

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200  
 Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

*Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts*

Master: What shall we say of the cook? Do we need his craft in any way?

The ‘Cook’ says: If you expel me from your society, you’ll eat your vegetables raw and your meat uncooked; and you can’t even have a good broth without my art.

Master: We don’t care about your art; it isn’t necessary to us, because we can boil things that need boiling, and roast the things that need roasting, for ourselves.

The ‘Cook’ says: However, if you drive me out so as to do that, then you’ll all be servants, and none of you will be lord. And without my craft you’ll still not be able to eat.<sup>1</sup>

So the Englishman, Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 950–c. 1010), writing a thousand years ago, exposed a basic truth. Lords cannot maintain their status unaided, even for a day. Without subordinates to prepare food ‘you’ll all be servants, and none of you will be lord’ and without skilled labour ‘you’ll still not be able to eat’.<sup>2</sup> Lordship, kingship, the actions of the elite, many of the facets of human behaviour captured in our historical sources, beg a multitude of questions, not least about what sustained them. These are questions usually tangential to the concerns of the writers who composed narratives and drafted documents in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, to the extent that when we encounter exceptions, most famously Domesday Book, historians have difficulty distinguishing the novel from the normal.<sup>3</sup> For this period answering questions about how

<sup>1</sup> *Ælfric’s Colloquy*, in M. T. Swanton, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Prose* (London, 1993) p. 174.  
<sup>2</sup> On the workers invoked by Ælfric see John Ruffing, ‘The labor structure of Ælfric’s Colloquy’, in A. J. Frantzen and D. Moffat, eds., *The World of Work: Servitude, Slavery and Labor in Medieval England* (Glasgow, 1994), pp. 55–70.  
<sup>3</sup> For a recent study of the complexity of this source see Alan Cooper, ‘Protestations of ignorance in Domesday Book’, in R. F. Berkhofer, Alan Cooper and A. J. Kosto, eds., *The Experience of Power in Medieval Europe, 950–1350* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 169–81.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

individuals conducted their lives and what their environments looked like, even about the labour and resources which sustained them, almost always involves going beyond what written sources will readily tolerate. As a consequence reconstruction risks failure: just as nineteenth-century visions of Alfredian democracy reveal nothing about the ninth century, so early reconstructions of pre-Conquest village life are now treated as an artefact of Victorian intellectual history.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of written evidence, or with evidence distributed very unevenly, historians of early England have had three courses of action: to scrutinize with great care surviving sources but to create necessarily tentative or lacunose accounts; to generalize from the particular; or to use projections from relatively limited sets of data. These have naturally been precarious and much criticized, and many historians have chosen not to engage in necessarily speculative and controversial reconstruction.

In the last century, particularly the last half-century, opportunities for examining questions of ranking and resources have multiplied. Archaeological discoveries, methods and technologies have transformed our understanding of the economy and demography of early England. Searchable databases are allowing the manipulation of historical data in new and powerful ways. The long-dominant interpretative model, of transformation by conquest in 1066, which has shaped historical writing about the period for four centuries, is yielding ground to other models of explication (see Chapter II.2). It will be the purpose of this introduction to explain our approach and to sketch a little of its historiographical context.

## A SOCIAL HISTORY

England's semi-insular location as part of the British Isles with its exposed coastline made it vulnerable to attacks from overseas. More than any other country in medieval Europe, England suffered from repeated invasions and conquests. Even before the period covered by this volume (900–1200) Britain was subject to substantial foreign incursion, first by the Romans and then in the fifth and sixth centuries by Germanic migration from continental Europe. Against this backdrop the repeated battering by Vikings in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, followed by the Danish and Norman conquests, turned the history of Britain into

<sup>4</sup> S. Keynes, 'The cult of Alfred', *ASE*, 28 (1999), 225–356; J. W. Burrow, 'The village community and the uses of history in late nineteenth-century England', in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), pp. 255–84.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

a well-worn historiographical narrative of an island under threat of attack, as a result both of warfare and of incipient migration. From Bede, via the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, to the works of twelfth-century historians such as William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, the recurrence of seaborne attacks, defeat in the face of foreign naval strength, and settlement of new 'nations' (*nationes*) is a leitmotiv of English chronicles. For each wave of historians complaining of foreign invasion, the constituency of native and newcomer was, of course, different, even though from Bede onwards the natives were English. By the mid-1140s a chronicler in northern England, Alfred of Beverley, distinguished six nations prominent in the history of the island, of which the English were one. He added the Flemish as a new group to the Britons (that is, Welsh), the Picts, the Scots, the Normans and, of course, the English.<sup>5</sup> The process whereby newcomers turned into natives is one of which these chroniclers were well aware. It is up to modern historians to identify and trace the processes that were at work in early England. A word of caution is needed to remind ourselves that where natives and newcomers are distinguished in national groups, suggesting clear-cut lines of distinction, identifying them on the ground, so to speak, is often an impossible task. Moreover, many such statements recorded localized perceptions. For Alfred at home in Beverley in the northeast of England the Flemish were a substantial, identifiable group, whereas they were not so for, say, William at Malmesbury in the southwest.

Repeated attacks by foreigners, which in their brutality are themselves reminiscent of modern terrorism, the disastrous loss of life after battle (especially in 1066), the massive destruction of land in countryside and cities and above all the exploitation of natives by new elites compel us to realize that twelfth-century historians looked back on the preceding centuries in a way not dissimilar to how we now look back on the twentieth century, an era deeply scarred by two world wars. Then, as now, political turmoil, war and small-scale ethnic cleansing resulted in many deaths, displacement of large numbers of people – some forced from homes as a result of conquest, others propelled from homesteads in search of jobs – and the rebuilding of lives stretching across several generations. Looking at the history of central medieval England from the perspective of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century experience inspires us to ask fresh questions from well-known sources and also to explore information that was not

<sup>5</sup> T. Hearne, ed., *Aluredi Beuerlacensis Annales, siue Historia des gestis Regum Britanniae* (Oxford, 1716), p. 10.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

available to our predecessors. This new quest for deeper understanding of old (and new) historical problems is particularly clear in areas such as ecology, landscape history, archaeology, migration, ethnicity and gender.

In our model we have deliberately allowed ample consideration of the political dimension of ‘the social’ in social history, a position to which Patrick Joyce has recently lent support.<sup>6</sup> We have taken it as axiomatic that social history cannot be written without paying close attention to the actions of kings, their regional deputies such as ealdormen (later earls), sheriffs and reeves, or indeed minor household officers. In a period in which Britain and Ireland were under constant pressure from political and economic predators, those living in England had to work together to protect their own interests and to accommodate newcomers, whether they liked it or not. Although most resources were in the hands of a warrior elite (whether English, Danish or Norman) this relatively small group of potentates could collect and exploit their resources only through co-operation with or coercion of local people, rich and poor, by adopting existing networks of power and shaping them into new ones. Therefore, it is essential to interpret the ‘social’ in our title in a sense wide enough to encompass the political and the economic world of rulers and labourers. Moreover, our volume also fully embraces the material world as an essential part of the historical story. For it is only through reciprocity that the men and women of England living in their villages and towns acted the way they did, not only to keep themselves alive but also their animals and their crops, as well as to keep in good order the things they manufactured.<sup>7</sup> All these together form the ingredients for our view of a social history of England for the years 900 to 1200. However, beside the question of what is social in our historical investigation, there is for England also the question of its relationship with the European continent.

#### ENGLAND AND EUROPE

England between 900 and 1200 developed from an aspiration with little territorial expression to an intensively governed state extending into modern Wales (and Scotland). Its written record develops concomitantly, with the intensification of royal government demonstrated in and recorded by the record-keeping offices of the twelfth-century state. Its history in these three centuries has usually been told in terms of conquest and control,

<sup>6</sup> P. Joyce, ‘What is the social in social history?’, *P&P*, 206 (2010), 213–48 at 232–44.

<sup>7</sup> C. P. Lewis, ‘The new Middle Ages?’, *History Workshop Journal*, 63.1 (2007), 303–11; Joyce, ‘What is the social’, 231–2.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

and for good reason, because three of the major ruling regimes of England in this period – the West Saxon, the Danish (from 1016) and the Norman (from 1066) – established themselves through conquest and, at least for a time, were able to live off the political fat of territorial aggrandizement. Conquest continued as the dual impetus of social mobility and political ambition pushed English and later Norman nobles into experimental forays into Wales, Ireland and Scotland, later followed by permanent plantation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the apparatus of the English state grew in response to the threat and reality of invasion. Alfred and Edward the Elder's emergency measures against Danes, both those attacking and those later resident in England, left a legacy of burghal towns and mint-centres, the locus of centralizing royal administration of the tenth century which generated much of the cash which, even at the start of our period, lubricated political and economic relationships and which later yielded the tens of thousands of pounds of currency extorted from the West Saxon dynasty in payment to the Danes.<sup>9</sup> Another consequence of invasion was England's position as a satellite kingdom – an appendage to political interests which lay elsewhere, in Denmark (from 1016), or Normandy (after 1066) and later Anjou (after 1154).

To a significant extent, then, it makes sense to understand England's history in our period in terms of attack, resistance and subordination. This is what the narrative sources dictate and where, consequently, the oldest historiographical paths lead. Indeed, these three centuries have been cloven in two by the historiographical chasm of 1066 around which the historiography of the two halves, pre- and post-, has accumulated over perhaps four centuries.<sup>10</sup> Since the nineteenth century, moreover, the fragmentary historical record of the pre-Conquest period, in particular, has been subjected to the equally powerful gravitational pull of teleology: the expectation that these centuries form a beginning, and so encapsulate in embryonic or inchoate form developments of future centuries.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093–1343* (Oxford, 2000) traced the process in the post-1066 era, but the phenomenon is exemplified in the behaviour of all three major *eorlisc* dynasties before the Norman Conquest (Harold Godwinsson and Leofric in Wales and Siward in Scotland): see further K. L. Maund, *Ireland, Wales and England in the Eleventh Century* (Woodbridge, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Note, for example, the volume of English currency in the 40-kg-haul of silver deposited in the Viking hoard at Cuerdale, Lancs., c. 905: J. Graham-Campbell, ed., *Viking Treasure from the North West: The Cuerdale Hoard in Its Context* (Liverpool, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Hugh MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1982), chs. 3 and 5.

<sup>11</sup> For discussion of teleology and its implications see the contributions to P. Stafford, J. L. Nelson and J. Martindale, eds., *Law, Laity and Solidarities: Essays in Honour of Susan*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aware of the conceptual traps of Anglocentrism, historians specializing in Anglo-Saxon England have long been willing to look across the Channel to the Continent to analyse reciprocal influences. Patrick Wormald, heir to the comparative method of his teacher, Michael Wallace-Hadrill, both historians obviously at home in both Francia and England, identified the profound debt of English royal legislation to the Carolingian kings.<sup>12</sup> Other Anglo-Saxon historians have made seminal contributions.<sup>13</sup> Carolingian specialists, too, have always had an open mind about cross-Channel contacts, foremost amongst them Janet Nelson in her Royal Historical Society lectures 'England and the continent in the ninth century', whose title is directly inspired by that important work by Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*.<sup>14</sup> But she, too, acknowledges the relatively limited post-war participation of British scholars in studies of early Continental history, an involvement which is going to be hampered by a lack of foreign-language skills in the early twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup> Much wider comparative studies embrace Britain. Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages 400–800* despite its title covers the period up to the first millennium and firmly includes Anglo-Saxon England, while Thomas Bisson in his recent study of power in feudal Europe has treated Norman and Angevin England as something of a significant exception.<sup>16</sup> However, it is also clear that for the period

Reynolds (Manchester, 2001). For recent reflection on insular historiography see P. Stafford, 'Historiography', in P. Stafford, ed., *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c. 500–1100* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 9–22; W. Davies, 'Introduction', in W. Davies, ed., *From the Vikings to the Normans, 800–1100* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 1–8.

<sup>12</sup> P. Wormald with D. Bullough and R. Collins, eds., *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), esp. pp. ix–xi; and of course his *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1, *Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford, 1999), esp. part 1, ch. 2, pp. 29–108.

<sup>13</sup> J. Campbell, 'The significance of the Anglo-Norman state in the administrative history of western Europe' and 'England, Flanders and Germany in the reign of Ethelred II: some comparisons and connections', in J. Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London and Ronceverte, 1986), pp. 171–90, 191–208; L. Abrams, 'England, Normandy and Scandinavia', in C. Harper-Bill and E. van Houts, eds., *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 43–62.

<sup>14</sup> J. L. Nelson, 'Presidential address. England and the continent in the ninth century: I. Ends and beginnings; II. The Vikings and others; III. Rights and rituals', in *TRHS* 6th ser., 12 (2002), 1–22; 13 (2003) 1–28; and 14 (2004), 1–24; W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1947). A companion study is in press: David Rollason, Conrad Leyser and Hannah Williams, eds., *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century* (Turnhout, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Nelson, 'Presidential address. England and the continent: I. Ends', 10 n 31.

<sup>16</sup> C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 306–26, 339–51, 428–34, 502–4, 805–14. Thomas M. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton and Oxford, 2009), esp. pp. 378–97.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

of our volume Anglo-Continental relations have not received sustained attention.<sup>17</sup>

Naturally, there is no shortage of work on facets of this history; indeed, in studies of the tenth-century reform movement, the Danish and Norman Conquests and the twelfth-century renaissance, England in a Continental context has received its share of attention.<sup>18</sup> The *Anglo-Norman Studies* series offers a truly cross-Channel perspective for Anglo-Continental research in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Important, though much more focused, studies were written by Karl Leyser and Timothy Reuter on political and cultural comparisons and contrasts between England and Germany.<sup>19</sup> And there are of course other important individual scholars who looked to both sides of the Channel, as Janet Nelson has recently reminded us for Henry Loyn, who pointed out that Domesday Book did have parallels (on a smaller scale) on the Continent.<sup>20</sup> Or very welcome is the appreciation by David Crouch and Kathleen Thompson of the crucial contribution to England's history in a pan-Norman context by David Bates, whose own Ford lectures given at the University of Oxford in 2010 stress just this theme.<sup>21</sup> But this is nothing like the Levison–Nelson integrated approach that is badly needed.

Foreign-born scholars, some of whom work and live in anglophone areas, are as a matter of innate interest more willing to give England a European context. K. Van Eickels (Bamberg, Germany) weaves English

<sup>17</sup> There is no series of lectures on Anglo-Continental history for the tenth, the eleventh or the twelfth centuries. For the thirteenth century there is an annual publication primarily focused on England/Britain which contains the occasional cross-Channel contribution: *Thirteenth-Century England* 1 (1986) (Woodbridge, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> D. Bullough, 'The continental background of the reform', in his *Carolingian Renewal. Sources and Heritage* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 272–96; C. Cubitt, 'The tenth-century Benedictine reform in England', *Early Medieval Europe*, 6 (1997), 77–94; C. W. Hollister, ed., *Anglo-Norman Political Culture in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. Proceedings of the Borchard Conference on Anglo-Norman History, 1995* (Woodbridge, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> K. Leyser, 'England and the Empire in the early twelfth century', in his *Medieval Germany and Its Neighbours, 900–1250* (London, 1982) and T. Reuter, 'The making of England and Germany, 850–1050', in T. Reuter, ed. J. Nelson, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 284–99.

<sup>20</sup> J. L. Nelson, 'The Henry Loyn Memorial Lecture for 2006. Henry Loyn and the context of Anglo-Saxon England', *Haskins Society Journal*, 19 (2007), 154–70.

<sup>21</sup> 'Introduction', in D. Crouch and K. Thompson, eds., *Normandy and Its Neighbours, 900–1250. Essays Presented to David Bates* (Turnhout, 2011), forthcoming. Amongst David Bates's publications the following are particularly important for our purpose: D. Bates, 'Britain and France and the year 1000', *Franco-British Studies*, 28 (1999), 5–22; D. Bates, 'England and the feudal revolution', in *Il Feudalesimo nell'alto medioevo (Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo)*, 47; 2 vols.; Spoleto, 2000), pp. 611–46.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and French diplomatics together in his book on political ritual.<sup>22</sup> Bjorn Weiler (Aberystwyth) views the reigns of Stephen and Henry III from a pan-European perspective.<sup>23</sup> Viewed from the eastern side of the Channel, England, and the British Isles, belong quite naturally to the history of the Continent.<sup>24</sup> Some concerted efforts are made to force historians to confront unspoken biases or involuntary insular views, not only in Great Britain. The heritage of nationalist historiography going back to the late nineteenth century is still alive, not only in university curricula but in publishers' views of what textbooks should look like. Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried and Patrick Geary brought together American and German scholars on medieval history with a view to learn from one another's approaches across national boundaries. The resulting book, despite the plea by its editors, is a collection of essays, each with a strong nationalistic focus. Interestingly for us, there is nothing in it on England!<sup>25</sup> Clearly whereas writing parallel histories of countries, or an analysis of relationships between countries, are preferred by these scholars, the results do not amount to truly comparative history.<sup>26</sup>

One of the reasons why medievalists from the Continent may on occasion have seemed intimidated by the history of England, and skirted an integral Continental view of it, is the problem of England's common law. If Patrick Wormald is right that the common law roots in fact go back to

<sup>22</sup> K. Van Eickels, *Vom inszenierten Konsens zum systematisierten Konflikt. Die englisch-französischen Beziehungen und ihre Wahrnehmung an der Wende vom Hoch- zum Spätmittelalter* (Mittelalter-Forschungen, 10; Stuttgart, 2002) and a shorter version in French limited to the twelfth century, 'L'hommage des rois anglais et leurs héritiers aux rois français au XIIe siècle: subordination imposée ou reconnaissance souhaitée?', in M. Aurell and N.-Y. Tonnerre, eds., *Plantagenêts et Capétiens: confrontations et héritages* (Histoires de famille. La parenté au Moyen Age, 4; Turnhout, 2006), pp. 377–86.

<sup>23</sup> B. Weiler, 'Kingship, usurpation and propaganda in twelfth-century Europe: the case of Stephen', *ANS* 23 (2000), 299–326; B. Weiler, *Henry III of England and the Staufien Empire 1216–1272* (Woodbridge, 2006); B. K. U. Weiler and I. W. Rowlands, eds., *England and Europe in the Reign of Henry III (1216–1272)* (Aldershot, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> E. M. C. van Houts, *History and Family Traditions in England and the Continent, 1000–1200* (Variorum Collected Studies; Aldershot, 1999); E. M. C. van Houts, ed., *The Normans in Europe* (Manchester Medieval Sources Series; Manchester, 2000); E. M. C. van Houts with C. Harper-Bill, eds., *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World* (Woodbridge, 2003); E. M. C. van Houts, 'The vocabulary of exile and outlawry in the North Sea around the first millennium', in L. Napran and E. van Houts, eds., *Exile in the Middle Ages* (International Medieval Research, 13; Turnhout, 2004), pp. 13–28.

<sup>25</sup> G. Althoff, J. Fried and P. J. Geary, 'Introduction', in G. Althoff, J. Fried and P. J. Geary, eds., *Medieval Concepts of the Past. Ritual, Memory, Historiography* (Publications of the German Historical Institute; Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1–17.

<sup>26</sup> C. Wickham, *Problems in Doing Comparative History*. The Reuter Lecture 2004 (University of Southampton, 2005), esp. pp. 1–9.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

the tenth century (if not before), the unique legal development of England, especially after 1066, hampers comparisons across the Channel.<sup>27</sup> There is on occasion also the hint of suspicion within the medieval community on either side of the Channel that the common law's uniqueness is the exclusive property of English legal historians.<sup>28</sup> The only central medieval historian who thus far has met the challenge head-on by looking at the common law from a comparative perspective is, interestingly, Flemish, Raoul van Caenegem.<sup>29</sup>

One of the challenges for all contributors to this volume concerned the fault line of '1066' that runs through English history and its modern historiography. No other country in central medieval Europe witnessed an invasion followed by occupation on the scale of the Norman conquest of England. The nearest rupture of that magnitude might be in France (and some of its neighbouring countries) before and after the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon. With this in mind historians writing about medieval social and economic development in continental Europe do not have to cope with a caesura based on political events. How then do they structure their discussion of central medieval social life for our period? Some do so thematically, as we have done for the period from 900 to 1200 as a whole, for example in the case of a recent textbook for medieval history by Wim Blockmans and Peter Hoppenbrouwers.<sup>30</sup> Or if they prefer a chronological approach they discuss the period on a century-by-century basis, the clearest example (from the USA) being W. C. Jordan's *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, which is divided into four parts each devoted to a hundred years.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Bisson, in his recent pan-European study, has reasserted the importance of the Norman Conquest as the moment when coercive lordship, a phenomenon developing across the European continent and infringing public power, was imported wholesale into England.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> P. Wormald, *Lawyers and the State: The Varieties of Legal History*. Selden Society Lecture 2001 (London, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> J. Hudson on Maitland's acid remarks about German legal historians who dabbled in English legal history, though acknowledging the massive contribution by Friedrich Liebermann's edition of the legal texts, J. H. G. Hudson, *F. W. Maitland and the Englishness of English Law*. Selden Society Lecture 2006 (London, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> R. C. van Caenegem, *Legal History. A European Perspective* (London and Rio Grande, OH, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> W. Blockmans and P. Hoppenbrouwers, trans. I. van den Hoven, *Introduction to Medieval Europe 300-1550* (London and New York, 2002), where the central Middle Ages occupy pp. 128-52 (ch. 8 on religious renewal), pp. 153-85 (ch. 9 on early kingdoms and territorial principalities 900-1200), pp. 186-216 (ch. 10 on eastern Europe), pp. 217-40 (ch. 11 on towns) and pp. 241-70 (ch. 12 on thinking about man and the world).

<sup>31</sup> W. C. Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (London, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Bisson, *The Crisis*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88561-4 - A Social History of England, 900-1200

Edited by Julia Crick and Elisabeth van Houts

Excerpt

[More information](#)

But whether historians are interested in European (Continental) history or in history across the whole of the European canvas, they all grapple with the same perennial problem of a patchy source base.

## SOURCES

In our case, nowhere is the divide of '1066' more obvious than in the discussion of the spread of sources across our period. Its unevenness hampers historians in any comparative approach across three centuries of English history, so they continuously have to be aware that bounty in one period almost inevitably means scarcity in another. Here again, the situation can be understood both as the product of historical processes and as more than a local phenomenon. Historians have discussed how record-keeping advanced in tandem with acquisitive lordship in England and on the Continent and can be understood as a product of mistrust.<sup>33</sup> Boundaries and political relationships needed to be articulated in an age of ecclesiastical reform when the Church sought to define its relationship with secular authority.<sup>34</sup> The composition and keeping of written records may consequently signal political stress as much as educational attainment.

As far as narrative sources are concerned, we have a good selection of saints' lives and miracles from Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman England, but in terms of chronicles – despite the existence of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in its various versions – the post-Conquest period provides the bulk of annals, chronicles and histories. Many were written in the early twelfth century as part of a campaign to record in writing knowledge from before the Norman Conquest that would otherwise disappear and to make sense of the new political and social order. Besides there is poetry in Old English, Latin and Old French that provides a wealth of information on social stratification. Any discussion of documentary sources must of course begin with Domesday Book, compiled on the basis of the Domesday survey of 1086, a survey of the king's resources in wealth (land, tax and moveables) for three key dates: January 1066 (the time of King Edward's death), late 1066 (the time of the Norman arrivals) and 1086 (the date of the survey). Although therefore the data straddle the '1066' divide they do so only just. It is always tempting to extrapolate

<sup>33</sup> Bisson, *The Crisis*, pp. 28, 316–49. M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* (2nd edn; Oxford, 1993) p. 5; see also below, Chapter VI.2.

<sup>34</sup> P. Hyams, 'Homage and feudalism: a judicious separation', in N. Fryde, P. Monnet and O. G. Oexle, eds., *Die Gegenwart des Feudalismus* (Göttingen, 2002), pp. 13–49; Bisson, *The Crisis*, p. 494.