

Economic Collapse?: A Historical and Archaeological Perspective on the Anglo-Saxon Emporium

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Many view pre-conquest England, before William the Conqueror in 1066, as a period of little international trade, no economic activity, and few urban centers. However, Anglo-Saxon England did contain a remarkable degree of “urbanism” in a period dominated by rural agricultural settlements and high status portable wealth. The urban, economic sphere was centered on *emporia* – organized merchant communities characterized by high degrees of manufacturing, water based trade and no political or defensive structures. These emporia, otherwise known as *wics*, were essentially oversized permanent market places physically divorced from judicial and political centers. Imagine a city, large, sprawling and filled with the hustle and bustle of urban dwellers going about daily affairs. Perhaps most inhabitants are engaged in daily tasks such as weaving fresh wool into yarn in dark loom houses while others tend the scorching fires of kilns. Still others might be walking the docks, examining new goods being unloaded by foreign traders. The entire city is alive with the sounds of human inhabitation, yelping English hunting dogs, the crack of the loom weights, and the sounds of merchants cutting deals. As far as the eye can see, neat long houses string back from the docks. Far off in the distance, there is countryside, the counterpart to this urban center. Though very different from modern perceptions of the industrial, mechanized urban sprawl, this medieval antecedent is not so different in its basic human components. Humans, animals and merchandise all inhabit this strictly ordered environment. Yet, even as the emporium seems to meet modern expectations of urban life, it also contradicts them. Instead of a bustling cultural, economic and political center, the *emporium* is strictly commercial. No large palaces or courthouses mar the simple skyline. Their simultaneous familiarity and distinctiveness place these early medieval urban centers in dialogue with modern perceptions of town and city; as alternative forms, they challenge our minds to question the nature and purpose of cities in the broadest sense of the word.

Traditionally, the early Middle Ages are seen as a “black hole” in economic prosperity and urban life, especially in England. The period from the 5th to the 11th centuries is often seen as a bleak era in the shadow of Rome’s great past; the achievements made in urban centers, trade and manufacturing are measured by the example of ancient Rome. The most quintessential view of this period is that of Edward Gibbon who wrote in his seminal work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that “the active virtues of society were discouraged... a large portion of public and private wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion,” which was embraced by a “servile and effeminate age.”¹ Such a one-sided view of this period is an extremist position; however, even many modern historians such as Bryan Ward-Perkins adopt similar negative views.² This understanding cheats the early Middle Ages of its successes and amplifies its failures. By looking at the range of archaeological and documentary evidence from the middle and late Saxon period, it is evident that during the 6th to the 9th centuries a new understanding of town life and urban planning sprung up along with commodity trade in both England and the rest of the Northern World. This trade was not simply a matter of gift exchange for the elite, water based trade communities, but rather a complex system of trade, borrowing little from the Mediterranean models. This system became highly embedded in Anglo-Saxon society as can be seen by both literary and archaeological evidence. In examining emporia through both literary and archaeological lenses, it is apparent that quantifying successes, failures and civilized life are far more complicated than previously assumed.

Over the past century, the development of the archaeological discipline and a renewed interest in an insular “English” identity have pushed the study of Anglo-Saxon history, art and material culture to new levels. These developments have resulted in a veritable flood of scholarship concerning who the Anglo-Saxons were and what type of kingdoms they created. In these works, much has been made of the reintroduction of urban life in the 6th through the 9th centuries; scholars have questioned what these emporia are, how they functioned, and in what ways they influenced later medieval and modern notions of town and trade. Henri Pirenne and Colin Renfrew proposed the traditional view of emporia in 20th century; these scholars alongside many others developed lasting models for economic history in which these early medieval settlements are seen as little more than remnants of true trade in a collapsed civilization where the aristocracy used trade centers solely to transport high status goods.³ However, the idea that elites maintained these sites only in order to facilitate long-distance movement of high status gifts does not fit with

¹ Edward Gibbon, “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” (1776-1789): Chapter 39.

² See Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ See Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: their origin and the revival of trade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925); Also Collin Renfrew, “Systems collapse as social transformation: catastrophe and anastrophe in early state society,” in *Transformations: Mathematical Approaches to Culture Change*, edited by Collin Renfrew and K. Cook (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

the artifact assemblages found in emporia nor is it consistent with the written documentation from the period.⁴ One of the most important arguments made about the Northern World's economy is from Richard Hodges' work *Dark Age Economics*. In this book, he argued that "we may define them [emporias] as an expression of a territory's involvement in long-distance trade."⁵ He put forth the economic model that emporia acted as "gateway communities" where traders from the Carolingian world who wanted to trade manufactured goods for raw materials or commodities from the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian world could do so. So too did the socio-political integration develop with more firm control in the hands of the secondary kindgomds.⁶ This basic view of the Anglo-Saxon economy as a development in commodity trade gained considerable acceptance. More recent scholarly theories include the maritime archaeologists Loveluck and Tys' theory of a common coastal identity in the Northern World that differentiated it from inland sites.⁷ This type of argument builds on Hodges' earlier works on emporia. From this perspective, many others' view emporia as indicators of international trade in commodities, but do not view them as integrated parts of the entire economy of the Anglo-Saxon world. However, this view does not take into account the literary and archaeological evidence in concert. By looking critically at the evidence from both these sources, emporia appear as fully functional economic centers integrated into Anglo-Saxon society. To demonstrate this, I will discuss what *emporias* are, how the populations interacted with their rural counterparts, how contemporaries viewed these urban centers, and their interaction with the Anglo-Saxon kingship system.

Excavations and Arguments: How did emporia function, prosper and develop?

In order to understand these arguments, it will first be necessary to develop a working understanding of emporia. These towns represent a complete break with the classical model of urban life. Classical towns like Rome or Athens were economic and political centers; moreover though they may originally have been planned, they grew organically to accommodate a growing urban population over time. The invasions of the Germanic tribes coupled with the retreat of the Roman military created mass panic in many frontier cities. In the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire, urban life disappeared; major town centers often became ghost towns with only religious leaders holding administrative power. The city of Trier in Germany saw a notable settlement shift from the Roman town to the medieval one. Abandoning the grid plan of the Roman town, medieval citizens of Trier flocked to the area surrounding the Cathedral creating a new, organic street plan as needed. Just as in Trier, many British cities experienced population decline and shift after the Roman period. Though Roman Britain was never as urban as other parts of the empire, those urban areas that existed vanished completely. As time went on, trade developed on new routes. The intersection of these trade routes created the possibility of new models of growth divorced from the classical past.

This progression from trade to urbanism is seen in the development of emporia from their beginnings in the 5th century to their flourishing during the 7th and 8th. Just as many other settlements develop, *emporias* grew in stages from the simple type A emporia of the 5th century, which appear to be temporary trade centers, to the more complex type B emporia of the 7th century.⁸ In contrast to the earlier prototype, these type B emporia were planned permanent establishments for trading purposes.⁹ Unlike rural settlements of their time, the population of *emporias* measured within the thousands rather than hundreds: scholars estimate the population of Anglo-Saxon Hamwic to be approximately two to three thousand.¹⁰ Unlike both rural settlements of their time and classical urban centers, emporia present a uniform structure and often show evidence of town planning, which met its occupants' needs until the towns' desertion. Sites like Hamwic or Ipswich show a planned street pattern and enclosure ditch that changed little after its construction. These towns represent a first attempt at town planning and management in the aftermath of the Roman collapse.

Not only did these centers begin to reinvigorate urban planning, they also reintroduced manufacturing into early medieval England. After the departure of Roman troops in 410 AD, both domestic manufacture and the importation of manufactured goods stopped in Britain with the exception of a few sites in Wales and Cornwall.¹¹ Production of everyday items reverted to domestic production at the village level until the 7th century.¹² During the late 6th and early 7th century, emporia, palaces and churches appeared in England concurrent with a major shift in production

⁴ C. Scull, "Urban centres in Pre-Viking England?" in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the 8th Century*, edited by J. Hines (1997), 185.

⁵ Richard Hodges, "The evolution of gateway communities: the socio-economic implications," in *Ranking, Resource and Exchange*, edited by Collin Renfrew and S. Shennan (1982), 118.

⁶ Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, (Palgrave: Macmillan, 1982), 50.

⁷ C. Loveluck and D. Tys, "Coastal societies, exchange, and identity along the Channel and southern North Sea shores of Europe, AD 600-100," *Journal of Maritime Archaeology* 1 (2006), 140-169.

⁸ Scull, "Urban centres in Pre-Viking England?," 282.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

¹¹ For an in depth discussion of this see Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 70-72.

¹² Richard Hodges, "The rebirth of towns in the early Middle Ages," in *The Rebirth of Towns in the Medieval West, AD 700-1050*, edited by Richard Hodges and B. Hobley (1988), 3.

methods.^{13,14} Excavations at the emporium of Ipswich on the River Orwell revealed evidence that the community was once again involved in large-scale production. At the site, excavators found extensive kiln debris and kilns around Cox Lane providing evidence for the major industrial site that produced Ipswich ware.¹⁵ The reintroduction of large-scale manufacture is an important step in the Anglo-Saxon economy and is almost only found in emporia and wics. As seen at Ipswich, emporia represented a key turning point in the Anglo-Saxon economy; unlike traditional views of the period as one of economic stagnation, emporia developed manufacturing of materials similar to those seen in the Roman period. The discovery of sites that include manufactured goods so soon after the so-called “Fall of Rome” strongly call into question how deep the loss of civilization and knowledge went into society. The reintroduction of manufacturing in emporia is entangled with the other broad trends in Anglo-Saxon culture including the beginning of tribute and the coming of Christianity.¹⁶ Although underappreciated by many archaeologists, textual sources discussed below provide evidence that emporia operated along with these developments to establish a commodity market. These three developments all probably correspond to the wider developmental trends in the Anglo-Saxon economy.

One of the supposed hallmarks of the “Dark Ages” in England and around Europe is the cessation of international trade. Though mostly true in the century immediately following the collapse of the Roman Empire, by the end of the 6th century type A emporia appear. These trade post like emporia are the harbingers of an international trade economy in Northern Europe. The emporia’s position on or near water deltas and safe harbors is indicative of their involvement in international trade. Both type A and type B emporia utilize locations convenient to international waterway trade: Sarre, in Kent, lies on the Isle of Thanet giving it access both to double tides and inland trade through the river Stow; Hamwic and Ipswich have similar locations.¹⁷ The archaeological excavations at these sites suggests international trade. Aside from the position of these sites near coastal or riverine locations, the artifacts recovered at these sites represent a wide range of medieval wares from across Europe and the Mediterranean. Even at the small emporium on Dalkey Island in county Dublin, archaeologists recovered both Mediterranean and Northern European goods. The artifact assemblages included Byzantine pottery such as Bii, Biii amphorae sherds and E- ware pottery, Carolingian bronze pins and glass probably from another Northern European emporium.¹⁸ At Hamwic, the excavators found similar assemblages containing imported pottery, quernstone and whetstone (two English resources for trade), and glass fragments.¹⁹ Along with this evidence of long distance trade, they also found the remains of a large wool working market.²⁰ This information counterbalances the arguments often made about the economy in Anglo-Saxon England demonstrating that the early medieval British Isles did indeed participate in long distance trade. Though the presence of long-distance trade items at emporia does not necessarily mean that long-distance trade existed throughout inland Anglo-Saxon England as well, it does support a much more connected and vibrant view of the Anglo-Saxon economy.

Though these excavations have clearly established the existence of long-distance trade in Anglo-Saxon England, it is still unclear who controlled this trade. Several excavations around Anglo-Saxon emporia have revealed interesting data. The cemeteries near these centers have shown male dominated burials, with many rich foreign goods. The excavation at the cemetery near Sarre is a prime example; upon excavation, archaeologists found many rich burials comprising predominately males accompanied with fine jewelry, imported pottery as well as Byzantine and Merovingian tremisses.²¹ Though not conclusive evidence of foreign merchant controlled trade, the high prevalence of rich male burials with coins and other foreign trade goods does suggest a foreign occupation consistent with a merchant hypothesis. This type of burial ground is not limited to Sarre; those at the cemetery near Hamwic revealed many male burials with rich Merovingian grave goods. Furthermore, analysis of the skeletons at Buttermarket in Ipswich even showed signs that some of those buried were foreign residents.²² This information gives increasing support to Hodges’ economic model which argues that emporia acted as “gateway communities” where traders from the Carolingian world who wanted to trade manufactured goods for raw materials or commodities from the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian world could do so.²³ While the nature of the Anglo-Saxon trade goods is still contentious, it is likely

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 47-48.

¹⁶ Hodges, “The rebirth of towns in the early Middle Ages,” 5.

¹⁷ Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ M. Brisbane. “Hamwic: an 8th century port and production centre,” in *The Rebirth of Towns in the West, AD 700-1050*, edited by Richard Hodges and B. Hobley (1988), 104-106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 104-106.

²¹ Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 69.

²² H. Hamerow, Lecture, 19 May 2011.

²³ Hodges, “The evolution of gateway communities: the socio-economic implications,” 118.

that these centers were the hubs of trade between the “more complex” Carolingian communities and the kingdoms of Northern Europe. Moreover, the common burial practice and foreign type artifacts seem to suggest a community of traders linking Northern Europe in much the same manner as Loveluck and Tys’ theory of a common coastal identity which differentiated emporia from inland sites.²⁴ Although this evidence does suggest a certain level of internationalism within emporia, it is important to remember that high status foreign individuals only made up one portion of the community. Furthermore, even if a portion of the population was not native to the area, this does not necessarily mean that they were not viewed as integrated members of the Anglo-Saxon community. Looking at the more ubiquitous aspects of these sites, such as food production and animal waste, will give a more reliable understanding of how emporia functioned.

The Independence and the Provision of Cities

Although the differences between rural and urban life in the Anglo-Saxon period were undoubtedly complicated, emporia could not have existed without significant support from the rural hinterland. The view that Anglo-Saxon emporia were small, commodity based trade towns cut off from rural, inland sites is overly simplistic at best. Undoubtedly a complex interaction between rural and urban individuals existed; the provision of emporia with food, the production of commodities for trade, and the sustenance of a large community of manufacturers and traders each illustrate this interaction.

In order to come to a full understanding of how emporia changed Anglo-Saxon society and economy, we must be able to explain the provision of resources for urban centers in terms of both food and industrial resources. The key to this explanation lies in both literary and archaeological evidence hitherto unrecognized as pertinent to the development of the *emporium* or to English community in general. One of the fundamental questions is how these urban centers survived as independent communities. In terms of basic human needs, any settlement would need access to clean fresh water, food and shelter. Although excavations have revealed extensive houses, storerooms and loom sheds, excavations have not shown any evidence of an agricultural or farming component responsible for providing the emporia with food. Zooarchaeologist Pam Crabtree argued that the redistribution of resources such as food represented one of the major problems for societies that encourage specialization in the workforce.²⁵ In her study of Middle Saxon faunal assemblages from Ipswich and the surrounding countryside, Crabtree noticed that the emporium of Ipswich was provisioned with a low species diversity of domesticated animals.²⁶ This meant that contrary to traditional farming and husbandry practices, the emporium was provisioned with only a subset of the animals present at rural sites. Using the analysis of this data, she argued that middle Saxon Ipswich developed a redistribution system to provide towns with the resources they needed for their large populations. Accepting Crabtree’s arguments, it is still important to question how this redistribution system was managed.

As mentioned above, these emporia specialized in long distance trade of manufactured goods, which included pottery and textiles as well as labor commodities such as slaves (before the conversion to Christianity) and English hunting dogs. It is important to remember that no industrial economy can exist in isolation. The minutia of maintaining this economy belies the rural involvement in these emporia. At a very basic level, the reintroduction of manufacturing posed a significant problem. Large-scale manufacturing requires full time work and specialized labor. Taking the manufacture of kiln fired pottery as an example, this industry necessitated the development of a skilled labor force capable of understanding how to form and fire pots as well as labor involved in tending fires, acquiring acceptable clays, and organizing a market. These tasks take the time of a specialized labor force as well as the resources of a large community. While the production of this particular trade item does not necessitate help from the rural hinterland in the acquisition of resources, it most certainly would require help in the form of food items and labor. A more specific example of the emporia’s reliance on the hinterland is the production of wool for overseas trade. In order to develop the kind of wool market seen both in trade logs from Mediterranean and from the large amounts of wool working products including loom weights in emporia, emporia would need a significant contribution of wool. However, Crabtree discovered at Ipswich that cattle and pig remains dominate despite the fact that sheep and goats are more suitable to the area.²⁷ Putting aside that this indicates rural provisioning of the emporia, this also indicates that the wool market would have needed an alternative source other than local sheep husbandry. Interestingly, the emporia’s need for wool correlates to a general increase in sheep and goat husbandry in many Anglo-Saxon villages from the 5th century onwards.²⁸ Taking this into account, it is most likely that the rural agricultural centers traded wool to their

²⁴ Loveluck and Tys, “Coastal societies, exchange, and identity along the Channel and southern North Sea shores of Europe, AD 600-100,” 140-169.

²⁵ Pam J. Crabtree, “Production and Consumption in an early complex society: animal use in Middle Saxon East Anglia,” *World Archaeology* 28, no. 1 (1996), 58.

²⁶ Crabtree, “Production and Consumption in an early complex society: animal use in Middle Saxon East Anglia,” 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁸ Pam J. Crabtree, “Sheep, Horses, Swine, and Kine: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on the Anglo-Saxon Settlement of England,” *Journal of Field Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (1989), 209.

urban counterparts. Looking at both pottery production and the wool trade, it is easy to see the fundamental problem with simplistic models of “rural” and “urban” areas in the medieval period. Instead of a strict delineation between the two sites, rural and urban communities necessarily were interdependent.

Urban sites imply large populations, which cannot generate *ex nihilo*. As mentioned above, emporia were relatively large urban centers for their time. Unlike rural settlements whose populations could waver in the low hundreds,²⁹ a thriving center like Hamwic had a population between two and three thousand.³⁰ Since these urban centers developed quickly without Roman historical antecedents, their relative size is very important. They could not have developed slowly along with local population growth because of the speed of their development. Moreover, the continuity in historical records suggests that these centers did not experience drastic migrations from continental or Northern populations; if this were the case, historians would expect a similar literature as with the *Adventus Saxonum* in the 5th century. During the 5th century, several historical sources detail a group or groups of Northern Germanic peoples who came into England after Rome’s departure; moreover, over the course of the century the native language shifted from Latin or British to Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic language. In contemporary literature, no mention is made of a change in language or population within these settlements. More appropriate perhaps is a model of urban growth where rural populations near coastal sites developed a trade market near the coasts that eventually separated from the original site to form a new one incorporating both native and foreign merchants. This model could fit both with the archaeological records showing increased foreign activity in these centers and with the logical assumption that these centers could not have been created entirely from an immigrant population without attracting significant attention. In order to refute the isolated coastal community model discussed earlier, both the provision of these urban centers with food and trade items as well as the historical origins of these centers is key. As such while absence of evidence against the coming of large amounts of foreign-born people to these sites is not evidence of absence, it is evidence that these communities were operating entirely within the realm of normal populations. This is even more evident when looking at the legal and literary evidence of emporia from this period.

Identity and Belonging in Anglo-Saxon England

Unlike research into trade goods, settlement patterns and urban provisioning, there are some questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily with material remains alone. While this in-depth look at emporia as centers of specialized craft and trade centers can help to determine that some material dependence must have existed between the rural and urban communities, the nature of this interrelationship remains obscured. Certainly complex ideas of group identity existed in this period; however, textual sources depict emporia as integral parts of inclusive Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

One of the basic misconceptions regarding Anglo-Saxon England is that it was one single unified entity. This pervasive ideology is grounded both in modern misconceptions that current geopolitical entities extend into the past and in the false accounts of the time. One of the most famous works of this period is Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (734 A.D.). This work details the history of the English nation from its roots in paganism to its recent (medieval) developments on the road to salvation. While taking his main narrative and purpose from earlier biblical works concerning the Old Testament, many scholars have argued that Bede promoted a united English front for a variety of political and religious reasons despite the fact that this idealistic view matched little with the reality on the ground.³¹ Even within this text on English unity, some historical facts come through. In his description of the death of King Aethelberht, Bede wrote “he was the third English king to rule over all the southern kingdoms.”³² Though Bede draws attention to the development of a unified kingdom of English people here, he also recognizes that individual kingdoms did not often coalesce into one overarching kingdom. In Bede’s desire to show the best view of English unity, he also called attention to the normal discontinuity within the island of Britain. With this discontinuity in mind, the identity of the dwellers in emporia is better understood. Just as politically and ethnically Anglo-Saxon England was divided between the Kentish, West Saxon, East Saxon and other divisions, so too were emporia.

There is significant literary evidence supporting this interpretation of the emporia’s communities. Though emporia do not feature prominently in any specific documents of the period, as integral parts of the economic system and geographical landscape, they are referenced often in passing. In these odd passages, these emporia are referred to in terms of their relationship to society at large. Again in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, he references the emporium Londonwic. The passage reads “He consecrated Mellitus to preach in the province of the East Saxons... Its chief city is London, which is on the banks of that river and is an *emporium* for many nations to come to it by land and sea.”³³

²⁹ As an example see Crabtree for an introduction to the rural Anglo-Saxon village of West Stowe.

³⁰ Scull, “Urban centres in Pre-Viking England?,” 282.

³¹ Many scholars have criticized Bede’s text including: Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)* Princeton, 1988. Or A. Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” in *Ideal and Reality*. Ed. P. Wormald et al. Blackwell Publishers, 1983.

³² Bede, “Ecclesiastical History of the English People,” edited by J. McClure and Roger Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 77 (Book 2, Chapter 5).

Here we get a bland, though helpful, description of an emporium from a contemporary source. Many characteristics of Bede's description are notable. First, Bede marks London as the largest city *within* the kingdom of the East Saxons. He includes London within the confines of the East Saxon Kingdom and thus within the sphere of influence of this new bishop rather than showing the kingdom as an isolated community near the borders of the kingdom. Second, Bede emphasizes that the emporium is a location where foreign merchants can come to trade, presumably for local wares that must be produced by non-foreign manufacturers in these centers. Though these may seem like issues of semantics, these minor issues are in fact at the heart of the argument concerning these settlements more generally. In taking only an archaeological perspective, it was only possible to show that emporia were complex coastal trade settlements separate in nature from their rural counterparts. However contemporary textual sources indicate that on a regional scale these settlements were thought of as part of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Moreover, the off-hand reference to these kingdoms within a pan-Anglo-Saxon text helps emphasize their acceptance into the larger community.

Any argument concerning the feelings of identity and belonging are fraught with difficulties even when working with modern, anthropological works. Necessarily it does need to be said that attributing these identities to ancient peoples are correspondingly more difficult because of the great remove in time. However given the textual sources, a *basic* judgment of regional identity is acceptable. Moreover, the complex social, political and ethnic realities that stemmed from 5th century migrations already created a situation in which complex and divergent identities were common. Within this framework, it seems clear that emporia were not just outsider communities; instead, they were tied to inland sites by a sense of belonging as well as material needs such as food and resources.

The Integration of Kingship and Trade

The integration of emporia into Anglo-Saxon economy and society would not be complete unless it included the dominant social, political and economic system of the period, kingship. Anglo-Saxon forms of nobility and kingship, like emporia themselves, owe nothing to their Roman predecessors in structure or form. Unlike the central government of the Roman period, Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were not centralized in urban or even rural areas. It was through a new system of kingship that English emporia were able to develop and prosper into successful urban centers.

One of the key innovations that aided in emporia's development was the institution of peripatetic kingship. Within this system, kings traveled around their domain literally eating their wealth and collecting surplus as tribute. In the early medieval period, this surplus tribute would take the form of foodstuffs, wool, slaves or other commodity items rather than scarce stores of coinage. It is through this system of wealth collection, that Anglo-Saxon kings could have redistributed food and resources from rural areas to the emporia. In such a way, kings could act as the missing link between the rural centers and urban emporia. Scholars have noted that the progression from simple seasonal market places in the 5th century to full-scale emporia mimics the upward trend in the development of this socio-political organization.³⁴ These developments were mutually beneficial. With the development of a strong kingship, tribute payments would increase. Once a surplus was reached, the kings could begin to encourage long distance trade to exchange their extra tribute for rare items such as high quality pottery, textiles, metalwork and commodities from the Carolingian Mediterranean worlds. The institution of tribute would thus act as a method for both provisioning emporia with food and resources and as a way to explain the distribution of high status goods in conjunction with regal inland sites. In this model, kings, sub-kings and high-ranking ecclesiastics would become the key players in the development of a commodity market instead of a simple gift exchange economy. These figures would act as the primary collectors and distributors of both low and high status goods because of their large land holdings and the tribute tax system.

The relationship between rural, urban and aristocratic society can thus be summed up within the development of this socio-political form. As mentioned above, commodity taxation of agricultural goods and resources could act as a stimulus for trade in these urban centers. However, this system should not be confused with the gift-exchange model put forth by traditional scholarship. Even while kings and the other aristocratic elite would be using their power and tribute to acquire high status "gifts," this would only be a small part of the Anglo-Saxon economy. Within *emporium* these expensive objects from the Mediterranean world could only ever make up a portion of any trade expedition's wares, the rest of which would necessarily be low status commodity goods such as the wool, glass beads and slaves seen in the archeological and historical record. These high status goods would thus be the stimulus for the kings' involvement in the affairs of emporia allowing these centers to gain food stuffs and resources for trade, but would be accompanied by a full range of more average products. In this way, though initially unclear, the new developments in tribute kingship allowed both high and low status goods to gain an economic niche.

If kings and high-ranking ecclesiastical sites were influential in emporia's trade relationships, than these

³³ *Ibid.*, 74 (Book 2, Chapter 3).

³⁴ Hodges, "The evolution of gateway communities: the socio-economic implications," 120.

groups should have a correspondingly higher amount of long distance trade and commodity items in their possession. Though difficult to judge through burial goods and the few high status permanent sites, there are some similarities in items in emporia and high-status sites. The distribution of coinage in Anglo-Saxon England supports this case best. Excavations of emporia from this period also have revealed large numbers of coins and mints within urban centers. Consequently, coinage is considered to be the main method of payment within these urban communities throughout both the Anglo-Saxon and Northern world. At the emporium of Hamwic, numerous sceattas, locally minted coins that conformed to a standard weight, were found spread in large quantities throughout the town.³⁵ However, coinage of any kind is almost nonexistent outside of Hamwic in the surrounding areas.³⁶ This pattern is similar to that of other manufactured goods and long distance trade items discussed earlier. Just like these other items, coinage can be found in many high status sites, notably the Sutton Hoo ship burial containing Byzantine serving ware, kiln fired continental pottery and Byzantine tremisses along with Anglo-Saxon coinage.³⁷ These sites should in no way be confused with the commonplace use of coinage and trade goods throughout even the highest classes of society. Rather, the implication here is that high status elites were actively interacting with emporia to gain certain items. It is not a difficult mental leap to argue that emporia were also included in this profit, perhaps gaining the necessary foodstuffs to support a large community as well as the raw materials for commodity trade.

This complex interaction between kingship and emporia is also supported in certain textual sources. Though records of excise taxes and property deeds are completely absent in early medieval England, references in law codes do point to political involvement of kings with these centers. One such example is in the 7th century law code of Hlothhere and Eadric, two Kentish kings. Title 16 of their laws states “If a man of Kent buys property in London, he shall have two or three trustworthy men, or have the reeve of the king’s estate as witness.”³⁸ Again using London as a basis for other emporia, here the text references an administrative official called the reeve. From this text, certain characteristics of the reeve are important. First, he is in charge of the king’s estate in London suggesting that rulers had an active place in emporia even though these settlements did not contain palaces, courthouses or other hierarchical buildings. Second, the king and his representative are responsible for the purchase and sale of land items even within emporia. As an early text in the development of emporia, this document shows that the king had a remarkable amount of involvement in Londonwic’s affairs. Other scholars have used this same passage to indicate a strong involvement of the kingship across Anglo-Saxon England in the affairs of emporia.³⁹ This view is perhaps too strong; while such documents undoubtedly speak for a strong involvement of the king in Kentish emporia, other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms may have had different institutions for dealing with emporia. Instead, it is far more likely that such administrative officials would have exercised varying degrees of power as correspondents between emporia and the local leaders.

The integration of kingship and trade is not confined to these textual and circumstantial sources. The positioning of emporia is another area that suggests that kings played an important role in the Anglo-Saxon trade economy. Even while emporia were placed in ideal locations for water-based trade, these centers also correspond to local strongholds of elite aristocratic and religious sites. The position of the emporium of Sarre near the ecclesiastical site of Canterbury in the heart of the Kentish kingdom is one example as is Hamwic’s position near the political center at Winchester.⁴⁰ Though not particularly convincing in and of itself, the proximity of these sites to high status ones alongside the textual sources and an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon kingship work together to demonstrate involvement of the aristocracy with this urban sites. This all links emporia with the political rulers of the time without necessarily implying that kings controlled the centers for the acquisition of luxury goods. Rather, the socio-political developments of the late 6th and early 7th century made trade in commodities an economically viable option for kings and monasteries. With this understanding of kingship and trade, emporia can exist within a coastal trade economy, but still remain embedded within the Anglo-Saxon social and political structure.

The economic and social position of *Emporia* in Anglo-Saxon England

Though very different from modern conceptions of town and trade, emporia do represent genuine attempts at organized urban life integrated into social and political landscape of Anglo-Saxon England. Unlike the more obvious interaction between town and country during the Roman or modern periods, no direct trade of goods and services existed during this period. Instead a complex system incorporated emporia into the agricultural countryside. The peripatetic kingship in the chiefdoms of Anglo-Saxon England acted as a mechanism through which merchants could funnel agricultural surplus into trade connections and wealth. In this three-way system, rural farmers paid tribute to

³⁵ Brisbane, “Hamwic: an 8th century port and production centre,” 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ For an in depth discussion of each of the items found at Sutton Hoo see: *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900*, edited by Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse (British Museum Press, 1991).

³⁸ *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), Book. 23.

³⁹ Scull, “Urban centres in Pre-Viking England?,” 188-189.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

their travelling local ruler who in turn provided these early urban settlements with food and raw materials such as wool for the upkeep of a mercantile center. This system benefitted both the rulers who gained access to foreign and manufactured goods as well as the inhabitants of emporia who needed food and resources. Though unnecessary in modern capitalist society, this redistribution system is also a successful means of provisioning early cities allowing Anglo-Saxon England access to non-local goods and services. Though ultimately abandoned, this form of urban life is still a significant triumph in the development of urban structures in the medieval West.

Equally as important as the introduction of commodity trade back into the English economy is the integration of these communities within the structure of Anglo-Saxon society and governance. Surprising as it may seem to maritime scholars who recognize similarities across Northern European emporia overall, literary and legal documents readily incorporate Anglo-Saxon emporia into regional political structures, viewing their citizens as local as opposed to the foreign merchants who trade there. Such unity does not mean that manufacturing communities of English living in these communities were not different from those in rural or aristocratic circles, nor does it mean that these communities did not share many similarities with other manufacturing and mercantile populations around Europe. Rather, this argument supposes that inhabitants of emporia, whether native English or foreign-born merchants, existed within the regional social and political constructs be they Kentish or Saxon. In such a way, emporia represent the first true English cities even if their form and function remain divergent from late medieval and modern ideas about city.

One of the key trends in the development of emporia is the introduction of long-distance commodity trade to post-Roman Britain. Moving from the archaeological evidence to the textual, this trade becomes easier for modern readers to comprehend. Though the material markers of settlement differ noticeably between rural Anglo-Saxon settlements and the emporia, these centers could not and were not as separate as could be imagined from the archaeological sources alone. These urban communities were dependent upon the redistribution of rural resources through the local ruler's tribute. Without such a system whereby rural agricultural and raw materials could enter the specialized workforce of the local emporium, the commodity-based trade evident from archaeological records would be impossible. Moreover, these urban centers existed within the structure of local political and social ties. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* provides an excellent example of the dominating sense of belonging within these communities. Despite the many foreign trade items within these centers and the innumerable foreign merchants living within the population, these cities were indeed viewed as part of the social and political framework of Anglo-Saxon England. These communities thus represent the beginnings of English notions of town and trade incorporated into local economic structures.

Conclusion

The development of this new inclusive model of urban and rural Anglo-Saxon settlement marks the final argument against the "Dark Age" model that has held so much sway in 19th and 20th century. Though the traditional view of an economic and social "black hole" has been refuted, the insistence that emporia represent only skin deep attempts at large scale manufacture and trade in the Anglo-Saxon World is part of the inheritance of this type of thinking. In this reexamination of the literary and archaeological evidence concerning emporia, they can finally leave behind this shadow recognizing the true successes and failures of this period. Even though this form of urban life did not last through the early medieval period, these settlements created an innovative and successful settlement form. Despite recent arguments to the contrary, emporia were integrated communities that interacted with the most important political and social institutions of the time, not failed "outsider communities." With this in mind, the concept of historical failure and success is thrown into sharp relief. Historians of all sorts make judgments about the past whether moral or qualitative. Though often unavoidable, these judgments often cloud the interpretation of the past. If the rise of emporia can instruct modern readers on anything, it is that historical hindsight can have little to do with the success of a given societal form in its context and more to do with its applicability to modern standards. When these immediate judgments are kept in check, modern scholars can look at the past in order to see alternative forms of familiar structures.