Lyminge: an archaeological research agenda for the pre-Viking minster and its associated settlement

From an archaeological perspective, Lyminge – a royally-founded religious centre prominent in the early history of the Kentish church – has good claim to be one of the most neglected pre-Viking monasteries in Southern England. Interest in its Anglo-Saxon past has recently been re-ignited and there is now the potential for integrating a fresh campaign of excavation and recording with the results of previous unpublished work within the wider rubric of a multi-period archaeological landscape survey of the Elham Valley. The aim of this preliminary document is to set out the main issues as a basis for a future campaign of research.

The historical evidence for Lyminge as a pre-Viking monastery

One of the key sources for pre-Conquest Lyminge is the legend of St Mildreth (royal founding abbess of Minster-in-Thanet) as surviving in its various pre- and post-Conquest versions (Rollason 1982). Lyminge appears early on in the narrative as the place where, in 633, Æthelburg, daughter of King Æthelbert of Kent, received a grant of land from her brother, King Eadbald, on which to found a monastery which she placed under her own rule as its abbess. In addition to housing the remains of its saintly founder, some post-conquest Canterbury versions state that the relics of St Mildreth and her successor St Eadburg were translated to Lyminge following the expulsion of the Minster community by Vikings in the 8th century. Whilst such retrospective claims are questionable, more certain are the close contacts that the two royal minsters shared: during the late 8th/e 9th century both communities were jointly under the rule of one Abbess Selethryth, a member of the Mercian royal family, then overlords of Kent (ibid., 24-5). Also suggested by the historical traces is that Lyminge itself, for a period, was a centre for literary activity and the promulgation of Mildreth's cult. From such traditions, then, Lyminge can be regarded as an important religious and cult centre intimately linked to the Kentish royal house.

Elsewhere in the pre-Conquest historical record Lyminge is numbered among the eight churches granted privileges by King Wihtred of Kent (696x716). Thereafter a series of charters witness the enrichment, by royal grant, of the Lyminge endowment which stretched to some 20 sulungs by the middle of the 9th century (Rollason 1982, 47). At its height, its estates provided a rich economic base including sources of iron in the Weald and specialist commodities such as imported wine and salt provisioned from holdings on the coast near Lympne (see below).

Like most of the early Kentish monasteries, Lyminge suffered at the hands of the Vikings, by which it was apparently sacked in the mid 9th century (it is last mentioned in a charter of 844). The rump of its endowment was subsequently absorbed into the Lordship of Christ Church as a gift from King Eadgar in 964 (Brooks 1996, 105) and it was finally suppressed as an independent monastic institution by Archbishop Lanfranc in 1085 when he had St Æethelburg's relics translated to St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury, and along with them the remainder of its estates. Thereafter the medieval manor of Lyminge, which included a greater part of the territories originally bestowed upon the Anglo-Saxon minster by the kings of Kent, was administered as an archiepiscopal estate (Du Boulay 1966, 24-5). Befitting its demesne status, Archbishop Peckham had a residence constructed there in 1279,

the foundations of which were reputedly discovered during 19th-century investigations to the south of St Mary and St Ethelburga church (Jenkins 1874); prominent earthworks surviving in an area of rough pasture next to the churchyard may also be related to the archiepiscopal *curia*.

More evidence of Lyminge's 'head minster' status can be gleaned from the 11th-century Domesday Monachorum lists of Kentish churches (Tatton-Brown 1988). Lyminge appears in the list of 12 major churches which traditionally enjoyed jurisdiction over daughter establishments, in Lyminge's case numbering ten. The spread of these subordinate churches, which include distant Wealden outliers such as Wittersham and St. Peter's, Newenden, reflects the early administrative territory (or *regio*) which fell under its ecclesiastical jurisdiction (see below).

The territorial and economic context

Lyminge's pedigree as an early religious centre satisfies one of the criteria displayed by those Kentish settlements identified by Everitt to be 'seminal places': settlements where evidence for continuity between the Romano-British and ultimately pre-Roman past and the early medieval is most striking (1986, 116). One category of evidence adduced in support of such continuity is the place-name (literally meaning territory of the Limen people) which contains a celtic root *Limen* - the archaic name of the River Rother which then flowed into the sea at Lympne, the site of the Roman shore fort of *Portus Lemanis* some five miles to the south west of Lyminge (ibid., 76). There is also the highly intriguing reference to the church being located on the site of a Roman temple though the veracity of this suggestion remains to be tested (see below). The siting of at least two Early Anglo-Saxon (Jutish) cemeteries nearby, one discovered in 1885 only some 300m to the east of the church during the construction of the now dismantled Elham Valley railway, indicates Lyminge remained a focus for settlement in the immediate post-Roman period (VCH Kent vol. 1, 364-5, figs 14 and 15; Warhurst 1955).

There is some ambiguity as to whether Lympne or Lyminge was the original centre of the embryonic territorial unit (or *regio)* which had emerged, by Domesday, as one of the major land divisions of kent: the lathe of *Limenwara* (Everitt 1984, 342; Blair 2005, 186). It has been suggested that Lympne and Lyminge served as centres for royal and ecclesiastical administration respectively and that the latter was originally founded on an outlying estate of the former (Rollason 1982, 48). Whatever the case for the earliest phase of the post-Roman landscape, the possibility that by the Middle Saxon period Lyminge was itself the site of a *villa regalis* cannot be discounted.

Especially germane to Lyminge's importance as an economic hub within eastern Kent are historically-attested links to the coastal trading site of *Sandtun*, including a charter of 732 which (re-) confirms a grant of land there by Aethelberht II to Dunn the priest of Lyminge minster (Sawyer 1968, no. 270). The land granted was one quarter of a sulung near to the River Limen to prepare salt, to which the king added one hundred acres and 120 cartloads of wood for heating the brine (Gardiner *et al* 2001, 166). The Old English bounds of the charter allow a direct association to be made to a sand-dune site at West Hythe (overlooked by the Roman shore fort at Lympne) which has produced extensive archaeological evidence for coastal and cross-channel trade during the Middle Saxon period. As well as being strategically sited as a landing-

place for boats engaged in seaborne trade, the site was also occupied as a seasonal base for fishing and salt-processing evidently - if were are to accept the charter reference - on an industrial scale. The grants to Lyminge (and others within the ambit of *Sandtun* to Christ Church, Canterbury at a later date) suggest that the Kentish church played an active, participating role in south coast trading networks as a means to obtain specialist commodities such as wine for the Eucharist and other exotics intended for sale at regional markets, primary being that at Canterbury which existed from at least as early as the middle of the 8th century (Sawyer 1968, no. 1182). It may be observed that in this sphere Lyminge played a similar role to the houses of Minster-in-Thanet and Reculver which exploited their position at the head of the Thames estuary to participate in a different nexus of trade fuelled by the *merconium* at Lundenwic (Kelly 1992).

The church and its monastic precursor

The dating of the standing fabric of the present church of St Mary & St Ethelburga remains on which it is partly rests have been the subject of considerable controversy and speculation over the past 130 years. The ultimate source of much of this debate are the less than scientific accounts (both published and unpublished) of Canon Jenkins, the Victorian Rector of Lyminge, who uncovered a complex sequence of foundations in the churchyard immediately to the south of the church (Jenkins 1874). In volume one of their monumental survey of Anglo-Saxon architecture the Taylor's accept the by then generally held view that Jenkins interpretation conflated structural evidence belonging to two separate buildings: the first - partly overlaid by the south wall of the present church – being the foundations of the church attached to St Æthelburg's monastic complex; and the second, located further to the west on a rough alignment with the church tower, a Roman bathhouse whose walls were robbed during the construction of the Anglo-Saxon monastery.

On the basis of Jenkins' published plan, the first building is assigned to a group of early east Kentish churches characterised by diminutive proportions, angled naves, projecting *porticus*, and apsidal chancels accessed via a triple-arcaded arch, of which Reculver and St Pancreas, Canterbury, are upheld to be classic representatives (Taylor & Taylor 1965, 408-9).[1] This interpretation has been challenged by Fernie, however, who argues that the published plans have been over-interpreted resulting in Lyminge being pigeon-holed in the same category as other, more clearly, attestable examples of the east Kentish group. He also draws attention to the distinctive western apse displayed by the second building, suggesting that it 'could be part of a villa or even the new Saxon foundation'(1983, 39).

Responding to a call by the Taylors to examine the archaeological evidence afresh (1978, 1074), Tim Tatton-Brown and Paul Bennett re-opened an area to the south of the church tower over a series of weekends during the 1990s in the process re-locating the western apse-like feature. This important work has yet to be published but the results offer considerable scope for clarifying the ground-plan of a substantial building which most probably represents one phase of the monastic church founded by St Aethelburg in the 7th century. The question of whether the source of the

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[1] In volume three they point out that the identification of the triple-arcaded chancel arch is one that cannot

Roman building material used in the construction of the Anglo-Saxon monastery (and subsequently re-cycled in the present fabric of the standing church) lies in the immediate vicinity of the church remains to be resolved. The integration of the results of the recent re-investigation with a newly-commissioned study of the extensive Jenkins' archive held by the Society of the Antiquaries of London should be considered a priority in any future campaign of research.

The recent campaign of work alluded to above also included a full internal and external survey of the standing fabric of the parish church of St Mary and St Aethelburga which also promises to resolve ambiguities surrounding that structure. On this subject, past attributions are divided between those which equate the greater part of the standing edifice (including the splayed windows with rear arches of Roman tile) directly to St Dunstan's supposed rebuilding of c. 965 (Jenkins 1874; Gilbert 1964; Taylor & Taylor 1978, 1074) and those which ascribe the same fabric to the Norman period partly on the basis of its incorporation of Quarr stone, invoking as a historical context Lanfranc's recorded translation of St Aethelburg's relics to St Gregory's Priory, Canterbury (Tatton-Brown 1988, 110). Further work drawing upon the results of recent recording is clearly required to resolve what may well turn out to be a more complex sequence spanning both these periods.

Topography and archaeology

The settlement of Lyminge occupies a commanding position across a watershed which divides the Elham Valley from a series of southern-facing catchments which extend to the sea at Hythe, Sandgate and Folkestone. This is in every sense a classic position for an Anglo-Saxon minster (itself capping a chalk spur overlooking the settlement) combining as it does prominence with easy access to several important communication arteries. The latter includes the Roman road of Stone Street (the road which connected the Shore fort of *Portus Lemanis* with Canterbury) located some 2km to the west along an ancient trackway fossilised by the North Downs Way. The settlement is also at the convergence of two routeways (surviving as roads) aligned on the axis of the Elham Valley which form part of a communication network which would have funnelled traffic between the south-east Kent sea-board and the comparatively densely populated zones focused on the Stour Valleys.

Until recently, the most significant archaeological discoveries made at Lyminge (other than those directly related to the Anglo-Saxon nunnery) were the aforementioned Jutish cemeteries: one close to the site of the church, the other some one kilometre to the north of the village (Warhurst 1955). The situation has now been transformed by the results of a recent investigation in an area of rough pasture to the south of the churchyard evaluated in response to an application by the parish to extend the cemetery southwards. Undertaken by Paul Bennett on behalf of the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, the evaluation produced a profusion of Middle Saxon (7th-9th-century) remains, the significance of which cannot be over-stated. The archaeology comprised a series of domestic features including rubbish and cess pits - some of which yielded rich assemblages of faunal and environmental remains and detritus from iron-working - structural traces from timber buildings, and a series of enclosure ditches of different phases. The latter, re-cut on shared alignments, demonstrate that that once established during the Middle Saxon period, the boundaries of the settlement endured for a remarkably long period, being maintained for the

duration of the pre-Conquest era and well beyond, as attested by a major east-west ditch perhaps to be associated with the site of the medieval archiepiscopal residence.

The glimpses provided by the recent evaluation are sufficient to indicate that this site holds considerable potential for revealing the layout, physical characteristics and economy of Lyminge in the pre-Conquest area and, given its location, the relationship of that activity to the Anglo-Saxon minster complex of which it may indeed have been part. This work, by unravelling the origins and pre-Conquest phases of the settlement (at least partially) will also represent a significant first step towards increasing our understanding of Mid-to-Late Saxon rural settlement in East Kent, a period which is notoriously silent in the archaeological record (see below).

Wider archaeological context

Past work has shown that for many parts of the country settlement patterns were substantially fixed by around 1000 and persisted with some alterations, including periods of depopulation and settlement growth, for the following millennium until the present. This phase can be contrasted with the very different settlement pattern which existed four hundred years earlier, characterised by shifting foci within a fluid landscape. The focus on Lyminge within the wider multi-period landscape survey of the Elham Valley offers considerable scope for exploring the transition between these two phases, and the question of continuity between the pre- and post-Roman landscape which comes across so strongly in Everitt's (1986) thesis on the evolution of the Kentish landscape - a theme which has barely been addressed from an archaeological perspective. The historico-geographical approach taken by Everitt and others suggests that the emergence of estate centres based upon royal vills and minster churches in the Middle Saxon landscape is a phenomenon that may have occurred earlier in east Kent than in other parts of the country (see Blair 2005, 278); it will be interesting to test this hypothesis in relation to the archaeological evidence for settlements which coalesced around them. This is but one in a whole raft of important questions which we might begin to explore through an examination of a settlement with the archaeological potential of Lyminge.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Thanks to the St Mildreth legend and other historical sources, Lyminge has enjoyed an almost mythical status as one of the key establishments in the annals of the early English church and the conversion of the kingdom of Kent. Like other documented sites sharing a similar pedigree - Minster-in-Thanet among them – much still remains to be discovered about the physical appearance of these institutions, and their impacts on the contemporary landscape, economy and society of early medieval Kent. What sets Lyminge apart is the unprecedented archaeological potential which may be brought to bear on such questions. There now appears to be the impetus for a major collaborative research programme which will ensure that this potential is maximised through the integration of the wealth of other topographic and field evidence waiting to be unlocked in the surrounding landscape. All the signs are that there is considerable support and enthusiasm within the local community for such a project – a vital ingredient towards converting this impetus into archaeological results.

On the basis of the background picture painted above, research themes and objectives for this component of the project might include (with more specific aims peculiar to each):

A re-evaluation of the standing fabric of the parish church and its Anglo-Saxon precursor

- Bring the results of the 1990s re-investigation of the buried foundations of St Mary's church to publication as part of an integrated study of the Middle Saxon minster complex and associated settlement

- Undertake research into the Jenkins' archive held by the Society of the Antiquaries with the aim of bringing to light significant details with which to inform the above

- Integrate the results of the recent fabric recording of the parish church towards a fresh appraisal of the building's development across the Late Saxon, Norman and medieval periods

- Undertake any further recording of the church fabric and the surrounding churchyard as deemed necessary

Provide an archaeological context for Mid-to-Late minster complex and its associated settlement

- Full archaeological examination of the evaluated area to the south of the churchyard in the form of a training excavation to be run over two or three summer seasons

- Undertake **a**rchaeological prospection and earthwork surveys within areas of rough pasture adjacent to the training excavation and other open areas within the historic core of the village

- Undertake trial excavations targeting significant anomalies highlighted by the above

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