1 The first millennium AD

> Agriculture (including pastoralism) is central to societies because it feeds people. Thus most human groups at some time make attempts to extend their area, either to feed more people or to feed some of them better.
>
> SIMMONS 1997, 161

Agriculture was the economic basis of Britain throughout the first millennium AD. In that respect, it continued a 4000-year-old prehistoric tradition there. By the time of the birth of Christ, farming was a well-established way of life in Britain. With reasonable success, it supported a sizeable population, a viable economy and a variegated landscape. Such was also the case a thousand years later.

In a global perspective such a situation is not especially remarkable, either in time or in space (Grigg 1974). Self-sufficient agrarian communities, some of much greater complexity and achievement compared to those of late prehistoric Britain, had already existed many times around the world. And just across the Channel (as yet unnamed as 'English'), much of Europe had enjoyed a reasonably successful way of life based on cereal farming for at least five millennia (Barker 1985; Thorpe 1996). This was a phenomenon, emergent from the post-glacial temperate deciduous forests, which had flourished in particular habitats, as beside the Swiss Lakes and along the Danube; likewise widely around the Mediterranean where specialist forms of crop production had developed, notably with olives and vines.

Elsewhere in the world, humans had long colonised most biomes such as temperate grasslands and different types of tropical forests, their various agrarian developments especially favouring habitat interfaces such as desert edges and montane foothills. In such zones, communities adapted opportunistically, for survival and more. Their farming systems involved other specialist crops, such as legumes in Mesoamerica and sweet potatoes in Polynesia in the first millennium, and the adaptation of particular species as main crops such as rice, yams, maize and squashes (Simmons 1997, 70–87, Fig. 4.4). Britain was a long way from the early heartlands of such processes which had already provided the bases of numerous

economically successful human societies, for example in south-east Asia, eastern China and India, and in the Americas the south-central Andes and Mexico (Smith 1995; Harris 1996). Nor were such developmental processes only in the past; they continued in many parts of the world in the first millennium AD. Agriculture in Britain at that time was, therefore, but one facet of a global phenomenon. In that it was based on thousands of years of farming tradition, it and its socio-economic outcomes shared characteristics with, for example, large parts of the Asian subcontinent (cf. Harris 1996); though a subsequent stasis there, still apparent in aspects of at least technology, is not reflected in the present state of British agriculture. In contrast, elsewhere agrarian societies were newly developing, in eastern North America (Smith 1992; 1995, chapter 8) for example, a situation which was very definitely not the case in Britain. Nevertheless, a broad perspective allows the minutiae of British insular *agraria* with which we concern ourselves here to be seen as generally of no great external significance at the time.

Exceptions to such a generalisation may well be sought, in the century between Caesar and Claudius perhaps, and in the tenth century AD too. In the same sort of time-frame, more or less as Claudius arrived in the heavily farmed lands of south-eastern Britain, maize arrived in the vast eastern deciduous woodlands of North America between the mid-Western prairie and the Atlantic coast. Thereafter, however, while in Britain we tend to look with the passing centuries for nuances in crop types and at changing relationships between arable and pasture among developed agrarian societies, development was different on the west side of the Atlantic. There, it took most of the first millennium before societies from northern Florida to southern Ontario finally became 'maize-centred' in the century between the Peace of Tiddingford (906) and Ethelred's midwinter in Shropshire (1016) (Hill 1981, maps 82, 162; Gartner 1999).

Lest we imagine we are dealing on either side of the Atlantic with arcadian nostalgia, it is as well to remember that, throughout the first millennium, our topic was, for most people, the prime matter of concern each day. This remained so throughout life: farming was literally a matter of life and death, and was always, beneath the realities of agricultural labour, an issue of deep passions involving status and tenure, gender and sex, ritual and religious belief, self and eternity. This rawness at the core of agrarian communities, which can be detected without too much difficulty in Britain in the first millennium AD, is dramatically expressed in a poetic fragment from the ancient Near East with which a native Briton, indigenous American or Saxon colonist could well have empathised:

She seizes the Godly Mot –
With the sword she doth cleave him
With the fan she doth winnow him –
With fire she doth burn him
With hand-mill she grinds him –
In the field she doth sow him.
(trans. Pritchard 1969, 112–13)

British farming over the ten centuries between Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror can, indeed should, be seen against a broad background and as part of a long-term process. In this essay, we are merely isolating one facet of that process in one small part of the world during one short period of time. In AD 1 our subject was what it was because of what had already happened, and its nature throughout the next thousand years was as much preconditioned by that experience as it was by environmental variables, like climate, and cultural changes like new farmers and practices. Creating a historical view of farming in first-millennium Britain, then, very much involves judgements about different emphases to be given to different balances through time between the traditional and the innovative. Much of the reality of farming – the geology of its stage, for example, and the seasonality of its practice – was unchanging, and so from one point of view there is no story to be told: 'Farming is as farming was', an idea still manifesting itself in rural attitudes at the beginning of the twenty-first century. But things did change from time to time, albeit neither regularly nor even progressively, and so, in truth, a story is there for the telling. Such as it is in a chronological sense will emerge in chapter 14.

Our task is to discern, if possible, how Britain was farmed during the first millennium AD, and why it was farmed in the way that it was. A whole series of questions follows, for example: What sorts of farming were practised? What kinds of life-style did they both require and support? What were the major changes, if any, over that millennium in farming and society? What did the countryside look like? Who owned it and how was it arranged? Who farmed it and how? More prosaically, perhaps, can we describe with conviction a plough, a field, or a day in the life of a farmer, generally during the millennium or at any one point in time within it?

History and farming in the first millennium AD

Another basic question is how we know what we know. We discuss this in general with some detail in chapter 2. Here we summarise how scholars arrived at the state of knowledge by about the mid-1990s.

'[T]he way to it lies through the Norman record' (Maitland 1960, 5). Maitland was, a century ago, and remains still, the great historical scholar of late Anglo-Saxon and Norman England; his 'it' in this quotation was the former, and it comes from his seminal book *Domesday Book and Beyond*, originally published in 1897. He was explaining his use of the retrogressive method, 'from the known to the unknown'. Domesday Book was the 'knowable' rather than the known; but through it, 'the Norman record', nevertheless lay the way to the 'Beyond' of his title, that is old English history before 1086. This attitude has dominated the historical study of the Anglo-Saxon period, reaching its apotheosis probably in Hodgkin (1935), Stenton (1943) and Blair (1956).

Coming at the earlier part of the millennium also primarily from a documentary point of view, Classical scholars have in contrast tended to think forwards and also outwards: Roman Britain, relatively small beer in Imperial terms, came towards the end of Classical civilisation chronologically and was marginal geographically. So the story of Roman Britain, cast in a documentary frame, has tended to be told from beginning to end in military and political terms, with non-narrative matters like farming and art treated thematically and somewhat awkwardly if at all (e.g. Collingwood and Myres 1937; Richmond 1955; Frere 1967). No wonder then that, with Classicists moving forwards in time ever less enthusiastically as Classicism fades, and historians probing backwards from the knowable familiarities of *Domesday* to the dark *Beyond*, a non-meeting of dissimilarities rather than a gap in time has occurred somewhere in between (cf. Holdsworth and Wiseman 1986). Many have consequently taken refuge either or both in the rich mythic and legendary heritage about the period or in the concept of the 'Dark Ages'. The former has often led to fantasy; the latter, originally a literary conceit (Ker 1958), has tended to be used as a convenient excuse to say nothing on the implicit grounds of the historian that if there is virtually no documentary evidence then there is nothing to be said. Fortunately Morris (1973), somewhat controversially but with scholarly panache, exploded the 'read nothing, say nothing' school of diplomatic negativism, while throughout the first half of the twentieth century a suite of archaeologists with a 'see something, say something' approach to material culture proposed a series of interpretations for the period essentially AD 400–700, e.g. Leeds 1913; Harden 1956.

That is all now history, so in a sense does not matter except as contributory to an academic horizon *c*.1970 from which we attempt to take up the story. Probably, however, the most influential book of all had already

been published for fifteen years by then. From Hoskins' *Making of the English Landscape* (1955) developed among many in a new generation of students a different, more comprehensive approach, especially to landscape, from which developed different ways of asking questions other than primarily in a chronological template, and new perspectives and interpretations. The process continues. The titles of some recent books nevertheless indicate that historiographical divisions persist, for example *The Landscape of Roman Britain* (Dark and Dark 1997) and *Landscape and Settlement in Britain AD 400–1066* (Hooke and Burnell 1995). One of the interesting enquiries (to the author anyway) to try to answer in this book is whether such a division is justified in terms of agrarian history as well as being explicable in terms of first-millennium historiography.

The setting

By the last centuries BC, much of the landscape of the British Isles had already been used several times over, and a lot of it farmed during the preceding 4000 years (Pl. I; Mercer 1981; Piggott 1981; Fowler 1983; Pryor 1998). Some of it had reverted; other parts were at one stage or another in a repeating pattern of abandonment and reclamation (Pl. II). Most of it was under agrarian use, ranging from intensive arable to extensive pasture, from managed woodland (Pl. III) to 'no-man's lands' (chapter 4). Very little of the land was in any sense 'wildscape', though some of it doubtless looked like unkempt wilderness even if it was quietly but critically being 'farmed' for perhaps its poisons and medicinal plants (chapter 12). Successful conventional farming, producing mainly cereals and animals for many purposes, including war, was the predominant characteristic of a British countryside in which many of the agrarian and technological challenges of a pre-mechanical, pre-industrial economy had been met (chapter 8). By and large, such a generalisation holds good for the next millennium too; our challenge is to spot the significant variations.

One base-line is clearly defined: Caesar's description of Britain (*BG* V.12–14) as perceived in 54 BC based on his interpretation of information acquired by what we would call techniques of field reconnaissance and questioning of a non-systematic sample of the population. He remarks that: 'By far the most civilized inhabitants are those living in Kent (a purely maritime district), whose way of life differs little from that of the Gauls. Most of the tribes in the interior do not grow corn but live on milk and meat, and wear skins' (*BG* V.14).

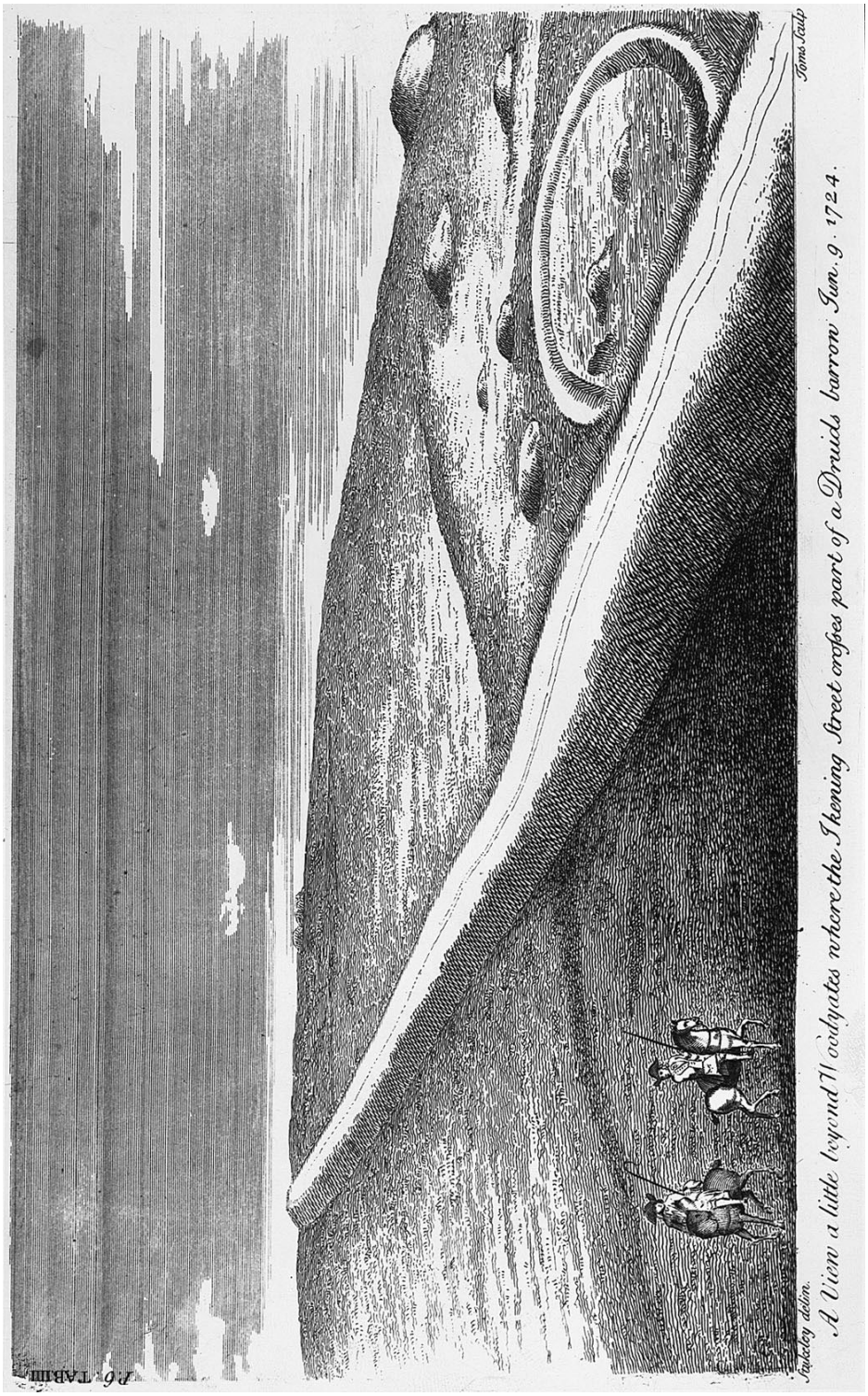

Plate I An ancient landscape: Ackling Dyke (a Roman road) cutting part of a disc barrow in the Bronze Age barrow cemetery on treeless Oakley Down, Dorset, as depicted by William Stukeley on 9 June 1724.

Farming probably intensified during the early decades of the new millennium, fuelled by demand from a growing domestic market, more affluent in the south-east than hitherto, and from abroad where Roman expansion in Europe required more and more grain to sustain empire. British agricultural success, as recorded by Tacitus telling of exports to Gaul, may well have reinforced the reasons for Imperial invasion in AD 43. Over the next century, the impact of that military and political event on farming in Britain was, as in so much else, considerable. It added to a landscape already littered with the cultural and environmental debris of its predecessors a further four centuries of characteristically Roman features, all with agrarian implications, notably military establishments, towns, villas and communication structures like roads, canals and harbour facilities (Pls. I, VIII; Fig. 4.2; see Bede on twenty-eight cities in chapter 3; and generally Dark and Dark 1997). Villas as centres of agrarian estates rather than as Classical buildings in foreign parts may well represent one of the most significant agrarian developments of the millennium, with an increasingly significant influence from the later first century AD onwards and then, less obviously, long after the fourth century; and a similar claim can be argued for the facilitation of civil and commercial transport around at least the southern parts of Britain. Such at one and the same time enabled and demanded greater agrarian production and, while neither the villa nor transport systems continued to function as intended as the Roman economy collapsed, parts remained recognisably in place, even in use in the case of some roads and fortifications along them.

Between the fifth and seventh centuries AD, nevertheless, agrarian history becomes very uncertain, with few documentary sources and only fragmentary, largely ambiguous archaeological evidence. Most of the limited mechanical technology of the Roman period had lapsed by the mid-fifth century if not earlier, yet it seems highly likely that much of the agriculture being practised in England by indigenous communities when Anglo-Saxons were arriving was at least on a par in technological terms with the husbandry of later pre-Roman Britain. That of the immigrants was, at best, probably similar. With it they found space to farm in a mosaic of well-farmed and derelict areas. By AD 600 most areas of south and eastern England, like the Vale of Pickering, Yorkshire, for example, were dotted with Anglo-Saxon settlements (following Powlesland 1999, 64; in general, Hooke 1988a, 1998). Elsewhere in the British Isles, in general an age-old, largely pastoral way of life continued, though the area under arable at any one time was probably considerable in what was often likely

Plate II Upland landscape with fertile valley: enclosures and hut circles at Threlkeld Knotts, Cumbria, with Skiddaw in the background.

to have been in many localities more truly a mixed farming economy than exclusively stock-raising (Pl. II).

From the seventh century onwards to the eleventh, most people continued to gain their livelihood, directly or indirectly, from the activity of farming and its products. Society remained essentially agrarian. The evidence for this basis is, however, fragmentary as well as diverse, despite these centuries being increasingly 'historic'. We can build on a vivid description, comparable to that of Caesar (above), written by Bede *c*. AD 730:

> This island is rich in crops and in trees, and has good pasturage for cattle and beasts of burden. It also produces vines in certain districts, and has plenty of both land- and water-fowl of various kinds. It is remarkable too for its rivers, which abound in fish, particularly salmon and eels, and for copious springs. (*HE*)

From the seventh century, but even more so from the eighth and later, evidence comes partly and increasingly from documents and expands

tantalisingly to include some manuscript illustrations (chapter 8); but, for farming itself, the bulk of it continues to derive from the present landscape, including its place-names, and from archaeological and related investigations.

The principal documentary sources are contemporary and later laws, biographies and land charters (chapter 2). Among the early laws, those of King Ine of Wessex (688–726), for example, set out to regulate numerous practical matters of the sort which arise when many individuals are seeking to wrest their living from the same area of land. His laws were consequently much concerned with cornland and fences, meadows and pasture, straying animals and the felling of trees. The general impression is of an agriculture effectively, even expansively, exploiting a range of resources in the Wessex landscape. Later Anglo-Saxon codes tend to follow Ine's pattern of attempted regulation, this common concern flowing from the basic importance of land to virtually everyone in an agrarian society. In somewhat different environmental and sociological circumstances in north Wales, the thirteenth-century Book of Iowerth, 'derived from ancient exemplars', 'reveals clearly that Welsh medieval lawyers . . . [also] recognized that land was the ultimate source of all wealth', as had indeed been the case there in earlier times too when it was crucial to integrate in a 'hierarchy of estates' the resources of lowlands and uplands in a mixed agrarian economy (Jones 1976, 15–17).

Biographies, such as Felix's *Life of St Guthlac* and Asser's *Life of King Alfred,* contain topographical descriptions. Charters contain much detail pertaining to specific areas of land, including headlands and woodland in working agrarian landscapes, mainly in Southumbria in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Manuscript illustrations include agrarian scenes, though few English examples, whatever their artistic origins, date before *c.* AD 1000 (chapter 9). A conversation piece, including a passage specifically about ploughing, also belongs to the end of our millennium (chapter 9).

If Roman farmers had found their landscape already 'littered with the cultural and environmental debris' (above) of their predecessors, how much more so must it have been as a distinctively Anglo-Saxon agriculture developed during the last centuries of the millennium (OS 1994). The land charters clearly show that the inhabitants of the time were aware of this: they referred to old tracks, burial mounds and lynchets of fields we know were prehistoric, to roads which we know as Roman (Pl. I), and to heathen burial places (Fowler and Blackwell 1998, 104–5, following Bonney 1976, Figs. 7.6, 7.7). Later, the impression is of a land extensively farmed in what had by then become England, with a lot of tree-cover which was probably

regenerated woodland and managed rather than wild-wood. But the fact that we can read detail and see change does not mean that change happened everywhere; nor did it develop evenly, either across the land or in time.

It seems very likely that, as a result, the regional distinctiveness of farming in Britain developed during the first millennium. Previously, of course, regional differences existed, but perhaps more at coarser levels such as 'highland' and 'lowland' zones (Fox 1932; Fowler 1978b) than in the mosaic of locally differentiated areas which enabled Thirsk (1967, 1984b) to write of British farming in regional and sub-regional terms and each of a whole team of scholars to write about field systems alone in one particular region (Baker and Butlin 1973). To take an extreme example to make the point, the farming of south-east Wales and the Hebridean Isles was distinctively different by the fourth century. More subtly, the Anglo-Saxon and Danish transformation of the British landscape was less radical in the West Midlands than in the East Midlands (Gelling 1992, Foreword); and agrarian life in north-west Wales in the tenth century was, as now, somewhat different from that in Midland England as a whole. At a smaller scale, within a region, Wessex for example, dairy-farming of the clay vales was distinctively different by Domesday Book from the long-established traditional mixed farming of the chalkland valleys and downs (Aston and Lewis 1994). Whenever they began, such regional farming differences were clearly marked over much of Britain by the eleventh century and were presumably then, as during the second millennium AD, directly affecting life, thought, landscape and economies. Following Davies (1989, 3), we would do well always to remember in these matters 'the immense influence of land and landscape on society, religion and politics, as well as on economy'. It is certainly not now necessary to believe that Anglo-Saxon agriculture presents 'a general picture of uniformity' throughout England (Hallam 1988) or indeed that various agricultures, racially attributable or not, were uniform throughout Britain. Continuities through time there may well have been in some places, but diversity rather than uniformity is the key to any understanding of the process of farming in first-millennium Britain.

The archaeology of the period has tended to be formed by big, and sometimes spectacular, excavations of the obvious, now largely redundant, features of the first-millennium landscape such as Roman cities and villas, Anglo-Saxon cemeteries and Viking towns. *Verulamium*, Fishbourne, Sutton Hoo and *Yorvik* spring to mind (Frere 1972, 1983; Cunliffe 1971; Carver 1992; Hall 1984). There is much there of agrarian significance, most of it secondary but containing some crucial, direct evidence. The actual evidence in the field continues to remain intriguingly