I

The Origin of the Borough of Cambridge:

A consideration of Professor Carl Stephenson's theories

It should be made clear from the outset that this paper does not pretend to throw any new light on this ancient question. All that I hope to do is to review once more facts that have been accumulated or established by the long labours of scholars whose pupils we all are: and whose work is to a very large extent recorded in the former proceedings and communications of this society. If one follows in the footsteps of Babington, J. W. Clark, McKenny Hughes, Maitland, Canon Stokes, Arthur Gray (the Master of Jesus) and Dr Cyril Fox one cannot hope to have much chance of discovering evidence that has been overlooked: and I should never have thought of bringing the subject forward but for the recent appearance of a work by an American scholar, which challenges, as he himself says, the 'weighty opinion of Maitland and Mr Arthur Gray' as to the origin of the Borough of Cambridge. It is clear, as I hope to show, that Mr Stephenson has not taken all the evidence into consideration; but it must be remembered that whilst all general historians are risking a great deal when they invade the realm of local history, topography and archaeology, scholars from another country are at a special disadvantage, and Mr Stephenson must therefore be regarded as particularly valiant in venturing on to such ground, and asserting as he does, very rightly, that the evolution of the borough must be approached from the side of topography. He is taking risks, and he knows it; and not the smallest is the risk of missing some invaluable article tucked away in the files of the proceedings and communications of some local association or club. This paper incurs the same risk; but the fact that the evidence is so scattered was a second reason for reopening the question: a synthesis of the work done over so many years by so many hands seemed worth attempting for its own sake, and not merely as an answer to a challenge.

1 Read to the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 27 November 1933, and reprinted from their Communications, vol. xxxv (1935).

2 Borough and Town, a study of urban origins in England, by Carl Stephenson (Cambridge, Mass. 1933).
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Mr Stephenson is a pupil of the great Belgian scholar Pirenne, whose work on the towns of the Netherlands has revolutionized the study of urban origins on the Continent. Mr Stephenson considers, possibly with justice, that research into the early history of English boroughs has suffered from insularity; Pirenne’s first study appeared in 1891, and, until the appearance of Mr Stephenson’s book, we have had no serious attempt to test the applicability of his theory to English urban beginnings. That theory is, briefly, that town life is due above all to economic factors, and that the origin of the medieval town is ‘a mercantile settlement freshly produced by contemporary economic changes’. In the eleventh century the revival of European commerce, practically extinct in the Dark Ages, produced colonies of merchants, planted outside the walls of an old Roman city, or, as in Flanders and Germany, of a burg of more recent origin, and from these new extra-mural settlements developed both urban life, and urban self-government. Pirenne, according to his pupil, had discovered ‘an explanation for all medieval towns’.¹ If the formula ‘a trading settlement which began as a stockaded quarter beside some older fortification’² accounts for the medieval town abroad, will it not also account for the English borough? In his recent book, Borough and Town, Mr Stephenson replies that it does.

Following Pirenne’s example, Mr Stephenson looks for evidence in England of a commercial activity sufficient to provide such colonies. The traditional view, upheld by Cunningham and most subsequent writers on economic history, is that the Danes provided the stimulus, and that the first development of town life is to be associated with their colonization of north-eastern England and their seafaring activities, though a second and more powerful stimulus was supplied by the Normans after 1066. To Mr Stephenson the Danes are mainly pirates and fighters,³ and though he allows that they were responsible for the growth of York and of Lincoln, he denies them any widespread and general influence on English commerce. Nothing worthy of the name of commerce, he maintains, existed in England before the eleventh century; the first general impulse to town life was given by the Norman Conquest, after which a whole crop of trading settlements and ‘new boroughs’ come into existence. Domesday Book is his main source for these conclusions.

¹ History, xvii. 10. ² Borough and Town, p. 8. ³ ‘It seems unlikely that the invading Danes established trading towns as a by-product of devastation and piracy.’ History, xvii. 14.
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The general scope of Mr Stephenson’s theories has been adequately examined already by Professors Tait and Stenton;¹ I only propose to discuss their application to the history of Cambridge. He very rightly insists on the necessity of detailed topographical study as a means of testing his hypothesis, and gives a series of plans of English towns—York, Lincoln, Nottingham, Norwich, Bristol and Cambridge—seeking to show that, in each case, a mercantile settlement outside an older fortress produced the medieval borough. In Norwich, Nottingham and Northampton Domesday definitely speaks of a new borough: a post-Conquest, French mercantile settlement outside the old Anglo-Saxon centre. To Mr Stephenson Cambridge offers a problem that “involves the same fundamentals”.²

Across the river from the modern town, he says, lie the remains of a considerable earthwork, inclosing some 28 acres. Whether it is Roman or Danish in origin does not affect his theory, which is as follows. Within this earthwork lay the ten wards of the Domesday borough. Cambridge south of the river was mainly a Norman development. The Conquest probably produced as great changes here as elsewhere; an expanding mercantile settlement absorbed an earlier village, and by the thirteenth century Cambridge centred to the south. The King’s Ditch was evidently a new work constructed (in 1215) for the defence of a town that was hardly old.³

This theory is the same that Freeman, Babington and T. D. Atkinson supported; Maitland, who examined it closely in his Townships and Borough, considered that 400 houses could not well be packed into so small an area—an area that contained only 70 or 80 houses in 1279, and only 209 in the eighteenth century.⁴

Mr Stephenson replies that the houses are packed as tight as this—14 houses to the acre—in Domesday Lincoln, and nearly as tight in Domesday Norwich,⁵ and that the Domesday record in saying “There are 10 wards in the borough—in burgo” settles the question, for the phrase in burgo, or in civitate, as used in Domesday Book,

⁴ Townships and Borough, pp. 99–100.
⁵ In each case Mr Stephenson arrives at his figures by comparing the number of houses destroyed to make room for the castle with the area of the (later) castle; at Lincoln the ratio is 166 houses to 8 acres (p. 193), at Norwich 98 houses to 8 acres (p. 199). From Mr Stephenson’s own figures a lower average might be deduced for Lincoln, but he believes that the ‘lower (Roman) city in part lay vacant’. As in Cambridge, it is not clear that all his premises are warranted.
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invariably means ‘inside the walls’—‘within a fortified area’, and the only fortified area in Cambridge was the earthwork on Castle Hill. These two words in burgo are in fact the sole piece of positive evidence adduced by Mr Stephenson in support of his theory, just as the Lincoln figures form the sole piece of new presumptive evidence which he brings against the ‘weighty opinion’ of Maitland and the Master of Jesus. The real reason for his assertion that the ‘weight of the evidence’ is with him is his conviction that the theory he is supporting is always valid unless the contrary can be proved.

Is it possible to prove a contrary? Is there evidence to show that in 1066 or 1086 ‘the borough of Cambridge’ was located on both sides of the Cam, and that transpontine Cambridge did not come into existence as a result of the Norman Conquest? I am not sure that it can be proved; but I am prepared to maintain that ‘the weight of the evidence’ goes the other way; that it is on the side of Maitland and against Mr Stephenson.

The general criticism to be brought against Mr Stephenson’s picture of the evolution of Cambridge is that he fails to take into account both the archaeological and the fiscal evidence for the early existence of Cambridge south of the Cam, whilst he also ignores several slight but significant indications of the economic importance of Cambridge before the Norman Conquest.

Let us then examine the evidence for the early history of Cambridge.

With regard to transpontine Cambridge, there is to-day practical unanimity amongst scholars. In the earthwork on Castle Hill we have a Roman station, to be identified with the ‘little ruined city called Grantchester’ which Bede describes under the year 695, when the first recorded archaeological discovery in this county was made by the monks who found under its walls the stone coffin that they needed for enshrining the bones of Etheldreda. Stukeley in 1736 saw ‘a vast collection of coins and antiquities dug up in the old Roman city of Granta, north of Cambridge river’. In 1894, according to Bowtell, walls were still traceable to the north-west, by the Histon and Huntingdon Roads, and foundations of what he held to be the Decuman gate were found on the east side in 1810. According to Dr Fox, the finds point to occupation from Nero to Honorius;}

1 Borough and Town, p. 201.
2 Surtees Soc. Proc. no. 76, p. 36. See Map i.
3 C. F. Fox, Archaeology of the Cambridge Region, p. 174.
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whilst excavation in the bank in Magdalen gardens by R. G. Walker in 1910 suggested that it was thrown up between A.D. 320 and 420.

That this area was inhabited in Anglo-Saxon times is proved by the Anglo-Saxon gravestones discovered in 1810 in the castle precincts, suggesting that an Anglo-Saxon churchyard was encroached upon for the throwing up of the Norman castle mound, which chronicle evidence places in the year 1068. The Master of Jesus has given reasons, accepted by Dr Fox, for attributing to Offa's time the building of the bridge which changed the name of the town from Grantchester to Grantebrigge. The Roman Road, he believes, crossed the river at the hard or ford formerly traceable to the east of the present bridge, in the direct line of Hills Road, from which Bridge Street to-day diverges at the Round Church: the bridge, that is, took a new line. It was probably, then, in this existing fortification that the three Danish kings placed themselves when, as the A.S. Chronicle tells us, they 'sat in' Cambridge in 875.

Let us now cross the river and consider the antiquity of cispontine Cambridge. The first kind of evidence to be considered is the geological, meticulously studied by Professor Hughes. Before men attempted to level up the low-lying areas east of the river, the ground sloped down from the gravel ridge along which the Roman Road ran, through a belt of gault to the alluvial deposits that were constantly submerged by the river in flood time. The names Peas Hill and Market Hill to-day reflect this stage of history; and examination of the soil shows that the whole area west of King's Parade, now occupied almost entirely by Colleges, is made land—built up from the rubbish dumps of the older period. Thus the few finds of the Romano-British period south-east of the river are mostly along the gravel ridge near the Union Society and the Round Church.

In the age following the Romano-British period, archaeological evidence indicates several small settlements in the area south-east of the river as well as in that north-west of it. There was a pagan cemetery south-east of Castle Hill, in ground that has now been encroached on by the Cam, and another in what is now St John's cricket field; these, Dr Fox considers, served a settlement inside the chester, whilst the cemetery at Newnham Croft is to be associated with a settlement near Ridley Hall. South and east of the river,

1 C.A.S. Proc. xv. 178 ff. (1911).
2 Ibid. xiv. 130 (1910).
3 Ibid. ix. 370–84 (1897); xi. 393–423 (1906).
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Map 1. The archaeology of pre-Norman Cambridge
interments near Jesus Lane and in Rose Crescent belong to a settlement south of the market-place, and there was another settlement out at Barnwell.\textsuperscript{4}

The evidence of archaeological finds, Dr Fox considers, corresponds in a striking manner with the theories worked out by the Master of Jesus in his paper of 1908 'The Dual Origin of the Town of Cambridge'.\textsuperscript{2} That paper maintained that Cambridge originated from two settlements, the southern town being separated from the northern by the river and by a belt of uninhabited land represented to-day by the parishes of All Saints, St Radegund, Holy Trinity and St Andrew. Mr Gray also traced the lines of certain old watercourses called king’s ditches, existing, to a comparatively late date, on both sides of the river, partly artificial, partly old branches of the Granta, and argued that these represented ancient bridgeheads formerly existing on both sides of the river to guard the crossing. When the southern or East Anglian town was the stronger it held the bridgehead north of the river known in the twelfth century as the Armeswerk, and bounded by the watercourse called Cambridge in the sixteenth century. The probable date of the ascendancy of the southern town was the reign of Redwald, the East Anglian king who was Bretwalda at the beginning of the seventh century.\textsuperscript{3} Later, when the Middle Anglians or Mercians triumphed, and Offa built the bridge, a southern bridgehead may have been constructed, defined by the ditch that ran across the land of St John’s Hospital to All Saints Churchyard, ran under All Saints Passage, and joined the main King’s Ditch at Jesus Lane.\textsuperscript{4}

If the twelfth-century writer of the Liber Eliensis was right in his statement that the Armeswerk where Etheldreda’s coffin was found was already in existence in 695,\textsuperscript{5} it would follow that the East Anglian settlement south of the river was established and had dug its ditches before the little waste city on the hill was reoccupied. That is perhaps more than we are justified in inferring; but the evidence of the artificially constructed bridgehead does undoubtedly point to a settlement of some importance south of the river in the seventh century, since after that date the dominant power was undoubtedly

\textsuperscript{1} Fox, \textit{ut supra}, pp. 246, 296; and see Map 1.


\textsuperscript{3} Fox, \textit{ut supra}, pp. 276 f., 295 f.

\textsuperscript{4} See Map 2.

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Liber Eliensis}, ed. Stewart, p. 64.
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Map 2. Churches, ditches and watercourses
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that of the Middle Anglian kings. It may be doubted if Mr Stephenson has fully grasped the significance of the watercourse called Cambridge—that ripam de Cauni—one up which, as Dr Palmer has shown, the barges brought stones to build the Edwardian castle in the year 1289, the stream mentioned in Magdalene deeds of the sixteenth century, indicated on Lyne’s map of 1574, and crossed by a bridge still remembered in 1792 as the ancient bridge called Cambridge.

Even if we set aside the evidence of pagan cemeteries and of the old town ditches, still, as Maitland says, ‘the tower of St Benet’s church raises its protest against the idea of an Anglo-Saxon Cambridge of purely transitory character. It is late Anglo-Saxon work, but definitely pre-Norman, being dated about 1040 by Baldwin Brown, and the community that could build a church like that was wealthy. If, as Mr Stephenson maintains, it was merely a village that ‘existed south of the river’ it is for him to show us the Domesday entry that describes that village. As Maitland says, ‘the houses which that church implies were a part of Grentebridge or they are not accounted for. The Survey of Cambridgeshire has no name to spare for the vanished village’. The archaeological deposits, the evidence of the watercourses and the tower of St Benet’s are all ignored by Mr Stephenson. But there is evidence other than archaeological which he has overlooked.

The Ely chronicler who records so many moots held at Cambridge in the tenth century, speaks on one occasion of Irish merchants there, who had brought cloaks and other goods and set them out for sale. At an earlier date, as Dr Fox shows, wares from Kent and even from France had reached Cambridgeshire, and Cambridge itself; but here in the tenth century we have exactly that foreign trade the existence of which Mr Stephenson denies. The Irish merchants, as the Master of Jesus says, were probably Danes from Dublin or Wexford, who came up the Cam (we must remember that Cambridge was reckoned a sea port as late as 1295) and landed their wares on one of the wharves or hithes in the quarter known for long after this date by the distinctively Danish name of the Holm, where the church of St Clement,

1 C.A.S. Proc. xxvi. 84 (1924).
2 Clark and Gray, Old Plans of Cambridge, no. 1.
3 Willis and Clark, Arch. Hist. ii. 356.
4 Arts in Saxon England, ii. 440 (1925 ed.).
5 Township and Borough, p. 99.
6 Liber Eliensis, p. 148.
7 Fox, ut supra, pp. 245, 274, 290.
8 Town of Cambridge, pp. 21–2.
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a favourite Danish saint, now stands. We have thus good reason to think that the Danish occupation of Cambridge which the chroniclers report under the year 875 left other than purely military traces. The Liber Eliensis, again, classes Cambridge in the tenth century with Thetford, Norwich and Ipswich,¹ all of them definitely trading centres in pre-Norman days. And lastly, the evidence of coinage is, as Professor Stenton points out,² highly significant. What need has a self-contained agrarian settlement of money? Yet from the reign of Edward the Martyr down to the time of Edward the Confessor coins continued to be struck at the Cambridge mint bearing the legend Grant.³ Pirenne’s contrast between gold and silver coinage is not valid in England; silver pennies were adequate for all purposes there for centuries after the Norman Conquest. The Cambridge of the tenth century, then, knew commerce—whether that Cambridge was confined to the ‘Chester’ or not.

Another bit of evidence is that afforded by the records of the Cambridge churches. Maitland has shown that nearly all of those south of the river seem to be the foundation of townsmen. Whilst none of their records are older than the twelfth century, there are indications of a previous existence of some duration. The Round Church was founded in 1114–30 on the site of a previous Church—St George’s.⁴ A church owned by Ely is mentioned in the Inquisitio Eliensis; it seems highly probable that this is St Andrew’s,⁵ which was held by Ely from 1225 on. If the church held by Ely in 1086 was not St Andrew’s it may possibly have been St Botolph’s, which was given to Barnwell Priory by the bishop of Ely. The dedications St Botolph and St Edward strongly suggest a pre-Norman foundation, just as the dedication St Clement suggests a Danish foundation. The earliest date to which documentary evidence points, however, is that for St Peter’s outside Trumpington Gate, the church that was rededicated in the fourteenth century and that is now known as Little St Mary’s. In 1207⁶ a jury found that the patronage of this church had formerly been in the hands of a certain Langlin who had held it as parson, and had bestowed it on a relation of his, one Segar by name, who had held it for 60 years in the same way, as

¹ Liber Eliensis, p. 140.
² History, xviii. 258.
⁴ Township and Borough, p. 174.
⁵ H. P. Stokes, Cambridge outside Barnwell Gate, pp. 9–10.
⁶ Curia Regis Rolls, v. 39.