⁰ The heads of Scottish soldiers then defeated are said to have been impaled on stakes in the market-place ('forum'), although with no indication of where it then was.¹¹ The motte, at the peninsula neck, may have been built during William the Conqueror's punitive expedition of 1068–9, but it is also recorded that Earl Waltheof built a castle in 1072.¹² The keep mound was probably heightened after 1075.¹³ The first stone defences have been attributed to Flambard (1099–1128) and are thought to have enclosed only the peninsula precinct.¹⁴ The Borough of Durham was in existence by 1130.¹⁵ In the mid-12th century are recorded the fires, both in city and suburbs, which attended the depredations of William Cumin. There followed a period of recovery and reconstruction under Bishop Pudsey (1153–1195), who gave the city its first extant charter in or before 1179.¹⁶ However, the walls which finally enclosed the Borough of Durham (market place) have been dated as late as the 14th century.¹⁷

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE EARLY SETTLEMENT

There is as yet very little archaeological evidence of sufficient quality to complement any of the first documented activities, and it is likely that only a little such evidence now survives (see below). The cathedral and its immediate area have received most attention. In 1796, during the partial demolition of the Norman chapter house, the grave supposed to be that of William of St Calais (d. 1096) was found under poorly recorded circumstances. It contained 'portions of sandals' (single thong 'flip-flops', now in the cathedral Library), and 'fragments of a robe richly embroidered in gold, ornamented with griffins *passant* and other quaint devices'.¹⁸ Later in the 19th century, a dean of Durham began the excavation of the east end of the demolished chapter house,¹⁹ and the results were collated, analysed and published by Fowler.²⁰ The chapter house building was interpreted to have cut across an earlier cemetery, containing the remains of

at least twenty adults, both male and female with a varied life-span, and four children. Grave features included coffin nails and clamps and a pillowstone. Five of the burials, including one child, were laid on charcoal. Two skulls were covered with 'efflorescence about the head in the shape of crystals'.²¹ A spear-head (now in the cathedral Library) was found nearby.²² These graves were superseded by those of at least five bishops, four of which lay within, and are supposed later than, the chapter house; they should therefore date to the early 12th century or later (see below).

The excavator noticed a difference between the 'long-headed' skulls of the occupants of the earlier cemetery and the 'round-headed' skulls of the interments which followed them.²³ Ranulf Flambard (bishop 1099–1128) was identified as the first of the latter (although, like William of St Calais, not buried in the known chapter house) and was accompanied by a crozier, ring and seal (now in the cathedral Library). He was laid on a bed of charcoal over lime interleaved with earth and stones. The builder of the chapter house, Bishop Geoffrey Rufus (d. 1140)²⁴ was not laid on charcoal but it is recorded that his body was disembowelled and preserved from decomposition by salt.²⁵ The three other bishops identified, William of St Barbara (1143–1152), Robert de Insula (1274–1283) and Richard Kellaw (1311–1316), were simple inhumations without charcoal.

The practice of charcoal burial is now known at Exeter, London, Winchester, Oxford, Worcester, Hereford, Shrewsbury, Stafford, Lincoln, York and elsewhere, and appears to belong to the 10th–12th centuries. Here at Durham at least, it would seem to have had some of its rationale in the preservation of the corpse, or more probably, of the skeleton and grave-goods. As observed by Sir Thomas Browne: 'common tombs preserve not beyond powder: a firmer consistence and compage of parts might be expected from arefaction, deep buriall or charcoal'.²⁶ The explanation of the rite is perhaps to be found in the character of the community who set such store by the incorruptible remains of St Cuthbert, the contents of whose shrine were exhumed, excavated and adjusted on numerous occasions after his arrival from Chester-le-Street in 995.²⁷

We thus have a sequence here potentially of the greatest value: a long-headed community of men, women and children practising charcoal burial and other rites of preservation (perhaps inspired by the example of St Cuthbert), are later joined by round-headed bishops, amongst whom the ritual of preservation and grave-goods lingers until the construction of the 12th-century chapter house.

Unfortunately, there are difficulties in accepting in detail this very important evidence. Wilson, for example, has pointed out that the identification of the episcopal interments is insecure, and the crozier would not in any case need to be Flambard's personal property.²⁸ The early history of the city would greatly benefit from a meticulous and critical republication (and perhaps re-excavation) of the chapter house site and its finds; in the meantime, one may observe that the archaeological sequence at least appears to be consistent, and dates are unlikely to diverge more than a few decades from those documented. 'Flambard's' crozier, ornamented in Urnes style with niello inlaid in silver plate may be

considered to be a product of Norman Durham; and whether of 'English'²⁹ or 'Anglo-Norman'³⁰ workmanship, its maker could have been a fellow-citizen of the shoemakers in contemporary Saddler Street (see below).³¹

No part of the *Ecclesia Major* has been located, although Hope³² followed by Gee³³ sought to establish its position by proposing an earlier (smaller) cloister than the present one. Bilson³⁴ found the triple apse of the Norman east end, predicted by Greenwell,³⁵ but the disposition and character of the earlier convent and its connection or contrast with the abbeys of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow are matters still to be explored.

The castle and city walls, too, are relatively innocent of archaeological investigation. Such work as there has been has neither contradicted nor endorsed the documentary record.³⁶ In the city itself, settlement sequences have been obtained from New Elvet³⁷ (where there was no evidence for activity earlier than the 13th century), and Saddler Street, where excavation took place in 1974 in advance of the construction of University College annexe. Here the backs of three tenements were examined, and a series of timber structures, with associated organic debris, all well preserved, were resolved into two main periods by artifact seriation and radiocarbon dating. In the late 10th or early 11th century (*Period 1*), shoemakers occupied a house lying in the same direction as the street; midden heaps were built up at the rear. By the late 11th or early 12th century (*Period 2*), the area had been organised into three fenced tenements, and buildings were end-on to the street. The pottery assemblage had changed abruptly from fine wheel-made to coarse hand-made, and several natural resources (including antler and game) had become less common. The shoe-making business, however, continued without a break into the late 12th or early 13th century, with only slight indications of involvement in other industries. The economic evidence, revealed in some detail thanks to modern expertise,³⁸ showed an interdependent community of craftsmen and tradesmen to be in existence from the earliest days of *Period 1* (about the year 1000): shoemaker, cobbler, turner (of wooden bowls), potter, butcher, and fishmonger were all represented. After the changes brought with *Period 2* (from about 1100), their interdependence was further increased; and the organising urban hand left its mark on tenement layout, rubbish disposal and the availability of resources.³⁹

A larger and less urgent excavation would have increased still more the value of this sample taken from the early town; and the excavation and analysis of other such well-preserved deposits (if they survive) within the cathedral precinct, or by the market-place, or in the suburbs of the city, would surely begin to evoke the social and economic structure of the early medieval community in a way not previously thought possible.

THE SURVIVAL OF EVIDENCE OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT

How far can we hope that such evidence survives and will be retrieved? The question is highly relevant for two reasons. First, where deposits still survive they must be located and excavated before destruction, if not protected. Secondly,

the process of prospecting for these deposits ('archaeological site evaluation') is a useful way of gathering evidence for the reconstruction of the site as it was, before the exigencies of war, commerce and property speculation caused it to change shape.⁴⁰ No site evaluation has been undertaken for Durham City, but some preliminary observations may be made for the peninsula.

It was Canon Greenwell who brought to light some early information, helpful for the understanding of archaeological deposits near the cathedral. Bishop Hugh of Le Puiset (1153–95) originally intended to build a Lady chapel at the east end of the cathedral beyond the site of the triple apse and the present Nine Altars. But as work proceeded, cracks began to appear in the walls, and the building began to subside. Hugh abandoned the site, and built the Galilee chapel at the west end instead. The cause of the subsidence, according to Greenwell, was that 'the foundation of the cathedral at the west end is close to the rock, whilst at the other end the soil is deep and in places of a peaty nature'.⁴¹ Part of his statement was supported by Hope, who reported that the sandstone bedrock was only ten inches below the cloister floor at its north-western corner.⁴² Such soil of a 'peaty nature' is undoubtedly an archaeological deposit of some kind, and may be compared with another, located further north. Here, in 1968, Dr Whitworth recorded a section across the extant deposit near Jevon's House and took a sample from a preserved organic layer.⁴³ The sample contained pollen (including wheat), bone and artifacts which compare interestingly with the material from Saddler Street. Dr Whitworth wanted to argue from this sample an agricultural exploitation of the peninsula earlier than A.D. 1000; but it ought to be pointed out that his single radiocarbon result of A.D. 940 ± 90 now calibrates to a date between 750 and 1220.⁴⁴ It is also possible to reinterpret his published 'black bed', not as a pond, but as an occupation layer artificially terraced into the sand. If this is so, the sampled pollen assemblage does not have to indicate nearby cultivation, but food waste, foliage, and wood brought together by the occupants. The site would thus be seen as part of the early medieval settlement on the peninsula, directly comparable to that in Saddler Street.

The peninsula has clearly been damaged at some early date by levelling and it may be that the first continuator of Simeon has provided us with an appropriate context: 'Ranulf Flambard made as clear and level as a field the space between the Cathedral and the Castle, which had been invaded by numerous dwelling-places, lest the church be soiled by their filth or imperilled by their fires'.⁴⁵ Presumably Flambard was not the first of the great levellers (in the civil engineering sense) since the material of which the motte is composed must have come from somewhere. This light sandy soil is more easily cleared than consolidated, and with the increasing use of stone foundations, a lowering of the surface must be expected. Neither Wheeler nor Pocock found that settlement had survived on the upper peninsula;⁴⁶ and a recent observation by the author at the north-east corner of Palace Green showed that naturally deposited sand lay within a foot of the surface. Indirect evidence for the same levelling operation may be inferred from a section cut by Grace Simpson and Victor Hartley through the motte during excavations on the site of Bishop Tunstall's chapel within the

castle.⁴⁷ The final make-up layer of the earliest mound, component to the motte, consisted of 'black earth containing vivianite, pieces of wood and many animal bones'.⁴⁸ This context, like that at Jevon's and the house areas at Saddler Street contained no pottery, but no doubt represents the Norman demolition of part of the later Saxon settlement, such as Domesday Book often reports elsewhere.

However, if much has gone from the crucial areas of the cathedral, castle and Palace Green, some deposit certainly remains. As indicated above, the early medieval settlement evidence may be intact along much of the east side. Modern engineers, moreover, have reported 'considerable pockets of filled ground'⁴⁹ in which sequences as good or better than that from Saddler Street surely await discovery.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE ORIGINS OF THE CITY

Enough is probably known about Durham to say that its site was unoccupied until the early middle ages⁵⁰ when the settlement developed upon a promontory of moderate height enclosed by the river or by a belt of protective marshland of which the edge of the alluvium marks the approximate limits. Such a site needed only a short earthwork across the peninsula neck to complete its defence.⁵¹ It exemplifies a type that was sought out for military purposes by Alfred and his successors⁵² and also earlier, as Professor Cramp has pointed out, by middle-Saxon monastic settlers.⁵³ While there is no direct evidence to place Durham in either context, its documented foundation in the late 10th century, the public commitment of Earl Uhtred, and the fact that it withstood a siege by the Scots twenty-six years or so before the Norman Conquest, means it must have had a military function; its origin could therefore be seen as much in the political strategy of the region as in the provision of a haven for its clergy. It could further be argued that there would be little point in moving the seat of the bishop, as was done in 995, before the site had been made secure with fortifications and a garrison; and this, we can guess, would be coincident with the establishment of a service industry. Here, indeed, we may have the mysterious cultivators of the clearing to whom Simeon alludes. The installation of such a garrison could have taken place as early as the first half of the 10th century, and still be consistent with the radiocarbon dates obtained from Jevon's House and Saddler Street. Provided we can endure the silence of clerical commentators on the matter, a pre-episcopal, military phase is thus perfectly possible, and may have its initiation in the strategy of a still earlier regime. The visit of Athelstan to the Community of St Cuthbert at Chester-le-Street in 927,⁵⁴ was presumably a seminal event of northern politics, a meeting at which arrangements for the protection of the new Kingdom would be high on the agenda.

It is, however, likely that distinctions in the archaeological record not only in date, but as between the military, the ecclesiastical and the mercantile sectors will always be faintly drawn, perhaps especially for the earlier stages of the settlement. The earliest cemetery known, immediately adjacent to the extant cloister, contained men, women and children and a weapon. This is not typical of a segregated community, but may still belong to an unreformed Anglo-Saxon

convent. Its supercession by the chapter house in the 12th century marks a transition into a more formally organised precinct, and it is interesting to note that the rite of charcoal burial apparently ceased at the same time. Bearing in mind the uncertainties inherent in the Durham evidence, the association of charcoal burial with unreformed Minister Churches is worthy of further investigation.

The Saddler Street excavations also told of a radical change in about the early 12th century. The first occupants here (as at the Jevon's House site) could draw on a mixed farming economy and a variety of wild animals and crops; there was evidence of domestic crafts, spinning and weaving in addition to leather-working, which was nevertheless serving a community, from wattle houses terraced into the hillside. By the 12th century the leather-workers were occupying one of three parallel tenements and following a more crowded (and more permanent) style of artisan life. There are a number of documented candidates for the instigators of such a change (the events following the Norman Conquest in the mid-11th century, the later 11th-century reformation and re-fortification, the improvements due to Bishop Hugh in the mid-12th century), but it is difficult to say which of them is being observed, if indeed any were directly responsible. The rationalisation of a pre-existing manufacturing quarter by Flambard is the most attractive hypothesis; but a recovery under Waltheof or Walcher after the 'harrying of the north' is equally consistent with the archaeological evidence. Even the development and chartering of the Borough by Hugh of Le Puiset, although asking a long life of the Saddler Street sequence, is by no means out of reach of the radiocarbon dates which alone place it in time.

It has to be admitted that the recognition of closely datable acts of town planning, or defence, or indeed most of the more abstract urban parameters, is not yet a particular talent of archaeology, even where there is excavation on a comprehensive scale (as at Winchester) or a sequence susceptible to dendrochronology (as at Novgorod). The exploration of the typical has begun with some success, but to achieve our goal of distilling independent archaeological information useful to the historian, far more research, strategically planned and carefully executed, is needed at Durham underneath the ground.

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2. For the Saddler Street Excavations, see M. O. H. Carver, 'Three Saxo-Norman Tenements in Durham City', *Medieval Archaeology*, xxiii (1979), 1-80. The account of these excavations given at the Durham conference has been omitted here.

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6. R. J. Cramp, 'A Cross from St. Oswald's Church, Durham and its stylistic relationships', *Durham University Journal*, new series, XXVII (1966), 120-24; and see these papers, p. 5.
7. Symeon, 80-81.
8. R. J. Cramp, 'The Anglo-Saxon Period', *Durham County and City with Teeside* (British Association 1970), 199-206.
9. VCH, *Durham*, I (1906), 306.
10. W. Greenwell, 'The Early History of Durham Castle', *T.A.A.S.D.N.*, VII (1934-36), 59. Earlier documented sieges (in 1006 and 1016) may be discounted, following B. Meehan, 'The Siege of Durham, the Battle of Carham and The Cession of Lothian', *Scottish Historical Review*, LV (1976).
11. Greenwell, op. cit. in note 10.
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14. W. T. Jones, 'The Walls and Towers of Durham', *Durham University Journal*, XXII, no. 7-12 (1920) and XXIII, no. 2 (1923), 527; VCH, *Durham*, III (1928), 11, 65.
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18. J. Raine, *A Brief Historical Account of the Episcopal Castle or Palace of Auckland* (Durham 1852).
19. The foundations of the chapter house later proved to contain four 11th-century cross-shafts of idiosyncratic iconography (now in the cathedral Library). See W. Greenwell, 'An account of the heads of four memorial crosses found in the foundations of the Chapter House, Durham', *T.A.A.S.D.N.*, IV (1890-95), 123-33; *ibid.*, 281-85; VCH, *Durham*, I (1906), 224; here discussed by Cramp, p. 8.
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21. Fowler 'Chapter House . . .', *Archaeologia*, XLV (1880), 397 no. 12.
22. Unpublished.
23. Fowler 'Chapter House . . .', *Archaeologia*, XLV (1880), 394; Fowler attributes this change to the ethnic differences as between Anglo-Saxon and Norman.
24. VCH, *Durham*, I (1906), 224.
25. Greenwell, 'Durham Castle', *T.A.A.S.D.N.*, VII (1934-36), 83.
26. Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydrotaphia, etc* (London 1893), 54. My thanks to Susan Hirst for this reference.
27. C. F. Battiscombe, ed., *The Relics of St. Cuthbert* (1956) and see a recent survey of the documented exhumations by Diana Boyson (unpub. Durham University MA Thesis, 1974). These relics have for the most part little direct evidence for the Durham settlement itself, unless the additions can be equated with the products of local craftsmen. For example, the 'episcopal shoes, perforated with holes' discovered during the Translation of 1104 may now be compared with an 11th-century sandal from Saddler Street (Carver, 'Three Saxo-Norman Tenements . . .', *Medieval Archaeology*, XXIII (1979)).
28. D. M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Ornamental Metalwork, 700-1100* (1964), 7n.
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31. For a brief discussion of the concept of 'Saxo-Normans' or 'Anglo-Scandinavians' as epithets

- applied to early medieval Durham, see Carver 'Three Saxo-Norman Tenements . . .', *Medieval Archaeology*, xxiii (1979). How far Viking taste or technique was really prevalent amongst either townsmen or prelates is unclear, but 'a strong localised Danish Settlement there' (H. R. Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain* (1977), 123) will probably always be difficult to demonstrate archaeologically.
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 39. Carver, 'Three Saxo-Norman Tenements . . .', *Medieval Archaeology*, xxiii (1979).
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