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Between Material Reality and Literary *Topos*: 'Towns' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of 'towns' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on insights from the discipline of archaeology. How did the *Chronicle* depict these places? Can we discern changes over time? Through an analysis of the *Chronicle* texts as a living set of documents, the paper comments both on the role of 'towns' in early medieval England and on the function of the *Chronicle* in contemporary society. It concludes that 'towns' in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* existed between material reality and literary topos: their physicality carried as much symbolism as their literary depictions.

1 Introduction

I first encountered early medieval England in 1996, during an introductory course in Old English taught by Erik. I do not know whether it was Erik's enthusiasm, or the fact that Old English was more 'my' kind of thing than other introductory topics, or (most likely) a combination of both, but the early medieval world felt real, exciting, and alive. More than two and a half decades later, I predominantly study the first-millennium inhabitants of the North Sea world through archaeological evidence. In this short contribution, I revisit my favourite set of chronicles—a group of closely related manuscripts jointly referred to as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—to discuss the role of 'towns' in early medieval society from an interdisciplinary perspective. How did the *Chronicle* depict these places, and how does that compare to their material 'realities' as deduced from archaeological investigations? Were they merely a backdrop for action, or did they serve a narrative function? Can we discern changes over time in the way(s) they were depicted, and how does that compare to their development as complex settlements in the real world?

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes a densely named landscape, frequently referencing places that we might recognize as the populated 'towns' of the later

period. Their mentions are often devoid of descriptive detail, but—partially thanks to decades of archaeological research—it is clear that they encompassed a variety of places, including fortified centres and the deserted ruins of abandoned Roman towns. The question of what we mean by the word ‘town’ has been subject to extensive academic debate.¹ During the twentieth century, their economic and demographic aspects stood central.² In the last 20 years, however, their ideological dimensions have received more attention, as reminders of the past splendour of the Roman Empire and/or references to the heavenly Jerusalem as the ultimate idea of *civitas*.³ In this view, the distinction between ‘towns’ and ecclesiastical settlements such as minsters and abbeys—sharing the same symbolic significance—becomes blurred.

Choosing criteria for inclusion in this paper was no easy feat considering the difficulties of definition and the huge transformations that took place in the settlement landscape of England between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Placename evidence can shed some light on the perception of places by their inhabitants and contemporaries, although categories are overlapping. Relevant suffixes include (variations of) *-burg*, denoting ‘fortification’ and later ‘borough’ or ‘market town’; *-ceaster*, usually referring to former Roman cities and towns; and those instances of *-wic* that refer to undefended coastal and riverine trading places—often considered ‘proto-urban’—but not where they denote places used for specialized production, especially dairy farming.⁴ The placename element *-tun* is largely excluded: although etymologically related to present-day ‘town’, it apparently did not obtain this meaning until the Middle English period, before which it was used for ‘village’, ‘hamlet’, ‘manor’ or ‘vill’.⁵

This is not the first discussion of ‘towns’ in the Old English literary corpus. Bintley’s detailed overview of settlements and strongholds in Old English and Anglo-Latin written sources—which also draws on historical and archaeological insights but excludes detailed discussion of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—distinguishes four phases, starting with an emphasis on ‘ruin mythologies’.⁶ From the seventh century, the Church makes a major impact, followed—in the Alfredian period—by a symbolic metamorphosis that transformed former

1 E.g., Ten Harkel (2013: 157–159).

2 E.g., Astill (2009).

3 E.g., Blair (2006: 247–251); Bintley (2020: 19); Carver (2011: 932–933); Ten Harkel (2013: 157–159).

4 Smith (1970a: 58–62; 85–87; 1970b: 257–263); Swanton (2000: xxxiii).

5 Smith (1970b: 188–198); Swanton (2000: xxxiii).

6 Bintley (2020: 29–73).

Church enclaves into 'places for community and prosperity', paving the way for the 'spiritual strongholds' of later pre-Conquest England.⁷

Bintley's phases reflect the material reality of the developing urban landscape in post-Roman Britain. Before the eighth century, there were no places that we would recognize as 'towns', although the stone-built ruins of Roman cities were tangible reminders of a past urban civilization. The fate of British towns was different to that of their counterparts in areas of the former Roman Empire where the Church retained a stronger grip on society. There, evidence for 'continuity' of urban functionality can be ascribed, at least in part, to the presence of powerful (arch)bishops. From the seventh century, many former Roman towns in Britain were also reoccupied as bishoprics or minsters and—at least among the educated population—imbued with *civitas* symbolism.⁸ Archaeological evidence from most former Roman cities in Britain is largely restricted to ecclesiastical activity until the tenth century: as Blair states, these places did not need 'trade, industry, or specialized occupations' to be considered '*civitates*'.⁹

The later ninth and tenth centuries, corresponding to Bintley's Alfredian metamorphosis, saw investment in the refurbishment of old (Iron Age and Roman) and the construction of new fortifications as part of a defensive network against Viking invaders.¹⁰ This was paralleled in the Viking-controlled north and east, with substantial investment in places like York and Lincoln.¹¹ Some of these (especially those that also fulfilled an ecclesiastical role) grew into complex and multi-functional settlements. In the north, sustained economic and demographic growth followed their defensive/military phase almost immediately, while in the south, this did not happen until the later tenth or eleventh centuries.¹²

Current archaeological understanding of the urbanization of pre-Conquest Britain also has some points of divergence from Bintley's four phases. The eighth century was the heyday of a new settlement form: the aforementioned *wics* or *emporia*—places with relatively large populations specialising in manufacturing and trade—including well-known examples such as York (*Eoforwic*), London (*Lundenwic*), Ipswich (*Gipeswic*) and Southampton (*Hamwic*) in England, and *Quentovic* and *Dorestad* in Francia. Although twentieth-century

7 Bintley (2020: 75–185).

8 Blair (2006: 247–248).

9 Blair (2006: 248).

10 Baker and Brookes (2013).

11 E.g., Ten Harkel (2013).

12 Astill (1991).

scholars commonly regarded these as ‘proto-urban’ settlements—a first step towards the high medieval urbanized landscape—they have made a notably low impact on the surviving textual corpus.¹³

What a close reading of the *Chronicle* can add to this discussion results from the specific characteristics of the genre. In 2002, David Dumville defined a chronicle as a ‘living text’, stating that ‘it was part of the function of a chronicle to be altered’, often involving a succession of different authors, later additions or corrections, and new recensions.¹⁴ From the multiple versions, adaptations and reworkings of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the focus of this paper will rest on the oldest of the surviving manuscripts—version A—in comparison to the other main versions in Old English (B–E).

Manuscript A (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173, ff. 1^v–32^r) was written in a single hand until the annal for 891 (corresponding to Bintley’s Alfredian reinvention). The period 892–924 is covered by a series of detailed annals representing a contemporary account of the Viking invasions. The later tenth- and eleventh-century entries are largely unique to MS A. In c. 1011, it was transferred from Wessex to Canterbury.¹⁵ It ends after the annal for 1070.¹⁶

The other surviving versions under consideration here are all later. Manuscript B (British Library MS Cotton Tiberius Avi, ff. 1–34) covers the period up to AD 977 and was written by a single scribe in the later 970s. Manuscripts C (British Library MS Cotton Tiberius Bi, ff. 115^v–64) and D (British Library MS Cotton Tiberius Biv, ff. 3–86), with a hiatus for the period 189–693, were both composed in the mid-eleventh century, adding information from different local sources; C ends in 1066 and D in 1079.¹⁷ Manuscript E (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud 636) is the most recent of the surviving manuscripts, largely copied out in c. 1120 and maintained as a contemporary account until the 1150s.¹⁸ In this paper, only the annals up to 1070 (where version A stops) are considered. All versions discussed here, as well as several other related sources, can be traced back to a now-lost, ninth-century original. The earlier parts of D and E are likely copied from a now-lost manuscript that originated in the north, drawing on Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and a set of northern annals.¹⁹

13 E.g., Biddle (1976) and Hodges (1982).

14 Dumville (2002: 18, 21).

15 Swanton (2000: xxi–xxii).

16 Swanton (2000: 206).

17 Swanton (2000: xxiii–xxvi).

18 Swanton (2000: xxvi–xxvii).

19 Swanton (2000: xviii, xxix).

If we consider the different parts of the *Chronicle* as products of the times when they were written, version A provides an opportunity to chart any changes in the perceived significance of ‘towns’ during a key period in the process of urbanization, between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Comparison with the other versions can provide further insights, although the textual relationships between the manuscripts imply that it is mainly in the differences between texts that we should expect to see later voices filter through. Reference to archaeological insights furthermore allows for comparison between the literary and the material worlds of southern Britain between the ninth and twelfth centuries.

This paper is structured into three parts, each corresponding to a group of annals in manuscript A. The first covers the period up to 891, the second 892–924, and the third 924–1070. Key passages are highlighted, differences between the manuscripts are discussed, and placed in the context of archaeological knowledge. The discussion is necessarily brief, but it will hopefully provide an interesting perspective on the role of ‘towns’ and the significance of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in ninth- to twelfth-century society.

2 The Period up to AD 891

The first set of annals under consideration provides an insight into the perception of ‘towns’ in the late ninth century. This was a time when many former Roman cities and forts had long been transformed into important bishoprics or minsters (but had not yet accumulated the full economic and demographic characteristics that *we* might expect a ‘town’ to have), and when the heyday of the *emporia* was already waning, possibly at least partly as a result of disruptions caused by Viking raids.

Starting with version A, former Roman cities dominate the selection of ‘towns’ that are mentioned in the annals to AD 891. They consistently have the placename element *-ceastre* (e.g., ‘Hrofesceastre’, Rochester; ‘Wintaceastre’, Winchester) to emphasize their Roman origin, except London and Canterbury, which are usually variations of ‘Lundenburg’ and ‘Cantwaraburg’.²⁰ References are largely devoid of detail. Their role in the narrative mainly falls into two categories: as places of ecclesiastical significance and as military targets (and

²⁰ Throughout this paper, all the Old English is taken from Thorpe (2013) and all modern English translations from Swanton (2000). Years, including corrections in brackets, follow Swanton (2000).

here, their role is shared by much lower numbers of other types of places, especially in the ninth-century entries, including newly constructed fortifications).

Both aspects emphasize their symbolic significance. This is aptly illustrated through a brief reference to Asser's *Life of Alfred*, likely written in 893 and a product of the same milieu as the original version of the *Chronicle*. Asser employs the widely used literary *topos* of the capture and/or restoration of a city—often following destruction, commonly by fire—by exemplary rulers on two occasions.²¹ In chapter 83 he states that in the year 886, 'Aelfred ... post incendia urbium stragesque populorum, Lundoniam civitatem honorifice restauravit et habitabilem fecit' ('Alfred ... restored the city of London splendidly—after so many towns had been burned and so many people slaughtered—and made it habitable again').²² In chapter 91, he states that Alfred invested in 'civitibus et urbibus renovandis et aliis, ubi nunquam ante fuerant, construendis' ('cities and towns to be rebuilt and ... others to be constructed where previously there were none').²³

Asser uses the words *civitas*, a term that was preserved for the ruins of stone-built Roman towns, and *urbs*, which was used more commonly in Anglo-Latin for places enclosed by earthen ramparts.²⁴ The *civitates* were the places that, since the arrival of the Augustinian mission in Kent towards the end of the sixth century, had seen the foundation of episcopal sees and minsters in an attempt by the Church to regain spiritual control over a lost province.²⁵ By linking Alfred explicitly to this process as a restorer of *civitas*, set against the backdrop of city-burning, Asser placed his king in the same tradition, as a restorer of both *civitas* and *Romanitas*.²⁶

Turning to the *Chronicle*, if all 78 annals in this section of A that include a mention to any 'town' are considered together, it is notable that the most commonly named 'town' is Rome ('Rome'). It occurs in 19 annals (approximately ¼)—including once to state that 'there was none who travelled to Rome' (889)—followed by London and Rochester (8 annals each) and Winchester (7 annals). Rome's prominence in the *Chronicle* illustrates its importance—as a concept—in the early English mindset.

21 E.g., Baghos 2021; Kraus (1994: 270).

22 Keynes and Lapidge (1983: 97–98); Latin from <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/asserius.html>.

23 Keynes and Lapidge (1983: 101); Latin from <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/asserius.html>.

24 Blair (2005: 248–249).

25 Blair (2005: 249); also see Bintley (2020: 75–76).

26 Blair (2005: 249).

Often the only reason that former Roman towns are mentioned is because they are (arch)bishoprics. For example, the annal for 633 states that 'Paulinus ... occupied the bishop's seat in Rochester'. In other cases, they serve as the location of the baptisms or burials of important individuals, such as the baptisms of Cynegils, Cwichelm and Cuthred at Dorchester in 635, 636 and 639 respectively, or the burials of Eadberht and Egbert in York, mentioned in 738.

The annal for 867 (866) seems to confirm that the former Roman towns were not densely populated places: that year, the raiding-army occupied York city ('Eoforwic ceastre'), seemingly without any resistance, and it is only then that the Northumbrians under Ælla 'gathered a great army and sought out the raiding-army at York city and broke into the city ('ceastre')'. The rendering of York as 'Eoforwic ceastre'—the *ceastre* associated with the *wic*—is consistent in the annals up to 891 in version A. Only the annal for 189 renders the placename as 'Euerwic', but this is a later addition. Given the archaeological evidence for a ninth-century extra-mural settlement at York in the Fishergate area, commonly held to be the *-wic* site, this reinforces the preoccupation of the chronicler with former Roman 'towns' at the expense of the relatively densely-occupied, economically-significant *emporia*.²⁷

Comparison with the later manuscripts reveals a less consistent use of language. Most passages that occur in all five versions (e.g., AD 738, 869) retain the *-ceaster* element, but several annals mentioning York are unique to 'northern' versions D–E, and these invariably drop the *-ceaster* element. They include references to (arch)bishops (and, once, a king) of 'Eoferwic' (e.g., AD 744, 766, 777 (779)), thus separating the direct association between (arch)episcopal sees and their Roman heritage. D–E also omit the *-ceaster* element in the annal for 189 (the passage is absent in B–C).

References to London in the different manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provide a parallel. In version A, London is consistently referred to as 'Lundenburg'. The annal for 604 refers to a bishop's seat in 'Lundenwic' (commonly held to indicate the extra-mural settlement that existed in the area where now the Royal Opera House is located, with evidence for specialist manufacturing activity and long-distance trade), but this is a later addition.²⁸ The passage is absent from versions B–D, but E also renders the name as 'Lundenwic'.²⁹ Only the annal for 839 (842) gives the name as *Lundenne* (in all versions). References to London that do not occur in version A but do occur in later

27 Mainman (2019).

28 Blackmore et al. (2012).

29 This is similar to the entry for 616, which is a later addition in version A, absent from B–D and included in E.

manuscripts drop the *-burg* element almost without fail, as can be seen in the annals for 656 and 675 (only present in E), 731 (present in D and E) and 883 (present in B–E).

The annal for 886 (885)—the last entry to mention an English ‘town’ in this group of annals, present in all versions, and recounting the same events as those described by Asser (above)—serves a clear narrative function. The chronicler states that ‘King Alfred occupied London fort (‘Lundenburg’) and all the English race (‘all Angelcyn’) turned to him’. The *-burg* element (paralleling Asser’s *civitas*, in this case) is shared by several English fortifications (e.g., *Wihthgaras byrg* (Wihthgar’s stronghold) in 530 and 544, or *Bebbanburh* (Bambury) in 547), but, interestingly, none of the Viking raiding army’s fortifications have the suffix *-burg*.

To understand the full significance of the passage, the annals up to 891 must be considered as a whole. Especially the annal for 409 (410) is important, which states that ‘the Goths destroyed the stronghold of Rome (‘Romeburg’), and afterwards the Romans never ruled in Britain’. The third reference to Rome in A, it uniquely renders the name as ‘Romeburg’ instead of the usual ‘Rome’. More explicitly than Asser, the chronicler creates a direct link between the loss of Rome, accompanied by a loss of Roman political power, and the restoration of London, intrinsically related to political success.

The passage is shared by versions B–C and falls within the hiatus in D, but in E, A’s ‘Romeburg’ (‘the stronghold of Rome’) is changed subtly into ‘Romana burh’ (‘the stronghold of the Romans’), explicitly linking the ‘town’ to its population in a way that does not occur in earlier versions. It suggests a twelfth-century understanding of ‘towns’ as populated places that was somewhat anachronistic. This idea is strengthened by a passage in the annal for 616 in E, absent from the other manuscripts. Referring to a period before the heyday of the *emporía*, when archaeological evidence suggests the former Roman towns were predominantly ecclesiastical enclaves, it states that ‘þa wurdon Lundenware heðene’ (‘at that time the inhabitants of London [lit. ‘London-dwellers’] ... were heathen’).

3 The Period 892–924

In this set of annals, the narrative in A (and B–D) is dense and several differences with the previous section exist (coverage in E is sparse and not included here). Rome is not mentioned at all: instead, the narrative focuses on the movements of the English and Viking armies. This was the period—Bintley’s Alfredian reinvention—when old fortifications were refurbished and new ones

constructed as part of a defensive strategy against the Vikings, some of which grew out to become towns.³⁰ Archaeological evidence for the functioning of these places in ways that we would recognize as ‘urban’ remains absent for this period, although the text of the *Chronicle* suggests that the strategic and administrative potential of fortified places was increasingly realized.

The literary *topos* of successful kingship linked to the construction/restoration of ‘towns’ is mainly apparent in A’s contemporary account. The last three entries in this section—unique to A—discuss Edward’s fortification building, stating that he ordered them to be ‘gebetan 7 gesettan’ (‘improved and occupied’) (922 (918)), ‘gesettan 7 gemannian’ (‘occupied and manned’) and ‘gebetan 7 gemannian’ (‘improved and manned’) (923 (919)) and ‘gemannian’ (‘manned’) (924 (920)). In two of the annals, this is paired explicitly with references to the subjugation of groups of people to Edward’s rule as king.

In all manuscripts, ‘towns’ are frequently depicted as populated, although perhaps least clearly in the eleventh-century D-version. The annal for 896 (895) in A–C refers to ‘þa men of Lundenbyrig’ (‘the men of London town’). D changes ‘þa men of Lundenbyrig’ to ‘þa men on Lundenbyrig’ [my emphasis], thus rendering the association between people and *burg* somewhat vaguer. A–C also contain a reference to ‘þa men’ of Hereford, Gloucester and ‘þam niehstum burgum’ (‘the nearest strongholds’) in 918 (914), whereas D omits the phrase ‘þa men’, but this may be a scribal error.

‘Burgware’ (‘fortification-dwellers’) are mentioned for London (‘Lundenbyrg’) in 894 (893)—although D omits the phrase—and 896 (895), and for Chichester in 895 (894). Swanton translates this term as ‘inhabitants’ for London (894 (893)) and ‘the garrison’ for Chichester (895 (894)). Given the use of the same word in two consecutive annals, however, it is more likely that the same meaning was intended and that a clear dichotomy between military and non-military occupation is anachronistic.³¹

The relationship between ecclesiastical authority and ‘towns’ remains clear, but there is also evidence for secular identities connected to these places. The entry for 897 (896), present in A–D, only identifies ecclesiastical magnates by the ‘town’ to which they belong (e.g., ‘Swiðulf biscop on Hrofesceastre’), while secular ones are identified by regions (e.g., ‘Ceolmund ealdormon on Cent’). However, there are now multiple references to generic people ‘dwelling’ (*buan*) in or ‘belonging’ (*hieran*) to a *burg*. Examples include the entry for 919 (915) (unique to A), which mentions ‘þa burgware þe hie ær budon’ (‘the

30 Baker and Brookes (2013); Bintley (2020: 119–155).

31 Swanton (2000: 86, 88; also see xxxiii, 147, n. 10).

burgware who had earlier dwelt there' (i.e., in Bedford)). The entry for 918 (914) includes a reference to 'þa ieldstan men ealle mæste þe to Bedanforde hierdon 7 eac monige þara þe to Hamtune hierdon' ('almost all the principal men who belonged to Bedford, and also many of those who belonged to Northampton').³²

The adjective 'ieldstan' indicates a degree of social stratification, also suggested by the first references to (town-)reeves: the Winchester 'wicgefera' (A–D, 897 (896)) and the 'gerefa' of Bath (A–C, 906 (905)), which version D renders as 'tunegerefa'. The element *wic* in 'wicgefera' possibly suggests economic significance. The *tun* element in the eleventh-century D version represents an early example where its meaning had shifted from 'village', 'hamlet', 'manor' or 'vill' to its present meaning of 'town', highlighting the increasing administrative importance of places like Winchester.³³

4 The Period 925–1070

From the later tenth and eleventh centuries, archaeological evidence points to demographic growth and socio-economic complexity. The narratives in the different *Chronicle* manuscripts diverge increasingly. Coverage in A is thin, but includes several alliterative poems, two of which are considered here. Although the symbolic significance of towns continues to figure prominently, evidence for the greater diversity of 'urban' form and status, and the presence of urban populations, also shines through.

'The Capture of the Five Boroughs' (942) employs the literary *topos* of the capture of a city by a strong king (Edmund) resulting in the liberation of the people, reinforcing the connection of 'towns' to people. The 'cities' in question here are 'burga fife / Ligerceaster / 7 Lincylene / 7 Snotingaham / swylce Stanford eac / Deoraby' ('five boroughs: Leicester and Lincoln, and Nottingham, likewise Stamford also and Derby'), places with diverse origins as Roman towns and Mercian estate centres.

It is worth noting that the placename Lincoln—despite its Roman origins—does not have the *-ceaster* element, while elsewhere references to London (959, 962) drop the *-burg* element. Different types of economic 'town' now also appear more frequently in A. For example, in 993, the Vikings 'overran' 'Sandwic' ('Sandwich') and 'Gipeswic' ('Ipswich'), while the entry for 1031 describes

32 B omits the reference to Northampton. Also see 921 (917): 'Tæmeseforda (Tempsford) ... 7 hit budon 7 bytledon', and 'se here þe to Hamtune (Northampton) hierde'.

33 See above and Smith (1970b: 188–198); Swanton (2000: xxxiii).

how Canterbury Christ Church receives ‘the harbour at Sandwich (‘þa hæfenan on Sandwic’), and all the rights that arise there’. This trend becomes more apparent in the eleventh-century entries in versions C–E, when the use of the word ‘port’ (‘market town’) appears (e.g., 1010, the ‘port’ of Northampton (C–E); 1055, the ‘port’ of Hereford (C–D, but E: ‘burh’); 1068, ‘þa portmen’ (‘the men of the market-town’) of York (E, but D: ‘burhmenn’).

‘The Capture of the Five Boroughs’ is also included in B–D, but absent from E. Later annals in C–D also refer to ‘þæt folc into Fifburhingum’ (‘the people in the Five Boroughs’) (C, 1013), which E subtly changes into ‘þet folc of Fifburhingan’ [my emphasis]. By the eleventh century, there was clearly a territorial unit that had derived its name from this group of ‘towns’. Versions C–E all state that ‘ferde se æpeling ... in to Fif burgum’ (‘the prince rode ... into the Five Boroughs’) (C, 1015).³⁴ Given the fact that ‘The Capture of the Five Boroughs’ is absent from E, it is likely that this territory had become a commonly understood entity by the twelfth century at the latest.

The second alliterative poem under consideration here is the annal for 973, present in A–C. It describes the setting for Edgar’s coronation as ‘ðære ealdan byrig / Acemannes ceastre / eac hi igbuend / oðre worde / beornas Baðan nemnað’ (‘the ancient town of Ache-man’s city—the warriors dwelling in the island also call it by the other term Baths’), using both ‘byrig’ and ‘ceastre’ but also referencing its name in common parlance. It is absent from D–E, which place the coronation (in prose) ‘æt Hatabaðum’, without including any descriptive elements underlining the symbolic significance of the location.

This is not to say that town-symbolism has left the narrative in the eleventh- and twelfth-century versions of the *Chronicle*. Descriptions of the destruction and wholesale burning of ‘towns’ (for which, on the whole, no archaeological evidence exists) emphasize the direness of the situation in the eleventh-century annals in C–E (e.g., 1003 (Exeter, Wilton), 1004 (Norwich, Thetford), 1006 (Sandwich, Wallingford). This is contrasted with London’s resilience: in 994, the Vikings intend to set fire to London but ‘suffered more harm and injury than they ever imagined that any town-dwellers (‘buruhwaru’) would do to them’. In 1009, ‘they [the Vikings] often attacked London town (‘þa buruh Lundene’), but praise be to God that it still stands sound, and they always fared badly there’. Immediately afterwards in the narrative, the raiding army travels to Oxford and ‘burned down the town’ (‘þa buruh’)).³⁵

34 The same entry also includes a reference to ‘Seofon bur(h)gum’ (‘seven boroughs’); Williams (2013) for a discussion of their likely identification and significance.

35 Old English from C.

Finally, the eleventh-century entries in C–E commonly include references to townspeople as actors. In 1013, the ‘buruhwaru’ of Oxford and Winchester submit to the raiding army and give them hostages. In 1016 and 1018, the ‘Lundenwaru’ and ‘burhwaru’ buy peace from the raiding army.³⁶ In 1048 (1051), the king gets very angry with the ‘burhware’ of Dover (only in E). Most interesting, perhaps, is the annal for 1006, which—in the middle of a lengthy description of the destruction caused by the raiding army—states that the ‘Winchester leode’ (‘people of Winchester’) are able to ‘see’ the raiding army, in a passive role that serves to emphasize the imminent threat of the situation.³⁷

5 Discussion

Although the evidence from the *Chronicle* lacks descriptive detail, ‘every text ... has something to tell us, and its own language in which this is communicated’.³⁸ In some ways, the lack of detail is what makes it so interesting. It reminds us that the (educated) readership for whom the *Chronicle* was intended did not need to have explained the symbolic meanings that pervaded their material reality and its literary depictions.

The symbolic significance of towns (in all their forms) is evident throughout the *Chronicle*, but it is perhaps clearest in the annals up to 924 in A. Also in later sections, however, ‘towns’ were more than a backdrop for action: their capture or destruction reinforced the relative success of the various rulers who were in power at the time. London occupied a special place, starting with the juxtaposition of the destruction of ‘Romeburg’/loss of political power and the capture of ‘Lundenburg’/political success, and ending with its resilience in the face of persistent Viking attacks.

The main changes over time—although the evidence is by no means entirely straightforward, nor should we expect it to be—include increasing diversity of urban form and status, and a growing emphasis on townspeople. In the early tenth century, there are references to royal orders for towns to be ‘gesetan’ and ‘gemannian’. Was this Bintley’s symbolic metamorphosis, transforming former Church enclaves into ‘places for community and prosperity’, in action?³⁹ Archaeological evidence for sizeable populations is still scarce for this period, but the *Chronicle*—like other near-contemporary written sources and

36 Old English from C.

37 Old English from C.

38 Bintley (2020: 195).

39 Bintley (2020: 119).

as a product of the West-Saxon educated environment—‘may have played an active role in refashioning the perception of settlements and strongholds’ until they became the populated places of the Anglo-Norman period.⁴⁰

All in all, this brief analysis of ‘towns’ in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* underlines another lesson I first learnt from Erik’s lectures: the importance of inter-disciplinarity. The ‘towns’ in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were real places built of earth and stone, but their materiality was imbued with symbolism as much as their literary depictions, making it impossible to understand either without reference to the other. Even when their economic and demographic dimensions developed, this merely added to the complexity of the meanings they held. As such, they bridged the divide between material reality and literary *topos* in complex ways that this brief paper cannot possibly do full justice to. I hope that it will nevertheless inspire others to investigate this topic further.

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⁴⁰ Bintley (2020: 154).

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