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The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society

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This book has been long awaited and its appearance is a major event. John Blair's work over the last twenty years on the role and importance of minsters and on the subsequent emergence of a local network of parish churches has already transformed historians' understanding of the Anglo-Saxon Church. Here he develops and pursues these ideas in new and exciting ways and presents them in a powerful and compelling synthesis which will make them accessible to a much wider audience.

The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society surveys a broad sweep from c.550 to 1100. Its opening chapter places the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity in the context of Britain's Roman inheritance and the South East's increasing links with the Continent. At the same time a detailed survey of the evidence reminds us that each region has a story of its own. But most of these stories (Cornwall aside) have a common message: that minsters staffed by groups of clergy *were* the Anglo-Saxon church, its institutional framework and the resource base for both bishops and low level priests. Bishops might come with ready-made notions of episcopal authority but in practice the power of a great bishop like Wilfrid was rooted in his minsters. At the other end of the spectrum the aristocratic estate churches or mausolea which were common on the Continent were notable by their absence in England. The same cannot be said for minsters: a sample plotting of known minster sites suggests that most people outside the upland areas of England were in easy walking distance of a minster by 800 (p. 152). Central to Blair's argument here is the notion that the whole spectrum of religious foundations containing groups of nuns, monks or priests shared sufficient common characteristics to justify the application of a common term, minster, to all of them. Bede might see a world of difference between a

great monastic foundation like Monkwearmouth and the smaller aristocratic foundations which he lambasted but he and his contemporaries did not have a separate vocabulary to distinguish between them: the Latin monasterium and OE mynster were interchangeable and used for all.

The ubiquity, centrality and durability of minsters are further highlighted by Blair's consideration of several issues which have been at the heart of the big and most contentious debates of recent years. Blair's own original thesis that there was an early minster-based parochial framework is reassessed in the light of the counter-arguments put forward by Rollason and others to the effect that such a framework was imposed by kings in the tenth century (p. 153?60). Here he develops the case for looser multi-layered institutional structures evolving organically around minsters between the seventh and tenth centuries, noting that the welter of different church dues that can be traced from the tenth century do not look as if they are a part of a later imposition from above. Certainly the notion of fixed ecclesiastical territories would not have been inherently alien for early Anglo-Saxon societies which were used to the practice of extensive lordship with fixed renders levied from groups of vills or estates. More striking, but no less compelling, is Blair's thesis that minsters were the kernels of, and prime catalysts for, the re-emergence of towns in Anglo-Saxon England. After a fine discussion of the notion of monasteries as heavenly cities and a look at various processual models of urban growth, he drives home the powerful argument that minsters came first and were not a corollary of royal power centres as some have assumed. The ideas of royal palatia woven around Yeavering or York disguise the fluidity and impermanence of the residences of itinerant kings. The latter can be better characterised as temporary camp sites (one of which may have been identified on the middle Thames, p. 280 n. 165) and contrast markedly with the durability and economic pull of minsters. Half of the 53 non Roman places named as royal vills or stay places before 820 are unidentified and none look like regular or long-term residences before Offa began to imitate Charlemagne with a fixed capital at Tamworth, and other rulers began to be drawn to establish their regular residences alongside or within important minsters.

The single-minded pursuit of these key debates does not stop Blair propounding a grand narrative of rise and decline. The archaeological evidence for the wealth and expansion of minsters in the years around 700 is used to endorse Bede's notion of a golden age. Readers might be tempted to counter Blair's suggestion that never again, except perhaps in the twelfth and nineteenth centuries, was the English church so ebulliently expansionist (p. 100) with his own subsequent account of the great rebuilding of local churches in the eleventh century. But such enthusiasm is easily forgiven. Blair's initial timeline for decline is ambivalent: whereas Bede's critique of lay enmeshment is accepted as evidence of a decline by the 740s, at other times the emphasis is placed on the continuing economic vigour of minsters throughout the eighth century. But there is little ambiguity when the book's focus shifts to the escalation of pressures which came to bear on minsters from the 820s onwards. Here the Scandinavian attacks and settlements had a part to play but greater import is attached to creeping secularisation at the hands of kings, nobles or expanding towns and to the loss of status occasioned by the monastic reforms of the tenth century. Minsters were increasingly used as royal estate centres (at least nine minster sites appear in this guise in King Alfred's will), royal residences (pp. 326?7 for the wonderful example of how Philip Rahtz's excavations reveal the role of a late ninth- or early tenth-century hunting lodge on the periphery of Cheddar minster as a veritable cuckoo in the nest) and rewards for royal officials (the gifts of Banwell, Congresbury and Exeter to Asser being a prime example). As towns grew, they swamped the minsters which had been the original catalysts for, and defining marks of, urban growth (over half of all the markets and boroughs named in Domesday can be traced back to minster sites). The monastic reforms of the tenth century focussed royal patronage and protection on an exclusive group of reform houses at the expense of the wider body of minsters.

The neatness of such narratives of decline can easily be challenged (and Blair is the first to admit the exceptions) but it is hard to deny the general trend which saw the minsters increasingly submerged in a new landscape of local churches with their own priests, landholdings and rights to burial and tithe. In the last two chapters of the book Blair seeks to throw light on this shadowy but momentous development which saw a multitude of smaller churches come into being by the time of Domesday Book (it lists over 2,000 churches, priests, and 'priests with churches') and quickly take root, as they were organised into the framework of rural

parishes which survived in its essentials until the twentieth century. For Blair this transformation is to be understood in the context of a restructuring of the English landscape which shared much in common with the feudal revolution of the Continent: economic and demographic growth went hand in hand with a break up of big estates into smaller, more tightly focused ones; manorial exploitation intensified and farmsteads coalesced into villages. Amidst these changes churches became a mark of status at a much more local level: a Wulfstan text of c.1000 known as the Promotion Law relates that a freeman had the outward and visible signs of thegnly rank once he had acquired '5 hides of land of his own, a church and a kitchen, a bell-house and a fortress gate, a seat and special office in the king's hall' (p. 371). The fact that the references to church and kitchen are in fact first found in the *Textus Roffensis* recension of the mid eleventh century may neatly underline that it is precisely in this period that the great rebuilding of churches appears in full spate, having commenced around 1000, gathered pace in the decades before 1066 and continued through the later eleventh century. It is notable that the Norman Conquest is seen to have contributed little to this wholesale transformation of the religious landscape, though it is admitted that it further weakened the ability of minsters to retain tithes and resist encroachment by new and more local churches (p. 451).

What makes the book so attractive? Blair's skilful integration of archaeological and historical evidence is second to none. His synthesis and assessment of the most recent archaeological research conveys all the excitement of this fast unfolding field where, for example, an avalanche of new data from metal detecting surveys is continually sending archaeologists back to the drawing board. But it is the interplay of this material with Blair's brilliant analysis of the documentary sources that makes the work so rewarding; often the archaeological data provides the main story but elsewhere Blair places it alongside the slender written sources, be it to contradict, corroborate, or suggest new avenues of approach. The result is that the reader is given the sense of participating in the process of evaluation, as different types of source are weighed up and chewed over. Thus at one point we are plunged into a detailed debate as to whether minster sites can be distinguished from lay residences, a discussion which comes to the tentative conclusion that finds of styli are a crucial distinguishing marker of the former (p. 204?12). Much is made of the complexity of interpreting burial evidence. Christian and non-Christian burial co-existed for centuries and moreover the difference between the two is often hard to discern once it is understood that the disappearance of grave goods is a cultural shift (paralleled on the Continent) rather than a marker of a shift from paganism to Christianity. The temptations of a clear and seamless narrative are consciously eschewed in favour of stressing the preliminary and the contradictory. Thus discussion of the remarkable Scandinavian-type graves of the 870s (including a warrior killed by a sword blow and buried with his sword, amuletic boar's tusk and Thor's hammer pendant) which have been excavated around the chancel of the Mercian royal minster of Repton (where the Viking army settled during the winter of 873?4) leads to the conclusion that they can be interpreted both as evidence of far-reaching disruption and of the church's continuity in the face of this disruption (p. 293?4).

The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society is equally noteworthy for the illuminating way in which it treats the discussion of the Anglo-Saxon church in the context of both contemporary Frankish or Irish evidence and wider ethnographic or anthropological material. The need to consider Anglo-Saxon evidence in a Continental context is often recommended but rarely achieved at a serious level; yet here the comparisons and contrasts with continental patterns of burial, church foundation and Episcopal authority (to name but three) are fundamental to the analysis. Continental historians may question some of the assumptions, for example that the authority of Carolingian bishops actually matched their incumbents' aspirations. But they will also have much to learn: a telling example is the suggestion that Carolingian critiques of lay abbots should be traced back to Bede via Boniface (p. 106f). But contemporary continental Europe is only one of the wider contexts to which Blair turns in his quest to interrogate and understand the evidence. Throughout the book there is an illuminating engagement (much of it tucked away in the footnotes) with ethnographic evidence. Each of the first two chapters ends by turning to comparisons with the place of monasteries during the reception and official acceptance of Buddhism in seventh- to ninth-century Tibet. Chapter 3 concludes by looking at Anna Grimshaw's anthropological study of the impact of the Buddhist monastery of Rizong (founded in the 1810s) on settlement and economic networks in Ladakh. Elsewhere comparisons are made with Mesoamerican colonisation and conversion, and with William Christian's influential study of religious belief and landscape in a group of Basque villages in the 1970s. Again what we see is not some crude

attempt to use such studies to fill lacunae in the evidence but rather an exploration and admission of the intellectual debts which have shaped the ways Blair has tried to make sense of the Anglo-Saxon material.

At the very outset Blair is explicit that the book is concerned with 'the externals of Christian culture rather than its spirituality; with churches as social and economic centres rather than as sites of scholarship or the religious life'. By the end of the book few readers will question the underlying premise that minsters and the emerging grid of local parish churches had a profound impact on the wider development of rural and urban landscapes. But this focus does beg the question why historians still find it so difficult to write serious cutting edge work which integrates the exterior and interior aspects of the church. Recent work on Anglo-Saxon saints has gone some way to break down the traditional categories of the spiritual and the material, highlighting the extent to which communities depended on their heavenly patrons for their material well-being and survival. Saints are not absent from *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* and indeed receive a small section of their own (p. 141?9) but there is little attempt to gauge the role of their cults in both establishing minsters as central places and sustaining them in adversity. The emphasis is rather on the role of minsters in providing pastoral care, in the provision of burial, in trading and production. A sustained case for pastoral care is constructed from diverse sources: topography and sculpture; a brilliant analysis of Bede's *Letter to Egbert*; consideration of the reciprocity inherent in the customary dues paid to minsters (churchscot, soulscot, mass-priest dues). The case is compelling but one is still left wondering whether the model could not be inverted to a degree: less emphasis could be placed on going out to preach or to administer mass and other sacraments and more on the role of maintaining shrines to which people flocked for help in personal and collective crises. Blair's continental comparisons might extend to asking whether Gregory of Tours' central emphasis on shrines, saints and miracles in sixth century Francia (and his taking sweepings from St Martin's tomb to provide newly consecrated rural churches with appropriate relics) reflects a different world from eighth century England or merely a different outlook and proclivity from that of Bede. Such a change in emphasis does not lessen the central role of minsters in catering for the spiritual needs of the wider population but it does suggest that saints and shrines rather than pastoral outreach should be placed centre stage.

The reason that Blair eschews this approach can in part be explained by the fact that others have recently pursued these avenues to rich effect, but one also senses that his interest and preferences lie elsewhere. It is notable that he appears more interested in evidence for the extent to which pagan and shamanist elements were incorporated into the lay practice of Christianity (pp. 166?81), for churches being founded on prehistoric or Roman sites (p. 183?91) and on the sacred sites of holy wells or trees (pp. 374?83), for the ritual roles of the natural landscape (pp. 221?8), for trees, springs, barrows, and other unofficial cult sites retaining significance in the landscape (pp. 471?89). For Blair, as for the long tradition of protestant antiquarians who have been fascinated by such evidence, saints are but a small part of this larger tableau. There is much to recommend this emphasis on the continuities and appropriations of sacred space but it does tend to take attention away from the way minsters and parish churches also construct sacred space afresh through the promotion of, or association with, particular cults.

Pastoral needs and resulting loyalties are given a key place in the complex equation of factors which contributed to the emergence of a new landscape of local churches in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Lords might build local churches for reasons of status, but to take root these churches had to attract others; that they did so can be glimpsed in the rise of graveyards around these churches and perhaps also in the identification of their naves as the community's domain ? Aelfric's complaints about the commonness of chatter and other inappropriate behaviour in church is cited as evidence that the laity were carving out their own social space within church buildings (pp. 456?63). In contrast to this emphasis on the pastoral dynamic, Blair shies away from the possibility that this surge of new foundations could be a direct consequence of the imposition of tithe obligations which also first come to the fore in the tenth century; he touches on the possibility in his survey of the remarkable evidence of villages or even single churchyards containing two or more churches in Norfolk and Suffolk (pp. 397?401), but does not pursue the idea beyond the concluding observation that 'it is hard not to see them to some extent as manifestations of social climbing, or *even* [my emphasis] of attempts to divert tithes' (p. 400).

This hesitancy looks like an understandable reaction to the Marxist desire to reduce all to a nexus of exploitation, an approach which is forcefully refuted by the numerous wills which donate lands to local churches or the prominence of voluntary offerings at Christchurch in Hampshire (seen in the revealing corpus of material which Blair translates at the end of the book, pp. 514?19). However the evidence for tithes and other church dues which is discussed in detail (pp. 433?51) does suggest that the economic attractions may have played a more significant role in this surge in church foundation than is admitted. First, it is in the tenth century, in the codes of Aethelstan and Eadgar and contemporary leases, that we first encounter enforced tithes. Second, if thirteenth century yields can provide any guide, a tithe was a far more significant revenue (by up to a factor of ten) than the churchscot which seems to have been the most important of the dues traditionally claimed by minsters. Third, Eadgar stipulated that all tithe is to be given to the old minsters except that where a thegn has a church with a graveyard he is to pay a third of the tithe to his own church. A further pointer not only to the rising competition of manorial churchyards but also to the competition for burial dues (soulscot) is provided by the insistence of Aethelred II that soulscot should be paid to 'the minster to which it belonged' even if the body was buried elsewhere; such competition is vividly conveyed by Aelfric's strictures against clerics flocking to corpses like greedy ravens and by William I's striking 1086 judgement on disputed burial rights which made William of Briouze's men dig up bodies from their lord's church and take them back to the church of St Cuthmann's minster for lawful burial (pp. 463, 450). It is hard to ignore the way that Domesday Book lists churches and parts of churches as valuable assets; much of this can be attributed to the endowments they had attracted but tithes and other dues are also likely to have played their part. Faced with such evidence it is hard not to conclude that the desire to retain resources rather than pay them to another lord or neighbour's church was a powerful stimulus for the founders of local churches in general and not just the wealthy freeholders of East Anglia.

Aside from some telling and perceptive comments, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* purposefully eschews the well-trodden topic of tenth-century monastic reform. This is understandable: Blair has rightly shown that there are bigger issues and themes to consider than this topic which has dominated much of the previous historiography. However it does leave open the question why the reformed houses survived and prospered to a greater degree than minsters. Was it simply that the scale of their tenth century endowments gave them the option of living off past glories after 975 as Blair suggests? Or was it that they successfully broke free of the ties with the outside world (be it those with kings, nobles, or towns)? Or, to take the opposite view, was it the sheer scale of their networks of ties with the outside world that enabled them to become the key players, pulling the strings rather than being pulled? Here comparisons with some Carolingian and tenth century abbeys might be revealing in so far as their richer records allow us to see more clearly the way they could become masters of their universes or at least could hold their own ground thanks to the multiplicity of ties which they enjoyed with competing patrons. Such evidence might in turn offer a slightly different approach to the minsters themselves. Blair's story is one of a golden age of minsters around 700 giving way to a gradual decline which picked up momentum in the ninth and tenth centuries: the very success of the minsters was their undoing as they became the base for nascent royal and aristocratic

residences or were submerged by the urban growth which they had kindled. In such a story there is perhaps too much of a tendency to see the minsters in a passive role, 'reduced to pawns in political and financial strategies' (p. 131). Others do the turning of the screw whilst minsters merely succumbed. From another angle what needs explaining is their extraordinary tenacity notwithstanding their failure to live up to the ideals of Bede and their travails at the hands of encroaching kings and nobles. Here glimpses of communities actively exchanging land in order to build up more compact holdings or seeking privileges against interfering bishops forcefully remind us that they were powerful players who knew how to fight their corners. Minster-in-Thanet may have succumbed to external pressure in the ninth century but it is unlikely to have done so without a struggle: it can hardly have been an accident that the community chose to remember a foundation legend in which its first redoubtable abbess outwitted the king with a combination of cunning and miraculous help (p. 144).

The ability to raise such questions is a testimony to the way *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* encourages rather than stifles debate. The scale of its erudition and the richness of its insights will ensure that it long retains an important place in Anglo-Saxon historiography notwithstanding the fast unfolding pace of new discoveries in this field. It is a demanding book but the weight of its scholarship is constantly leavened by the rich array of illustrations and maps which effectively reinforce and illuminate many of its crucial arguments.

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The author thanks John Nightingale for his very kind and generous review, and hopes that the important additional points raised will stimulate further discussion.

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