London 800-1216: a review

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THE PUBLICATION of Professor Brooke's and Mrs. Keir's book[1] so soon after the setting up of an archaeological unit in the City is a salutary coincidence. Their book provides a conspectus of what is known and knowable of the general background to the second half of a long post-Roman period in which until very recently archaeological evidence was almost non-existent and for which documentary evidence of a topographical application is only relatively more profuse. In a book of this kind, the second of a series of eight which aims to cover "social, economic and political developments, administration, architecture, the arts" and so forth, it is obvious that only a section can be devoted to topography. It turns out to be a very generous section, and one which must be the chief concern of a review in these pages, even though the treatment of the sheriffs and City institutions, which are not susceptible to archaeological illumination, is one of the most valuable parts of the book.

Before the appearance of the present volume the most authoritative work of this kind was *London: its Origins and Early Development*, published in 1923 by William Page who had long since edited the single London volume of the *Victoria County History* in 1909. *Origins* was a valuable and imaginative study and a comparison with the present book is instructive. Page strove for the particular: though notably well equipped to do so, he seldom looked beyond London, and within London the most striking part of his work was his attempted identification of the 12th century sokes, which he defined as individually integral estates, with specific wards or parishes. Brooke and Keir are altogether more concerned with general principles. In the first place they are at pains to set London in its European, as well as its national, context, making good use of recent local studies which, to be fair, were not available to Page. The value of this approach is self-evident, but it is the first time that it has been applied on this scale to London. Of great interest is the consideration of the antecedents of the Alfredian *burh*.

Despite his acquaintance with such travellers as Ohthere, Alfred appears to have known little of the Baltic and Viking world. Nearer at home he would be familiar with France, Germany and the Low Countries, but the Flemish *castra* were too small and military, and Quentavic and Duurstede, though more closely parallel, too specifically mercantile to offer satisfactory analogies. The author suggests a more significant comparison with the towns of northern and central Italy, particularly Rome, much visited by English pilgrims and even by Alfred himself in his extreme youth, where there existed an English quarter described by contemporaries as a *burh*. It is perhaps strange that in this connexion so little mention is made of Canterbury which seems to have fulfilled all the requirements of the *burh*, possessing its own *cnihtengild* as early as 858, and *hagas* and outlying estates, with their military and/or economic connotations, under Offa.

For the Urban Renaissance of the 10th to 13th centuries, to which a chapter is devoted, significant pointers are adduced but no firm conclusions emerge from the current, uneven state of knowledge. Most documents, in England and on the Continent, are too late. Institutional evidence is unhelpful: towns had always existed in Italy,while their continuity in northern Europe is far less certain. The street pattern at Verona and Pavia survived unimpaired, but at Arles, and in Gaul and England in general the present plan is essentially medieval, Alfredian or later. Yet in both the rise of self-governing communes occurred at the same time, from the second half of the 11th century. Trade is clearly a central factor, but even here the physical evidence is contradictory. San Gimignano, which certainly flourished, was apparently confined within its Roman foundations, while Florence expanded hugely. But expansion is evident from the late 11th century at Milan, and from the 12th century in Zurich, and is reflected at that date in the new *enceintes* at Lucca and Mainz, Bruges, Ghent and Liege. All were built around planned market places.

To Brooke and Keir the institutions of parish and ward and their boundaries as boundaries are of greater and differing significance than to Page, many of whose detailed topographical reconstructions of

1 **London 800-1216: The shaping of a City**, C. N. L. Brooke assisted by G. Keir, *Secker and Warburg* (1975) xxi + 424 pp., plates, 5 maps, £8.

individual tenures they regard as not proven. The very shape of these boundaries are of considerable relevance: where they are irregular and jagged they indicate that property was already well developed at the time when they were drawn, and where they are neat, regular and more extensive that the slate was comparatively clean. Thus the western and southern areas of the City can be seen to have developed earlier than the northern and eastern. The question is, of course, when were these boundaries drawn? By far the greater number of the final medieval total of 126 City churches were founded, during the 11th and 12th centuries, as proprietary churches, built as private chapels by individuals, or as neighbourhood churches serving small communities, usually sharing a particular trading interest. In this process the ecclesiastical authorities seem, at least at first, to have been minimally involved, but from the late 11th century legislation on the payment of tithe which provided the churches' main income, and also the tendency among lay benefactors to grant these churches as endowments to religious houses, made it increasingly important to define the exact area over which a church had rights. Although related to existing property boundaries, there is no evidence that, as Page was apt to argue, parish boundaries followed existing tenurial units, and it is notable that a crossroads stands at the centre of most parishes.

Outside the walls, the dedications of churches are convincingly used to trace the development of the suburbs. Current work on this topic suggests that recent, local, saints were seldom commemorated in this way before the 8th and 9th centuries. Thus, as against the more ancient churches of St. Peter and St. Margaret at Westminster, and St. Andrew Holborn, to the west of the City, are to be found progressing eastwards, St. Sepulchre (from the crusade of the late 11th century) and several St. Botolphs (an East Anglian saint, very possibly imported into London from Colchester by the Augustinians of Aldgate early in the 12th century) and finally, at Portsoken, a case where the coincidence of ward and parish boundaries indicates the comparatively late development of the eastern suburb.

The wards appear to have been fully established by the mid-13th century, and were first listed, though not by their present names, c.1127. But while the parishes typically respected the City wall, wards did not for their function was to protect the gates. Thus they were arranged more or less symmetrically athwart the main roads both inside and outside the walled City. Their distribution suggests that they were established before the extra-mural area was highly populated, and their uneven size indicates that this was at a time when the City was unevenly settled. There is evidence that, at least in the east,

they were established later than the 970s, and the likeliest date is the 11th century, on the whole a little earlier than the parishes, though the two processes overlapped.

The nature of Brooke's and Keir's approach to these problems, their caution against Page's reconstructions and the fact that they are writing a text book designed, as it certainly deserves, to enjoy a long currency, has led to a disinclination to discuss particular areas or topographic features in any real detail. Many topics arise in passing which one would like to hear more about, however conjectural. To take one case of very considerable interest, the district of Guildhall and of the site of the Cripplegate fort, which they accept as the area of greatest continuity in the settlement of London. Here they review the evident antiquity of Bassishaw, the *haga* of the men of Basingstoke, but there is nothing about Staeningahaga, the *haga* of the men of Staines, around Staining Lane. But what could Basingstoke (or Staines) be to London, or London to Basingstoke and Staines, that the association be so steadfastly commemorated? Again, they accept Ekwall's explanation of Lothbury as the *burh* of Hlothere and seem to suggest that this may be Hlothere, the late 7th century king of Kent. But they say nothing of Hlothere's law code with its reference to a hall established in London for trading purposes. They are more sceptical than most writers about Matthew Paris's attribution of the origins of St. Alban Wood Street to Offa's chapel, but more positive than most about the *burh* of the Alderman, Aldermanbury, so close to Guildhall. And then, among these roosting conundrums, they enquire, "who can say what the significance may be of the siting of the Guildhall where Bassishaw and Cheap and Cripplegate (Aldermanbury's ward) now meet?" Any temptation experienced is successfully resisted, but from this a reader examining the curious configuration of boundaries at Guildhall may be inclined to conclude that at some moment it had been a matter of especial importance, and perhaps some inconvenience, to include Guildhall within the ward of Cheap, an entity which also included the eastern half of the great trading centre of Cheapside and all Poultry, and which extended further tentacles to secure the food markets at the foot of Milk Street, the Mercery and the Grocery and their halls, to say nothing of a mysterious area south of Cheapside.

The Shaping of a City outlines what, short of minute studies of individual sites, the historical record can contribute towards understanding the early development of London. As the authors stress, it is largely up to archaeology, and ancillary services, to uncover what remains to be learnt. To anyone interested in these poignant developments, this rich and original book is strongly recommended.