

# The landscape archaeology of secular power in 8th-11th century England

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RESUMEN: Este artículo aspira a valorar en cuánto ha contribuido la arqueología a nuestra comprensión de la naturaleza del poder regio en la Inglaterra anglosajona tardía. El interés principal recae en los indicios indirectos de la iniciativa regia, en particular la actividad judicial y militar.

ABSTRACT: This paper considers how archaeology has contributed to our understanding of the nature of royal power in later Anglo-Saxon England. The main focus is on indirect evidence for royal initiative with a particular emphasis on military and judicial activity.

PALABRAS CLAVE: defensa, ley, organización militar, palacios, poder real.

KEYWORDS: defence, law, military organisation, palaces, royal power.

## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this paper is to present a brief survey of the archaeological evidence for secular power in Anglo-Saxon England. While the magnificent Cruz de los Ángeles and the Cruz de al Victoria kept in the Cámara Santa of Oviedo Cathedral surpass any such surviving ecclesiastical treasure in Anglo-Saxon England, similar crosses of Anglo-Saxon provenance, or at least workmanship, such as the later 8<sup>th</sup> century ‘Rupertus’ Cross from Bischofshofen, Austria, and the 10<sup>th</sup> century Drahm Cross from the Treasury of the Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudule at Brussels show that similar objects once adorned English churches too (Wilson, 1984: 134, fig. 158; 191, fig. 240). A famous illustration in the *Liber Vitae* of Newminster and Hyde (Winchester) of c. 1031 shows King Cnut and his queen, Aelfgifu (also called Emma), before a large gold cross on an altar (BL MS Stowe 944, f. 6) (Wilson, 1984: 184, fig. 231). Beyond precious objects both Asturias and Anglo-Saxon England share an impressive early medieval ecclesiastical heritage evident today in standing buildings.

My focus here, however, is not on ecclesiastical wealth or influence, but on the evidence for royal power in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. In a European context the Asturian kingdom has provided one of the finest surviving monuments of early medieval royal power in the form of the palace of

Santa María de Naranco only a short distance from the city of Oviedo; Anglo-Saxon evidence for royal activity is much less obvious, at least initially.

The search for physical evidence of Anglo-Saxon royal power thus requires a wide-ranging enquiry and includes material which, on first inspection, is relatively unimpressive but whose implications support the commonly held view that the Late Anglo-Saxon state (of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) was a well organised and powerful machine (Campbell, 1975, 1994). The operational capabilities of the Late Saxon kings, particularly from the reign of King Alfred in the second half of the ninth century, are well illustrated by the fact that they maintained a network of royal palaces throughout their kingdoms (based in many cases on earlier arrangements), raised large armies, often at short notice, built fortifications based on a system of military obligations, and enforced complex judicial organisation. I shall consider each of these themes below and illustrate them with reference to examples, but to begin with I shall examine what little is known from material culture of the tastes and aspirations of Anglo-Saxon kings, before moving on to consider the wider manifestations of royal power.

## MATERIAL CULTURE

The separation of the English Church from that of Rome in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after nearly

1000 years of Catholic Christianity, brought about the loss of countless ecclesiastical treasures (Dodwell, 1982). A century later, the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and the period of the English Commonwealth ensured the destruction at the hands of Oliver Cromwell of what at that time remained of the English medieval royal regalia, which still included early medieval materials including a comb and various jewels. The upshot of these two episodes of English 'cultural revolution' is that material culture which can be directly associated with Anglo-Saxon royalty is extremely limited. Nevertheless, the few items either owned or given as gifts by Anglo-Saxon royalty give at least an indication of the quality of what has been lost.

The much discussed contents of the Mound 1 ship-burial at Sutton Hoo, which may or may not be attributable to King Raedwald of East Anglia (c. 600-c. 624), provide the only English material to compare with wealth of Frankish royal burials – most notably the contents of the grave of the Merovingian King Childeric (c. 457-c. 481/2), buried in Tournai, Belgium and subsequently discovered by a stone mason making repairs to St Brice's Church in the town in 1653. There is, however, nothing from England to compare with arguably the finest European treasure explicitly symbolising early medieval royal power, which is of course that recovered at Guarrazar (Toledo) between 1858 and 1861 (De Palol and Hirmer, 1967: 24). The Guarrazar hoard included over 20 remarkable jewelled votive crowns, among them those of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Visigothic kings Suintila (621-631) and Reccesswinth (653-672), along with many other items including dress accessories and gold crosses, all gifts to the church.

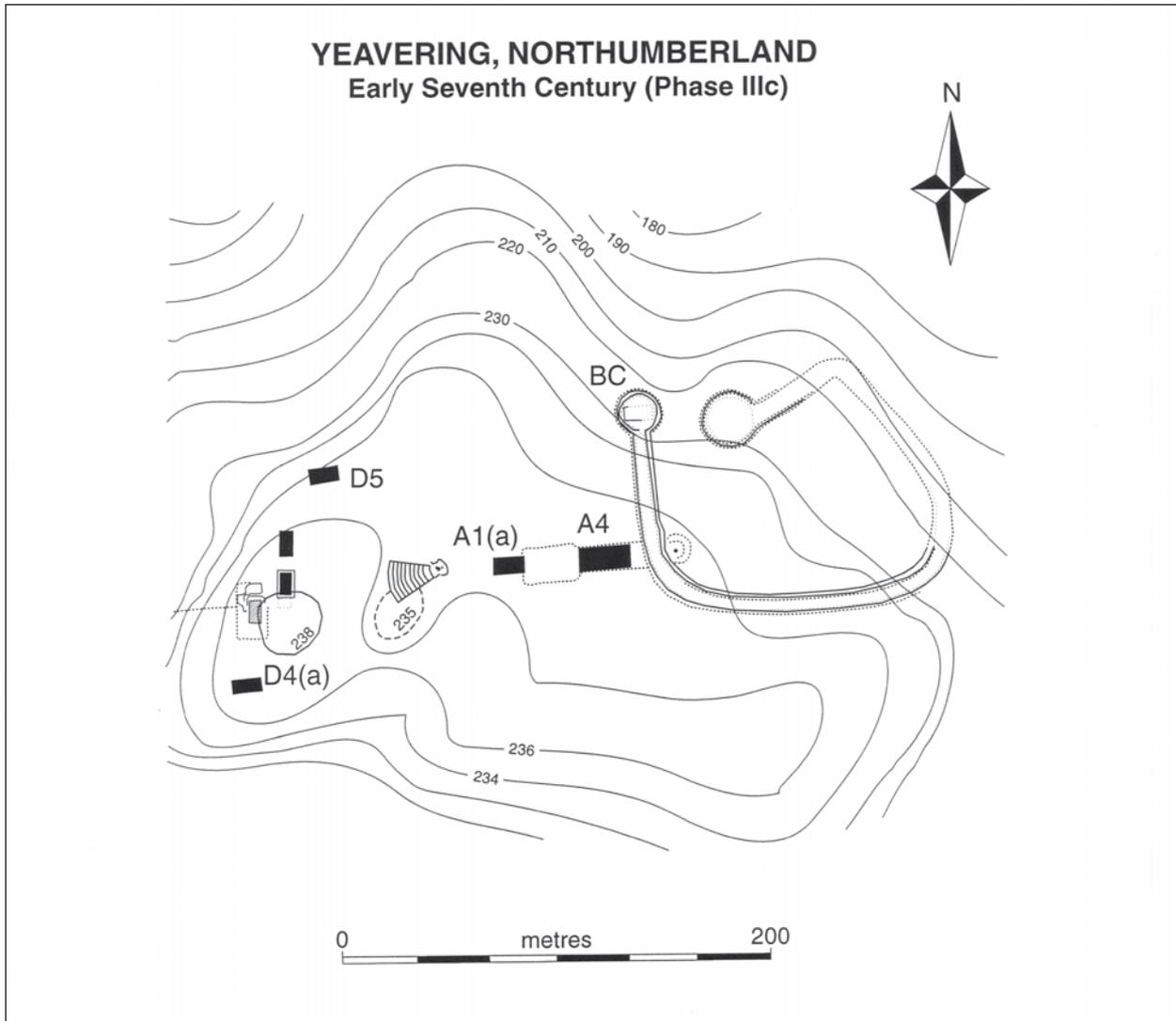
Besides the Sutton Hoo finds, English objects which either belonged to individual royals or, at the very least were commissioned by them, begin with two gold finger rings that can be dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of their stylistic attributes as they are decorated in the so-called Trewhiddle Style (Wilson and Blunt 1961; Wilson 1984, 102, figs 117 and 118). Both rings bear inscriptions with names with royal titles (Rex and Regna) identifying them with the 9<sup>th</sup> century West Saxon King Æthelwulf (839-58) and his daughter, Queen Æthelswith

(853/4-888/9). Both objects were found accidentally (his in cart-rut in 1780 in Laverstock, Wiltshire - hers ploughed up in a field in Sherburn, Yorkshire in 1870). Most famous of all, of course, is the so-called Alfred Jewel, a gold open work piece with an enamel and rock-crystal setting found near Athelney (the name itself means 'princely island') in Somerset in 1693. The openwork frame of the object incorporates an Old English inscription 'ÆLFREDMECH/EH/TGEWYRCAN' 'Alfred had me made' and, despite the fact that there is no royal title, the quality and stylistic features of the piece belong in a high-status 9<sup>th</sup> century context (Hinton, 1974: 29-48). That the object incorporates a socket for a now lost circular-sectioned rod (of bone, ivory or wood) has invited a link to be made with reading aids, possibly the objects referred to as *æstels*, noted by King Alfred as gifts made in his drive to foster learning among his subjects in his own translation of c.890 of Pope Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis* (Hinton, 1974: 46).

These few objects represent virtually all that is known of the material culture of Anglo-Saxon royalty. We move on now, however, to consider how royal power was manifested in the wider landscape and it is only at this scale of enquiry that the level and impact of royal initiative becomes apparent.

#### PALACES

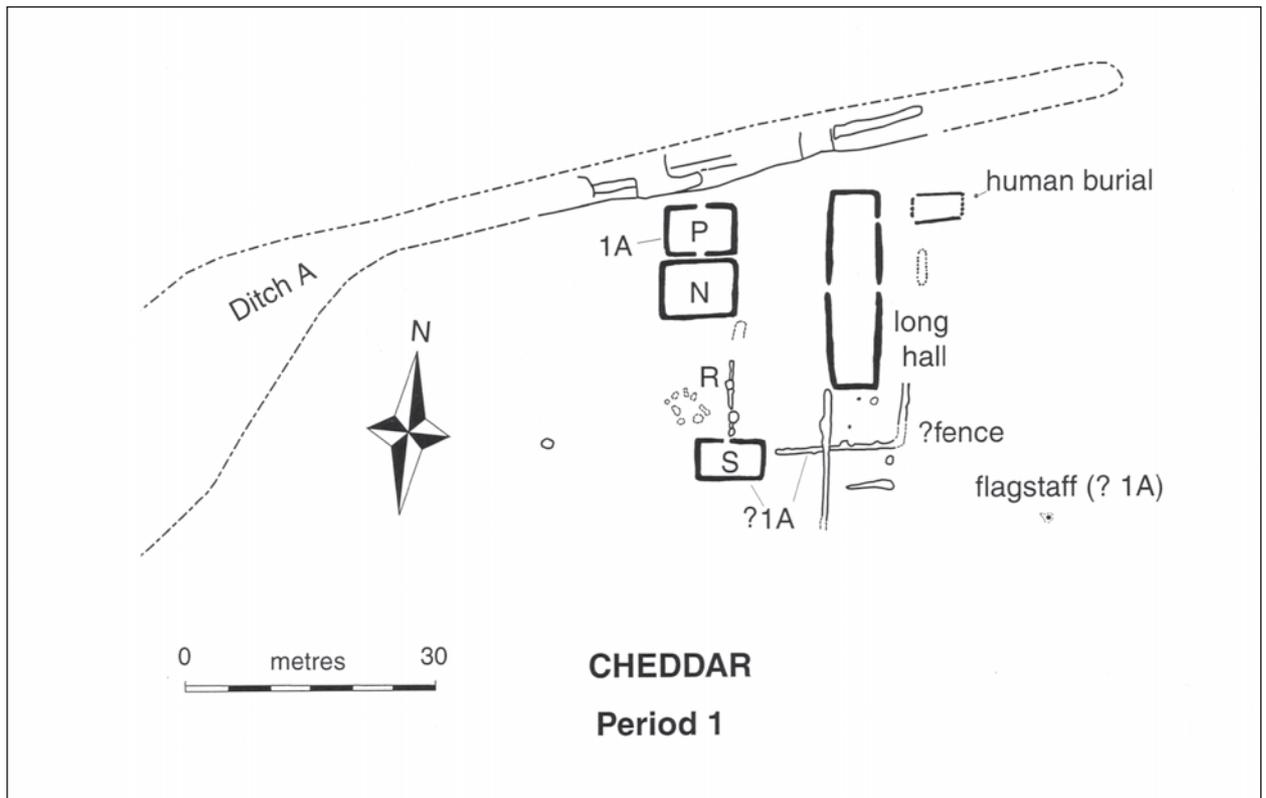
Unlike the finest stone-built royal palaces of the Carolingian world such as Aachen and Frankfurt, Anglo-Saxon royal residences (*villa regalis*, or *villa regia*) were constructed of timber. While stone construction is often linked with a perceived desire on the part of early medieval kings to express Romanitas, the English kings seemingly expressed a deeply embedded Germanic identity and their accommodation can be seen to bear closer similarities more generally with the northern and Scandinavian worlds than with the Merovingian/Carolingian area, southern Europe and the Mediterranean. Timber architecture, however, need not mean that royal accommodation was unimpressive, nor that the Anglo-Saxons had simply lost the technological



Plan of the 7th century palace at Yeavinger, Northumbria (after Hope-Taylor 1977).

capability to build in stone. In western and northern Britain in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, hillforts of Iron Age origin were sometimes strengthened with the addition of stone walls and gateways, for at example at South Cadbury, Somerset, while the high status secular residence at Tintagel, Cornwall contained many early medieval stone buildings (Alcock, 1995; Barrowman et al., 2007). In central and eastern England important churches were built in stone from the start of the period of the conversion of the pagan English to Christianity at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Much has been made of the various accounts in the writings of the Venerable Bede's of Frankish masons and glaziers being shipped to England in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century to assist in the building of the sister monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth in northeastern England (Cramp, 2005: 31-32), but for kings to have built their accommodation in wood and not stone is much more likely to have been a conscious ideological and cultural choice rather and not an indicator of post-Roman technological decline. Rather too much is made, perhaps, of the apparent desire of

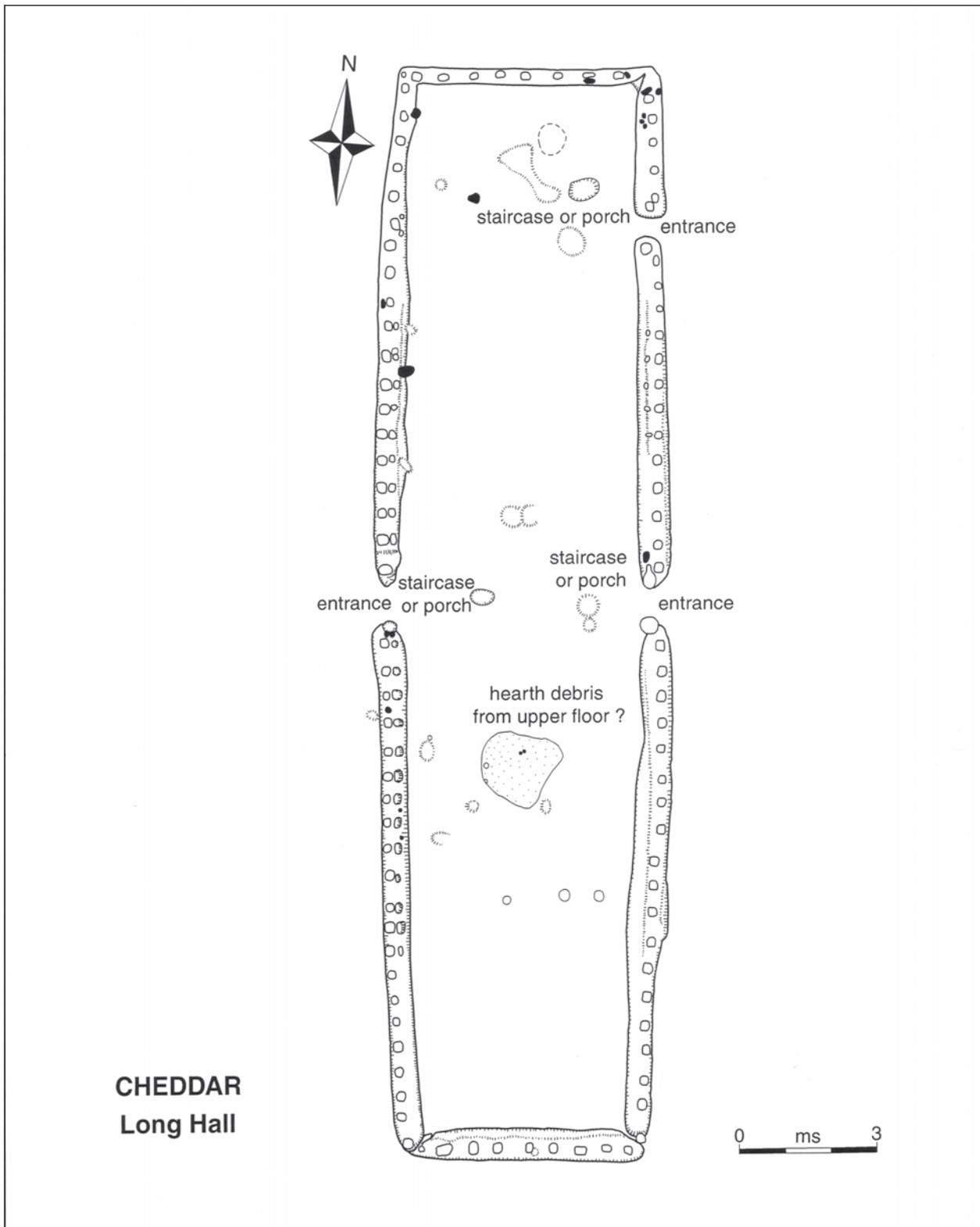


Plan of the 9th century palace (Period 1) at Cheddar, Somerset (after Rahtz 1979)

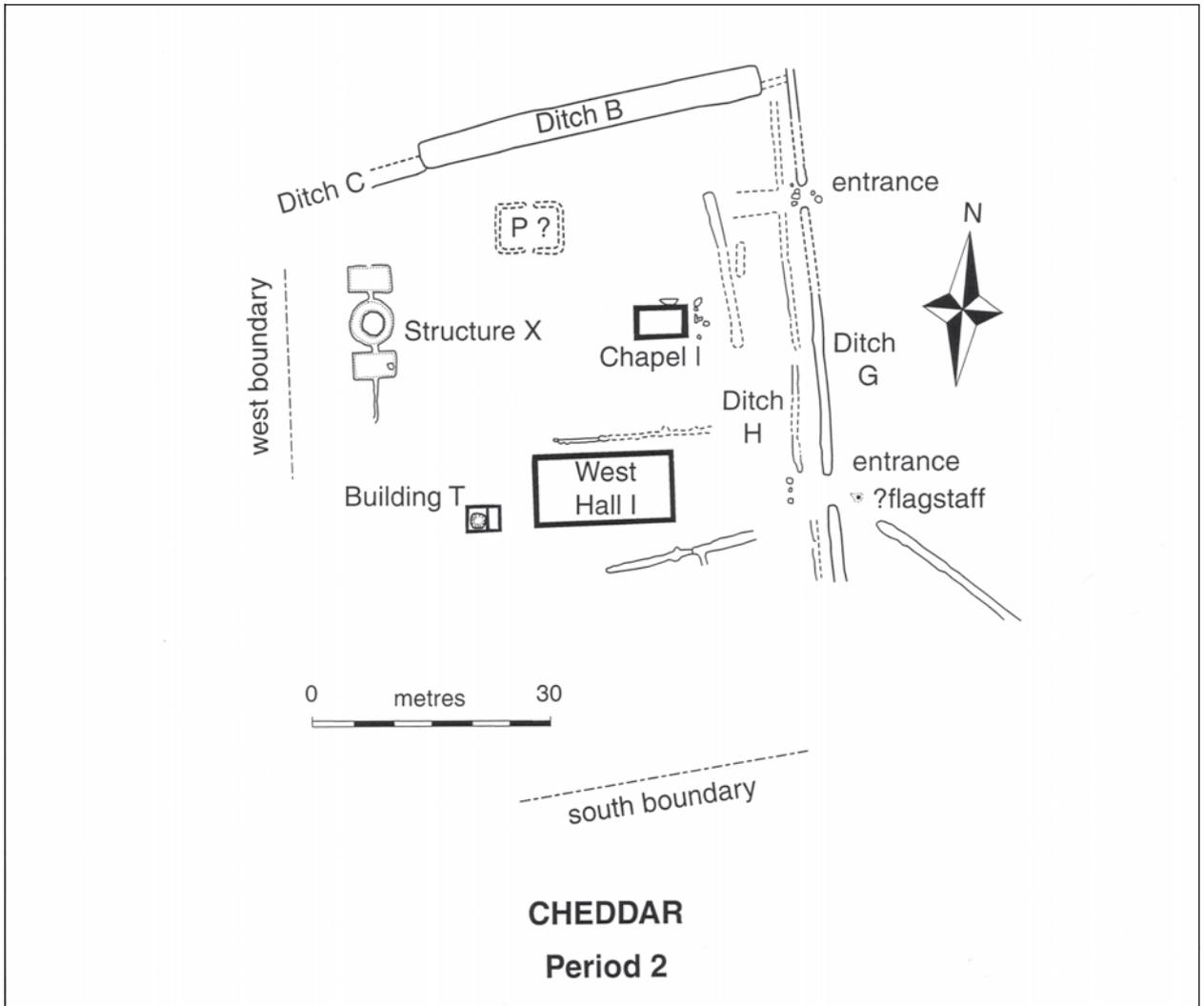
post-Roman society to re-create 'The grandeur that was Rome', but much writing has tended to sidestep the issue of just how deeply an overt 'northern' and non-classical culture was actively promoted by early medieval elites. More recent debate in Scandinavia and England has focussed on the degree to which these two societies resisted or emulated and accrued attributes of the Roman World, although there is little consensus (Hills, 2007). Had Anglo-Saxon kings wanted to live in palatial villas, surely they would have done. Indeed, while former Roman towns may have been rather dangerous environments owing to crumbling structures, the English countryside would have been littered with the remains of Roman masonry buildings, some standing to full height, even with vaulted roofs intact, into the late Middle Ages as documented by the chronicler Gerald of Wales at Carleon in South Wales in 1188 (Thorpe, 1978: 114).

Certain English place-names also provide indications of the visibility of Roman buildings in the medieval landscape. At Fawler in Oxfordshire, where an excavated villa is known, the place-name means 'flag-floor', indicating that Roman floors were still visible when English speakers re-named the landscape (Gelling, 1988: 153-154; Blair, 1994: xxv). Re-roofing a Roman villa and sweeping accumulated detritus off of mosaic or stone-paved floor would hardly have taxed the organisational or constructional capabilities of even the earliest Anglo-Saxon elites. Certainly, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, if not the 9<sup>th</sup>, local lords were building masonry towers, and late Anglo-Saxon fortified towns (of which more below) were furnished with walls, towers and gateways.

An important observation to be made at this juncture is that forming value judgements between societies who utilised stone and those who used timber is not



Plan of the 9th century Long Hall at Cheddar (after Rahtz 1979)



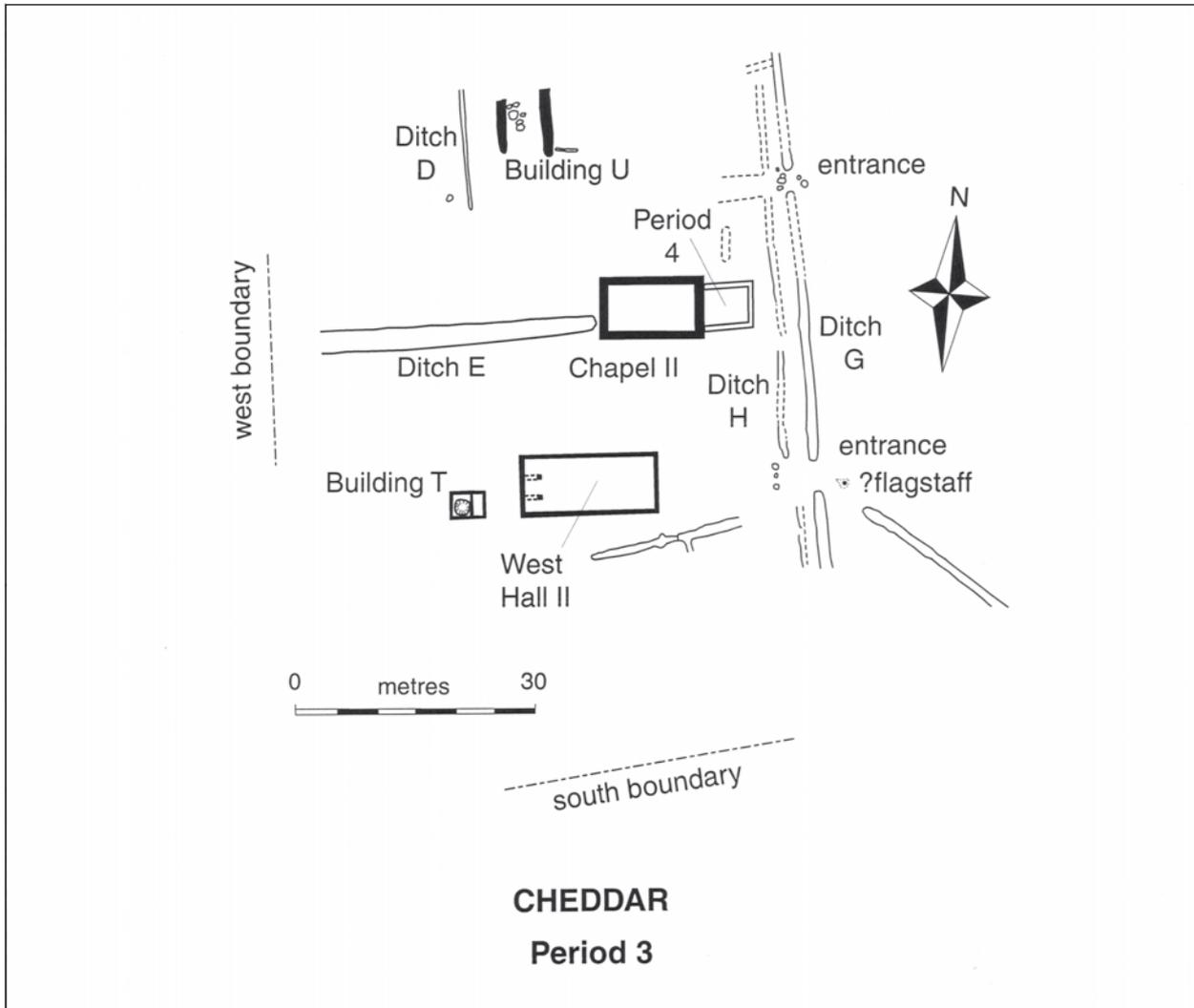
Plan of the late 10th or early 11th century palace at Cheddar (after Rahtz 1979)

straightforward and that it is far from acceptable to assume that what drove early medieval elites was an overwhelming desire to emulate, or re-invent, Rome and its cultural signature. Archaeology suggests a complex melding of cultural elements in the physical remains of Anglo-Saxon elite culture.

I will not review here all that is known of Anglo-Saxon royal accommodation from archaeological remains, although the number of sites where such evidence has been recovered can be counted on one hand with the sites ranging in date from the late 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>

centuries to the end of the period in England in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The late 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the formation of kingdoms across much of England, although in the southwest, Wales and the north extensive polities focussed on hillforts appear to have existed from an earlier period (Bassett, 1989; Alcock, 2003).

Royal accommodation of the 'Age of Sutton Hoo' is attested at Yeavering in northeastern England, where excavations in the 1950s and 1960s revealed an extensive palace, that documented by Bede (using the name *Ad Gefrin*) as the place of conversion of the Northum-



Plan of the palace at Cheddar just before the Norman conquest of 1066 (after Rahtz 1979)

brian King Edwin in AD 631 (Hope-Taylor 1977). The basic pattern observed at Yeavering and other contemporary elite settlements (such as Foxley, Hatton Rock and Sprouston) is one of substantial timber buildings exhibiting ritual alignments — either arranged end to end or around courtyards— but with relatively short periods of occupation, at least in comparison to ecclesiastical sites (Reynolds, 2003; Blair, 2005). It is worth noting, however, that the axial alignments of structures found at monastic sites is foreshadowed on secular, pre-Christian elite sites and is potentially a further indi-

cator that the increasing formalisation of the English landscape from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century was at least initiated by secular powers.

In the same fashion as their 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, the later Anglo-Saxon kings were itinerant. Kings and their retinues travelled throughout their kingdoms supporting their households on customary dues collected in the form of food rents sufficient to maintain the king and his party for short periods — nominally one night—. This practice is recorded in Domesday book where entries report that a given

estate is liable to provide *feorm* —the Old English term ascribed to food rents and which renders the modern English word ‘farm’ (Lavelle, 2007).

The archaeology of 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century royal accommodation is represented principally by excavations at Cheddar, Somerset, at the opening to the famous natural gorge (a pass through the Mendip Hills) (Rahtz, 1979). The estate of Cheddar is mentioned in the will of King Alfred (871-899) (Keynes and Lapidge, 1983) and, although a royal residence is not explicitly mentioned, it seems likely that the earliest phases of occupation discovered in the excavations there relate to a royal holding. The *witan* (a gathering of the king and his councillors) met three times at Cheddar during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in 941, 956 and 968 under the patronage of kings Edmund (939-946), Eadwig (955-959) and Edgar (959-975), respectively. Furthermore, a number of land charters were attested at Cheddar and of the series belonging to King Eadwig’s reign, a proportion of those issued in 956 may have been drawn up at the Cheddar *witan*. Cheddar’s royal associations continue in the period following the Norman Conquest and the site was visited by both Henry I and II.

Cheddar’s earliest activity, dated to before c.930, comprised five timber buildings ranged to the south of a substantial storm-water or drainage ditch. A penny of King Alfred’s father King Æthelwulf (839-853), the earliest coin from the site, dated to c. 845, suggests that the earliest phase of the settlement might be placed in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century, although an earlier date is possible. A long hall, possibly of two storeys, was the principal structure of the first phase. At 24 m in length, 5,5 m in width at either end and just over 6m in the middle, the plan of the structure is best described as ‘bow-sided’. It is suggested that a hearth lay in the southern end of the hall, while burnt material found within the hall is possibly derived from a clay-set hearth from a collapsed upper floor or perhaps a suspended floor at ground level, either situation would account for the disturbed nature of the burnt clay and charcoal deposit.

The other four buildings of the first phase probably included private residential accommodation, either for the king, his retinue or perhaps for reeves and others

who were permanent residents at the palace, and other structures serving the various functions that might be expected an estate centre. To the west of the long hall Building N was succeeded by Building P immediately to the north, while to the south-west of the long hall Building S evidently related to fence-lines to the north and east, the latter seemingly enclosing a space around the long hall. Overall, this arrangement forms a courtyard to the west of the long hall. To the east of the north end of the long hall lightly constructed Building Z was formed of individual posts, either set or driven into the ground, spaced at intervals of 0,4 m. The storm-water ditch to the north of the buildings silted up between the mid-9<sup>th</sup> and earlier 10<sup>th</sup> century as indicated by the successive occurrence of coins of c. 845, c. 870 and c. 930 in the filling of the ditch.

The site was completely refurbished, possibly with the retention of Building P from Period 1, in the late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> century phase of occupation, Period 2. A new hall aligned east-west was built in the southern part of the site with a masonry chapel to the north overlying the foundations of the Period 1 hall. A substantial construction, the new hall was 17 m long and 9,1 m wide with a superstructure formed of upright posts 0,3 m-0,6 m in diameter set 2,3 m apart within large post-pits. Entrance into the building was provided by openings at either end while, outside the west entrance, a latrine structure, Building T, was sited a few metres away.

The masonry chapel was built of limestone rubble faced with heavy stucco painted with pseudo-ashlar decoration in imitation of cut ashlar blocks; windows and doorways were of moulded limestone. A unique structure (Building X) with two rectangular elements either side of a circular compartment with the superstructure formed around closely spaced stakes was found at the western edge of the site and is difficult to interpret. The floor of all three parts of the building was dug 0,3 m into the ground, leaving a raised platform within the circular area. A fowl-house comprising two circular elements either side of a rectangular space can be found on the idealised 9<sup>th</sup> century plan of the Swiss monastery at St Gall, and on that basis it has been proposed that Building X was also a fowl-house, the

north part serving as a store, the central element as the fowl-house itself, with a dwelling for the fowl keeper in the southern part. Smelting and iron forging evidence is associated with fragmentary structures to the east of the chapel, whereas evidence for small-scale metal casting and melting in gold and silver and enamelling points to jewellery manufacture.

Period 3 is dated to before the Norman Conquest of 1066. The largest hall was reduced to 7.6 m in width, the chapel was rebuilt on a more impressive scale, while both the latrine building and the eastern boundary features were retained from the preceding phase. A ditch was cut running westwards from the southwest corner of the chapel, suggesting that only the southern half of the site was now occupied by royal accommodation. Structures to the north of this boundary perhaps represent workshops and accommodation for servants and other estate workers. The possible fowl-house was made redundant by these new arrangements. Building U also lay in the northern area and was poorly built with stone rubble foundations on two sides and light post settings; it was perhaps part of a lean-to attached to the main building. Industrial activity inside Building U is attested by iron working residues from forging. Further waste products found within suggest iron furnaces in close by.

Material culture from Cheddar has a broad range, but lacks spectacular finds. Metal dress fittings include a few fine decorated 9<sup>th</sup> century objects such as strap-ends. A very small quantity of pottery was found associated with Period 1 and only a little more with Period 2. During Period 3 the range and quantity of vessels broadened to include lamps as well as a wider variety of cooking pots and dishes. Faunal evidence suggests a reliance largely on cattle, while large dumps of animal bones recovered from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century fills of the Period 1 storm-water ditch appear to represent animals slaughtered at a prime stage of development. The lack of deer is of interest given the association of hunting with a royal presence in the area attested by the story noted above of King Edmund's narrow escape from death whilst involved in the chase in the vicinity of the Gorge. Agricultural and woodworking tools made

of iron in the Cheddar assemblage accord well with documentary evidence from the period that relates the tools and equipment to be expected at a major estate centre.

#### THE DEFENCE OF KINGDOMS

There is archaeological evidence from the kingdom of Mercia in central England for fortified settlements, potentially early towns, at Hereford (which literally means 'army-ford') in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century and, perhaps, at Tamworth and Winchcombe at about the same time (Bassett, 2008). The most impressive legacy of Mercian defensive capabilities, however, are Offa's and Wat's Dykes, the great linear earthworks that divided the Mercians from the Welsh. The frontier stretched from the Dee Estuary in the north, down to the Severn Estuary and serves to illustrate the considerable power exercised by King Offa in late 8<sup>th</sup> century Mercia. The surviving earthwork is not continuous, with gaps likely to have been filled by natural topography including woodland, while certain parts have since been slighted. David Hill's work on the Dyke has suggested that the earthwork was built in stretches, utilising a system of military obligations to muster labour and resources (Hill and Worthington, 2003). Recent work on Wat's Dyke has shown that it is to be placed alongside Offa's Dyke as an 8<sup>th</sup> century creation and that it is not a sub-Roman frontier (Malim and Hayes, 2008); the latter view is often —probably mistakenly— applied to linear earthworks of unknown date.

The substantial linear earthworks known as East and West Wansdyke, in the counties of Wiltshire and Somerset, perhaps represent unfinished public works of Middle Anglo-Saxon date; the result of a short-lived settlement between the West Saxon and the Mercians in the late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 9<sup>th</sup> century (Reynolds and Langlands, 2006). The ditch of both sections of the earthwork faces northward indicating that its builders were based to the south and, like Offa's Dyke, the Wansdyke frontier was not a continuous earthwork but an intermittent barrier incorporating other features in the landscape.

Assessment of the labour requirements of building linear earthworks on such a scale indicates that they are much more likely to have been built as major social and political statements by powerful polities than as desperate defence measures by fragmenting sub-Roman societies (Reynolds and Langlands, 2006).

#### FORTIFIED TOWNS: THE BURHS

The late 9<sup>th</sup> and earlier 10<sup>th</sup> centuries were one of the most turbulent periods of English history. Up to 850 Viking attacks had been frequent but brief. After 850, Viking armies began to over-winter and mounted increasingly sustained campaigns with ever-larger highly mobile armies that had a devastating affect on the landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. King Alfred's defeat and subsequent settlement with the Danish army in 878 resulted in the partition of England into the West Saxon kingdom and the Danelaw. As a result, Alfred initiated the building of a series of fortified locations, variously containing markets, minster churches and royal accommodation. Other sites were refortified centres of Roman origin, whereas the so-called 'emergency burhs' were lesser fortifications apparently used on a periodic or insubstantial basis, occasionally as mints. While the distribution of the forts is remarkably even, there was clearly a concern for providing a line of defensive sites along the northern boundaries of Somerset (Bath), Wiltshire (Malmesbury, Cricklade and Chisbury), Berkshire (Oxford, Wallingford and Sashes) and Surrey (Southwark) —in other words the frontier not between Wessex and the Danelaw, but that between the long-running rival kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia—. Coastal *burhs*, such as Watchet, Somerset, Bridport and Wareham in Dorset and Portchester Castle, Hampshire had an obvious motivation; to keep a watch for sea-borne raiders. Inland *burhs* were either existing settlements of economic, religious and political importance, such as Winchester, or they were smaller forts with lower hidages of land attached to them.

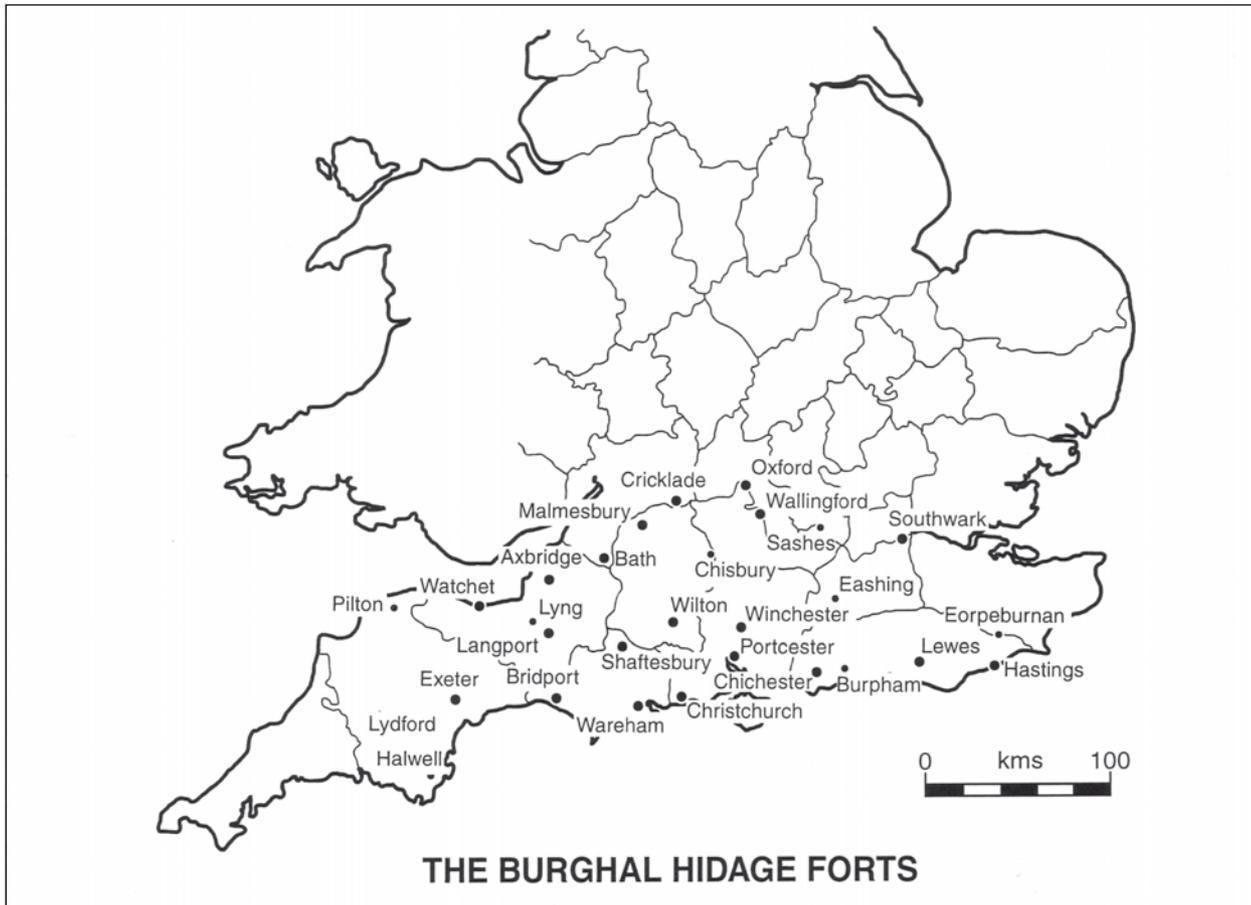
In 899 Alfred died to be succeeded by his son Edward the Elder (899-921) who lead a successful campaign

against the Vikings and who brought much of the Danelaw back under Anglo-Saxon control. Edward also built many new *burhs*, whose dates of construction or rebuilding are noted in *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries, particularly of the second decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest West Saxon *burhs* can be plotted onto a map using a remarkable document known as the *Burghal Hidage*. The *Burghal Hidage* lists 33 fortifications with details about the number of hides (1 hide was nominally the amount of land required to support a household) attached to each place. Compilation of the document is traditionally dated to between 911-14. After listing the series of forts, one version of the *Burghal Hidage* ends with a calculation describing how 'For the maintenance and defence of an acre's breadth of wall sixteen hides are required. If every hide is represented by one man, then every pole (an Anglo-Saxon system of measurement) of wall can be manned by four men. Then for the maintenance of twenty poles of wall eighty hides are required'. This formula facilitates a reconstruction the length of burghal defences at each of the recorded sites in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century: when applied to linear earthworks, the *Burghal Hidage* calculation reveals the astonishing level of social organisation required for their construction. As many scholars have observed, a close correlation can be seen between the 10<sup>th</sup> century defences and those attested on the ground by archaeological and topographical studies (Biddle, 1976; Hill, 1996).

As the distribution of burhs in the West Saxon kingdom shows, each fort was sited no more than 40 miles from the next, a feature strongly suggestive of a comprehensive and centrally planned exercise achievable only with a powerful and efficient system of governance and administration.

In addition to the location of burghal settlements in the landscape, centralised planning is also evident in their form and layout. Our knowledge of the layout of West Saxon *burhs* has been assembled using two approaches; urban morphology and archaeological excavation (Blair, 1994; Dodd, 2003). The town of Oxford illustrates well the layout of a classic planned *burh*. Anglo-Saxon activity at Oxford begins with the

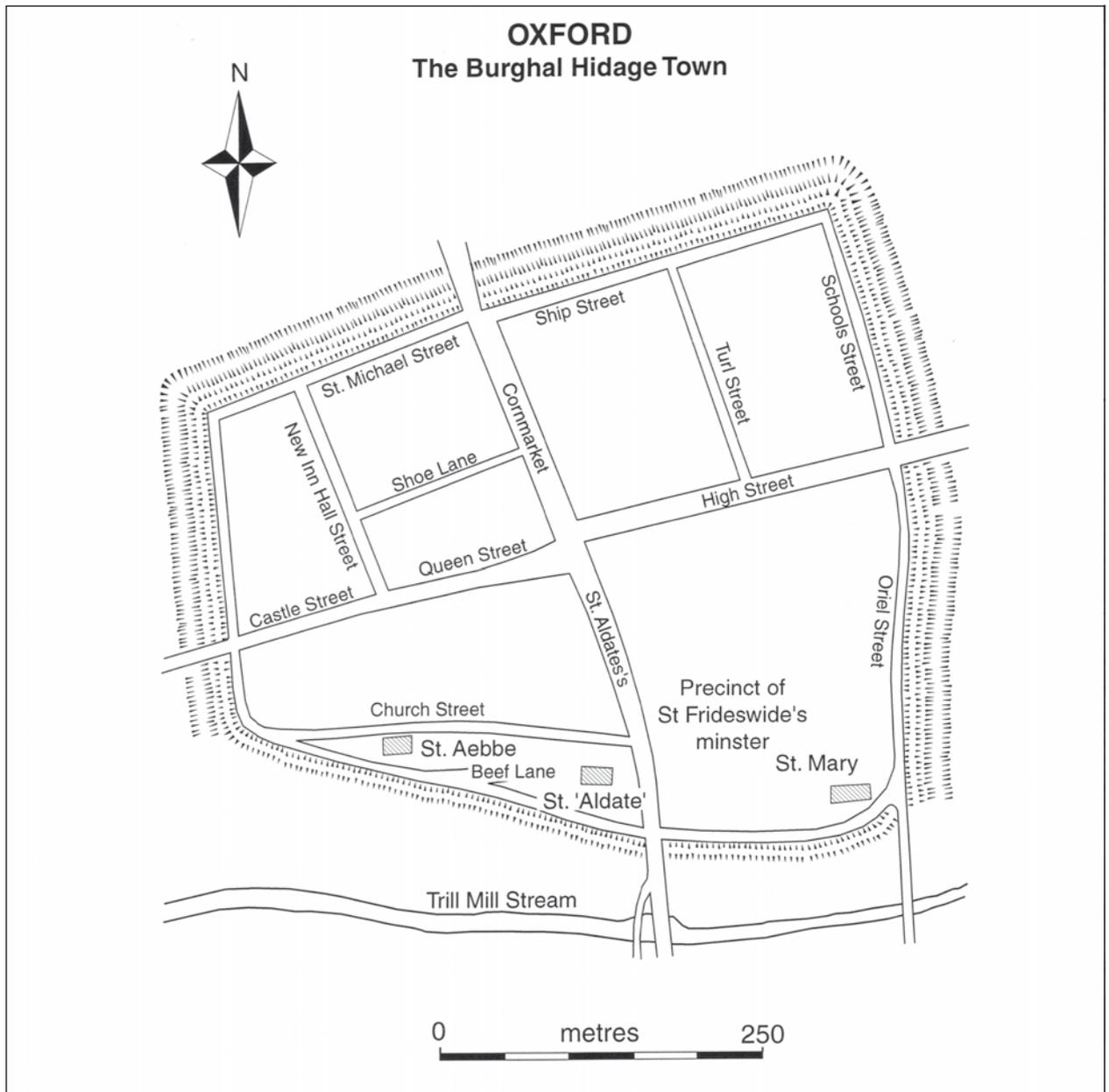


The West Saxon fortifications listed in the Burghal Hidage (after Biddle 1976)

founding there of St Frideswide's Monastery in 727. The burghal town, however, was laid out in one exercise furnished with gridded streets, gates and substantial defences in about 890 incorporating the precinct of the monastery; there seems to have been a mint from about 900, or perhaps as early as 890. Although there are grounds to support the contention that Oxford was a Mercian foundation, possibly of Æthelflæd 'Lady of the Mercians', and not one of Alfred's earlier forts (Blair, 1994: 101), the site is one of the best known archaeologically.

Two principal streets form a crossroads in the centre of Oxford's fortified area with minor streets documented in the northern part of the town and

likely elsewhere. Four entrances dictated by the main streets were located broadly on the points of the compass. Remarkably, parts of the town's masonry fortifications — of probable early 11th century date — survive in the form of a stone tower at the north gate and parts of another at the west gate (Dodd, 2003: 152-164). Internally, the street system has been examined in several places. Metalling of road surfaces has been found to be of a uniform grade while the High Street was furnished with an open drain, called the 'kennel': both of these latter features can be considered under the heading 'administrative archaeology' as indirect evidence for social organisation. The course of the defences of the town is known with some confi-



The plan of Late Anglo-Saxon Oxford (after Blair 1994)

dence, although there is a discrepancy between the hidage assessment in the Burghal Hidage list and the actual length of the ramparts: the assessment of one thousand three hundred hides is one hundred and sixty-three hides short of the length of the defensive circuit.

The ramparts on the northern side of the *burh* at Oxford have been partly excavated. Earth held back by planks set on edge against timber posts, placed just under 2m apart, had been dug from a ditch whose near edge lay some 3m from the revetment. The late 9<sup>th</sup> century rampart was strengthened with alluvial clay

and lacing timbers, while early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century a revetment of ragstone was added which would have presented a formidable sight to the inhabitants of the Upper Thames region, who had seen nothing comparable since the Roman period (Dodd, 2003: 151, fig. 4.10). The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 918 records that King Edward the Elder (899-921) built two *burhs* at Buckingham (one on either side of the river there) in under four weeks (Swanton, 1996: 100). This situation alone provides a striking impression of the efficiency of Late Anglo-Saxon governmental institutions.

#### BEACONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

The evidence for an Anglo-Saxon beacon system to facilitate military communications was first reviewed by David Hill and Sheila Sharpe (Figure 8) and then examined further by regional case studies, such as in the Avebury region in southwest England, and then by a national survey (Hill and Sharpe, 1996; Reynolds, 1995, 1999; Baker and Brookes, forthcoming). Charters of 10<sup>th</sup> century date record places with the names *weard-setl* (place where guard is kept), *weardan hyll* (beacon hill), *weard-dun* (beacon hill) and *weard-stall* (guard house). Land units at Highclere and Burghclere in Hampshire are defined by charter bounds with a *weard-setl* recorded as one of the boundary marks between the two. The spot in question, known today as Beacon Hill, was still used as a signalling place at the time of the Spanish Armada.

Traces of Late Anglo-Saxon urban defensive networks can also be preserved in place-names. Just to the west of the walled City of London, at Westminster, the name Tothill Street records the memory of a 'look-out hill', most likely a link in a signalling chain stretching from Shoebury, or 'protection burh', in Essex, where the Thames flows out into the North Sea, inland to London and beyond. A Late Anglo-Saxon written source that describes social roles in an idealised way, the so-called *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, records among a thegn's duties 'equipping a guard ship and guarding the coast' whereas the lower ranking cottar might be



The Late Anglo-Saxon masonry tower at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire (photo by author)

called upon to keep 'watch on the sea-coast' (Douglas and Greenaway, 1981: 875-879).

An eye to defensive concerns can perhaps be detected in settlement patterns. Along the course of the River Thames to the west of London, for example, settlement location is suggestive of a planned exercise to maximise visibility either way along the river with known Anglo-Saxon settlements such as Brentford and Chelsea situated on bends in the river (Cowie and Blackmore, 2008: 2, fig. 1).

Towers which served a sighting and, perhaps, sounding, role would have substantially improved visibility between and around individual settlements. A specific type of Late Anglo-Saxon masonry towers called 'turriform naves' is known of which the finest surviving example is probably that at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire. A Late Anglo-Saxon document,

the *Geþyncðo*, which describes the material requirements of a thegn or lord makes reference to a structure known as a burh-gate, a feature best interpreted as a fortified gatehouse or tower (Whitelock, 1968: 432). It has been suggested that the lower stages of such towers functioned as a private chapels (Auduoy et al., 1995). At Earl's Barton this aspect appears to be explicitly signalled by crosses carved on the heads of the ground floor windows and a stone roundel with a cross set into the south facing wall at ground level. The first floor of the tower apparently functioned as part of a private residence entered via a narrow doorway in the south wall of the tower presumably with a timber structure immediately to the south. The upper storey is a clear exhibition of status with extravagant architectural detail reminiscent of timber architecture; even when building in stone, Anglo-Saxon secular elites worked with timber exemplars in mind.

#### JUDICIAL ACTIVITY

As we have seen, the exercise of secular power in the early middle ages can be approached in a wide range of contexts. In recent years, historians have placed increasing emphasis on the significance of limiting feud and facilitating dispute settlement as key elements of the emergence and maintenance of successful kingship in the early middle ages (Hudson, 2006; Hyams, 2001, 2003; Reynolds, 2009a, 2009b). Archaeology is now making a major contribution to our knowledge of judicial activity using physical evidence in the form of execution cemeteries (Reynolds, 2009a). One of the principal advantages of studying archaeological material is that it provides a standpoint, independent of written evidence, for assessing the chronology and landscape context of punitive practice and, importantly, a means of assessing the reality of the intent expressed in written law codes.

An individual caught in the act of committing an offence or judged guilty at trial, could be subject to a range of punishments. Lawcodes are known in England from c. 600, with a substantial body of material known from the 7<sup>th</sup> century kingdom of Kent. From the time of King

Alfred onwards, many of the Late Anglo-Saxon kings issued lawcodes and the surviving corpus presents a rich body of material. Throughout the period the majority of atonements for wrongs comprised monetary fines, but from the reign of the West Saxon King Ine (688-725) onwards, courts could impose the death penalty.

Non-capital punishments included exile, the forfeiture of land, and, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, mutilation. King Athelstan's Exeter lawcode of AD 935 (IV As 3; V As 1-3) records banishment and it has been suggested that communities of outcasts may have been a feature of the late Anglo-Saxon landscape (Tallon, 1998-1999). In the laws of King Alfred (871-99) forfeiture of land is a marked feature and has been linked to a desire to consolidate royal lands (Wormald, 1999: 149). Mutilation was effectively state-sponsored grievous bodily harm, and could result in the casting out of mutilated offenders to die in the fields (E&G 10). Specific wounding included the removal of a hand for theft or counterfeiting by moneyers. In the latter case the severed extremity was to be 'fastened over the mint' (II As 14.1). From the 10<sup>th</sup> century, scalping and the removal of ears, noses, eyelids and tongues is known, most notably in legislation produced during King Edgar's reign and preserved only in Lantfred of Winchester's *Translatio et Miracula St Swithuni*. Mutilation is suggested to have developed as a function of the increasing influence of leading churchmen on the moral and ideological tenor of the law in the Late Anglo-Saxon period (Wormald, 1999: 125-127).

Where capital punishments are specifically described in the laws the mode of execution is normally either hanging or decapitation, although other means related to social rank are recorded. King Athelstan's (924-939) fourth lawcode, for example, relates how for theft female slaves should be burned, free women thrown from a cliff or drowned, while male slaves should be stoned to death (IV As 6.7, 6.4, and 6.5).

#### *A DYNAMIC JUDICIAL LANDSCAPE?*

Places of judgement and execution were distinct from each other in a landscape context, but individual

administrative districts —known as hundreds and roughly equating to the early medieval Spanish *alfoz*— contained all of the functions necessary for the maintenance of the judicial process. Evidence from King Ine's laws (I 36) shows that the accused might be confined before a court hearing that this could be the responsibility of an ealdorman (an official of the king). Mercian charters of c. AD 800 note that wrongdoers should be delivered to a royal manor (S179; S1861) and by King Alfred's reign, prisons at royal estate centres are described in the king's own writings in Books I and III of his translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*.

In certain cases the accused could be subjected to judicial ordeal, but there is limited evidence for this actually happening in Anglo-Saxon England. First referred to in Ine's laws (I 37), a 10<sup>th</sup> century text known as *Ordal* gives specific instructions as to how the rite should be conducted (Wormald 1999, 373-4) and it seems that major churches almost exclusively held the right to administer the process. Minster churches at Canterbury, Northampton and Taunton, for example, possessed the right to conduct the ritual (Blair, 2005: 448).

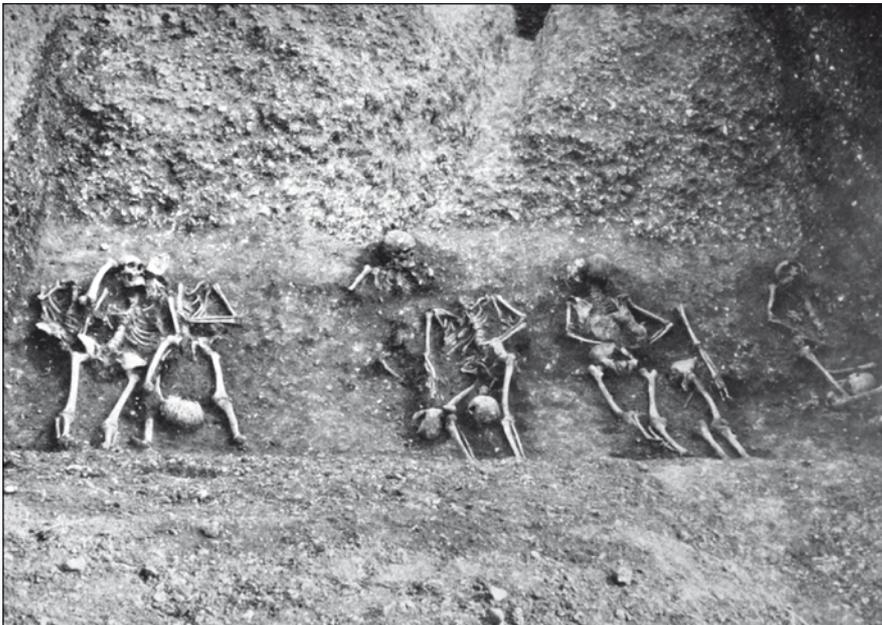
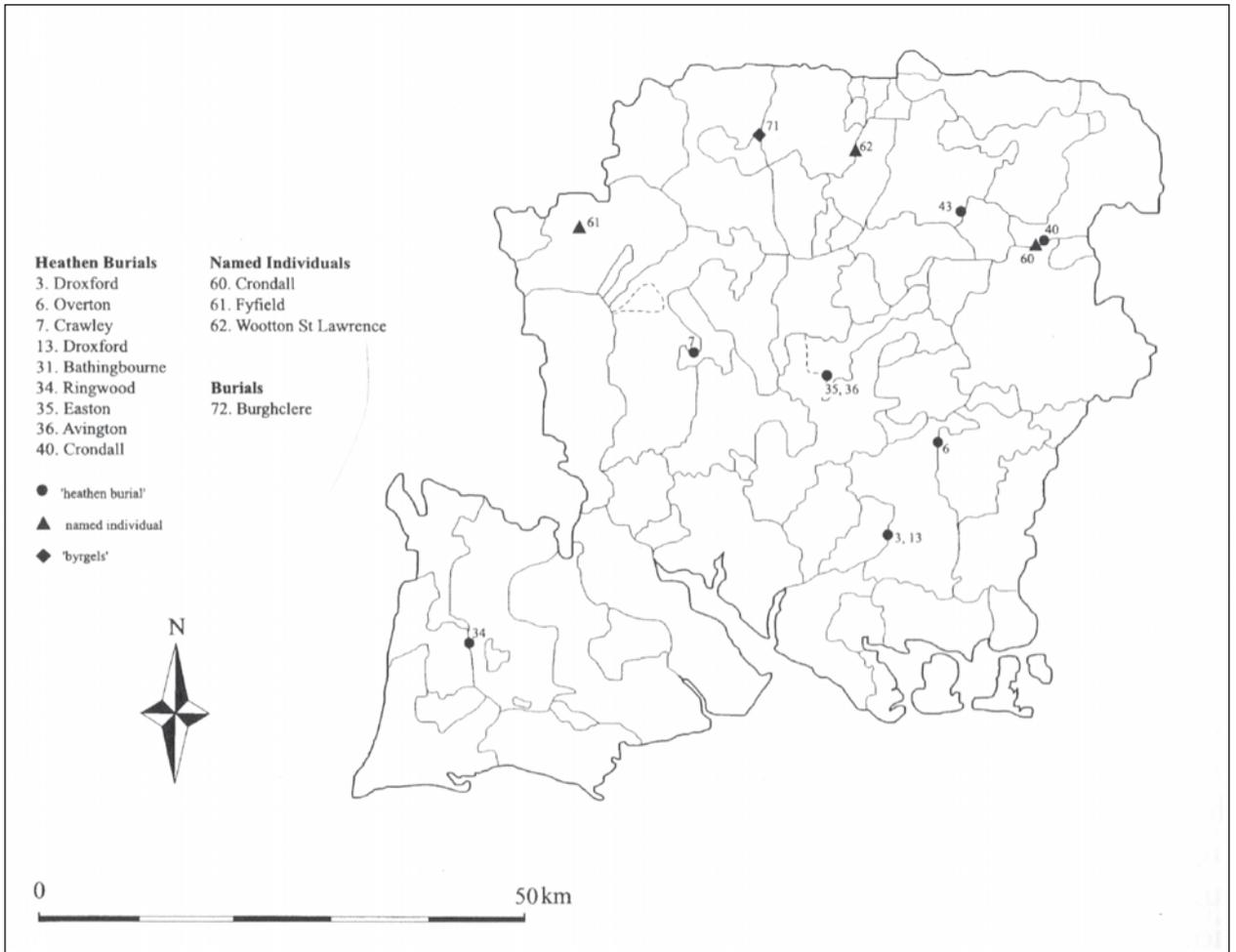
#### THE LOCATION OF EXECUTION SITES

One of the most remarkable aspects of Anglo-Saxon execution sites is their consistent location on territorial boundaries, in the main of major administrative significance such as shire, hundred, royal estate and borough. Anglo-Saxon territorial geography can be at least partially reconstructed using the evidence of the Domesday Survey of 1086, which groups individual holdings by hundreds, while extant boundary clauses in many cases facilitate a mapping of more local territories. Indeed, one of the major debates in early medieval archaeology over the last forty years or so has concerned the antiquity of the territorial framework of the English landscape as visualised by the Domesday Survey; execution cemeteries with C14 dates bring an important new perspective to the problem. The prevalent view that local estates and the hundreds within which they were grouped are products of the late Anglo-

Saxon period (c.f. Hooke, 1998) can now be challenged by the fact that a series of execution sites with origins scientifically dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries indicate a much earlier recognition of territorial limits, particularly at the scale of units that became explicitly termed hundreds by the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Reynolds, 2009a).

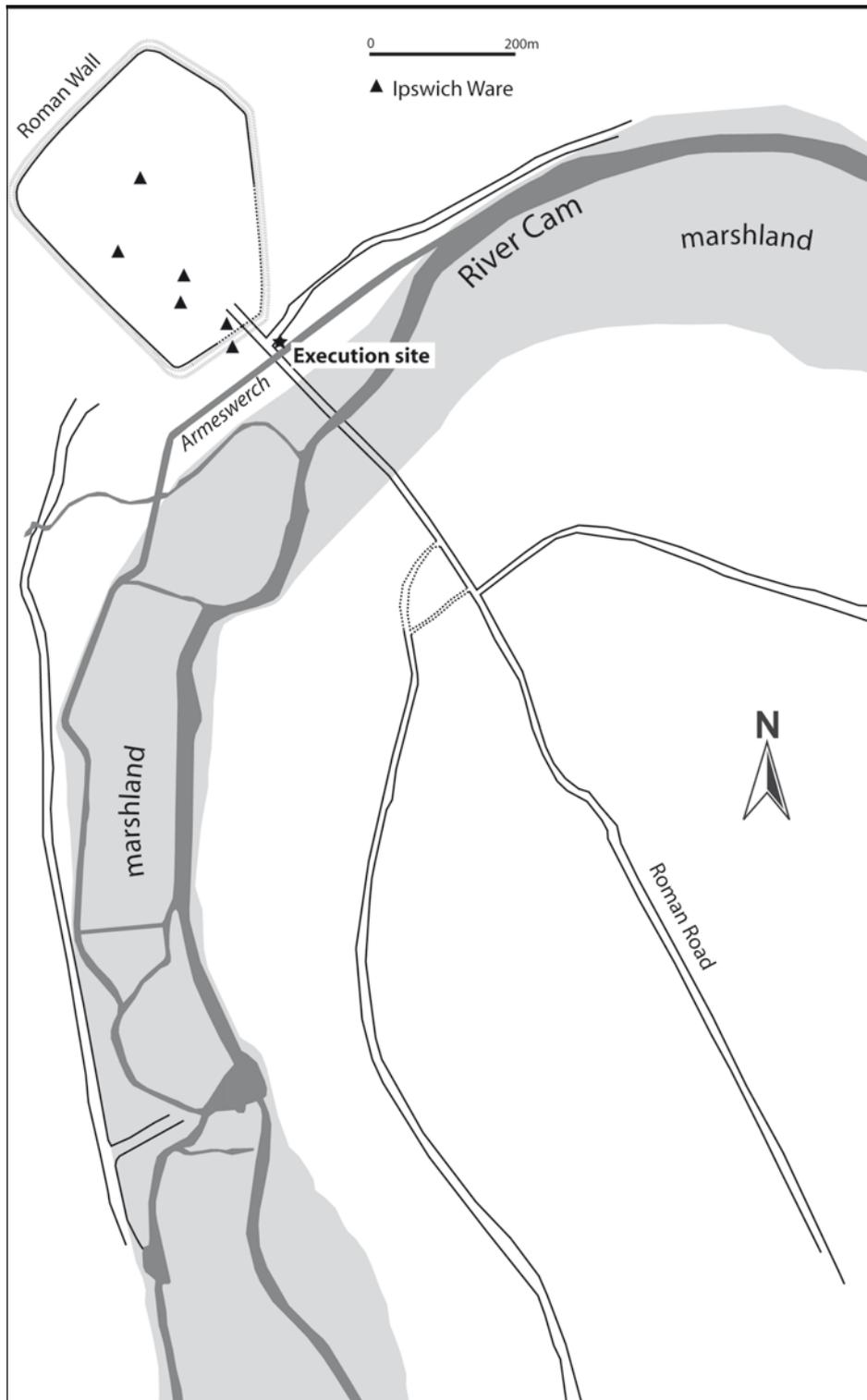
In addition to sites on hundred boundaries, execution cemeteries are also found on the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon boroughs. At Cambridge, Eashing, Guildford, Steyning and Winchester, Old Sarum, Staines and Wallingford among others, evidence has been found for places of execution located alongside major approach roads. The recognition of these sites has allowed two of the defining characteristics of Anglo-Saxon towns long considered beyond the reach of the archaeologist, that of a judicial role and legal autonomy, to be addressed by archaeology. Judicial activity is an important feature of Martin Biddle's influential list of urban criteria published in his classic essay on Anglo-Saxon towns (Biddle, 1976: 100). Passing a place of execution on the way into a major town would have left the traveller in no doubt about the fact that they had passed from one jurisdiction into another. At Cambridge, the execution cemetery at Chesterton Lane Corner lies on the Roman road approaching the town from the south-east and on the boundary of the Domesday Hundred of Cambridge; C14 dates demonstrate beyond doubt an 8<sup>th</sup> century origin for the cemetery, perhaps coinciding with a period of urban regeneration during the reign of King Offa of Mercia, but very likely earlier (Cessford et al., 2007). Importantly, Cambridge was a major crossing point over the River Cam which itself formed the boundary between the kingdom of the Mercians and that of the East Angles (Reynolds, 2009b).

Approaching the Late Anglo-Saxon capital city of Winchester, from the north-west and also along a Roman road, is another execution cemetery, this time containing mostly decapitated bodies. The location is coincident with the Domesday Hundred and borough boundary and is known today as Harestock, a name derived from OE *heafod stocc* meaning literally 'head-stakes'. Three Anglo-Saxon charters with boundary descriptions (for the estates of Chilcomb, Easton and



▲ Anglo-Saxon execution sites and outcast burials in Hampshire in relation to hundred boundaries (after Reynolds 2002)

◀ The Anglo-Saxon execution cemetery at Meon Hill, Hampshire (after Liddell 1933)



Anglo-Saxon Cambridge – a town on the Mercian side of the border with the Kingdom of East Anglia to the east. Note the location of the execution site at the river crossing (after Reynolds 2009b)

Headbourne Worthy) refer to 'head-stakes' at the spot and the site is quite remarkable for the range of evidence available. C14 dates confirm that the cemetery was in existence by the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, which fits well with archaeological and written evidence for the growth of the town as a centre of occupation and commerce.

Rural execution cemeteries were also situated beside major highways as at Meon Hill and Stockbridge Down in Hampshire, and Roche Court Down on the Hampshire/Wiltshire border, all beside the highway linking Old Sarum (where yet another excavated cemetery is known) with Winchester; a later Anglo-Saxon traveller between the two towns would have passed at least five places of execution, an average of one every 6km, leaving no doubt about the extent of royal power in the landscape (Liddell, 1933; Hill, 1937; Stone, 1932; Blackmore, 1894; Reynolds, in press). While one person may have read the message of the gallows as one of royal protection and a clear sign of the king's concern for public security, others may equally have found the spectacle of heads on stakes and rotting corpses, potentially of children as young as 12, hanging from gallows an intimidating and depressing manifestation of an overbearing moralising state.

The populations of execution cemeteries vary by some measure, but the average size is about 50 individuals. If used for 500 years, as radiocarbon determinations indicate, a crude reckoning, and that is all it can ever be, indicates one execution every ten years, making such events remarkable rather than commonplace. The infrequency of capital punishment fits with the impression gained from the surviving laws and lawsuits and serves to underscore a contemporary appreciation

of the severity of the ultimate penalty. Altogether, it can be seen that the progress of a capital offender from apprehension to execution might lead him or her on a protracted and highly ritualised journey throughout their local district ending up ultimately at its limits.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Royal power in later Anglo-Saxon England took many forms. While expressions of royal authority and capability in England are not as immediately impressive as certain of the monumental remains of the Carolingian Empire and its neighbours, the English evidence for fortifications, economic and judicial infrastructure provides an exceptionally strong image of the effectiveness of royal governance. While documents and treasure can be taken as measures of the intent and pretensions of individuals, making an assessment of the working realities of royal governance is much harder. Archaeology provides perhaps the best means of checking, extending and verifying the view provided by written evidence and careful study of the English evidence shows just how pervasive and all encompassing the will of Anglo-Saxon kings was among their people.

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