

Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian settlement in the Peak District

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This essay sets out to evaluate the archaeological and place-name evidence for Anglo-Saxon (AS) and Scandinavian settlement in the Peak District of Derbyshire, and its immediate surroundings. This area (Fig 1) was frontier territory between competing British, AS and Viking Kingdoms from the end of the Roman period (conventionally set at the final withdrawal of the Roman army in 410 AD) until the unification of England in the 10th Century, and was thus subject to many changes in political control. The main types of evidence considered, in addition to place-names, are burials, settlements, landscape features such as banks and ditches, and architectural features such as stone crosses. Where possible, supporting evidence from the historical (written) record will be quoted. Firstly, I will deal with the earlier period of AS colonisation and expansion at the expense of the Romano-British peoples, from the 5th to the 9th C, and then I will cover the period of Scandinavian incursions and rule that followed.

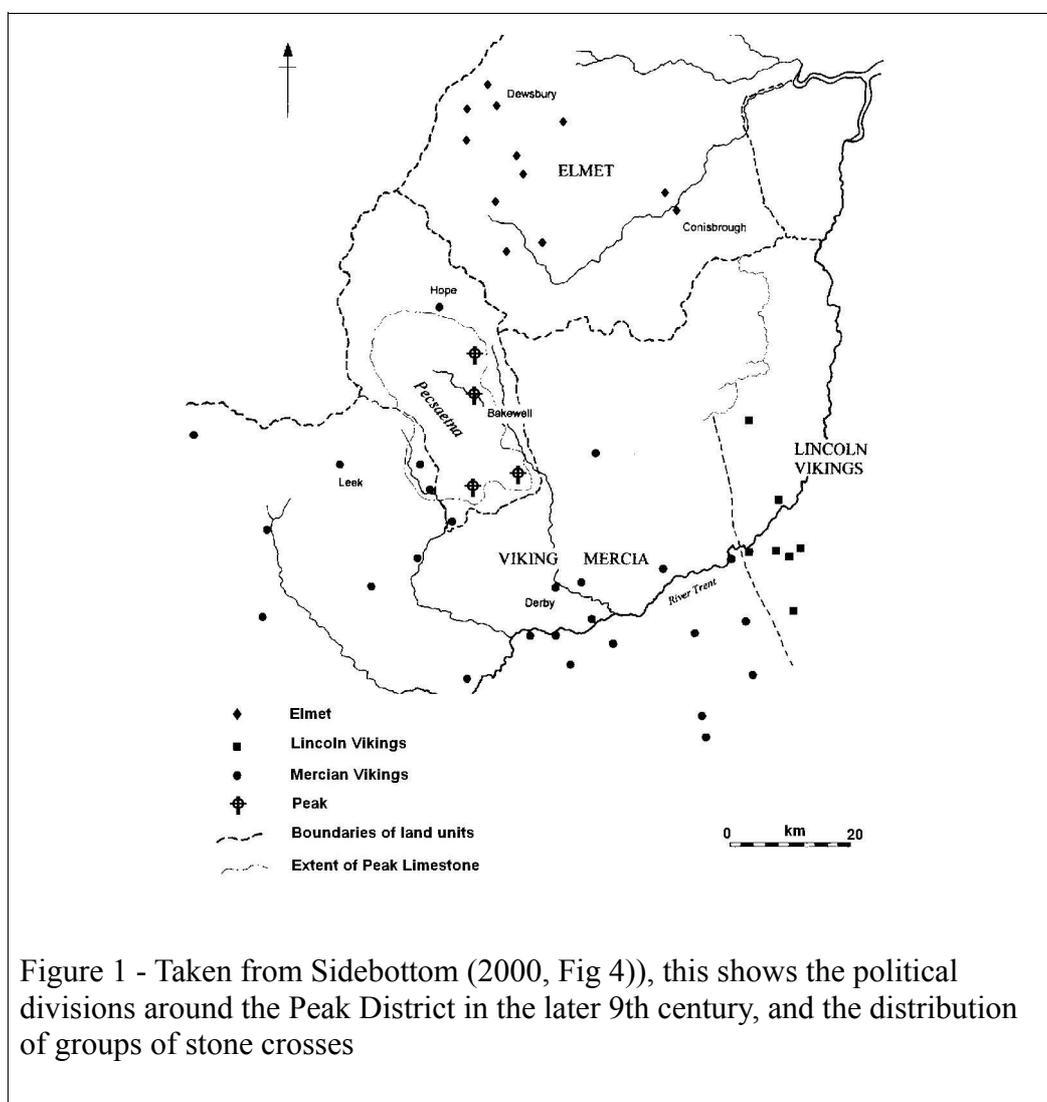


Figure 1 - Taken from Sidebottom (2000, Fig 4)), this shows the political divisions around the Peak District in the later 9th century, and the distribution of groups of stone crosses

Pagan burials with grave goods are a specific indicator of pre-Christian Germanic culture, and are concentrated in eastern England (Campbell, 1991). Such burials are not found in Wales, Cornwall or other areas known to have been under British rule, or after conversion to Christianity, with its very different concept of death and the after-life.

In his summary of the current archaeological evidence concerning AS Derbyshire, Barrett (2000) quotes the unpublished PhD thesis of Jones (1997), who:

"identified between 60 and 70 burials of Anglian date (6-7th C), including primary burials under barrows, ... secondary burials in prehistoric barrows .. concentrated on the limestone plateau.. (apparently) focussed on the Roman road from Buxton to Derby, and bounded to the north by the Wye valley" (page 3)

The most famous of these is probably Benty Grange, because of the helmet found there, now in Weston Park museum, Sheffield (the only other example of an AS helmet in grave goods being from Sutton Hoo). The helmet was decorated with a Christian cross, even though the presence of grave goods indicates a pagan burial. Perhaps the incumbent had recently taken an interest in the new religion, but he and his family had not yet adopted it.

The contents of these barrows (usually one or two bodies only, jewellery, weapons and other valuables) and the cost of construction of barrow burials indicate the wealth of the owners and their families. Bevan (2004) suggests that their location in prominent places may indicate an attempt to declare overlordship of the surrounding countryside (especially when, as at Wigber Low, earlier occupants of the tomb had been replaced). Being focussed on the Roman road, the barrows would have been visible to passing travellers, or this may also indicate that these new overlords had arrived via the road, and settled near it. Barnatt & Smith (2004) maintain that these burials show that a new Anglian (Germanic) ruling elite had taken over the White Peak by the 7th C - they do not show a wholesale displacement of the preceding Romano-British population. Bevan (2004) points out that it is also possible that the local British chieftains adopted Germanic burial practices to impress more distant AS overlords. Figure 34 in Campbell's (1991) book shows that there is a concentration of these burials in the Peak, compared to neighbouring areas, only matched in areas much further east and south. Perhaps, like the Romans, they were attracted to the mineral resources of the Peak, or maybe they just wanted to specialise in sheep farming, for which the Peak has always been particularly well suited.

There is very little material evidence of settlement in the White Peak between the Roman period and the 7th C. Work at Roystone Grange (Hodges, 1991) identified Roman farmsteads, and later medieval buildings (the Grange itself), but only a single fragment of a 6th C brooch. Even that could of course have been a family heirloom lost a century or two later. When the Romans withdrew, it appears that the main effect was economic collapse (Campbell, 1991). There was no longer an organised system for trade, no common coinage, travel to markets became difficult, and the markets themselves stopped. Durable Roman pottery was no longer made in Britain, and was mostly replaced by 'home-made' baked clay ware and wooden implements, which do not survive well. Although undoubtedly some farmland was abandoned and returned to its 'natural state' of mixed woodland (eg Ecclesall Wood in Sheffield), there is evidence (Hodges, 1991) that some farming estates continued within existing boundaries, perhaps under new owners, but with existing staff (ie the overseers, peasants, slaves etc.). What did occur during the AS period was the gradual fragmentation of estates into smaller units, reflecting the earlier AS inheritance practice of dividing property between the sons on death - although this occurred more slowly and later in the Peak than in the richer farming areas of the east and south (according to Barrett, 2000). Roffe (1986) and

Sidebottom (1999) suggest that 4 large estates centred on Bakewell, Eyam, Wirksworth and Bradbourne comprised the core of the enigmatic land of the *Pecsaetna*, (literally, Peak-sitters, in Old English) mentioned in the Tribal Hidage (a list of property or tribute valuations).

Bevan (2004) and Barnatt & Smith (2004) both describe the prominent AS earthwork near Hope called 'Grey Ditch', which cuts across the Roman road connecting Hope with the fertile Derwent valley and Buxton to the south. The north-facing ditch was presumably a defence built by the southern (*Pecsaetna*) people against their northern neighbours, the *Elmetsaetna* (roughly the old West Riding of Yorkshire), who were probably a British people (Stafford, 1985), although often under Northumbrian overlordship. The *Pecsaetna* and *Elmetsaetna* were thus both buffer statelets between the major AS kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria, and many wars and battles took place during the 7th-9th C as they struggled for supremacy over what was to become England, as described by Yorke (1990) and in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (Savage, 1997). Their situation was not dissimilar to that of Belgium and Alsace as buffers between France and Germany from 1870 to 1940. However Northumbria and Mercia were both AS kingdoms, and their later struggles were mostly with each other, rather than the native Romano British (whom the AS referred to as the Welsh - Old English for 'foreigner'), until the arrival of a new Germanic group, the Vikings.

Viking raids along the south coast were reported in 840, and continued sporadically, growing in seriousness until a 'great army' arrived in 865 (Campbell, 1991, and the *AS Chronicles*). The overall effect of this invasion was the conquest of Northumbria and the dismemberment of Mercia into a northern Viking kingdom, and a southern 'English' part. It enabled Wessex to assume the undisputed leadership of the Anglo-Saxon/English peoples, in opposition to the Viking ruled north. The ultimate victory of Wessex over the Viking states effectively unified England for the first time, but left it weakened and ripe for conquest by the Normans - themselves originally French Vikings.

Apart from place-name evidence dealt with below, one of the main indicators of Viking influence in the Peak comes from analysis of stone crosses found in what is now Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. By comparing designs, Sidebottom (1999) concluded that there were four geographically linked groups (Figure 1), and a fifth group which could be linked to a particular ethnic group. He linked all these to Viking occupation of the area, and their subsequent conversion to Christianity, between 920 and 950 AD, as they are only found within the so-called Danelaw. One group, comprising crosses found in the 4 old estate centres of the *Pecsaetna* (but not the newer estates fragmented from them) share several design elements (especially vine-scrolls) with crosses from Northumbria, suggesting Bernician rule or influence. Other groups correspond approximately with *Elmetsaetna*, the Lincoln Vikings and the Mercian Vikings. The fifth group, according to Sidebottom (*ibid*) were produced by Hiberno-Norse refugees (ethnic Vikings from Ireland) who were permitted to settle in very marginal areas later in the 10th C.

Place-names generally reflect the language of the people who either first occupied a place, or took it over after a period of abandonment. They may change when the local language changes, or ownership does. Names become less fluid once writing is introduced, and even less so when national mapping and bureaucracy arrive (Gelling, 1978). Smith (1956) provides a comprehensive description of the origins of most English place-names.

In Derbyshire and elsewhere rivers tend to have 'Celtic' (ie Romano-British or earlier) names - Dove, Derwent, Trent, perhaps because no-one 'owns' them. Likewise (Cameron, 1959), many Derbyshire hills have Celtic names - Mam Tor, Baslow Bar, Kinder. Stafford (1985) also points out that Derbyshire has a significant number of Celtic place-names, such as Crich, Dinting and Eccles, and that AS words like *wicham* refer to a Roman *vicus* or small town, showing that such towns were

extant in AS times. Eccles, in particular, originates in the latin *ecclesia* (cf modern French *eglise*), and suggests pagan people adopting a British word for something for which they did not yet have a word of their own (church, kirk etc appearing later). Cameron (1959) points out that almost half of the Celtic place names of Derbyshire are concentrated in the inhospitable far north-west, perhaps because the land was of least interest to the Anglians. Stafford (1985), however, concludes that the scattering across the rest of the Peak showed there was a significant survival of Romano-British people in these areas too. Cameron (1959) remarks on the absence of pre-English names in the lead mining areas of the Peak, but does not suggest a reason. We know the Romans mined lead, and that the Anglo-Saxons also did following their conversion to Christianity (for church roofs), but it is possible that the collapse of the lead industry for 200 years between these phases cleared the 'folk memory' through depopulation, and allowed naming to start afresh when mining resumed.

Most place-names, as in the rest of England, are of Anglo-Saxon origin (Stafford, 1985). Cameron (1959) points out that the Derbyshire names lack the earliest (pre 550 AD) forms such as those ending in *-ingham* and *-ingas*, but that the ending *-low* (meaning burial mound) is quite common. The first part of names such as Baslow, Hucklow etc. is an Old English personal name. From this he concludes that such names originated during the later pagan period (550-600 AD).

There is less evidence of Viking influence in the place-names of the Peak. 'Derby' is a Norse name, but there are few other examples of local *-by* or *-thorp* (village) place names in the more northerly parts (the Peak District, or its ancient equivalent, the land of the *Pecsaetna*), compared with neighbouring lands to the north and east. However, there are examples of less common, but more specific topographical place names of Norse origin in Derbyshire. Stafford (1985, p117) cites *Flagg* (turf), *carr* (marsh), *holme* (watermeadow) and *booth* (hut or temporary shelter) as examples, and points out that many of these places coincide with poorer soils, and harder to work areas. Stafford (1985) and Cameron (1959) both conclude that the main effects of Viking settlement in the Peak were linguistic - introducing Norse words into the local speech, producing place names like Ingleby (= the village of the English), with evidence of actual settlement restricted to more marginal agricultural areas (as also suggested by the Hiberno-Norse group of crosses mentioned earlier). Other examples of linguistically mixed names include Bretby and Bretton (Britons' village, in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, respectively).

Taken together, the archaeological and surviving place-name evidence supports the view of Frances Pryor (2004) that land holdings and estates tended to survive political upheavals, such as the Anglo-Saxon, Viking and indeed Norman invasions, more or less intact, but with new owners from the invading armies. Estates fragmented by inheritance and sale, rather than war and pillage. Economic and climatic changes (and outbreaks of disease) also saw areas fall into disuse, and thus depopulate, and lose their place names, rather than the slaughter of indigenous people by newcomers. Language can (and still does) change rapidly in response to political and economic change, without any change of ethnicity - English is, after all, now the lingua franca of India.

Britons adopted the burial practices of their new Anglian overlords, Anglians borrowed many words from their new Viking masters, and the Vikings, defeated by resurgent Wessex, adopted the religion of their conquerors, but expressed it in the form of stone crosses to mark their estates as loyal to the new order. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, as they say (Karr, 1849).

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