

Viking & Anglo-Saxon Science, Knowledge & Belief

A series of five explorations with Max Adams

In the third session we look at traders, merchants and the places where they did their business. There are no real towns until the 9th century – so how was trade conducted? The historical and archaeological sources combine to paint a vibrant, if quirky picture.

Ælfric's colloquies

Teacher: What have you to say, Merchant?

Merchant: I say that I am useful to king and to ealdorman, to the wealthy, and to the whole people.

Teacher: And how so?

Merchant: I go aboard my ship with my wares, and row over parts of the sea, selling my goods, and buying precious things which cannot be produced in this country. Then, with great peril on the sea, I bring them here to you. Sometimes I suffer shipwreck, and lose all my things, scarce escaping with my life.

Teacher: What things do you bring us?

Merchant: Purple garments and silks; precious gems and gold; strange raiment and spice; wine and oil; ivory and brass; copper and tin; sulphur and glass, and many such things..

Laws of King Ælfred..

34. Moreover, it is prescribed for traders: they are to bring before the king's reeve in a public meeting the men they take up into the country with them...

... and of Athelstan

12. That one is not to buy outside a town.. and we have pronounced that no goods over 20 pence are to be bought outside a town, but they are to be bought there in the witness of the town-reeve (*portgerefa*) or of another trustworthy man..

14. Concerning moneyers. That there is to be one coinage over all the king's dominion, and no-one is to mint any except in a town.

24.1 And there is to be no trading on Sundays.

Letter of Charlemagne to King Offa 796

Concerning pilgrims... they may go in peace free from all molestation... But we have discovered that certain persons fraudulently mingle with them for the sake of commerce,

seeking gain, not serving religion. If such are found among them. They are to pay the established toll at the proper places; the others may go in peace, immune from toll.

You have written to us also about merchants, and by our mandate we allow that they shall have protection and support in our kingdom, lawfully, according to the ancient custom of trading. And if in any place they are afflicted by wrongful oppression, they may appeal to us or to our judges...

Grant by Burghred, King of Mercia, to Ealhun, Bishop of Worcester 857

✚ In the name of the Lord God Most High, who is the hope of all the ends of the earth and in the sea far off... I, indeed, Burghred, by the concession of the most omnipotent God, king of the Mercians, will grant and deliver to Ealhun my bishop for the relief of my soul with the consent of my councillors a certain small portion of a liberty, of a profitable little estate in the town of London, i.e. at a place called Ceolmundinghaga, which is situated not far from the west gate; for the bishop to have in his own liberty, or belonging to the city of Worcester, with all the things which rightly belong to it, great and small, i.e. that he is to have therein to use freely the scale and weights and measures as is customary in the port.

Arrangements about the building of fortifications at Worcester, 889-899.

... Ealdorman Æthelred and Æthelflæd ordered the borough at Worcester to be built for the protection of all the people...

... they will grant to God and St Peter and to the lord of that church half of all the rights which belong to their lordship, whether in the market or in the street, both within the fortification and outside...

... they will grant this ; except that the wagon-shilling and the load-penny go to the king as they have always done at Droitwich. But otherwise, land-rent, the fine for fighting, or theft, or dishonest trading, and damages to the borough wall, and all the fines for offences which admit of compensation, are to belong half to the lord of the church...

St Willibald abroad

Taking with them the necessary money for the journey and accompanied by a band of friends, they came to a place which was known as Hamblemouth, near the port of Hamwic. Shortly afterwards they embarked on a ship. When the captain of the swift-sailing ship had taken their fares, they sailed, with the west wind blowing and a high sea running, amidst the shouting of the sailors and the creaking of oars... a swift course brought them safely to dry land... At once they gave thanks and disembarked, and pitching their tents on the banks of the River Seine, they encamped near the city which is called Rouen, where there is a market.