Domnocc and Dunwich: A Reappraisal

Jeremy Haslam

The question of the site of the East Anglian see of Domnocc, founded by Felix in c. 631, has had a considerable airing. Stuart Rigold’s original paper (1961), in which he suggested its location near Felixstowe rather than at Dunwich, was followed by a short discussion by Dorothy Whitelock (1972: 4 n. 2) who favoured its traditional location at Dunwich. This in turn evoked a reply from Rigold (1974) who adduced further evidence in support of his original thesis. It is the purpose of this paper not so much to rehearse earlier arguments, or even to continue (at least as the primary motive) the “East Anglian game of musical ‘sedes episcopales’” (Campbell 1979: 36), but rather to extend the discussion laterally by considering these places within the wider context of the development of the historic landscape.

From the evidence of the place-name it can be inferred with some certainty that Domnocc was on a Roman site. It was called “civitas” by Bede, the Anglo-Saxon translation of which renders in civitate Domnocc as Domnoccceastre (Skeat 1913: 114–5; Whitelock 1972: 4 n. 2; Campbell 1979: 34). The significance of this has been brought out by James Campbell, who has observed that “Although he (Bede) names a considerable number of places at which monasteries were founded he never describes them as ... ‘civitas’... unless their vernacular names terminated in ‘caestir’...”. He goes on to conclude that “All the identifiable places which Bede calls, or usually calls, ‘civitas’ had a significant Roman past”. The correlation between the use of ‘civitas’ and the existence of Roman sites is, furthermore, found in other writers such as Eddius, and in charters earlier than c. 800 (ibid: 35). The same distinction is implied in the record of the Council of Clafeshe in 803 (Birch Cart. Sax.: 312), in which former Roman places with episcopal sees are called civitas (as Domnoccce civitatis), whilst those which were not (such as Elmham, Selsey and Lichfield) are described as ecclesia.2

Rigold’s primary hypothesis was that the Roman fort at Walton near Felixstowe was the site of Felix’s see (1961: 58). This was based on three premises: first, that the place-name Felixstowe preserves the memory of St Felix himself; second, that there was no identifiable Roman site at or near Dunwich; and third, that Dunwich itself was of little significance before the Conquest. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that the first of these premises carries rather less weight than Rigold supposed, and that the other two are called in question by new evidence. It is suggested that there was both a spatial and functional connection between Domnocc and Dunwich in the middle Saxon period, and that both were dependent in a number of ways upon a royal site at Blythburgh.

With regard to the first premise, Rigold’s conclusions about the significance of Walton Castle, including its early associations with St Felix, as well as the inferences from the slight archaeological evidence for its use at this period (Rigold 1974: 101–2), may well be correct. He maintained that, given that fortified Roman sites were “regular places for early missionary settlement”, it would indeed be “remarkable if Walton had not been so used” (1961: 58). Its use by Felix as a missionary station is likely to have been a consequence of the proximity of the royal centre at Rendlesham a little way up the Deben estuary (ibid.), just as the emporium at Ipswich in the next estuary to the south was also probably related to it (Wade 1981: 9; Hodges 1982: 70–1 and passim). Such considerations, however, do not by themselves necessarily demonstrate any connection of Walton Castle with the original see of Domnocc. As Whitelock has pointed out (1972: 4 n. 2, 5), there were doubtless a number of unrecorded and probably unidentifiable monastic sites of the period in East Anglia, and Felix’s activities were not likely to have been confined to one place or even one region alone.

Rigold’s second premise appears to be undermined by the convergence of at least four Roman roads towards Dunwich or thereabouts (Scarfe 1972: 56; West 1973: 25–37; Wade-Martins 1980: 4–5). From the fact that modern roads follow the alignments of parts of these it can be inferred that this site and/or its immediate area provided a settlement focus throughout the Saxon period. A hypothetical Saxon shore fort situated to the east of Dunwich (and now destroyed by the sea – see arguments below), placed approximately mid-way between Walton Castle and Burgh Castle, has been suggested as a focus for these roads (West 1973: 25–37). This would have been well placed to ensure the defence of the Blyth estuary. Warner, however, denies both the Roman date of the roads and the existence of any large Roman
Location of Dunwich and of other Anglo-Saxon sites in East Anglia mentioned in the text.
settlement at Dunwich (1984: 68–9), noting in part the absence of Roman finds from near Dunwich. But since any Roman site is likely to have been destroyed by the sea by the late Saxon period (see below), this argument loses much of its force. Furthermore, Dr Warner does not take into account the implications of the early names of the see (which if they relate to the Dunwich area, as he himself argues) imply the existence there of a fortified Roman site.

Rigold’s third premise, that Dunwich was “not of any commercial importance before the Conquest” (1961: 56), is also questionable. He argued from the lack of references to Dunwich before Domesday, and from the absence of coins attributable to a pre-Conquest mint there. This minimising view seems to have been followed by later writers. Dunwich is not mentioned by Martin Biddle in his survey of Anglo-Saxon towns (1976), nor does it figure as a pre-Conquest town in the 1976 survey of East Anglian towns (Carter 1976).4 It must be said, however, that Rigold’s arguments from silence do nothing to demonstrate the non-existence of a town at Dunwich before the Conquest. The case of Ipswich, which flourished as an important emporium for more than three centuries before its first mention in any document,5 is an analogous and salutary example. Neither is the absence of a mint at Dunwich in the middle Saxon period necessarily demonstrated by the lack of any mint signature on sceattas.6

Other more positive evidence, however, suggests that Dunwich was a place of some significance throughout the Saxon period. It was the largest town in Suffolk at the time of Domesday, and already had a sizeable population by 1066 (Darby 1971: 194).7 Most importantly, its earliest name-form (‘Duneuic’ at the time of Domesday) contains the -wic suffix, of which an important meaning is a middle Saxon coastal trading place and/or market town (Ekwall 1964; Biddle 1976: 114–5).8 As Ekwall has pointed out (ibid: 714–20) its name-forms are palatalised and singular, which characteristics are shared by those of other middle Saxon trading places such as Sandwich, Fordham, Hamwic and others. In contrast, the class of name-forms with the -wic element with the meaning ‘dwelling, dependent farm’ are usually unpalatalised and plural. From this alone, it can be inferred with some certainty that Dunwich was an emporium of the Hamwic type in the 7th–9th centuries.9

The hypothesis of the existence of a trading place at Dunwich in the middle Saxon period also accords with the evidence, equivocal though it is, relating to sea levels and coastal erosion at that time and later. Green has suggested (1961) that the East Anglian coast only began to sink in relation to the sea from the 14th century, with a consequent period of erosion in the late medieval and post-medieval periods. However, the evidence of Domesday Book for extensive erosion at Dunwich,10 combined with, for instance, recent observations in London (Wilcox 1975) shows that the coast was already sinking in the late Saxon period. More recently Dr Everard has put forward a detailed model of coastal change (1975), in which he identifies several phases of fluctuation in sea level around the east coast of England during the post-Roman period. These include transgressive phases in the late Roman and early Saxon periods, relatively low sea levels (and hence absence of erosion) in the 7th and 8th centuries, followed by a fluctuating but increasingly rapid rise in sea level in the late Saxon and medieval periods (ibid: 93–5 and fig. 55). This model would allow the development of a trading port at Dunwich during a period of relatively low and stable sea levels in the middle Saxon period, with coastal erosion progressing at varying rates from the late Saxon period onwards. This would carry the implication that the Roman shore fort on the former coast near Dunwich, postulated above, would have been destroyed by the sea – together with much if not all the middle Saxon wic – in the late Saxon phase of marine transgression and erosion.

This factor also supplies a single alternative explanation for two hitherto unconnected events: first, the extinction of the see of Domnoc in the 9th century; and second, the translation of Felix’s remains from Domnoc to Seham (Soham, Cambs). William of Malmesbury explained the disappearance of the see to its suppression in the 820s or 830s through impoverishment (Whitelock 1972: 19), while Whitelock herself accepts the ‘usual assumption’ that it was destroyed in the Viking invasions in the later 9th century (ibid: 1, 19). But the latest definite record of a bishop of Domnoc is in 845 (ibid: 21); and Felix’s remains were translated to the church of Soham at some time before that same church was destroyed by the Vikings in the 870’s (ibid: 4, n. 3). It seems on balance more probable that both the disappearance of the see and the translation of Felix’s remains were the result of and the response to the destruction by the sea of the Roman fortress, in which the cathedral was arguably located, rather than that both resulted from the Viking depredations in and after 869. This process is likely to have occurred, therefore, in the middle decades of the 9th century.

If Dunwich was an important undefended trading centre in the middle Saxon period, its proximity to Blythburgh, some 5 km up the Blythe estuary, can be seen as highly significant. It can be argued that Blythburgh was an important royal administrative, ecclesiastical and judicial centre in the middle and late Saxon periods, towards which both Dunwich and the see of Domnoc stood in a dependent relationship. Blythburgh was in the early medieval period the central place of a large royal estate which reached to and probably included Dunwich. It was the centre of the hundred of Blything from an early period (Scarfe
1972: 93–5), which as Dr Warner has suggested (1984: 109–12, 259–61, 264–5; 1988: 23–32) can be recognised as an early, possibly pre-Roman, land division or regio occupying the catchment area of the river Blythe. As such, this area is likely to have had a similar origin and history to the area of the seven hundreds of Wicklawn immediately to its south, whose centre was the royal vil at Rendlesham (Scarfe 1972: 93–5; Warner 1988: 15–16).

The ecclesiastical connections of Blythburgh in the 12th century, as well as the exceptionally large holdings of its church at Domesday, demonstrate the presence there of an important minster church (Harper-Brill 1980: 1–2; Warner 1984: 75–81). Its early importance can be inferred from the record of the veneration there of king Anna, martyred in the 7th century and supposedly buried at Blythburgh, in the 12th century (Blake 1962: 18). There is other evidence which supports these inferences. Firstly, the existence of a market at Blythburgh at Domesday provides a clear example of the process of the accretion of proto-urban and urban attributes not infrequently found at such early royal centres (Haslam 1984). Secondly, its position on a spur which commands the crossing place of the Pilgrim’s Way over the Blythe river would have been a good site for a royal administrative centre. The suggestion that this river crossing was the location of the battle of Bulcamp, in which king Anna was killed by Penda of Mercia in 654 (Bruce-Mitford 1975: 679; Warner 1984: 59 n. 7), fits very well with this function and siting. Thirdly, the finds of mid- and late-Saxon pottery, and of the important late 8th century writing tablet, all from the site of the Priory, attest to the existence there of both a settlement and a monastery in these periods. Fourthly, its status as an administrative and judicial centre for Dunwich can be inferred from the record in Domesday Book of two significant items of information: that thieves tried in Dunwich would be punished at Blythburgh, and that there was in 1066 a money changer (cambitor) at Blythburgh but not at Dunwich. Given the importance of Blythburgh in the middle Saxon period, there is every reason to believe that the dependent relationship of Dunwich towards it is well evidenced in the 11th century would have been a survival from a much earlier period.

These considerations provide grounds for the inference that Dunwich was a royal port-of-trade or emporium, from possibly the early or mid 7th century, which stood in the same functional relationship to the royal centre at Blythburgh as pertained between other early -wics and royal centres, such as Ipswich towards Rendlesham, possibly Norwich towards a centre at Thorpe, Hamwic towards Winchester and/or Hamtune, and others (Biddle 1976: 112–7; Wade 1981; Hodges 1982: chs 3 and 4). Similar relationships may have existed between the early monastic and missionary centres in Roman forts at Reculver and Richborough, early emporia at Sarre, Fordwich and Sandwich, and a probable royal site at Canterbury. A royal vill, early emporium and bishop’s see seems to have coexisted at Selsey, Sussex (Munby 1984), although Wilfred’s see does not appear to have been sited in a Roman fortress. Given the causal relationship between early missionary activity and royal patronage (Cambell 1982: 61), the role of Blythburgh as an early royal central place provides a context for the suggested reuse of a Roman fortress near Dunwich as a missionary centre in the 7th century, which became the site of the first see of East Anglia founded by Felix. The missionary station at Domnoc would thus have born the same relationship to Blythburgh as that at Walton Castle, also possibly first established by Felix, could have done to Rendlesham. That all these royal centres were associated with early -wics or ports of trade (Norwich, Dunwich and Ipswich) emphasises the function of royal authority in the growth of international trade recently examined in detail by Dr Hodges (1982), just as the relationship of the missionary sites to these royal centres serves to underline the role of the royal authority in the initial spread of Christianity.

A further functional connection may also be inferred between Domnoc itself and Dunwich. On the assumption that Felix’s original foundation of c. 631 would have grown to become a sizeable settlement in the 7th century and later, it seems quite possible that the -wic at Dunwich developed, at least in its early stages, directly from the trading interests of the monastic site. Hodges has pointed out (1982: 55–6) the mercantile interests of the church at this period, and such a functional relationship between an early monastic site and trading place has been suggested from archaeological evidence at Butley Burrow Hill, Suffolk (Fenwick 1984). In view of this, it does not seem possible to accept Warner’s suggestion (1984: 76, 260) that the reason for the establishment of the see in the Roman fort at Domnoc was the existence of the neighbouring emporium at Dunwich.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the hypothesis of the existence of the cathedral of the see of Domnoc within a probably fortified Roman site near (but not at) an early emporium at Dunwich best accommodates all the available evidence. The functional interrelationships between Domnoc, Dunwich and a royal central place at Blythburgh forms a pattern which is recognisable elsewhere in the south and east of England in the middle Saxon period. The existence of the two spatially and functionally separate sites also explains the existence, emphasised by Rigold, of the two distinct name-forms Domnoc and Dunewic, which only became conflated (and the former identified with Felixstowe) well after the Conquest (Rigold 1961: 57–8; 1974: 98–100). By this time it
seems probable that the fortress called Domnoc, as well as a sizeable part of the middle Saxon wic at Dunwich, had been swallowed by the sea. It is only unfortunate that this hypothesis cannot now be put to the test archaeologically.

The case discussed in this paper is but one of many in eastern and south-eastern England where such spatial and functional relationships can be observed or inferred. Some aspects of the interrelationships between monastic sites, trading places (or early or proto-urban development in general) and royal administrative centres have been discussed elsewhere (Biddle 1976; Sawyer 1977; Hodges 1982; Astill 1984; Haslam 1984; Tatton-Brown 1984). The general model for these middle Saxon coastal developments proposed for instance by Hodges (1982) is being updated and refined on a local level by such discoveries as the site at Butley Burrow Hill (Fenwick 1984), and the wics at London (Biddle 1984; Vince 1984; Cowie & Whytehead 1989), York (Hall 1988: 128–9) and Canterbury. These general relationships, therefore, need restating in the light of this new archaeological evidence, as well as other detailed local studies such as that forming the subject of this paper. It has seemed important to stress that the spatial relationships between these middle Saxon sites, insofar as they show patterns common to similar sites in other parts of the country, should be seen as comprising an important class of evidence in the formulation of any overall model which sets out to articulate such functional relationships and site dynamics. In view of this, it is also important to work out some coherent methodology which will make possible the evaluation of the different levels of inferences concerning spatial relationships, functional attributes and the archaeological and documentary data, in such a way that the resulting models can be refined and tested against new data.

Notes
1. I prepared the first draft of this article in early 1983 before seeing Dr P. Warner’s PhD thesis on “Blithing Hundred” (Leicester University, 1984). Dr Warner also argues for a middle Saxon origin for Dunwich, and explores its relationship to Blythburgh. I have drawn on Dr Warner’s thorough researches, but diverge from his conclusions in a number of points of both emphasis and interpretation. I am grateful to him for his comments on the earlier draft, and to James Campbell and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes for further helpful comments and suggestions. Some of Warner’s work contained in his doctoral thesis is now published (1988). In this he accepts the origin of Dunwich as a middle Saxon wic (p. 14 & n. 48), but does not argue the case.
2. Rigold (1961: 59) postulates a Roman progenitor DOMMUCHUM, though Warner suggests a more plausible origin for the place-name in ‘don’, a hill, which would fit the local topography of the Dunwich area quite well.
3. The royal associations of the area of the Deben valley in the early and middle Saxon periods have been discussed by Bruce-Mitford (1974: 730).
4. This minimising view was perhaps initiated by A.I. Sackling (1848: 234) who stressed the absence of coins from a Dunwich mint, and postulated a rapid rise in prosperity of Dunwich in the 11th and 12th centuries as a result of “free communication with the provinces of France consequent on the Norman Conquest”.
5. The earliest reference to Ipswich is on coins of c. 975, and in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle in 993 (Ekwall 1964: 19).
6. The existence of several coins apparently bearing Dunwich mint names have been recorded by Sackling (ibid. ii: 250–1). I have been kindly informed by the late Christopher Blunt that these were Edward IV groats from a Norwich mint.
7. The direct comparison between Dunwich, Ipswich and other towns in Suffolk is made difficult by the different categories by which population was recorded (or failed to be recorded) in Domesday Book. In 1066, however, Ipswich had 538 burgesses and Dunwich 120 (Darby 1971: 193–4).
8. The significance of this is brought out by Warner (1984: 69).
9. These places have been most recently discussed by Hodges (1982: ch. 4). Dunwich is however omitted from this discussion because of the lack of physical evidence (ibid: 203).
11. A pottery series is held by the Suffolk Archaeological Unit, Bury St Edmunds. For the writing tablet, see the British Museum Guide to Foreign Textile Antiquities (1982): 112–3. I am grateful to Mrs S.M. Youngs, Dept. of Medieval and Later Antiquities, British Museum, for this information and opinion on the tablet’s date and significance.
12. See note 10 above.
13. For the question of the royal vill near Norwich see Campbell 1975: 2 & n. 18, and Carter 1978: 195 & n. 4. The association of Felix’s missionary station at Domnoc, and his establishment of a school there, is seen by Warner as a consequence of the existence of the emporium at Dunwich, rather than of the presence of the Roman fort nearby (1984: 76,260).
15. James Campbell has suggested to me (pers. comm.) the possibility that the primary royal site at Domnoc itself was later transferred to Blythburgh (with the remains of king Anna) when it was eroded by the sea in the late Saxon period. This hypothesis seems however to be contradicted by two considerations: first, that Felix’s remains were transferred to Soham in the 9th century and not, as might be expected if this were so, to Blythburgh; and second, that the early role of Blythburgh as a royal administrative site is to be inferred from (amongst several characteristics of nearly equal significance) its centrality in relation to Blything hundred, and the archaeological evidence for the existence of a monastic settlement in the middle Saxon period.
16. Sonia Chadwick Hawkes has pointed out (pers. comm.) the regular occurrence of monastic and trading sites in close proximity with royal villas along the East Anglian coast, and has suggested two links in particular – Snape and Iken, and Rendlesham and Butley Burrow Hill – as instances of the association of royal and ecclesiastical sites. It is possible that another royal -wic could have been located at the head of the Deben estuary. This would most likely have been located either at Rendlesham itself, which is the only place in England described by Bede as vicus regius, or else near Kingston immediately to the south of Woodbridge, on the opposite side of the estuary to Sutton Hoo. The area around the latter “has yielded more separate finds of sea-tottas than anywhere else in Suffolk except Lakenheath...” (Sherlock 1984: 49). See further discussion by Fenwick (1984: 40–1) and Sherlock (ibid). See also the useful discussion on the wics of Kent in Tatton-Brown 1988, 213–221.
References


Ekwall E. 1964: Old English wic in place-names, Lund.


Gardner T. 1754: An historical account of Dunwich, Blythburgh and Southwold.


Hodges R. 1982: Dark Age Economics.


Scarte N. 1972: The Suffolk Landscape.


Suckling A. 1648: The History and Antiquities of Suffolk.


