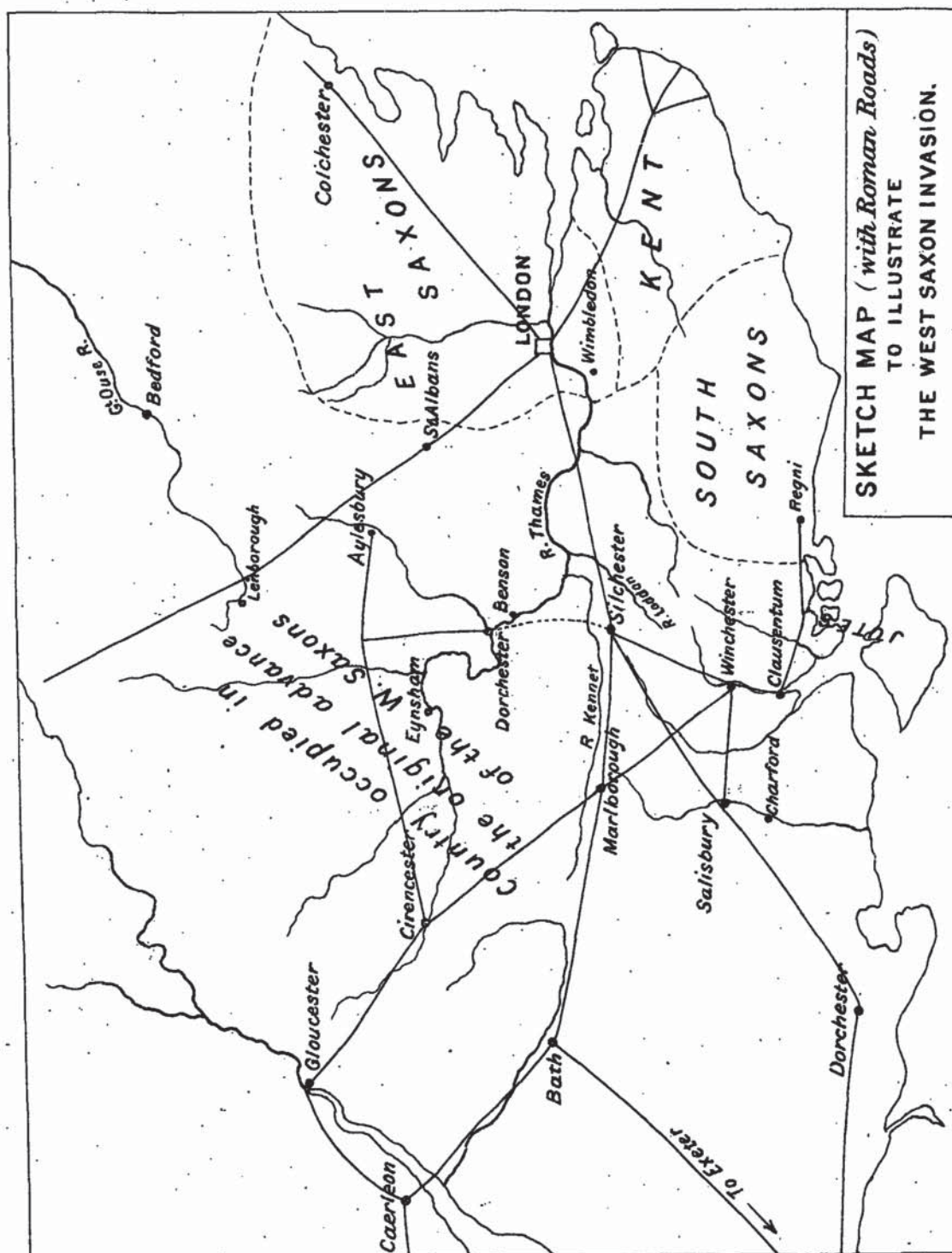


THE WEST-SAXON OCCUPATION OF HAMPSHIRE.

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A two-fold apology may be offered for the insertion in these Proceedings of a paper on so trite a subject as the story of the West-Saxon settlement in the Hampshire area. In the first place, the history of that settlement has a most important bearing upon the whole early history of Southern Britain. For if the generally accepted account be true, Hampshire can claim the unique honour of having been the birthplace of the British Empire. In the second place, the whole story has acquired new interest from the tendency of certain recent writers to discredit what has come to be called the "Cerdic legend," and to point to the necessity for reconstructing the early history of Wessex. The object of the present paper is to outline a possible reconstruction, in the hope that more competent authorities than the writer can claim to be, may be led to re-investigate the facts for themselves, in a way that will either establish the older account beyond the reach of criticism, or demolish it in favour of a very different version.

The usually accepted story, as told by J. R. Green and his school, is so well-known that here it will be necessary to give only the barest outline. That a West-Saxon war band under Cerdic appeared off the Hampshire coast towards the end of the 5th century, effected a landing on the western shore of Southampton Water, and fought its way north-westwards until it crushed the British forces at Charford-on-Avon; that from this beginning followed the occupation of Winchester, of Southern Hants, of Dorset, Wilts, North Hants, and Berks; that Wessex by the beginning of the 7th century had expanded northwards beyond the Thames—these are statements accepted until recently as established history. First, a landing on the



south coast, followed immediately by a period of warfare; then a period of consolidation around the Winchester centre; and, finally, a period of steady expansion northwards and westwards; these, we are told, were the stages of the occupation.

Some years ago Sir H. H. Howorth, in a paper in the "English Historical Review,"¹ threw doubt on this received account. Since then, Mr. H. M. Chadwick² has subjected the whole basis of the story to a most rigorous criticism, and, though he does little by way of reconstruction, it must be admitted that after such destructive handling, the traditional account can hardly be rehabilitated. Hence, in spite of the warning conveyed in a certain well-known but uncomplimentary proverb, I will venture where Mr. Chadwick hesitates to tread, and will endeavour to sketch an alternative account of the early West-Saxon settlements, which may satisfy the requirements of his own and other recent researches.

The "Cerdic legend" just outlined rests almost entirely upon several very doubtful entries in the early part of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle." Not only is there good reason for doubting the credibility of these entries from the character of the early part of the Chronicle itself, but evidence drawn from other sources points to conclusions with which, as they stand, they cannot be reconciled. This evidence we shall have to consider. It includes the statements of Bede in his "*Historia Ecclesiastica*," the evidence of archaeological discoveries, and the facts of local geography. To these might be added such evidence as we can gather from our knowledge of the Hampshire area in Roman times.

At this point it will be convenient to cite from the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" itself those entries which form the basis of the story here questioned. They are as follows:—

459.—Two ealdormen, Cerdic and Cynric his son, came to Britain with five ships, at a place which is called Cerdicesora, and the same day they fought against the Welsh.

¹ Vol. XIII.

² "Origin of the English Nation" (C.U. Press, 1906).

508.—Cerdic and Cynric slew a British king, whose name was Natanleod, and five thousand men with him. The district was afterwards called Natanleag as far as Cerdicesford.

519.—Cerdic and Cynric began to reign, and the same year they fought against the Britons at a place which is now called Cerdicesford.

527.—Cerdic and Cynric fought against the Britons at a place which is called Cerdicesleag.

530.—Cerdic and Cynric obtained possession of the Isle of Wight . . .

534.—[Death of Cerdic].

552.—Cynric fought against the Britons at a place which is called Searoburg and put the Britons to flight.

556.—Cynric and Ceawlin fought against the Britons at Beranburg.

Other entries of the same period record the landing of Port and Maegla at Portsmouth, and the occupation of the Isle of Wight by Stuf and Wihtgar.

Now let us briefly examine these statements. (We may set aside certain difficulties of dates and numbers, for although these may be inaccurate, the record itself may enshrine a genuine tradition). The feature that arouses suspicion is the close correspondence between place name and personal name. Cerdic lands at Cerdicesora, and battles are fought at Cerdicesford and Cerdicesleag; Port lands at Portsmouth; Wihtgar seizes Wihtgaraesburg (Carisbrooke); Natanleod rules a district of Natanleag. Such close correspondence strongly suggests that the personal names are derived from ancient place names, and the suggestion is strengthened by the fact that Cerdic is a Celtic name. It would appear that names like Cerdicesora, Natanleag, Portsmouth, already existed, and that from these personal names were derived to give definiteness and point to a vague tradition of invasion. The Wessex chronicler, writing at a time when the West-Saxon people had established a firm hold over Hampshire, seems to have found this vague tradition of early invasion, and, in the true

spirit of his kind, appropriated it as an achievement of his ancestors, deriving names in an obvious way from existing pre-Saxon place names.

Let us assume then, provisionally, that there *was* some invasion of Southern Hampshire during the early part of the 6th century, which, however, is not proved to be a West-Saxon invasion. If the invaders were not West-Saxons, who were they? The "Historia Ecclesiastica" of Bede, a much more trustworthy authority than these early annals of the Chronicle, will help us here. Bede wrote more than a century after the date assigned for the arrival of Cerdic, at a time when almost the whole country had become Christianized, when a diocesan organisation had been set up, when the various Kingdoms had become consolidated, and when (as later seventh-century records abundantly show), there was much intercourse between north and south. He had something of the true historian's spirit, and he had also the means of obtaining accurate information. Moreover, the Chronicle itself as we now have it is a much later work than the "Ecclesiastical History." Now Bede tells us distinctly (H.E. I., 15) that "From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent and the Isle of Wight, *and those also in the provinces of the West-Saxons, who are to this day called Jutes, situated opposite to the Isle of Wight.*"

Bede also tells how the Jutish Isle of Wight was conquered by Wulfhere of Mercia in 661, and given to the South Saxons, from whom it was violently wrested twenty years later by Cadwalla of Wessex. His language makes it quite clear that he regarded the island, if not also the Jutish "Meonwara" district of the mainland, as being quite distinct and separate from Wessex until the conquest by Cadwalla.

Taking these statements of Bede in connection with the vague tradition of an early invasion embodied in the "Cedric legend," may we not take it as probable that there *was* such an invasion, but that it was an invasion of *Jutes* and not of West-Saxons at all? The West-Saxon chronicler, writing when Wessex was firmly established on the southern coast of Hampshire, claims for his own people an invasion that was really Jutish. "Here," he seems to reason, "are the West-Saxons,

here they have been for long years past, what more natural than that this dim tradition of invasion should represent the original appearance of the West-Saxon people in the land?"

The consequences of the above conclusion are at once obvious. If the suggested account be true, then Southern Hampshire, far from being the first, was one of the last of the West-Saxon conquests; far from being the original sea-base of a *northward* expansion, it was the place where a *southward* expansion reached its limit. Let us glance at other evidence to see whether the suggestion here made can find support in addition to that already given: later entries in the "Chronicle" will help us here.

From about the year 570 the records in the Chronicle appear to be more worthy of credence. They are fuller, more circumstantial, and contain place names that can be identified with certainty. An impartial examination of the West-Saxon entries of this period will afford a strong clue to the real story of West-Saxon, as distinguished from Jutish invasion. In 568 the West-Saxons overcome the men of Kent at Wibbandun (Wimbledon). Three years later they fight the Britons at Bedcanford (Bedford), and capture the four villages ("tunas") of Lygeanburg, Aegelsburg, Bænesington and Egonesham. These names may be identified respectively with Lenborough (near Buckingham), Aylesbury, Benson and Eynsham. A continued advance westward is indicated by the capture in 577 of the three "cities" ("ceastro") Gloucester, Cirencester, and Bath.

To state at once the conclusion to which these more trustworthy entries appear to point. The "West"-Saxons are, as we should expect, those who planted themselves to the westward of the "East"-Saxons. The situation of the early Kingdom of Essex is the dominating fact. The East-Saxons hold London. Surrey, the "South-rice," is Essex beyond the Thames. The East-Saxons, therefore, are astride the main highway into central England; they command it seawards, they hold the first (or last) crossing, at the site of London Bridge; and they are free to move into the interior whenever the need arises. The West-Saxons, then, would appear as a migrating host from Essex, checking Kentish opposition at

Wimbledon, crossing the Chilterns, and seizing the line of the Upper Thames, passing thence into the Lower Severn valley, to be checked there, apparently, by the Welsh hills in front, and the Mendips and Wiltshire Hills on their left. The entry of the West-Saxons into Hampshire, proceeding perhaps by steady infiltration, must have followed the seizure by the invaders of the line formed by the Chilterns and the Berkshire Downs. The course of the Loddon, and the route of the Reading-Basingstoke railway probably mark the line of entry. Three centuries later, the Danes, coming from the Midlands, followed the same route until they were checked at Basing. Probably Hampshire was never in the main line of West-Saxon advance, though it *was* in the main line of West-Saxon retreat when the southward pressure of Mercia grew great in the seventh century.

Other evidence tends to support the conclusion that Hampshire was first entered by the West-Saxons from the Thames valley, and not from the south coast at all. Winchester is not so much as mentioned in the Chronicle until the year 643, the year in which the Old Minster was founded. In face of the steadily accumulating evidence of continuous life in Romano-British cities from Roman into Saxon times, it would seem incredible that such a city as Venta Belgarum should be left entirely without mention for 150 years after the supposed "Cerdic" invasion is supposed to have taken place. This must always remain an insoluble difficulty for the advocates of the "Cerdic" story. Moreover, the first ecclesiastical centre of the West-Saxons was not Winchester, but Dorchester-on-Thames, in the very centre of that Upper Thames district, where, according to the present theory, the West-Saxon consolidation took place. Hither came St. Birinus on his mission in 635. Even Bede, whose accounts of early missions are full and circumstantial, and who wrote when Winchester had become the capital of Wessex, does not mention the city in connection with St. Birinus. At Dorchester was the royal palace; at Dorchester the King was baptized; Dorchester was then the centre of a West-Saxon domain, which stretched northwards across the Thames far into the Midlands. The founding of the Old Minster at Winchester in 643, and the final removal

to that city of the Dorchester bishopric in 680 mark the stages of that steady southward retreat which the West-Saxons had to make before the formidable power of Mercia. For many years the Thames, far from being the central artery of their kingdom, was not even their northern boundary. Wulfhere of Mercia even conquered the Isle of Wight in 661. How strange it is, and yet, apparently, how unavoidable, that we should have to view the entry of the West-Saxons into the Southampton district not as the advance guard of a conquering imperial race, but as the crushed remnant of a defeated people!

The geography of Southern Hampshire further strengthens this conclusion. In Roman times the southern coasts can have been little better than wild stretches of tangled forest and treacherous marsh. They are difficult and wild enough even to-day. Roman remains, with the exception of Clausentum and Portchester, are found almost entirely upon the uplands of the centre and north. The two places just mentioned mark the time when, probably in the third century, it became necessary to guard against an attack in the rear.¹ For the *sea* was then the rear of the county; its "face" was turned towards the north-east.

Again, what have the results of archæology to say to this conclusion? *No West-Saxon remains whatever* of an early date have been found in Hampshire. Some early remains have been found in the Meon valley, but these are admittedly Jutish, and their discovery materially strengthens the theory here put forward. On the other hand, the peculiar "Wessex" form of brooch (as Mr. R. Smith points out in the "Victoria County History"), is most commonly found in the area between the rivers Severn, Thames, Avon, and Ouse, the very district in which, as I have already claimed, the West-Saxon power was first consolidated. The fact that no traces of violent destruction and calamity are found in the county might also be mentioned as pointing to occupation by steady penetration rather than by sudden and violent seizure.

¹ When the usurper, Carausius (289-296), was holding Britain against the Roman fleets in the Channel.

But enough has been said already to show that the theory here put forward is supported by a considerable weight of evidence. Indeed, it might almost be said, that while there is evidence for this theory, there is little or none for that which it is intended to replace. Others, no doubt, will be able to raise objections which he who advocates a new theory may overlook or minimize; or they may strengthen with fresh evidence the conclusion already tentatively sketched. Much remains to be done ere the story of West-Saxon invasion in Hampshire can be clearly and unequivocally told. It would be a real achievement for the Hampshire Field Club if that body could earn the distinction of having finally settled a question which is of so much importance, not only to the history of the county, but to the general history of England.

NOTE.—The above paper was written before the author had seen Professor Oman's recent work on "England before the Norman Conquest" (Methuen). Professor Oman also rejects the "Cerdic legend," and, though he does not very definitely commit himself to an alternative, the theory of a movement from the region of Essex meets with much support from him.