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## Reviews

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### English Episcopal Acta 31, Ely 1109–1197

Nicholas Karn 2005

Oxford University Press (published for the British Academy), cxlix + 288 pp, £47.50

The 12th century was a formative period in the development of medieval Ely. A Benedictine abbey had been founded there c.970, a successor to St Etheldreda's foundation of c.673. By the time of the Norman Conquest, the abbey had acquired an extensive estate that fell under the control of the bishop of Ely following the establishment of the see in 1109; the abbey became a cathedral priory. The 12th century saw the early stages in the division of former abbey holdings between bishop and priory; documents recording this process are among those presented in this volume.

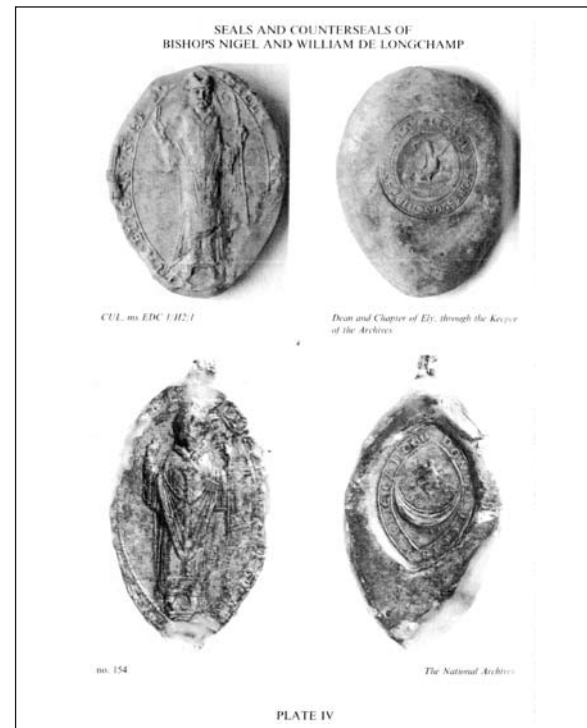
This edition of episcopal *acta*, or records of transactions and decrees, has an extensive introduction. This provides the background to the main part of the volume that consists of an edition of the documents produced in Latin by the 12th-century bishops' administrations. Five appendices conclude the volume.

In the introduction, Karn presents some of the reasons for the creation of the see of Ely, among the smallest in medieval England, and outlines the organisation of the diocese in the 12th century. This is followed by biographies of Hervey, Nigel, Geoffrey Ridel and William de Longchamp, the four bishops whose *acta* are the subject of this volume. All four bishops were involved in affairs of state and spent much of their time travelling around England and abroad; a summary of their movements is presented in Appendix I. The introduction continues with a section on the monks and the bishops, discussing the chronology of grants made to the monks in the decades following establishment of the see; there is an editorial oversight in the introductory paragraph (p. xc) where the author incorrectly states that St Etheldreda's monastery had been founded in the 6th century. The bishops' households are then described, much of the evidence deriving from witness lists. In the final part of the introduction, Karn explains his criteria for inclusion of documents; *acta* concerned with the bishops' secular and ecclesiastical administrations are included, as are those of

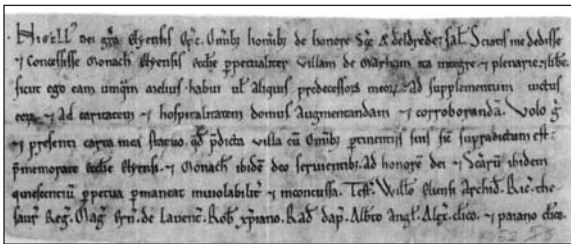
Bishops Nigel and William that illustrate the secular office of these bishops. The form of the documents is then analysed.

The edited *acta* comprise some 176 entries of which 147 are extant texts. These include later medieval copies of 12th-century originals. The remainder are quotations from other documents. The *acta* are grouped into four chapters, one for each bishop. Although the documents are in Latin, a summary of contents in English makes these accessible to the non-Latinist (but note an error of translation in no. 46 where *ad opus fratrum infirmorum* means 'for the use of infirm brethren', not 'for the work of...'). The edited text is followed by a commentary in English.

A large proportion of the *acta* is concerned with the priory at Ely, and the process of division of the former abbey estate between the monks and the bishops may be followed. Bishop Nigel's grant of named villas on the Isle of Ely and beyond, and of specified dues (no.



31), formed the basis of the medieval priory's estate; a similar grant attributed to Bishop Hervey (no. 6) is discussed and considered to be a forgery. Most *acta* contain single grants, often for a specific purpose. A few documents deal with holdings in Ely, including a reference to clearing the land around St Etheldreda's church to reduce the risk of fire (no. 65). Other *acta* deal with the religious houses at Thorney, Ramsey and further afield; there are also grants to named individuals or institutions. Among miscellaneous other topics is a letter of Bishop Nigel addressed to Henry II regarding the number of knights' fees on the estates of the bishop of Ely (no. 59).



Acta No. 40 of Bishop Nigel, from English Episcopal Acta 31, Ely 1109–1197.

Karn's edition of the episcopal *acta* for Ely is a valuable contribution to the study of medieval Ely, it also provides an illustration of 12th-century episcopal administration. This compilation of manuscripts drawn from a wide range of sources will be of use to those requiring an edition of the original texts. The non-specialist will find this a useful reference book. The text is clearly written; the introduction and the comments on the *acta* provide much new information on this significant period in the development of medieval Ely.

Anne Holton-Krayenbuhl

### Cambridge and its Economic Region 1450–1560 John S Lee 2006

University of Hertfordshire Press, 256pp, £35.00 hardback, £18.99 paperback

What is the 'Cambridge region'? Today, a wide range of indicators, as diverse as travel-to-work/study/shop patterns, the circulation area of the *Cambridge Evening News* and the geographical distribution of the hardy band of Cambridge United supporters are easily available to economists and planners to illustrate the influence of the city on its hinterland, although each would undoubtedly show a somewhat different pattern. For historians and historical geographers the task is less easy. HC Darby and JA Steers, editing the two comprehensive British Association surveys of 1938 and 1965 respectively, got round the problem by ignoring it and giving their contributors freedom to define the 'region' as they wished. The one thing that is clear is that the impact of Cambridge on its county and beyond has varied over time and that the

'Cambridge region' of 2006 is very different to that of (say) 1806 or 1606.

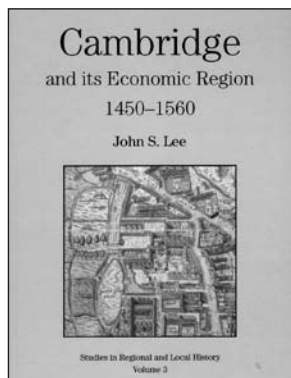
Dr Lee's work is an attempt at definition of the region in the 15th and 16th centuries, although his study extends chronologically well beyond these dates in both directions. He skilfully deploys an impressive range of national and local primary and secondary sources and his bibliography alone is a valuable contribution to regional studies. The reviewer's favourite ploy of 'spot the missing items' drew only one major blank: Donovan Purcell's *Cambridge Stone*, a surprising omission, perhaps, in view of the importance building materials play in his study.

This is a multi-layered book, but three themes dominate. The first, implicit in the title, is Cambridge's relationship with the world beyond its own boundaries, which through college accounts (Corpus, King's, St John's and Trinity are the most used) can be traced with a degree of certainty impossible for most other late medieval towns. As might be expected, Lynn and London were the town's most important trading partners, but there were links with many others, including Norwich, Salisbury and Winchester. Local commercial relations with places such as Cherry Hinton, Foxton and Whittlesford are also explored, although the suggestion in Chapter 1 that even relatively small towns like Cambridge could be important agents of change in the 'modernisation' of the countryside remains unproven (and probably unprovable, at least before the 18th century). What emerges is confirmation that rural Cambridgeshire was a relatively poor county (ranking 21 out of 33 nationally in 1515), but that this masked, then as now, major sub-regional differences: the river valleys south of the town prosperous, the western clay plateau and parts of the Fens less so.

The second theme is the late medieval 'urban crisis' long familiar to historians. There is general agreement that the 15th century did indeed mark a nadir in the fortunes of most English towns: but when did recovery start and how strong and sustained was it? The Cambridge evidence is far from clear-cut, and complicated both by the growing importance of the University and the Corporation's habit of pleading poverty throughout the 16th century whenever faced with new financial demands from central government. Nonetheless the lack of manufactures (47% of the occupied population were in service-based industries in the 16th century) seems to have helped the town avoid the depression that affected its neighbours in Suffolk, Essex and Norfolk and its attraction to immigrants, especially in skilled trades such as leather-working and building, would suggest a degree of dynamism throughout the period.

The third theme is the rise of the University. Emerging from the medieval hostels, the colleges (of which six were new in this period) gave the town an unusual economic profile: effectively, it contained the equivalent of several great aristocratic, ecclesiastical and gentry households. They varied greatly in wealth: King's had an annual net income of £1011 p.a. in 1546, Magdalene £44. Corpus, St John's and Jesus had extensive town property holdings, Magdalene none.

Town-gown relationships, Dr Ley suggests, were less-polarised in this period than later: he notes the close links between them in parish church rebuilding (especially Great St Mary's) and gild membership. However, other evidence he adduces – for example over market tolls – might suggest the contrary.



There remain unanswered questions. The role of Barnwell Priory remains elusive. The impact of the Reformation is not explored in any detail: the empty (ex-monastic) spaces on the Lyne map of 1574 suggest the urban crisis was far from resolved by that date, and what gaps were left in social welfare provision by the dissolution of the Friaries?

The illustrations, other than those drawn from documents of the time, are rather uninspiring and interpretation of the important maps in the scene-setting Chapter 2 ('Population and wealth') is made difficult by the absence of any key enabling individual rural parishes to be identified. And by restricting themselves in the south to the county boundary and in the north to a rather arbitrary line drawn from Ely to Sutton they perhaps serve to mask, rather than illuminate, the basic question of what the Cambridge region actually was at this time. What was happening, in terms of population and wealth, in such places as Littleport and Fenstanton?

The book is not an easy read. It shows its origins as a PhD thesis a little too clearly and lacks those sharp and sympathetic insights into the everyday lives of individuals that mark Margaret Spufford's *Contrasting Communities*. But it would be churlish to finish on such a note. Overall, Dr Ley's work must rank as one of the most important contributions to our knowledge of late medieval and early modern Cambridge of at least the past half-century, ranking with the RCHM's work on its topography and architecture and Nigel Goose's on its social structure. Furthermore it is handsomely produced and a tribute to the fledgling University of Hertfordshire Press.

It remains for others to carry the work forward: how has Cambridge's region been transformed by the agricultural, industrial and transport changes of later centuries? A theme for a future CAS Conference, perhaps?

Tony Kirby

***Liber Eliensis* A history of the Isle of Ely from the seventh century to the twelfth**

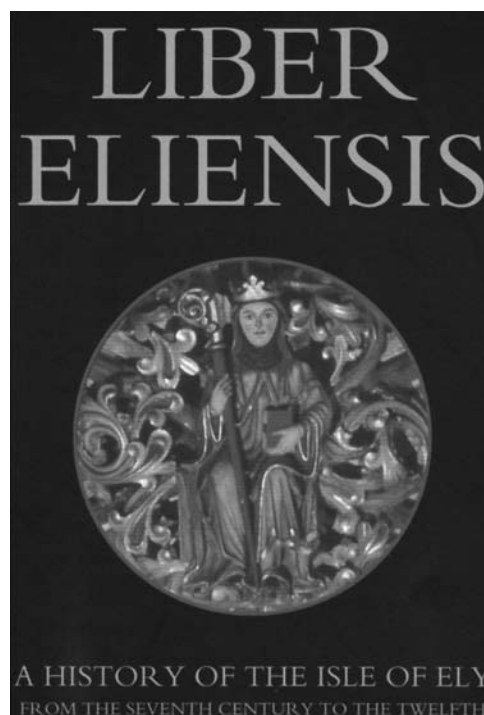
Translated by Janet Fairweather 2005

Boydell and Brewer 627 pp £30 pb

'for Ely...is magnificent in its wealth and its towns; equally praiseworthy for its woods, vineyards and waters, exceedingly rich in all fruit, livestock-breeding and crops...it is of the greatest beauty and renown, famous for its miracles, glorious for its relics. It is recognised as providing a satisfactory, peaceful dwelling place and... is guarded by a garrison of strong and warlike men'.

Here, tremendously to be welcomed, is the first English translation of the massive *Liber Eliensis*, a work that has been much quoted but one suspects little read even after the first printed edition in Latin was published by EO Blake in 1962.

Compiled towards the end of the 12th century, it aims to give the history of the monastery at Ely from its foundation by St Aethelthryth (more commonly known as Etheldreda) up to the compiler's own time, and much that is of interest to historians, archaeologists, ecclesiologists and art historians is included. Though some of the later parts in particular become a barely-concealed legal justification for the huge number of estates the monastery owned and over which many law-suits were waged, it includes data on social organisation, economics and the national and local government, some from eye-witness accounts even if embroidered by later hands. It includes entries that were lifted wholesale from other sources, local hagiographical works, a mixed bag of anecdotes, and Ely's own archives (these forming much of the rather tedious legal texts and wranglings). The latest local



event recorded was the death of Bishop Nigel in 1169, the exhausted author then extending his text to include the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in 1170.

As an historical work, the first of its three books concentrates on Aethelthryth herself and on the foundation and subsequent destruction of the monastery, much of it drawn from Bede's stories. There are dramatic accounts of attacks by Danes, when nuns were killed and the monastery and city looted and burned. Book II moves on to restoration of the abbey under Edgar, and subsequent bequests that allowed Ely to build up a massive estate. This includes interesting asides on urban origins and how legal settlements were made, including purchases and agreements 'in the place called Cambridge, in the presence of the better people of the district'. By the bridge at Cambridge is given as a specific place for settling disputes, and we hear that 'Cambridge, Norwich, Thetford and Ipswich were possessed of such great freedom and liberty that, if anyone bought land there, he did not require sureties'. In the 12th century there were Jews in Cambridge to whom Bishop Nigel pawned a cross and gospel book.

In the 10th century Abbot Byrtnoth rebuilt the church and the Abbey was enriched by Ealderman Byrtnoth who, in gratitude for hospitality denied at Ramsey, left estates in Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Suffolk and Essex to Ely when he died at Maldon soon afterwards. In the 11th century Cnut too became a friend to Ely, helping the Abbey set up a system of food-rents, whereby villages became responsible for feeding the monks and staff for one or two weeks, with lists of all the villages concerned. Of course we hear the tale of Cnut joining in singing which he heard on his boat as he approached Ely, and also how, when stopped from visiting Ely by snow and frost, he ventured over the frozen mere at Soham in a wagon.

After the Norman conquest there are dramatic accounts of Hereward's campaigns, including instructions to build the Aldreth causeway, the siege works of peat blocks, William's blockades, and details of how William ordered wood and ballast to be thrown in the marshes, covered with sheep skins, and filled with sand. Despite this, the army that tried to cross drowned. This is but the start of Williams's long campaign, its details compiled from varied sources. Plentiful details on Hereward include the account of how he disguised himself as a potter to spy on the king's stronghold at Brampton, an interesting insight into how lowly pots were traded by potters themselves, carrying them to households who might be interested in a purchase.

Important local details too are supplied about the civil war between Stephen and Matilda, the castles occupied and taken at Ely and Aldreth, siege engines, battles and royal visits. Other aspects of the Abbey's interests provide detail for the local historian. We hear for example of the creation and endowment of a religious house at Eynesbury (St Neots), the later expulsion of the monks under the Normans and their replacements from Bec, of the woman who was given Coveney where, with young girls, she did gold

embroidery and tapestry weaving for religious purposes, and how Chatteris nunnery was annexed by Bishop Hervey, complete with charters that even this Ely chronicler admits were highly advantageous to his abbey. Book III concentrates on charters etc, with lists of estates and sometimes the produce they sent to the monks: eels from the Isle parishes, salt from Terrington, timber from Bluntisham and Somersham, and 30,000 herrings from Dunwich in addition to normal farm produce. Local detail comes too with a spy's report to William, with a description of the Isle, the richness of its soil, loveliness of its fields and pastures, 'well-known for the hunting of wild animals, a productive breeding ground for farm animals and beasts of burden....equally praiseworthy for its woodlands and vineyards', and with a dream of an Exning farmer who was told by St Edmund to build a causeway to Ely. Following this, one monk measured out the land from Soham 'through trackless expanses of marshland', cutting a swathe through the reeds and building two bridges.

Not surprisingly, given the ecclesiastical background of the work, it is a particularly rich source on burials and reburials. We get the full account of Aethelthryth's first reinterment by her sister Seaxburh, with all the ceremonies of lifting, washing, re-clothing, wrapping, singing and festal dancing. In the 12th century we hear of the translation of bodies that had been buried 'deep down and long ago', all with unambiguous marks of identification. We also have the shameless story of how Abbot Byrtnoth, 'a pirate in the cause of the faith', lead a raid to steal the bones of St Wihtburh from her resting place at Dereham. This involved the Abbot entertaining the townspeople with 'convivial festivities', prising open the coffin to steal her body at night, and escaping by wagon and water pursued by a furious army of townspeople. St Wihtburh appears again in the text when she had to be translated when the church was rebuilt. Her body and clothes were still incorrupt, her cheeks rosy and her breasts upstanding.

As she states, the translator is a classical scholar, not a medieval historian, and so the numerous footnotes are mostly concerned with problems in the Latin text rather than providing more than minimal historical or archaeological background or critique, and the text is rather frustrating without such annotations. However, that would be another work which may be produced one day. As evident from accounts referred to above, a modest taste derived from its 627 pages, this is a work for historians and archaeologists to raid with gratitude, both to Janet Fairweather and to the patient monks who set down the texts compiled here.

*Alison Taylor*