

THE SAXON BISHOPS OF LEICESTER, LINDSEY (*Syddensis*), and DORCHESTER

by

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The Anglo-Saxon bishoprics of Leicester, Lindsey (*Syddensis*), and Dorchester have in common that in the ecclesiastical reorganisation after the Danish wars of the ninth and early-tenth centuries they were amalgamated together into a single diocese, the largest in England, administered first from Dorchester and, after the Norman Conquest, from Lincoln. Their earlier and individual history is obscure. Leicester was the bishopric of the Middle Angles, a subject province of the Mercians of the Trent valley from the mid-seventh century; *Syddensis* was the bishopric of the men of Lindsey, modern Lincolnshire, also a subject province of the Mercians from the late-seventh century; Dorchester, originally the Oxfordshire bishopric of the Thames-valley Saxons, was similarly annexed by Mercia in the late-seventh century. Ranging as these dioceses did across the whole of the eastern part of the powerful kingdom of Mercia, it is evident that they must have been bishoprics of some considerable importance in the ecclesiastical organisation of pre-Viking England; and from the mid-tenth century the unified diocese covered the most concentrated areas of Scandinavian settlement. Little is known about the ecclesiastical history of these dioceses, due first to the accident of the survival or otherwise of historical records—the ancient kingdom of Mercia is generally very badly documented—and secondly to the evident absence of flourishing monasteries attached to the cathedrals of east Mercia—the monastic writing offices have bequeathed to us most of our information about the Anglo-Saxon Church and its bishops. Sufficient evidence has survived to enable us to reconstruct, at least in broad outline, the history and inter-relationship of these three bishoprics.

In point of time, of the two more northerly sees, Lindsey (*Syddensis*) and Leicester, Lindsey was probably the older, perhaps only by one year. Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*¹, written in 731, provides the available information for the early history of the see of Lindsey. Lindsey possessed its own dynasty in the seventh century but nothing is known of the kings except their names and what can be deduced from them.² In the early-seventh century it became a subject province of the Northumbrians. Bede describes how Paulinus, bishop of York, the Roman missionary to Northumbria, converted Blaecca, governor of the city of Lincoln, and baptised converts of the kingdom of Lindsey in the Trent in the presence of Edwin, king of Northumbria (*Hist. Eccles.* II, 16). These events occurred *c.* 630. Lindsey remained a part of the vast Northumbrian diocese of York until conquered by Wulfhere, king of Mercia, in the years following 659, when it was administered by the bishop of Mercia. Re-annexed by the Northumbrians *c.* 674, Lindsey was formed into a separate see under Eadhaed, at the time

when the Northumbrian kingdom was divided into several dioceses in 678 (*Hist. Eccles.* IV, 12). Eadhaed did not long enjoy his see in peace. In 679 Lindsey was again conquered by Mercia, this time permanently. Eadhaed withdrew to become bishop of Ripon; Lindsey survived as a separate diocese but under the Mercians. Aethelwine, brother of the abbot of the monastery of Partney in Lindsey, was made bishop.³ Aethelwine was remembered as a good man who long governed his church in a worthy manner (*Hist. Eccles.* III, 27). According to the chronicle attributed to Florence of Worcester, which dates from the late-eleventh century and is an important source for Mercian affairs, it was Aethelwine who established his see at *Syddensis*.⁴ The site of *Syddensis* or *Sidnaceaster* remains uncertain, though it may be identified with Stow in Lincolnshire or even with a part of the city of Lincoln itself.⁵

Just as the Northumbrian diocese of York was divided in 678 to make possible more effective diocesan administration, so the equally vast Mercian see, centred originally on Lichfield, was partitioned by 679.⁶ New bishoprics were created at Hereford, Worcester, Leicester and Dorchester, the latter only very recently annexed by Mercia from the kingdom of Wessex. Cuthwine was made first bishop of Leicester, the see intended for the territory of the Middle Angles;⁷ Aetla was made bishop of Dorchester.⁸ Bede records that Aetla had been a monk of the Northumbrian monastery of Whitby (*Hist. Eccles.* IV, 23). Florence of Worcester does not name any successor to Aetla and there is no evidence that the bishopric of Dorchester survived for very long. The bishopric of Leicester also experienced an uncertain start. It is not known when Cuthwine died, but from 691 to 697 the Northumbrian Wilfrid, exiled bishop of York, administered this diocese of the Middle Angles (*Hist. Eccles.* IV, 23⁹). After Wilfrid's departure, Lichfield and Leicester were rejoined under Headda, bishop of Lichfield, and his successor, Ealdwine, who died in 737.¹⁰ Only then were they finally separated, the see of Leicester embracing that of Dorchester.

For the subsequent histories of the sees of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) and Leicester we are virtually dependent upon surviving lists of the names of successive bishops.¹¹ Bede himself lists the three bishops of Lindsey down to his time of writing: Aethelwine, Edgar and Cyneberht. Cyneberht was still alive in 731 (*Hist. Eccles.* IV, 12) and had supplied Bede with materials for the ecclesiastical history of Lindsey. An early set of Northumbrian annals, preserved in the *Historia Regum* of Simeon of Durham, a late-eleventh-century compilation, records the succession of some of the bishops of the dioceses of Lindsey and Leicester.¹² Cyneberht's death is recorded in 732. His successor, Alwiu, was evidently bishop from 733 to 750. He was succeeded as bishop from 750 to 765, by his deacon, Ealdwulf, and Ealdwulf by Ceowulf, who was consecrated in 767 and died in 796. No further notice of a bishop of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) occurs in the annals, although they continue down to 801, but from the evidence of the lists of witnesses to ecclesiastical synods and royal charters it is possible to establish an approximate chronology. The episcopal lists name Ceolwulf's

successor as Eadwulf. He witnessed the "*statutes*" of the Council of *Clofesho* (unidentified) in 803 as Eadwulf "*Syddensis civitatis episcopus*", and his name is found among witnesses to a royal charter as late as 836.¹³ Beorhtred, the only successor to Eadwulf in the episcopal lists, witnessed royal charters as early as 839 and as late as 872.¹⁴ He appears to have been the last of the pre-Viking bishops of Lindsey.

At Leicester, Torthelm was bishop from the re-creation of the see in 737 until his death which took place, according to the Northumbrian annals, in 764. Torthelm was one of the many correspondents of St. Boniface, and prayers were said for Boniface in the church at Leicester.¹⁵ The Northumbrian annals do not record the succession of the subsequent bishops of Leicester and the date of the death of Torthelm's successor, Eadberht, is unknown, although he attended a church council as late as 781.¹⁶ Eadberht's successor, Unwona, was alive as late as 799.¹⁷ Waerenberht was bishop as early as 803 and as late as 814.¹⁸ He described himself both as "*mediterraneorum Anglorum episcopus*" and "*Legorensis civitatis episcopus*".¹⁹ Hraethun, successor of Waerenberht, witnessed charters as early as 816 and as late as 841.²⁰ He must have died in 841, for his successor, Ealdred was witnessing charters in that year.²¹ Ceolred, the last recorded bishop of Leicester in the pre-Viking period, witnessed charters as early as 843-4 and as late as 872.²²

The bishops of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) and Leicester can be traced down to *c.* 872. They lived through the period of the greatness of the Mercian kingdom but of their deeds and thoughts virtually nothing can be deduced. The succession to the two sees ceases at the moment when the Viking attacks became serious. The Humber and the waterways of the Wash gave the Danes immediate access into east Mercia. In 874 they drove out Burgred, last king of all Mercia, and annexed much of the eastern and northern parts of the kingdom. The conquest of what was to become Danish Mercia was complete by 877. As the episcopal lists name no more bishops after Beorhtred and Ceolred, it is reasonable to infer that the havoc caused by the Danish occupation disrupted ecclesiastical organisation in the dioceses of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) and Leicester. It is known from the relatively detailed Northumbrian sources that there was a breakdown in the organisation of the Northumbrian Church in these years.²³ One interesting ecclesiastical reference to Mercian affairs occurs in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,²⁴ when the death in 896 of Ealheard, bishop of Dorchester, is mentioned (*A, sub anno* 897). Ealheard's name occurs in no episcopal list, so it is not really known who he was; but it is possible that he was a bishop of Leicester who had moved south to Dorchester *c.* 874 to avoid the Danes.²⁵ Whether or not he had a successor at Dorchester in 896 is unknown.

Leicester became the base of one of the Danish armies of Mercia, and it was not until 918 that Aethelflaed of Mercia, sister of Edward the Elder, king of Wessex, was able to gain peaceful possession of it.²⁶ Despite this re-possession, Leicester, with Derby, Nottingham, Stamford and Lincoln, known collectively in the tenth and eleventh centuries as the Five

Boroughs, passed under temporary control of Norse kings at York.²⁷ At Leicester in 940, Edmund I, king of Wessex, was forced to cede the land north of Watling Street, including the Five Boroughs, to Olaf Guthfrithson, king of York. Though Edmund recovered possession of the Five Boroughs in 942 from Guthfrithson's successor, Olaf Sihtricson, king of York, it was not until 954 that the king of Wessex was able to establish his authority uncontested in Northumbria.²⁸

The military advances of the West-Saxon rulers were accompanied by attempts to revive the ecclesiastical organisation of the areas affected by the Scandinavian attack. About the year 909 Edward the Elder and Archbishop Plegmund of Canterbury re-organised the Church in Wessex and southern Mercia by the creation of new sees and the revival of old ones,²⁹ and it was at this time that Cenwulf was made bishop of Dorchester.³⁰ His authority cannot have embraced the whole of the old diocese of Leicester for the conquests of Edward and Aethelflaed still lay in the future. A bishop called Wynsig witnessed royal charters between 925 and 935,³¹ styled by William of Malmesbury "Winsi Legecestrensis".³² Great advances towards the subjection of northern England were made by Athelstan, king of Wessex (924-39), in whose reign there seems to have been a premature attempt to revive the northern Church.

Several bishops of unknown sees who seem to be Northumbrians appear in the lists of witnesses to Athelstan's charters.³³ The number of bishops whose sees are unknown from the Anglo-Saxon period generally and from the early-tenth century in particular is legion.³⁴ It is hopeless to try to attach any of them to Lindsey (*Syddensis*) or Leicester, for there is no evidence on which to build, but it is not impossible that some were bishops of these sees. Oscytel, a Dane and uncle of St. Oswald, was bishop of Dorchester in the mid-tenth century, witnessing charters from 951.³⁵ He succeeded as archbishop of York after Wulfstan died in 956. A Bishop Leofwine, who witnessed charters as early as 953,³⁶ succeeded Oscytel at Dorchester.

It seems probable that Leofwine had previously exercised the office of bishop in a revived see of Lindsey (*Syddensis*), and it is to the time of Leofwine that later writers date the union of the see of Lindsey with that of Dorchester and Leicester.³⁷ This union probably occurred at about the time that Leofwine became bishop of Dorchester. The precise date of his succession to Dorchester is uncertain because, though the death of Wulfstan of York is recorded in 956, Oscytel witnessed a charter as late as 958 still only as bishop.³⁸ The years 956-58 may have been a troubled period for the Mercian Church. From 957 to 959 Edgar, son of King Edmund, was recognised as king in Mercia in opposition to his brother, Eadwig, in Wessex. But it is interesting that it is to the time of the reforming archbishop of Canterbury, Oda (942-58), a kinsman of Oscytel that the revival of the see of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) and possibly also the union of Lindsey, Dorchester and Leicester may be dated; and among Edgar's supporters in Mercia was the zealous reformer and ambitious ecclesiastic, Dunstan, who later became archbishop of Canterbury when Edgar succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex on the death of Eadwig.

Apart from a mysterious Sigferth, bishop of Lindsey, who witnessed charters between 997 and 1004³⁹ in the troubled reign of Aethelred II (978-1016), there is no evidence for the separate existence of Lindsey (*Syddensis*) as a diocese after this period of reconstruction. As an area of heavy Danish settlement, Lindsey may well have broken away from the diocese of Dorchester in Aethelred's time. It is known that Godwine, ealdorman of Lindsey, had little regard for the authority of the king,⁴⁰ and that in 1013 the men of Lindsey in particular were prepared to help Swein, king of Denmark, in his attack on Aethelred.

The union of these three ancient sees is of considerable interest to the student of the late Anglo-Saxon Church. In the contemporary records of the diocese the bishops usually call themselves bishops of Dorchester, occasionally of Lincoln, though never, before 1066, of Leicester. In the reign of Aethelred II the Five Boroughs were still an important element in the Danelaw, and most of them fell within the jurisdiction of the bishops of Dorchester. Derby was part of the diocese of Lichfield, and at some time during the tenth century it is possible that Nottinghamshire passed to York, but this is not certain.⁴¹ Leicester, Lincoln and Stamford were in the diocese of Dorchester, and so also was Torksey, probably one of the boroughs added to the Five between 1013 and 1015.⁴² The task of administering such an extensive area, with its high proportion of Scandinavian settlers at a time of acute Anglo-Danish conflict, must have been particularly arduous and, as has been noted, it is probable that Lindsey broke away for a time. An interesting document shows Aescwig, bishop of Dorchester c. 979-1002, contributing money for Danegeld to be paid by the archbishop of Canterbury in 994-5.⁴³ Bishop Eadnoth I of Dorchester (c. 1006-16), attending on the side of King Edmund II, perished at the battle of Ashingdon in Essex, fought between Edmund, son of Aethelred, and Cnut, son of Swein. He is credited with the founding of the monastery of Stow St. Mary in Lindsey.⁴⁴

The see of Dorchester embraced the eastern counties of Northampton, Huntingdon, and Cambridge, and therefore included within its boundaries the great fenland monasteries of Peterborough, Ramsey, Thorney and Ely as well as Crowland in Lincolnshire. Ely's closest episcopal links were with the bishops of North Elmham in Norfolk and the monastery opposed the bishops of Dorchester by claiming exemption from their episcopal jurisdiction.⁴⁵ In 1109 Ely was established as the see of a separate diocese of Cambridgeshire. The foundation ceremony of the monastery of Ramsey in 974 was attended by Aelfnoth, bishop of Dorchester, and it is in their relations with Ramsey that we see the Saxon bishops of Dorchester most clearly; some charming glimpses are afforded by the *Ramsey Chronicle*.⁴⁶ Before becoming bishop of Dorchester, Eadnoth was the first abbot of the reformed monastery of Ramsey, and his episcopal successors, Aethelric (1016-34) and Eadnoth II (1034-49) were both former monks at Ramsey and school-fellows.⁴⁷ As boys, in a fit of high spirits, Aethelric and Eadnoth rang the monastery bells until they cracked.⁴⁸ Abbot Wulfsige of Ramsey perished

with Bishop Eadnoth I at Ashingdon in 1016.⁴⁹ When Abbot Withman (1016-20) complained to Bishop Aethelric of the bad character of the Ramsey monks an episcopal visitation followed and Withman was shown to be at fault.⁵⁰ Interesting light is shed by the Ramsey *Chronicle* on Anglo-Danish relations in the diocese, for on two recorded occasions Bishop Aethelric bought estates from Danes who believed their lives to be in danger from their English neighbours and were quitting.⁵¹ The records of Peterborough and Thorney relate to the benefactions of archbishops of York in the first half of the eleventh century, and do not add to our information about the bishops of Dorchester ; neither does the fabricated history of Crowland by pseudo-Ingulf.

A bull of Pope Nicholas II, addressed in 1061 to Wulfwig, bishop of Dorchester (1053-67), reveals that Ailric, archbishop of York, had seized the diocese of Lindsey from Dorchester. Ailric is a form of the name Aethelric, and an Aethelric, a monk of Peterborough monastery, was archbishop of York for the limited period 1041-2, before being removed and appointed instead to Durham where he acquired for himself, in some quarters, an unenviable reputation.⁵² Lindsey ceased to be a part of the diocese of Dorchester, therefore, from 1041-2 to 1061, when Pope Nicholas II restored it to Wulfwig.⁵³ Disputed jurisdiction over Lindsey was again a bone of contention after the Norman Conquest ; and although the council of Winchester (1072) ruled that the Humber was the southern boundary of York, twenty years later Robert Bloett, bishop of Lincoln, still had to buy the support of William Rufus against the claims of York.

Apart from the rule of Ulf, bishop of Dorchester (1049-52), one of Edward the Confessor's unpopular Norman bishops, concerning whose episcopate the writer of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (*D*, *sub anno* 1049) refused to go into details, the general history of Dorchester in the last years of the Old English Church appears to have been uneventful. The last Saxon bishop, Wulfwig, died in 1067, the year that William the Conqueror built castles at York, Nottingham and Lincoln. In 1072 the council of Winchester ordered that cathedral sees be sited in towns rather than in more isolated villages, and a programme of diocesan re-organisation was inaugurated. Dorchester was found too poor to remain the seat of bishops and, in 1072-3,⁵⁴ Remigius, first Norman bishop of Dorchester, who had styled himself in his profession to William the Conqueror as bishop of Dorchester, Leicester and Lincoln,⁵⁵ moved the site of his bishopric to Lincoln. He is said to have found the whole diocese in a very unsatisfactory state and was obliged to undertake long tours of visitation and exhortation.⁵⁶ The move to Lincoln, a prosperous and expanding city, protected by a castle, was part of the work of reform in the diocese of Dorchester, in itself only a part of that wider reform of the whole Anglo-Saxon Church which the Normans at least considered an urgent necessity.

NOTES

1. ed. C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols. (1896), and hereafter cited in the text as *Hist. Eccles.*
2. F. M. Stenton, "Lindsey and its Kings", *Essays in History Presented to R. L. Poole*, ed. H. W. C. Davis (1927), 136-150.
3. ed. B. Thorpe, *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis* (1848), I, 240.
4. *ibid.*, I, 240.
5. On the identification of Syddensis: E. M. Sympson, "Where was Sidnacester?", *Reports and Papers of the Architectural and Archaeological Societies of the county of Lincoln . . .*, xxviii (1905), 87-94 (91-94); and J. W. F. Hill, *Medieval Lincoln* (1948), 22-3, 377-8.
6. *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi*, I, 239.
7. *ibid.*, I, 242: cf. 240. By an error, in his text he makes Saxwulf of Lichfield bishop at Leicester, but the episcopal lists (241-2) show that this was not so and they, probably, represent an older tradition.
8. *ibid.*, I, 240.
9. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddi Stephanus* (1927), 92-3.
10. *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi*, I, 242.
11. Episcopal lists may be consulted in Florence of Worcester, *op. cit.*, and in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton (Rolls Series, 1870). For the type of original list these writers used, H. Sweet, *The Oldest English Texts, Early English Texts Society*, 83 (1885), 167, T. Wright & J. O. Halliwell, *Reliquiae Antiquae* II (1845), 169; M. R. James, *Catalogue of Manuscripts, Corpus Christi Coll., Cambridge* (1912), I, 432. On the subject in general see the recent study by R. I. Page, "Anglo-Saxon Episcopal Lists," *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, ix (1965), 71-95, and x (1966), 2-24. His argument (ix, 92-3) that Cuthwine was bishop of Lichfield, not Leicester, is unconvincing, (cf. fn. 7).
12. *Symeon of Durham*, ed. T. Arnold (Rolls Series, 1885), II, 30.
13. W. de Gray Birch, *Cart[ularium] Sax[onicum]* (3 vols., 1885-93), nos. 312, 416.
14. *Cart. Sax.*, nos. 421, 535. On Eadwulf's interesting profession of obedience to Canterbury (no. 276), see F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (1955 ed.), 226.
15. ed. M. Tangl, *Mon. Germ. Hist., Epistolae Selectae*, I (1916), 75.
16. *Cart. Sax.* no. 241.
17. *Cart. Sax.* no. 293.
18. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 308, 251.
19. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 309, 312.
20. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 356, 432 (note).
21. *Cart. Sax.* no. 434.
22. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 443, 535.
23. D. P. Kirby, Northumbria in the Reign of Alfred the Great, *Trans. of the Architectural and Archaeological Soc. of Durham and Northumberland*, xi (1965), 335-46. cf. on the East Anglian Church, D. Whitelock, "The Conversion of the Eastern Danelaw", *Saga Book of the Viking Society* xii, pt. 3 (1941), 159-76.
24. ed. B. Thorpe, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (2 vols., 1861). The most recent translation is that by D. Whitelock, D. C. Douglas, and S. I. Tucker, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (1961).
25. A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents* III (1871), 129.
26. F. T. Wainwright, "Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians", *The Anglo-Saxons*, (Studies presented to Bruce Dickins), ed. P. Clemoes (1959), 53-69.
27. F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 352-4.
28. A. Campbell, "The End of the Kingdom of Northumbria", *English Historical Review* lvii (1942), 91-7.
29. *Cart. Sax.* no. 614. F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 432.
30. *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi*, I, 136.
31. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 642, 716.
32. *Cart. Sax.* no. 719.
33. D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, I (1955), 95.
34. W. G. Searle, *Anglo-Saxon Bishops, Kings, and Nobles* (1899), 212.
35. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 890, 891.

36. *Cart. Sax.* nos. 899, 900.
37. *Florentii Wigorniensis monachi*, I, 242 ; *cf. Gesta Pontificum*, 311.
38. *Cart. Sax.* no. 1211, and *cf. English Historical Documents*, I, 514. On the other hand, Oscytel witnessed as archbishop in 956, *Cart. Sax.* no. 1348. In 959, Beorhthelm, archbishop of Canterbury, is styled simply bishop: *Cart. Sax.* no. 1045.
39. J. M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* (1839-48), nos. 698, 710.
40. *Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (Rolls Series, 1863), 78-83.
41. *Gesta Pontificum*, 100. On the problem of Nottinghamshire, where the church of York certainly acquired an important centre at Southwell (*Cart. Sax.* no. 1348), *cf. The Victoria County History of Notts.*, ed. W. Page, II (1910), 38-9. The shire was regarded as belonging to the church of York after the Norman Conquest.
42. F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 383, n.l.
43. J. M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, no. 689 ; *cf. English Historical Documents*, I, 527.
44. *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, ed. A. J. Robertson (1956), 213, 465-6.
45. *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E. O. Blake (Camden Third Series, xcii) (1962), 402.
46. *Chronicon Abbatiae Ramesiensis*, ed. W. Dunn Macray (Rolls Series, 1886).
47. *ibid.*, 110, 112, 115, 120, 148.
48. *ibid.*, 112.
49. *ibid.*, 117.
50. *ibid.*, 121.
51. *ibid.*, 140, 143.
52. *Symeon of Durham*, I, 91-2.
53. *Registrum Antiquissimum of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln*, I, ed. C. W. Foster (Lincoln Record Society, xxvii) (1931), 186-7.
54. *Henrici Archidiaconi Huntendunensis Historia Anglorum*, ed. T. Arnold (Rolls Series, 1879), 212. On the date, J. W. F. Hill, *Medieval Lincoln*, 64-5.
55. *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, vii, ed. J. F. Dimock (Rolls Series, 1877) 151.
56. *ibid.*, vii, 20.