

The World Before Domesday: The English Aristocracy 900–1066

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This is an accessible and engaging book about the ranks, obligations, and image of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, written by one of the leading historians of the period. Ann Williams is the author of *The English and the Norman Conquest, Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England c. 500–1066* and *Æthelred the Unready: The Ill-Counselled King* ([1](#)), not to mention numerous articles. This work and her deep knowledge of the period, its mechanics, its sources, and its characters makes Williams the ideal person to have authored this expository survey. Her expertise on Domesday and the prosopography of the Anglo-Saxon elite is clear throughout, and the book also distils much of her earlier work, along with important studies by scholars such as Stephen Baxter, Robin Fleming, Naomi Sykes, and Robert Liddiard, to create a wide-ranging, rich, and detailed overview of these lords, their environment, and trappings.

Williams explains that she wants here to present Old English aristocrats ‘in their prime’, that is in the period between 871 and 1066 – although there is more on the 11th century than the 10th, due to the nature of the surviving evidence. The book falls into two unequal halves. ‘The first three chapters introduce the various layers of aristocratic society’ (earls, stallers, and the thegns who formed the county communities), with each chapter including two or three exemplars to give a sense of each rank’s role, obligations, and limitations. There then follow ‘the more interpretative chapters’, five in number, which look at the relationships between land and men, the thegnly residence, display, and pastimes. Although the book does form a coherent whole, each chapter also stands alone as a discrete study of its subject.

Before looking at the aristocracy and their culture, Williams provides some definitions. Status was affected

by wealth, lordship, and closeness to the king. Wergeld tariffs (sums paid as compensation for an unlawful killing) are used to demonstrate the social stratification of Anglo-Saxon society, and Archbishop Wulfstan's 'Promotion Law' to show how affluent freemen and successful thegns might scale the social ladder. What is striking is not so much the various grades of thegn that these tracts reveal, as the Promotion Law's attempt to create a taxonomy with reference to empirical evidence. Presumably it was the need to know the relevant wergild payment and heriot (a payment in arms and money made to inherit a dead man's property) that drove this need for clear social divisions. The introduction also alerts readers to the geographical bias of the evidence. As most Benedictine monasteries were located in the south and west, and as these were the bodies most likely to have preserved the evidence, we know relatively little about the aristocracy of the north and their relationship with the political centre in the south. This imbalance in the evidence is something that becomes clear as the book unfolds, and helps to explain its shape.

Where the earls are concerned, Williams notes that 'the best recorded are the great earls of Edward the Confessor's day, Godwine of Wessex and Leofric of Mercia, and previous research has naturally enough been concentrated on these two families' (p. x). Here, however, the two exemplars 'more typical because less wealthy' are Earl Odda and Earl Ralph, both of them mid 11th-century characters whose interests were focused in the Welsh march. The careers of both are sketched out before Williams turns to an assessment of an earl's wealth generally, which she believes (on good grounds) must have been one of the 'distinguishing characteristics' of the class. One important point made in this respect is that at least some of the lands the earls held went with their office (and Nicholas Karn has recently made a similar point with reference to the post-Conquest sheriffs of Dorset).⁽²⁾ Exon Domesday describes some land in Devon as 'belonging to the kingship', and there are similar statements in Little Domesday Book. The right to the third penny (one third of the profits of justice from a shire) also attached to particular manors held by the earl. Comital manors and rights were thus transferred with the earldom, so that when Edward the Confessor transferred earldoms he also inflicted a financial blow on those who found themselves out of favour. From this follows another important point: earls did not enjoy a hereditary position. They were simply the greatest servants of the king who held their office at his pleasure.

Chapter two concerns in particular the stallers, 'whose landed wealth placed them among the richest thegns below the rank of earl' and who 'as a group ... seem to have been particularly close to the king' (p. 26). The word 'staller' first appears in contemporary sources only in Edward the Confessor's reign. Williams suggests, however, that the office was a Scandinavian import which might have existed for some time but without that label – she notes that the title 'ealdorman' gave way to 'jarl' without a change to the duties and status of those who bore it (p. 31). 'Such evidence as there is implies that the duties of the stallers was not fixed but various, and were performed as and when the king had need of them' (p. 32). Kings always needed such men, regardless of what they might be called, and, indeed, Williams believes that the stallers were similar in status and function to the 10th-century *pedisequi*. This allows her to examine the career of Wulfstan of Dalham, who was a benefactor of Ely abbey, active in the reign of King Edgar (943/4–975). He seems to have acted as a proto-sheriff for Cambridge. The other two exemplars discussed in this chapter are from the eleventh century. The first of them is Osgod Clapa, perhaps the commander of the stipendiary fleet based at London, who was outlawed in 1046 and died in 1054; the second is Tovi the Proud who was the first founder of Waltham abbey and Osgod's son-in-law.

Chapter three looks at local communities, taking as its exemplar the shire community of Kent in the late 10th and 11th centuries. In a quest for an early example of a county community, Williams identifies, tracks, and fleshes-out the witnesses to an agreement transferring land at Offham in the late 1040s, a marriage agreement concluded between 1016 and 1022, the settlement of a dispute over the manor of Snodland of 995 × 1005, and a royal diploma for Æthelred, portreeve of Canterbury, of 1002. The findings are set out in three tables, with the second (covering the period c. 1000–c. 1030 and illustrating the attestations of nine acts) being the most convincing regarding the existence of a county community. This is a very useful exercise, and Williams concludes that 'it seems permissible to conclude that the shire of Kent was dominated from the mid-tenth to the mid-eleventh centuries by the same group of interlinked Kentish families' but warns that 'any firm conclusions on how typical Kent was are precluded by the lack of comparable source material

elsewhere' (p. 57) – although a quick look is taken at Herefordshire and Oxfordshire too. The chapter ends with a look at the wider functions of the shire court and of the suitors' relationship with the king and his government.

Chapter four begins the 'more interpretative' part of the book, and is concerned with lordship and service. After a brief discussion of wills and what they reveal about aristocratic households, Williams discusses commendation: 'the tie which bound men to their lords' (p. 69). Commendation was legally enforceable, and once a man had commended himself to a lord he could not go elsewhere without due cause. The bond was such that according to Cnut's law code betrayal of one's lord could not be compensated by a fine. Nonetheless, a man might have two lords. Once this bond had been created, the commended man might ride in his lord's entourage, act as his messenger or bodyguard, and fight (and die) by his side. In return he received his lord's protection and presents – including land.

The transfer and possession of land, as well as the service due for it, is the focus of chapter five. It is here perhaps more than in any other chapter that Williams's ability to explain clearly and concisely what various technical terms mean is most in evidence. The reader has already been introduced painlessly to commendation; now terms such as bookland, loanland, and thegnland are defined. In return for the land given or leased to them, men performed a variety of services from paying for pasturing their pigs through to obligations to act as a bodyguard or messenger, lend horses, contribute to bridge works, make deer hedges, bring their men to the hunt, and – where land was held from Worcester cathedral – to do whatever was necessary for the bishop of Worcester to perform his own service to the king.

Chapter six moves away from land and service to look at how status was displayed. Williams looks at how the Viking invasions of the 11th century turned the social world upside down, and how Archbishop Wulfstan's 'Sermon of the Wolf' and his 'Promotion Law' are both part of the same programme designed to turn everything the right way up again. This, of course, explains the latter's desire to spell out the distinctions between ranks quite so clearly, and it is the 'Promotion Law' that states that to become a thegn a ceorl had to have not only five hides of land but also 'a *bellhus* and a *burhgeat*' (p. 88). It is the *burh* – the Old English manor house (p. 89) – and its attendant church that are the focus of the rest of the chapter. The name *burh* suggests that these residences were supposed to be defensible, and the *burhgeat* 'can scarcely be anything but the entrance-gate in the defensive circuit' (p. 91). A *bellhus*, too, was originally a tower designed for use in siege warfare (and here we are faced with a development from Williams's earlier article on the subject that may contribute to the debate about the difference between *burhs* and castles).⁽³⁾ The hall was the main public building within the enclosure and it defined the identity of the attached (which might be detached) estate. Williams looks at the literary, documentary and archaeological evidence – which is especially well-integrated here – to give a rounded overview of halls and chambers and their uses. We are shown around kitchens, stables, the privy, the threshing floor, the metal-working shop, and the weaving-shed. From the manor house we move to the church. From the 9th century, minster churches fell prey to thegns who built their houses within their enclosures and became their patrons. New churches were also founded, and a hierarchy developed from great minsters down to 'field churches' which had no graveyard and which were intended as a place where the lord of the manor and his family might worship.

Chapter seven takes us from the buildings by which aristocrats of all stations displayed their wealth to their clothes, jewellery and possessions, beginning with the gold-hilted swords that symbolized rank from King Alfred in the 9th century to John of Worcester in the 12th (although gold hilts are almost unknown from the 10th and 11th centuries). The English may not have fought on horseback, but a well-bred horse was a status symbol and so lords kept studs. R. H. C. Davis looked at the war horses of the Normans some years ago and concluded that they would have been small by modern standards.⁽⁴⁾ This seems to be confirmed for the period before 1066 by Bishop Ælfwold of Crediton's will. In 1012 he left Æthelstan ætheling the wild horses (*wildra worfa*) at Ashburton in Devon – Dartmoor ponies, in other words (p. 111). The heriots of eorldormen and king's thegns also included a monetary component, paid in coin or bullion or even in arm-rings. Such rings were thus 'a decorative form of portable wealth' (p. 116) and a blatant (if perhaps old-fashioned) way of displaying one's riches. The final section of this chapter is concerned with textiles, including mention of the golden embroidery with which a well-off Englishmen's clothes were decorated, the desire for which

outlived the Conquest and allowed some English ladies to gain or retain land as a result of their skill (p. 120). One general comment mentioned almost in passing is important: the period sees an increase in consumption, and a development of urban markets as aristocrats turned to professional craftsmen in the towns rather than to their own in-house metalworkers for these valuable items.

The final chapter is about aristocratic pursuits: hunting, falconry and feasting. Williams is quick to remind us that the forests and deer parks existed before the Conquest, and that Cnut was keen to protect his own hunting on pain of fines (pp. 123–4). Hunting lodges are discussed, as well as the place-names that suggest settlements particularly associated with hunting. Here, the ‘lutegar’ element is telling – it means ‘trapping-spear’ interpreted as ‘a trap which shot itself off when an animal disturbed it’ (pp. 129–30) – as at Ludgershall (Wilts). Williams notes, too, that ‘sparrowhawk’ and ‘goshawk’ are Old English words, testifying to the importance of hawking before 1066. The names for falcons, in contrast, were largely imports (indeed the Old English for ‘falcon’ is *wealhhafofoc*: foreign hawk). Hunting was not an efficient way of getting food, but eating what had been caught reinforced the prestige of the lord. Furthermore, it turns out that the highlight of the great ceremonial feasts of Anglo-Saxon England was not the food at all but rather the drinking that followed (p. 133). Nonetheless: ‘As with weapons, armour, clothes, furnishings and the decorative arts, so it was with food: conspicuous consumption was ever uppermost in the minds of Old English lords (and ladies). What’s the point of being rich if no-one notices?’ (p. 137).

In bringing all this evidence together and in setting it out so clearly, Ann Williams has provided a great service to students and scholars working on the aristocracy and material culture over a much longer span than that covered by the book. As will now be apparent, however, *The World Before Domesday* is not an all-encompassing study of aristocratic family life. There is no discussion of women and childhood, family structure or naming patterns, or of marriages or religious patronage as a means of creating or recognizing a community or the equivalent of an ‘honorial baronage’ (for example), and these terms do not appear in the index. The book is thus comparable, in both what it does and does not cover, to David Crouch’s *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain 1000–1300*.⁽⁵⁾ This is not a bad thing, but it is worth saying in the absence of a statement to this effect in the preface or introduction.

A book like this cannot be expected to cover all the issues that might arise to all its readers, and there are inevitably places where the book raises questions that it does not answer, or where it might have addressed or acknowledged some wider issues. In chapter one, for example, we are told that earls were unable to form their own administrations: ‘Old English earldoms were not territorial principalities, like the Frankish counties ... Since there was no level of local administration higher than the shire, there was no ‘comital’ government. Earls received a share of the profits of justice ... but they could not themselves hold courts or mint coinage’ (pp. 23–4). But if the king could administer the kingdom through shire courts, why did it matter to the earls that there was no higher level of local administration? Surely they had their own courts (in the sense of assemblies), like the witans, that they might use to organise their earldoms. Equally, as government was based in part on faction (and some of the chapter considered this), to what extent did an earl’s dominance of one or more shire courts create a comital administration? As a second example, in chapter five we are told that bookland was ‘granted by a royal diploma (*boc*), in perpetuity, with full rights of disposition for the beneficiary’ (p. 76). The diploma apparently need not relate to royal land; Earl Harold’s endowment of Waltham Holy Cross required a royal diploma to be effective (p. 24). But what makes an Anglo-Saxon diploma different from an Anglo-Saxon charter? Where might one find out more about them? The preface notes the availability of documentary sources, but the relevant note says only that not all diplomas survive as originals but that even forgeries can be illuminating (p. x, n. 12), and the index omits both ‘diploma’ and ‘charter’ altogether. Moreover, for those coming to this book without much knowledge of Anglo-Saxon law, the king’s monopoly on issuing diplomas and the fact that they might grant non-royal land might suggest that the king had ultimate rights of ownership of all land in his kingdom, and so of reversion should the holder die without heirs. As this is relevant to arguments about the position of the king at the top of the so-called feudal pyramid after 1066, a reference to further reading on this matter, or simply a sentence expressly squashing such unorthodox ponderings, would have been helpful.

A reader might thus regret a lack of information and guidance in a few notes, and might wish for some more

entries in the index. It would have been nice, too, to have had some illustrations of the archaeology or objects mentioned in the text. It may be supposed that their absence is the result of economy on behalf of the publisher, but it is a shame nonetheless. And, while griping, mention might also be made of the fact that the publisher has chosen to have endnotes rather than footnotes, which this reviewer, at least, finds inconvenient. The typesetter might have felt much the same, as the pagination disappears for no reason between pages 141 and 149 inclusive (from appendix two to the first couple of pages of endnotes).

The author can take no blame for much of this, and in any event these few grumblings and criticisms should not be allowed to detract from the overall value of the book. This is a stimulating, careful, and enjoyable study of its subject; illuminated by well-chosen anecdotes and the archaeological record; and well-rooted in the sources and historiography. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy or, indeed, that which replaced it after 1066.

Notes

1. Ann Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge, 1995); *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England c. 500–1066* (London, 1999); *Æthelred the Unready: The Ill-Counselled King* (London, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. N. Karn, 'Secular power and its rewards in Dorset in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries', *Historical Research*, 82 (2009), 5.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. Williams, 'A bell-house and a *burh-geat*: lordly residences in England before the Conquest', *Medieval Knighthood IV*, ed. C. Harper-Bill and R. Harvey (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 221–40.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. R. H. C. Davis, 'The warhorses of the Normans', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 10 (1988), 67–82.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain 1000–1300* (London, 1992).[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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