

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC



Renato Rodrigues da Silva

The Anglo-Saxon Elite

Northumbrian Society
in the Long Eighth Century

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The Early Medieval North Atlantic

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*Northumbrian Society in the
Long Eighth Century*

Renato Rodrigues da Silva

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*These charnel pastures serve as a reminder, a memento
mori, never letting us forget that though Olympus
pierce the very skies, in all the history of Earth, there's
never been a heaven; never been a house of gods...
...that was not built on human bones.*

Alan Moore, *Miracleman*, Book Three: Olympus.



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Abbreviations

ANS	<i>Anglo-Norman Studies.</i>
ASC	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , trans. by Whitelock, <i>EHD</i> .
ASSAH	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History.</i>
BAR	<i>British Archaeological Reports.</i>
BAR Brit. Sr.	<i>British Archaeological Reports, British Series.</i>
BEASE	<i>The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England.</i> 2nd edition. Ed. M. Lapidge, John Blair, Simon Keynes, Donald Scragg. Oxford: Blackwell, 2014.
CASS	Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. Available at http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/ (accessed 20 March 2021).
DLV	<i>Durham Liber Vitae: London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A. VII: Edition and Digital Facsimile with Introduction, Codicological, Prosopographical and Linguistic Commentary, and Indexes.</i> Ed. D. Rollason and L. Rollason. 3 vols. London: The British Library, 2007; also the digital version at 'Durham Liber Vitae', The British Library Digitised Manuscripts Available at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_domitian_a_vii_fso01r (accessed 2 March 2021).
EEE	<i>Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertvm Episcopvm</i> , 'Bede's letter to Ecgberth'. In: Christopher Grocock and Ian N. Wood (ed. and trans.), <i>The Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow.</i> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 123–161.
EHD	<i>English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042</i> , ed. Dorothy Whitelock. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955.
EngHR	English Historical Review.
HA	<i>Historia Abbatvm.</i> In: Christopher Grocock and Ian N. Wood (ed. and trans.), <i>The Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow.</i> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 21–75.
HE	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum</i> , ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.



- HR* *Historia regum*, in *Symeonis Monachis Opera Omnia: Volume 2*, ed. Thomas Arnold. RS75. London: Kessinger Publishing, 1885.
- MEC* *Medieval Early Coinage*
- ODNB* *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/>.
- S (number) *The Electronic Sawyer – Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters*, <http://www.esawyer.org.uk/about/index.html> (accessed 10 March 2021).
- VCA* *Vita santi Cuthberti auctore anonymo*. In: Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 59–139.
- VCB* *Vita santi Cuthberti auctore Beda*. In: Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 141–307.
- VW* Stephanus, *Vita Wilfridi*. In: Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927.

Introduction

*I have made a heap of all that I could find.*¹

Nennius

In 2013, a survey on British social class divisions was published. Titled ‘The Great British Class Survey’, the research was done in partnership with the BBC, and was ‘one of the largest ever studies of class in Great Britain’, based on 160,000 responses. It concluded that British people can be divided into seven different social classes, ranging from the elite (the top tier) to the precariat (the lowest).² The survey was acclaimed for its scale and also because it took into consideration not only so-called economic capital (income and assets), but also cultural capital and social capital. The survey followed the method developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1960s survey on French culture, organized and published in his book *La Distinction*.³

The ‘Great British Class Survey’ is very interesting and bold. The study pointed out the complexities of British social differentiation, but it only alluded to a connection between the increasing number of social classes and the distance between the elite levels and the ones below. The research thus missed something very important: the strong focus on the empirical data led the sociologists to omit analysis of the historicity of social classes. Yet, they alluded to something even more crucial: despite what is alleged in neo-liberal thought on the subject, and, more currently, in neo-right and alt-right speeches, social classes still matter.

This book sets out to examine evidence for the crystallization of the aristocracy during the long eighth century. The research aims to define the aristocracy, explore its characters and internal stratification and examine its relationship with other sectors of society. It focuses on the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, and approaches the evidence from this period

1 *Ego autem coacervavi omne quod inveni.* D. N. Dumville (ed.), Nennius, *Historia Brittonum*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985, p. 303.

2 Sam Jones, Great British Class Survey Finds Seven Social Classes in UK. *The Guardian*, 2013.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979.

from a theoretical perspective that is self-consciously and unashamedly Marxist. This approach to the Northumbrian evidence is unusual, and it is from this that the originality of the research derives. In its theoretically driven approach, the current book is inspired by the works of Timothy Reuter.⁴ The great question Reuter addressed was the early medieval aristocracy, and he was not afraid to draw models, concepts and insights from other disciplines such as anthropology.⁵ His models for understanding the aristocracy focused primarily on the relations into which aristocratic families were inserted, rather than the institutions. Reuter understood that social practice creates institutions, and that it was the *praxis* of the aristocracy, rather than what they said about themselves, that should be examined. However, Reuter also paid close attention to the dynamics of rule and its associated rituals.⁶ His influence on this book is responsible for the themes related to the aristocracy (dynamics and rituals of rule, warfare, social prominence, etc.), the aristocratic nature of the Church (with its internal levels and hierarchies) and the emphasis on social practice.

Most of the analysis of Anglo-Saxon England must refer at some point to Northumbria, generally in the seventh and eighth centuries. The necessity of addressing Northumbria arises from the source of a great hub of primary sources: Bede.⁷ The works of Bede are so valuable for early medieval studies that they exert their own gravitational pull on historians. Bede's writings illuminate Northumbrian history but also cast the remainder of the eighth century into darker shadow by comparison. Moreover, there is a significant shortage of written sources in the early ninth century, which helped to crystallize the interpretation of the disintegration and decline of Northumbrian society.

4 Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Medieval Nobility: Studies on the Ruling Classes of France and Germany from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 1978; Reuter (ed.), *The Greatest Englishman: essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton*. Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980; Reuter, The "Imperial Church System" of the Ottonian and Salian rulers: A Reconsideration. *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982), 347–374; Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c. 800–1056*. London; New York: Longman, 1991; Reuter, "You Can't Take It with You". Testaments, Hoards and Moveable Wealth in Europe, 600–1100. In: Elizabeth Tyler (ed.), *Treasure in the Medieval West*. York: York Medieval Press, 2000, pp. 11–24; Reuter and Janet L. Nelson, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

5 Patricia Skinner, Introduction. In: Skinner (ed.) *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History: The Legacy of Timothy Reuter*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2009, p. 1.

6 Henry Mayr-Harting, Foreword. In: Skinner (ed.), *Challenging the Boundaries of Medieval History*.

7 The bibliography on Bede is vast. The most recent compilations are: George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009; Scott DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*. 1st edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.



As the proposed interpretation of the long eighth century is focused on the aristocracy as a class, and social domination is its main element, this research proposes a new approach and to narrative of the history of Northumbria itself. Traditionally, historiography discusses Northumbrian history following the path of Anglo-Saxon infiltration (sixth century), the unification of Deira and Bernicia and Christianization (both early seventh century), the Golden Age (late seventh and early eighth century), political instability and crisis during the eighth century, climaxing with the raids that mark the start of the Viking period.⁸ The perspective assumed throughout this book, however, points to a different interpretation: the history of Northumbria as a history of class dominance, and the crisis and ‘destruction’ of the kingdom as a development of its own historical contradictions. A second important point that rises from the theoretical perspective assumed here is that the focus on class relations leads to the interpretation of both secular and clerical aristocracy as part of the same group, albeit with certain specificities. So, instead of following a traditional path that emphasizes the distinction between these spheres, this book will highlight their ties and connections, as well as their similarities.⁹ The class focus also proposes a non-traditional understanding of kingship, since the king is understood as part of the ruling class (to whom the king belongs and at whose hands he sometimes perishes). Finally, the Marxist approach can also produce different questions and interpretations of the primary sources, enabling us to view them in a new light. In this sense, a confraternity book like the Durham *Liber Vitae* is read as a book of privileges; the *Historia Regum* is perceived as a record of the autonomy and rise of the *duces*; coins as evidence for surplus from class exploitation; feasts, food and its absence as manifestations of power and networks of sociability; death rites as a moment of class apotheosis.

The structure of the book requires a methodological explanation. The decision to address ‘production’, ‘circulation’ and ‘consumption’ is not accidental. In his introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx pointed out the possibility of dividing societal spheres into these three elements in order to achieve a holistic understanding of a certain society.¹⁰ ‘Production’, ‘circulation’ and ‘consumption’ are also key elements of analysis in Hansen and Wickham’s

8 D. W. Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

9 Idem, pp. 171, 198–208.

10 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Revised edition. London: Penguin Classics, 1993, pp. 88, 98.



study of the eighth century, which perceives the century as a long one.¹¹ Opting for this triad of terms is also a way of stating right from the beginning the theoretical background on which the research is built.

The study of the aristocracy is not new in Anglo-Saxon studies. However, what is generally produced in such studies is actually the study of the male elite. In order to understand the role played by the other half of the ruling class, this book could either include a chapter about women and gender relations or weave the role of women into each chapter and discussion. A whole chapter dedicated to the discussion of women could be seen as an artificial focus, since women are part of all the dimensions of social life and of all themes discussed throughout the investigation. Another important point is how the historical sources actually tend to minimize the role of women. In other words, the underrepresentation of women in historiography in general is a reflection of the same phenomenon in the historical sources. This gap simultaneously limits historical analysis and enlightens us about gender relations in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria. Women tended to be subsumed by those who composed the written sources. However, this does not mean that they were not important. Even in the most basic, biological sense, women are a vital part of aristocratic production and reproduction. Therefore, whenever possible, each chapter contains a discussion about the role of women within the topic the chapter addresses. Unfortunately, primary sources do not always make this possible. It is also significant that women are more visible through the archaeological data, especially those related to funerary rites.¹² This approach to the question of women in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria seemed much more fluid and natural than simply addressing 'women' within a token chapter.

This book does not start by looking directly at the mechanisms or core relations that are essential to the reproduction of the aristocracy. In other words, it does not start by deconstructing the aristocracy. The first chapter concerns the 'appearance' of the aristocracy, focusing on both the extant evidence for the aristocracy and on how the aristocracy represented itself within those primary sources. This approach has a dual objective. The first is to present to the reader the primary sources available for examining the aristocracy, as well as addressing the author's understanding of the sources. The second objective relates to the theoretical approach of the research. The Marxist perspective does not ignore the way social phenomena are perceived,

11 Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham, eds, *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.

12 See Chapter 6.



since this perception is a very important part of the society itself. This perspective requires us to address the appearance of these social phenomena, since the appearance of any phenomenon is also a manifestation of the relations that underpin them. This is the reason why *Das Kapital* begins:

The wealth of societies in which a capitalistic mode of production prevails, appears as a 'gigantic collection of commodities' and the singular commodity appears as the elementary form of wealth. Our investigation begins accordingly with the analysis of the commodity.¹³

In other words, Marx's proposed study of the phenomenon he called 'capital' must start with how wealth 'appears', how it is perceived. Before analysing it in depth, and reaching its essence, its appearance (in the sense of what is visible) must be taken into consideration. The same perspective is valid and important for other realities and temporalities (like 'the Middle Ages') since it represents a question of methodology. This is the path taken by the current book. The first step will be the analysis of the aristocracy's appearance (in the sense of visibility, not meaning 'emergence'), before analysing its essence.

Another important point needs to be made about the methodology adopted here. A decision was made to select those pieces of evidence that could best address the questions asked. As Marc Bloch suggested, primary sources are like witnesses on a trial: they only speak when asked, and some are better suited to answer some questions, while not as valuable to others.¹⁴ Therefore, the methodology adopted for each chapter is to start by discussing a general question (such as 'production' or 'circulation'), then move on to the discussion of that question in the early Middle Ages or Anglo-Saxon England more generally, and finally address how this phenomenon is observed in Northumbria through a primary source case study. Each chapter concludes with an attempt to dialectically connect all these dimensions and layers of the phenomenon. At the same time, the chapters are interconnected in order to create a holistic and dialectical approach.

Chapter 1 addresses the appearance of the aristocracy. It examines specific Latin nouns in order to understand how their usage can refer to specific groups within the aristocracy, and the crystallization of its elite (mainly those called *dux*); the role and visibility of women, almost exclusively

13 Karl Marx and Ernest Mandel, trans., *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin Classics, 1992, p. 83.

14 Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954, p. 53.

reserved for those at the apex of the ruling class (abbesses and queens); the tales of social mobility which actually present such mobility as an impossibility; and how the aristocracy and its relations are crystallized in a confraternity book by the end of the long eighth century. The argument of the first chapter is that the forms in which the aristocracy make itself visible are expressions of their power, rank and internal hierarchy, and that these expressions change throughout the long eighth century.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of production in terms of class relations. The key arguments of this chapter are that the main classes of the period are the aristocracy and the peasantry, and that both intra-class and inter-class relations follow a logic of encompassing spheres. This principle means that class relations do not erase each other, but rather, fit a bigger puzzle.

Chapter 3 addresses the circulation of wealth among the aristocracy. The first part addresses land donation, with the hypothesis that land donation expressed the process of empowerment and relative autonomy of the aristocracy. The impossibility of infinite donation also revealed the contradictions and limits of a class rule based on the constant acquisition of land and workforce. The second part of the chapter addresses coins and coinage. There are two main arguments here: 1) that coins can be understood as an expression of class power since they are also part of the extraction of surplus by the aristocracy; 2) that the early coinage of Northumbria is clerical, and it emerges in connection to the access to the surplus of the peasantry, as well as to the workers who specialized in precious metal.

Chapter 4 addresses the production of history in eighth-century Northumbria. Its main argument is that control of the devices that allow ideological reproduction is the mortar of the ruling class ideology. In this sense, the chapter tries to establish the different forms of reckoning time and how they are connected to and converge in a particular sense of historicity.

Chapter 5 addresses consumption, through the practices associated with eating. It argues that patterns of consumption must follow class rank and express prestige. Feasts and meat consumption were a practice of the elite, both lay and ecclesiastical, while for the peasantry protein was obtained from chicken and fowl.

Chapter 6 is the last chapter and addresses the rites of death. Its main contention is that funerary rites were an essential part of celebrating the life of the deceased, and as such it expressed their social class of origin. In that sense, death appeared in Anglo-Saxon life as an element that converged all topics discussed throughout the book – surplus acquisition, time-reckoning, circulation and reproduction, and so on – in a ceremony of class apotheosis.

Marxist concepts are commonly a matter of controversy among Marxist thinkers. In this sense, it is vital to define three main concepts and their inter-relationship. Forces of production can be defined as the combination of the means of labour (land, infrastructure, accumulated knowledge, tools, etc.) with human labour power; at least since the 1960s, it is also acknowledged that ideal elements are also a vital part of the forces of production.¹⁵ Relations of production are formed by 'the economic ownership of productive forces'.¹⁶ Relations of production may be interpreted broadly, since the German word *verhältnis* can mean 'relation', 'proportion', or 'ratio'. In this sense, relations of production can be used in a quantitative or qualitative sense, or a dialectical combination of both. However, although they have a wide range of meanings, they refer to socio-economic relationships that are derived from the organization of production. Relations of production and forces of production are connected concepts in Marxist thought. In Marx's own words,

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.¹⁷

The mode of production is the articulation and combination of the productive forces and the relations of production. Although there is a long discussion in Marxist theory about how this articulation works, it is acknowledged that both of them are necessarily interconnected in a dialectical way, which means that each dimension modifies the other at the same time as it changes itself.¹⁸ In this sense, the mode of production is a dynamic and historical system, not a static model of a society.

15 Laurence Harris, Forces and Relations of Production. In: Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 204–206.

16 Idem, p. 204.

17 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015, p. 3.

18 Susan Himmelweit, Mode of Production. In: Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, pp. 379–381.

The definition of 'aristocracy' is also vital for the research. The current work understands 'aristocracy' as the ruling social class, whose members are detached from the process of production and live off the products of the labour of another class (or classes). Although they form a social group, the aristocracy has its own internal hierarchies. The aristocracy also has forms of expressing its own social distinctions, built on patterns of consumption and the way it is perceived by other members of society. The elements of distinction converge to form a social identity that reproduce the aristocracy in ideological terms. Moreover, the ways in which prestige, status and wealth are displayed are gendered, and this distinction is vital to the reproduction of the aristocracy.

The goal of this book is to establish the historicity of a particular social class in a specific social context. However, even in a remote past, a historian's object of study is never exclusively about the past. There is always a dialectical connection between and an expression of two realities – the one in which the research was produced and the one to which it refers. One possibility of connection was explored by Marx in his famous aphorism, 'Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape', referring to capitalist and pre-capitalist realities.¹⁹ In this sense, a study that highlights the historicity of a social class in the past is also one that can indirectly shine a light on current social classes and relations. It is my hope that this book will make these connections more visible.

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19 Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 105.



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