

The World Before Domesday

The English Aristocracy
900–1066

Ann Williams

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*Once it used to be that people and the law went by ranks,
and the wise men of the folk (ƿeodwitan) were entitled to
respect, each according to his station, whether earl or ceorl,
thegn or lord (ge eorl ge ceorl, ge þegn ge þeoden).*

Wulfstan lupus, Archbishop of York: Geþyncðu



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This book, begun in the year which saw the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day, is dedicated to the memory of all those who have given their lives to defend and serve this country.

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Preface

In 1939, an astounding discovery was made on 'the windswept plateau overlooking the estuary of the River Deben in Suffolk', an intact ship-burial, full of such splendid artefacts that it had to represent the last resting-place of a seventh-century king of East Anglia.¹ The subsequent fame of the Sutton Hoo treasure has printed an indelible picture on the minds of many (many, that is, of those who think about such things at all), a picture of 'Anglo-Saxons' decked out in gold jewellery, enriched with cloisonné garnet and blue and white millefiori glass, wielding pattern-welded swords and crowned with spectacular dragon-crested helmets. Nor is it Sutton Hoo alone that concentrates popular attention on the early years of what (in modern convention) is called 'the Anglo-Saxon period'.² In 731, the Venerable Bede published his great *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* ('The Ecclesiastical History of the English People'), which was copied, re-copied, translated and imitated throughout the mediaeval period and into modern times.³ Bede's skill both as a propagandist and as a teller of tales has had the same effect as the Sutton Hoo treasure on the popular imagination, and his picture of his contemporaries has been taken as the paradigm for an entire era.

It is easily forgotten that the distance which separated those English earls and thegns who went down fighting on the field of Senlac in 1066 from their forebears as represented in Bede and Sutton Hoo is the same as that which separates us, their remote descendants, from the England of James I. No-one now wears padded Jacobean britches or starched ruffs; nor (alas) is the everyday speech of the Authorized Version familiar to modern ears. Of course the twentieth century has seen changes in culture, custom and taste far surpassing anything previously experienced, so that the difference between Earl Godwine of Wessex and the Northumbrian ealdorman Berhtred, who led the army of King Ecgrith to raid Ireland, may not have been as marked as that between James Villiers, duke of Buckingham, and Gordon Brown.⁴ But difference there certainly was, and in many respects Earl Godwine had more in common with his contemporary neighbour Duke William of Normandy than with his seventh-century ancestors. The similarities have been obscured by the thoroughness with which the ruling élite of pre-Conquest England was expunged by their Norman supplanters, but many of the supposed differences between the two societies arise from an

unacknowledged comparison between eleventh-century Normandy and an England which had by then long passed away.

I have written elsewhere about the fate of the English aristocracy after the Norman Conquest; in this book I want to present them, as it were, in their prime, the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁵ I suppose that the picture which most will have of the English thegns on the eve of the Norman Conquest is of brave if backward warriors, always to be found on the losing side. The picture has some literary foundation. The anonymous poem on the battle of Maldon, fought in 991, tells how the hearthtroop of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth fell to a man around the body of its slain lord, while Gaimar, writing in the 1130s, records the last stand of Hereward, surprised while sleeping, and cut down to lie within a ring of enemy corpses.⁶ More prosaic sources can tell a similar tale. The English historian, Orderic Vitalis, laments the fall of Earl Edwin in 1071 in circumstances very similar to that of Byrhtnoth in 991; betrayed by three brothers 'whom he had trusted most' and trapped on the banks of a river by the rising tide, he fell with 30 faithful companions (*equites*), 'all fighting desperately to the last'.⁷ Most disastrous of all was the battle of Hastings, fought on 14 October 1066, which saw the flower of the English aristocracy left dead on the field.

The title of this book refers not only to the doom which befell the Old English thegns, but also to the fact that one of the chief sources for our knowledge of them is Domesday Book, produced at the behest of the first Norman king, William the Conqueror.⁸ This brings us to one of the chief problems relating to the understanding of Old English history. The early twelfth century saw a resurgence of historical writing in England, unprecedented since the appearance of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which was indeed its chief inspiration.⁹ The writers of this time, many of them English or half-English by birth, saw themselves as rescuers of the traditions of their conquered people, re-creating for the new order the illustrious history of the English nation. The most prominent among them was William of Malmesbury, who played such a crucial role in the transmission of the pre-Conquest past that much of what has been presented as the history of England and the English between the death of Bede and the Norman Conquest has been influenced, both in content and in presentation, by his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* ('The History of the English Kings').¹⁰ All the twelfth-century writers, however, had their own agendas, which affected their attitudes to, and presentation of, earlier events to which they were not direct witnesses. It has been claimed that they had access to original sources which are now lost, but there is little to suggest that such material was plentiful. Indeed in their attempts to produce a coherent narrative, the twelfth-century writers seem frequently to have resorted to inference to fill the gaps in their knowledge, and, where inference failed, to have used popular myths, folk-lore and, when all else failed, gossip.

We are not entirely reliant on these twelfth-century reconstructions, for, though scanty in comparison with later periods, a considerable body of written material remains from the pre-Conquest period, which can be supplemented by information from other disciplines, chiefly archaeology, onomastics and numismatics. These strictly contemporary sources are patchy in their survival, so that even today the seventh century is viewed largely through the eyes of Bede, and the late ninth century through those of King Alfred, whose educational and cultural aspirations produced a wealth of material, including Asser's 'biography' of the king himself, and the first redaction of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. After this there is a dearth of historical writing, though the *Chronicle* continued to be kept up sporadically – it is a contemporary source for the reigns of Æthelred *unræd* (978–1016) and Edward the Confessor (1042–66) – and a group of 'family biographies' was composed in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.¹¹ Such literary works say little about the structure of Old English society, but diplomatic sources, law-codes, legal tracts and charters are more revealing.¹² In what follows I have tried to draw directly from such contemporary testimony, and to use later sources only for comparison.

The subject of this book is the aristocracy of tenth- and eleventh-century England, between (roughly) the accession of King Alfred in 871 and the battle of Hastings in 1066. There is a long literature on the words 'aristocracy' and 'nobility', and how far they may be applied to the social strata of early mediaeval Europe.¹³ Of the two, 'aristocracy' is the less specific, and, unlike 'noble', it bears no connotations of legal privilege. In what follows, therefore, 'noble' and 'nobility' will be employed only in quotations from other writers, while 'aristocrat' and 'aristocracy' will denote what contemporaries would have described as 'better men' (*optimates*) or 'chief men' (*proceres*), as distinguished from burgesses, free men, peasants and slaves. The first three chapters introduce the various layers of aristocratic society. Chapter 1 begins at the top, with the earls and ealdormen who occupied its pinnacle.¹⁴ The best recorded are the great earls of Edward the Confessor's day, Godwine of Wessex and Leofric of Mercia, and previous research has naturally enough been concentrated on these two families.¹⁵ Godwine and Leofric are, however, unusual, and my exemplars, more typical because less wealthy, are Odda, briefly earl of the western shires in 1051–52, and Ralph, earl of the 'middle peoples' from 1050, and of Hereford from 1052, until his death in 1057. Both men were related to King Edward, and their lives interlocked at a crucial moment in their royal kinsman's reign, but Odda came from the old-established aristocracy of Wessex, while Ralph, though his mother was the king's sister, belonged through his father to the continental hierarchy of northern Frankia.¹⁶ Chapter 2 concerns another group of royal officials, those who served in the king's household, the greatest of whom (to judge from their recorded wealth) were the stallers and their tenth-century equivalents, the *pedisequi*

(literally, ‘those who sit at the [king’s] feet’). As with Chapter 1, some individuals have been chosen to represent the rest; Osgod *clapa* and Tovi the Proud for the eleventh-century stallers, Wulfstan of Dalham for the tenth-century *pedisequi*. Chapter 3 covers aristocrats further from the centre of royal authority, whose wealth and power was more localized, but who dominated the shires and regions which made up the kingdom of the English; the paradigm is Kent, since it is for this region that the material is most copious. After the *dramatis personae* come the more interpretative chapters: two (Chapters 4 and 5) on the factors governing the relations between lords and men, and two more (Chapters 6 and 7) on status and how it was displayed. The final chapter (Chapter 8) provides a brief sketch of some of the occupations and pastimes of the Old English aristocracy on the eve of the Norman Conquest. Some matters, of technical but limited interest, have been relegated to appendices.

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Abbreviations

Note: the Old English law-codes are cited according to the convention established in *MEL*.

<i>Ælfric's Colloquy</i>	G.N. Garmonsway, <i>Ælfric's Colloquy</i> (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, revd edn, 1991)
<i>Æthelgifu</i>	Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), <i>The Will of Æthelgifu: a Tenth Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript</i> (Oxford: Roxburghe Club, 1968)
<i>Anglo-Saxon Charters</i>	A.J. Robertson (ed.), <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 1956)
ANS	<i>Anglo-Norman Studies</i>
<i>Antiq.J.</i>	<i>Antiquaries Journal</i>
<i>Arch.J.</i>	<i>Archaeological Journal</i>
<i>AS Chronicle</i>	Dorothy Whitelock, David C. Douglas and Susie Tucker (eds), <i>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation</i> (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1965)
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
Asser, <i>Life of Alfred</i>	W.H. Stevenson (ed.), <i>Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of St Neots</i> (repr. with introduction by Dorothy Whitelock; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959)
Attenborough, <i>Laws</i>	F.L. Attenborough, <i>The Laws of the Earliest English Kings</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922)
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
<i>Battle of Maldon</i>	D.G. Scragg (ed.), <i>The Battle of Maldon</i> (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981)
BCS	W. de Gray Birch, <i>Cartularium Saxonicum</i> (3 vols; London: Whiting, 1885–99)
BNJ	<i>British Numismatic Journal</i>
<i>Canons of Edgar</i>	Roger Fowler, <i>Wulfstan's Canons of Edgar</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)
<i>Charters of Burton</i>	P.H. Sawyer (ed.), <i>The Charters of Burton Abbey</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)

<i>Charters of New Minster</i>	Sean Miller (ed.), <i>Charters of the New Minster, Winchester</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)
<i>Charters of Rochester</i>	A. Campbell (ed.), <i>Charters of Rochester</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)
<i>Charters of St Augustine's</i>	S.E. Kelly (ed.), <i>Charters of St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, and Minster-in-Thamet</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)
<i>Charters of Sherborne</i>	M. A. O'Donovan (ed.), <i>Charters of Sherborne</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
<i>Chron. Æthelweard</i>	A. Campbell (ed.), <i>The Chronicle of Æthelweard</i> (London: Nelson, 1962)
<i>Chron. Ramsey</i>	W.D. Macray, <i>Chronica Abbatiae Ramesiensis</i> (Rolls Series; London: HMSO, 1886)
DB iv	H. Ellis (ed.), <i>Liber Censualis Vocati Domesday Book, Additamenta</i> (London: Record Commission, 1816)
<i>Domesday Monachorum</i>	D.C. Douglas (ed.), <i>The Domesday Monachorum of Christ Church Canterbury</i> (London: Royal Historical Society, 1944)
ECEE	C.R. Hart, <i>Early Charters of Eastern England</i> (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966)
ECNENM	C.R. Hart, <i>Early Charters of Northern England and the North Midlands</i> (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1975)
EHD i	Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), <i>English Historical Documents c. 500–1042</i> (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1955)
EHD ii	David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, <i>English Historical Documents 1042–1189</i> (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1953)
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>Encomium</i>	A Campbell (ed.), <i>Encomium Emmae Reginae</i> (Camden Classic Reprints; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
<i>Excerpta</i>	Augustus Ballard, <i>An Eleventh-Century Inquisition of St Augustine's, Canterbury</i> (Records of the Social and Economic History of England and Wales, 2; London: British Academy, 1920).
<i>Exon</i>	<i>Exon Domesday</i> (see DB iv)
GDB	R.W.H. Erskine (ed.), <i>Great Domesday Book</i> (London: Alecto Historical Editions, 1986)
<i>Haskins Society J.</i>	<i>Haskins Society Journal</i>

HE	Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds), <i>Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969)
Hemingi Chartularium	Thomas Hearne (ed.), <i>Hemingi Chartularium Ecclesie Wigornensis</i> (2 vols; Oxford: e Theatro Sheldoniano, 1723)
J. Med. Hist.	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
JnW	R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk (eds), <i>The Chronicle of John of Worcester</i> (3 vols; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955–)
KCD	J.M. Kemble, <i>Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici</i> (6 vols; London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1839–48)
LDB	Ann Williams and Geoffrey Martin (ed.), <i>Little Domesday Book</i> (6 vols; London: Alecto Historical Society, 2000)
LE	E.O. Blake (ed.), <i>Liber Eliensis</i> (Camden Society, 3rd ser., 92; London: Royal Historical Society, 1962); trans. in Janet Fairweather, <i>Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely</i> (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005)
Liebermann	F. Liebermann, <i>Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen</i> (3 vols; Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1905–13)
MEL	Patrick Wormald, <i>The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century</i> , vol. 1: <i>Legislation and its Limits</i> (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999)
Mem. St Dunstan	William Stubbs (ed.), <i>Memorials of St Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury</i> (Rolls Series; London: HMSO, 1874)
Mem. St Edmund's	Thomas Arnold (ed.), <i>Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey</i> (Rolls Series; 3 vols; London: HMSO, 1890–96)
Monasticon	W. Dugdale, <i>Monasticon Anglicanum</i> (6 vols in 8; ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis and B. Bandinel; London: Longman, 1817–30)
NDNB	<i>New Dictionary of National Biography</i>
OE	Old English
ON	Old Norse
OV	M. Chibnall (ed.), <i>The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis</i> (6 vols; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969–80)
P&P	<i>Past and Present</i>
Poems of Wisdom and Learning	T.A. Shippey (ed.), <i>Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English</i> (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1976)

<i>Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotland</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland</i> P.H. Sawyer (ed.), <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters: A Handlist and Annotated Bibliography</i> (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968) [update available via < www.trin.cam.ac.uk/kemble > (accessed 1 March 2008)]
Robertson, <i>Laws</i>	A.J. Robertson (ed.), <i>The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925)
<i>Select EHD</i>	F.E. Harmer, <i>Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914)
Symeon, <i>Opera Omnia</i>	Thomas Arnold (ed.), <i>Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia</i> (Rolls Series; 2 vols; London: HMSO, 1882)
TRE	<i>Tempore Regis Edwardi</i> (the time of King Edward [the Confessor])
TRHS	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
TRW	<i>Tempore Regis Willelmi</i> (the time of King William I)
VCH	<i>Victoria History of the Counties of England</i>
<i>Vita Edwardi</i>	F. Barlow (ed.), <i>The Life of King Edward who Lies at Westminster</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1992)
<i>Wills</i>	Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), <i>Anglo-Saxon Wills</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930)
<i>WmM</i>	David Preest (trans.), <i>Williams of Malmesbury, Deeds of the Bishops of England (Gesta Pontificum Anglorum)</i> (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002)
<i>WmM, GP</i>	N.E.S.A. Hamilton, <i>De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum</i> (London: Longman, 1870)
<i>WmM, GR</i>	R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (eds), <i>William of Malmesbury Gesta Regum Anglorum</i> (2 vols; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998–99)
<i>Writs</i>	F.E. Harmer, <i>Anglo-Saxon Writs</i> (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1952)

Introduction: Definitions

My thegns are to have their dignity in my lifetime as they had
in my father's.

KING EDGAR¹

In the early middle ages, status was largely a matter of custom, much of it unwritten. The concept of the three orders, which divides the ideal polity into those who pray (*oratores*), those who fight (*bellatores*) and those who work (*operatores*), is sometimes called into play to describe early society, but the orders are not primarily social distinctions.² They concern function, not rank, and relate to the processes of ideal government; the concept of the three orders first appears in England in the context of King Alfred's reflections on the resources which he needed to control his kingdom.³ Social standing was primarily determined by birth, specifically the rank of the father, and an aristocrat's offspring, male and female, were *ipso facto* of aristocratic status, but the definition of that status is a more complex matter, involving wealth, lordship and that peculiarly mediaeval association known by its German name as *Königsnehe*, 'closeness to the king'.

Definitions were rarely recorded in writing, but the codes of the early English kings did specify tariffs for the payment of wergeld, the compensation due to a family for the slaying of one of its members.⁴ Wergeld was not only paid for male victims, but also for women, the rate of whose compensation was determined by the rank of their fathers and brothers, and was unaffected by marriage, even to a man of lesser standing. A thegnborn woman who married a ceorlborn man retained her thegnly rank, but the converse also applied; an unfree woman who married a free man remained a serf unless freed by her owner.⁵ Wergeld applied even to the unborn, for killing a pregnant woman incurred not only the wergeld of the woman but also half the wergeld of the child, reckoned according to the father's status.⁶ By the time of Alfred, the tariff in Wessex was set at 200s for an ordinary free man (*cierlisc mon*), with two higher grades, of 600s and 1,200s. By the early tenth century the 600s wergeld had fallen into oblivion, and men were divided into two groups, 200s men (*twihynde*) and 1,200s men (*twelfhynde*).⁷ Slaves, being classified as property, had no wergelds, though their masters were entitled to compensation for their loss.⁸ There are no wergeld tariffs in codes subsequent to Alfred's, but it is clear that the same basic distinctions applied

throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. Around the first millennium, the homilist and lawmaker Wulfstan *lupus*, bishop of Worcester and archbishop of York (d. 1023), collected the customs of the Mercians and Northumbrians, which reveal that the wergelds among the former equate precisely to those of Alfred's Code: 200s for a free man (*ceorl*), 1,200s for a thegn.⁹ The wergelds given in *Norðleoda laga*, which relates to Northumbria beyond the Tyne, are somewhat different: 8,000 *thrymsas* for an ealdorman, 4,000 *thrymsas* for a *hold* or a king's high-reeve, and 2,000 *thrymsas* for a thegn.¹⁰ The *thrymsa* was equivalent to 3d in the West Saxon currency, so that the thegn's 2000 *thrymsas* equates to a 1,200s wergeld in West Saxon terms, while the sum of 266 *thrymsas* owed by a Northumbrian *ceorl* is specifically equated with the 200s wergeld among the Mercians.¹¹ The chief difference between the Northumbrian tariff and those of the southern kingdoms lies in the subdivisions among the aristocracy. Though the categories of *hold* and high-reeve look a trifle archaic in the eleventh century, they still existed; Thurbrand *hold* played a key role in the early establishment of Cnut's power in the north (see below), and 'high-reeve' was the former title of the earls of Bamburgh.

The wergeld tariffs reveal the subdivision of the free (as opposed to slave) population into *ceorlas* (ceorls, free men) and *þegnas* (thegns, aristocrats). Such simple distinctions could be used to embrace everybody, or at least everybody who mattered. In his First Letter to the English people, King Cnut addressed 'all his people in England, *twelfhynde* and *twihynde*'; for the king and his entourage, thegns and ceorls made up the whole English nation (*Angelcynn*).¹² In practice, of course, matters were much more complicated than this tidy legal fiction implies. In the uncertain years of the tenth and eleventh centuries, it was easy for free men to slip into slavery, either by the formal act of selling themselves and their families in order to gain a master's protection, or by attrition, as landlords gradually increased services and customary dues until formerly free peasants became serfs.¹³ The ranks of the ceorls thus included men teetering on the edge of serfdom. Upward mobility, however, was also possible, and some ceorls might aspire to the ranks of thegnhood, so that it was no easy matter to distinguish between more prosperous *ceorlisc* men and less affluent thegns. The only thing which all ceorls had in common was that legally they were neither thegns nor slaves. It is for this reason that *ceorl* is better translated as 'free man' rather than as 'peasant', for not only has the latter acquired pejorative associations, but it is also clear that not all *ceorlas* personally worked the land; some were themselves landlords with dependants who worked it for them.

It was upward mobility which occupied the thoughts of contemporaries, especially Archbishop Wulfstan. One of the clauses of Wulfstan's most important tract on status, the 'Promotion Law' (*Gebyncðu*, 'honour, dignity, rank'), describes

how a *ceorl* might attain thegnly status. Since frequent reference will be made to this tract, it will be useful to cite the main clauses here (in translation):¹⁴

(1) Once it used to be that people and rights went by dignities, and councillors of the people were then entitled to honour, each according to his rank, aristocrat and free man,¹⁵ retainer and lord. (2) And if a *ceorl* prospered, that he possessed fully five hides of his own, a *belhus* and a *burhgeat*,¹⁶ a seat and special office in the king's hall, then was he henceforth entitled to the rights of a thegn. (3) And the thegn who prospered, that he served the king and rode in his household band on his missions, if he himself had a thegn who served him, possessing five hides on which he discharged the king's dues, and who attended his lord in the king's hall, and had thrice gone on his errand to the king – then he [the intermediate thegn] was afterwards allowed to represent his lord with his preliminary oath, and legally obtain his [right to pursue a] charge, whenever he needed. (4) And he who had no such distinguished representative, swore in person to obtain his rights, or lost his case. (5) And if a thegn prospered, that he became an earl, then was he afterwards entitled to an earl's rights.

Commentary on the text will appear in the appropriate contexts in what follows, but for the moment the important thing to notice, apart from the 'thriving *ceorl*', is the threefold gradation among the thegns; the thegn who prospers to become an earl, the thegn who serves the king and has other thegns in his own service, and those lesser thegns themselves. That these categories should reappear in the heriot tariffs laid down in the Secular Code of King Cnut is not remarkable, because, like *Gēþyncðu*, Cnut's code is the work of Archbishop Wulfstan:¹⁷

(71) And heriots are to be so determined as befits the rank: (71a) an earl's heriot as belongs thereto, namely eight horses, four saddled and four unsaddled, and four helmets and four coats of mail and eight spears and as many shields and four swords and 200 mancuses of gold; (71§1) and next, the king's thegns who are closest to him: four horses, two saddled and two unsaddled; and two swords and four spears and as many shields, and a helmet and a coat of mail and fifty mancuses of gold; (71§2) and of the median (*medumre*) thegn: a horse and its trappings, and his weapons or his *healsfang*¹⁸ in Wessex; and two pounds in Mercia and two pounds in East Anglia. (71§3) And the heriot of the king's thegn among the Danes, who has his *soc* (rights of jurisdiction): four pounds. (71§4) And if he has a more intimate relation with the king: two horses, one saddled and one unsaddled, and a sword and two spears and two shields and 50 mancuses of gold. (71§5) And he who is of lower position: two pounds.

Gēþyncðu and the heriot tariffs introduce finer distinctions than those for wergeld. Men who acknowledged only the king as their lord owed the highest heriots, and earls owed more than king's thegns.¹⁹ Both groups are distinguished from the median thegns, the men of lords other than the king, and it is noticeable that so far as this group is concerned, the tariff was higher in Wessex than in Mercia and East Anglia; in Wessex the payment in war-gear could be

commuted for the *healsfang* of 120s (£2½), whereas in Mercia and East Anglia the sum required was £2.²⁰ A further distinction was made between West Saxons, Mercians and East Angles on the one hand and Danes on the other (the ‘Danes’ in this context are the Anglo-Scandinavian inhabitants of the former kingdom of York, which incorporated not only Yorkshire, but also the modern shires of Lincoln, Huntingdon, Nottingham and Derby). Here and here alone two kinds of king’s thegn were found: ‘[he] who has his *soc*’ and ‘[he] who has a more intimate relation with the king’. The distinction may not have been preserved, for by 1066, according to Domesday Book, a thegn with more than six manors owed a heriot (*relevatio*) of £8, payable to the king, while a thegn with six manors or fewer paid £2 to the sheriff.²¹ The lower sum is that due in Cnut’s code from the thegn ‘of lower position’, but the higher is twice that of the thegn who ‘has his *soc*’, and since it is paid direct to the king it may represent a commutation of the sum paid in cash and wargear by the thegn ‘who has a more intimate relation with the king’. It was presumably due from those described in Domesday Book as having *sake* and *soke* over their lands.²²

No more than *ceorls* did earls and thegns constitute homogenous groups, and legal pronouncements offer no more than a basic benchmark to social distinctions. Other determining factors of status included the possession of land. The aspiring *ceorl* of *Gebyncðu* had to possess ‘fully five hides of his own land’ in order to qualify for thegnhood, a qualification which re-appears in *Norðleoda lagu*, where the *ceorl* required five hides ‘on which he discharges the king’s dues’, with the proviso that ‘even if he prospers so that he possesses a helmet and a coat of mail and a gold-plated sword, he is a *ceorl* all the same’.²³ This property qualification had to be maintained for three generations: ‘if his son and his son’s son prosper, so that they have so much land, then the offspring is of *gesith*-born class at 2,000 *thrymsas*’, otherwise ‘one is to pay at the *ceorl*’s rate’.²⁴ Landed wealth seems also to have marked a cut-off point within the ranks of the thegns themselves.²⁵ When Guthmund, brother of Abbot Wulfric of Ely (1044/5–66), was negotiating a marriage with the daughter of ‘a very powerful man’ (*prepotens vir*), she rejected him because although he was of aristocratic status (*nobilis*), he ‘did not hold the lordship (*dominium*) of forty hides of land’, and thus ‘could not be counted among the chief men’ (*proceres*); only after Guthmund’s brother had leased him enough of the abbey’s lands to bring up his holding to the required amount was the contract agreed.²⁶ There is no other reference to a ‘property qualification’ for the greater thegns, but in his study of King Edward’s aristocracy Dr Clarke used the 40-hide principle, transmuted on a ‘pound per hide’ basis into land valued at £40, to distinguish the 90 richest thegns below the rank of earl, suggesting that such men, regularly styled *proceres* (‘chief men’), *optimates* (‘best men’), *duguð* (‘elders’) and the like, might have been numbered among the earls rather than the thegns.²⁷ It is true that the words

eorl, *eorlisc* never entirely lost their older meanings of ‘high-born’, ‘noble’.²⁸ The heriot regulations, however, do not speak of *eorlas* but ealdormen, and there is nothing to suggest that ‘ealdorman’ was ever more than a term of office, though clearly promotion to ealdorman enhanced the status of the recipient. The words ‘earl’ and ‘ealdorman’ were beginning to coalesce in the tenth century, when ‘earl’, presumably translating ON *jarl*, was used first of Scandinavian and then English office-holders; in the ‘Peace of Edward and Guthrum’, which despite its title was composed by Archbishop Wulfstan, *eorl* is used in the sense of ‘ealdorman’ and in *The Battle of Maldon*, which is roughly of the same date, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth is consistently called *eorl*, and the term is employed of no-one else.²⁹ The *proceres*, who may as well be described, albeit anachronistically as ‘magnates’ are thus not ‘earls’, though they may be *eorlisc* as opposed to *ceorlisc*.

Guthmund’s dependence on the generosity of his brother, Abbot Wulfric, brings us to another determinant of thegnly rank, the status of the thegn’s lord. The word *þegn* originally meant ‘servant’ (Latin *minister*), and never lost its connotations of dependence and service. In this regard, the distinction was between king’s thegns, who served the king, and median (*medeme*) thegns, who served other lords. The ‘service’ qualification cut across the ‘landed’ qualification; most *proceres* were probably king’s thegns, but the west-midlands landholder Vagn, whose 55 hides of land in Warwickshire and Staffordshire would have qualified him as a *procer*, was in the service of Earl Leofric of Mercia.³⁰ Conversely, not all king’s thegns possessed large amounts of land. Domesday Book reveals that Cynewig *chelle*, whose rare and distinctive name allows for the identification of all his estates, held only 28 hides of land in the west country, but was nevertheless a king’s thegn.³¹ In landed wealth, Cynewig was matched by Ketel, who held the equivalent of about 25 hides of land in East Anglia, but Ketel was a median thegn, the man of Archbishop Stigand, to whom he rendered his heriot.³² Ketel’s maternal uncle Eadwine, however, was a ‘household thegn of King Edward’ (*teinus dominicus regis Edwardi*), even though his recorded wealth amounts to only 15 carucates and 45 geld acres of land.³³ Small though their landed wealth might be, the status of such *taini regis* was elevated by the eminence of the lord whom they served.

It might be asked how men like Cynewig and Eadwine could afford the heriot of a king’s thegn, which was just under half that required of an earl, but it seems that the rate was abated for the less well off. The customs of Berkshire, as recorded in Domesday Book, set the heriot (*relevamentum*) of the ‘thegn or king’s household retainer’ (*tainus vel miles regis dominicus*) at his weapons and armour, two horses, one saddled and one unsaddled, and his hawks and hounds, if the king wished to have them.³⁴ This is well short of the heriot of a king’s thegn as specified in Cnut’s Secular Code, but more than that of a median thegn. It should also be said that royal service allowed its agents to accumulate

other kinds of wealth, notably cash, by both legal and illegal means; complaints about the rapacity of royal officials were commonplace and largely disregarded.³⁵ Guthmund's story illustrates the key role played by land in perceptions of wealth, but cash, bullion and moveable goods were also highly desirable; in the reign of Cnut a Herefordshire lady announced a bequest of 'my land and my gold, my clothing and my raiment and all that I possess', and it is one of the failings of the available sources that such wealth can never be properly assessed.³⁶ The later tenth century saw a shift in the connotation of the word *rice*, originally denoting power and rulership, into its modern usage of 'rich, wealthy', reflecting (it seems) 'a time when those in authority were conspicuously rich, and when their wealth seemed the most striking thing about [them]'.³⁷ Wealth in this sense may have become even more important during the eleventh century, when the gaps between rich and poor, and between wealthy and super-wealthy, seem to have increased.³⁸ The initial refusal of Guthmund's intended to accept his suit could be read as evidence of snobbery among those at the top of the tree towards others who, though technically 'equals' in rank, were less affluent in terms of possessions.³⁹

As the West Saxon kings extended the bounds of their kingdom in the tenth century, the exigencies of royal administration may have produced an increase in the numbers of aristocrats of modest wealth, who owed their rank to participation in their lord's service. Domesday Book reveals the existence of a large number of minor thegns holding directly of King Edward in the heartlands of Wessex, Hampshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire and Dorset, close to Winchester, the chief seat of the Old English kings and the centre, insofar as there was a centre, of their administration. Some of these men, or their heirs, continued in the service of King William, and by 1086 had been joined by others, the vast majority identifiable as English, many identified as royal officials like chamberlains and huntsmen.⁴⁰ The holdings of these *taini regis*, as Domesday calls them, resemble the sergeanty tenures recorded down to the thirteenth century, small amounts of land granted in return for a specific service.⁴¹ Not all Domesday's *taini regis* are of this kind; in the northern shires, the category looks more like a catch-all for those Englishmen who after 1066 succeeded in retaining or acquiring land held directly from the king, rather than from some foreign incomer. It includes, for instance, Forne Sigulf's son, a landholder in Cumbria as well as Yorkshire, whose daughter Edith was one of Henry I's lady-friends, and whose son became the ancestor of the Greystokes, and Earnwine the priest, a *taini regis* in Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, who held land in Bedfordshire as well, who gave testimony before the Domesday commissioners in 1086, and may have been one of the jurors of Lawress hundred (Yorks.).⁴² The northern equivalents of the West Saxon *taini regis* may be those thegns with six manors or less who had owed a heriot of £2, paid to the sheriff. This was the sum required in Mercia

and East Anglia from median thegns, but by 1086 the former holdings of a number of northern thegns were appended to the royal lands (*terra regis*) and though this could be a post-Conquest development, they may always have been ministerial tenants of the king.⁴³ Across the Pennines in what was to become south Lancashire, the thegnly tenants of the king's land in West Derby hundred also owed £2 in heriot, as did their counterparts in the neighbouring hundreds of Newton and Warrington, who are called drengs.⁴⁴ Thegns and drengs continued to be associated with the ancient, non-manorialized royal estates in northern England and southern Scotland; they were royal officers who collected the king's dues and performed a wide variety of services in return for their holdings.⁴⁵ They represent an era of extensive lordship, which in southern and central England was passing away.

King's thegns, then, might include not merely men who were themselves rich and powerful lords, but also minor estate servants, and though median thegns in lay followings are less well-documented, the same variation in status and wealth probably applied.⁴⁶ Whether royal or median, the line between less affluent thegns and more prosperous free men is not easily drawn. It is possible, for instance, that not all the 'king's household retainers' in Berkshire were of thegnly rank; some may have been free men, who because of their service to the king owed a thegnly wergeld.⁴⁷ The heriot codes do not specify payments from ceorls, but in the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest, a *villanus* on the royal manor of Kingston (Surr.) paid a heriot (*releva*) of 20s on the death of his father, and it is probably significant that he was an estate officer, charged with 'the collection of the queen's wool' (*codundandi lanam reginam*).⁴⁸ Heriot was also paid by burgesses, not all of whom were of thegnly status; at Stamford (Lincs.) it was not only the 12 lawmen (the urban élite) who owed heriot, but also the 77 sokemen with property in the town.⁴⁹ Nor is there any suggestion that the heriot-paying men of Archenfield (attached to Herefords.) were thegns, though this seems to have been true of the men 'between Ribble and Mersey', another frontier district (attached to Ches.).⁵⁰ In a world which envisaged that a ceorl might have a helmet, a mail-coat and a gilded sword but remain 'a ceorl all the same', heriot-paying free men need occasion no surprise.⁵¹

A thegn's offspring, male and female, were *ipso facto* 'thegnly', but it was sometimes hard to decide in individual cases whether a man was of aristocratic descent (*þegnborn*) or simply freeborn (*ceorlboren*). In 1066, a carucate of land at Little Melton (Norf.) was held as a manor by 'a certain free man who was also a thegn' (*quidem liber homo teinnus etiam*).⁵² Ælfweard of Longdon, commended to Earl Odda, is variously described in Domesday Book as a thegn, a free man and a radman ('riding man', a mounted retainer), and his colleague Merewine appears both as a radman and as a thegn.⁵³ It could, of course, be argued that Domesday Book was produced for Normans who neither knew nor cared about English

social niceties, but most of those who provided its underlying data were English, as was the scribe who wrote the bulk of it, and they presumably had some idea of what they were talking about. Similar ambiguities are found in pre-Conquest sources. The Kentish ratification of the laws of King Æthelstan runs in the name of ‘all the thegns of Kent, thegns and ceorls’ (*omnes Cantescyrae thaini, comites et villani*), and a writ of Cnut confirming the privileges of the archiepiscopal see and drafted by the Christ Church scribe Eadui *basan* is addressed to ‘all my thegns, *twelfhynde and twihynde*’.⁵⁴ The sort of men envisaged in such passages probably included the nine named individuals who attested a Kentish memorandum of 968 as *rustici*.⁵⁵ The precise meaning of *rusticus* (if it had one) is uncertain, but since some of the other witnesses are specifically described as thegns, it presumably denotes a free man, like the *rusticus* Æthelric who held 8 hides on the River Kennet in Berkshire in the later tenth century.⁵⁶

The rank of the lord clearly affected the rank of the follower, but the general significance of *Königsnehe*, ‘closeness to the king’, as a determinant of status has recently been questioned. Since virtually all the surviving source material emanates from the circle around the king and his court, it has been argued that what we are hearing is ‘a stridently royalist interpretation’, raising not only the possibility that ‘aristocratic status was not solely dependent on a connection with the king’, but also that ‘many powerful aristocrats were indifferent to the ways such a relationship could affect their social standing’.⁵⁷ The first assertion may well be true, though the nature of the surviving evidence makes it difficult to know. Yet even if we admit that *Königsnehe* may not have been the only determinant of status, it does not follow that royal connections were a matter of indifference to aristocrats, however wealthy or locally powerful. Royal influence was certainly exercised in different ways in different areas. The centre of kingly power was in Wessex, south-west Mercia and the south-east, and it is here that the king and his court can most be often found.⁵⁸ It is true that this picture is distorted to an unknown degree by the imbalance in the surviving sources; the royal diplomas upon which we rely for our knowledge of the king’s movements are most numerous for southern and western England, since the agencies most likely to preserve them, the reformed Benedictine abbeys, are concentrated in these regions. Yet the general picture is still of a court centred in southern England; William of Malmesbury remarked that kings, whether English or Norman, ‘are known to stay more often in the south than in the north’.⁵⁹

In an age of peripatetic kingship, it was hard to maintain control of regions peripheral to the royal itinerary, and since royal visits to northern Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria were rare, the thegns of these regions would have had little opportunity to attend meetings of the royal *witan*. The aristocrats of northern and eastern England are thus much more remote figures than those of Wessex, Kent and south-west Mercia, and their activities are largely concealed

from us, except at moments of crisis. A particularly illuminating glimpse of royal relations with the thegns of the north is provided by a diploma of King Æthelred, issued in 1009, in favour of Morcar, one of the leading thegns of York.⁶⁰ Its long witness-list represents 'an unusually large assembly ... which must have been summoned to deal with the crisis' presented by the eruption in the same year of Thorkell the Tall and his 'immense raiding army' upon southern England.⁶¹ Present were Bishop Aldhun of Durham, making his only appearance as a witness to King Æthelred's diplomas, and a number of lay witnesses whose names suggest a northern context: Wither, Fredegist, Thurferth, two men called Asketel, Kata and Swafi.⁶² None of them are more than names, but three of the remaining witnesses, Sigferth, Styr and Thurbrand, were prominent figures in the politics of the north in Æthelred's day. Sigferth, whose name is given particular emphasis in the diploma's witness-list, was Morcar's brother, and in 1015 the pair were described as 'the chief thegns belonging to the Seven Boroughs', that is, York, Stamford, Lincoln, Leicester, Nottingham and Derby and (probably) Durham.⁶³ Styr's name is uncommon, and he can be identified as Styr, Ulf's son, who attended a royal council at London in 989 or 990.⁶⁴ The post-Conquest Durham tract known as *De Obsessione Dunelmi* ('the siege of Durham'), which recounts the history of those church estates which formed the inheritance of Bishop Aldun's daughter Ecgfrida, describes how her first husband, Earl Uhtred, repudiated her in order to marry Styr's daughter.⁶⁵ The marriage was probably prompted by King Æthelred's promotion of Uhtred, already earl and high-reeve of Bamburgh, to the earldom of all Northumbria in 1007, and its intention was presumably to provide Uhtred with allies south of the Tees. *De Obsessione* describes Styr as a thegn of York, but he also held land in Northumbria; in 1014, he granted Darlington (Co. Durham) to St Cuthbert, in the presence of King Æthelred, making a rare visit to York.⁶⁶ *De Obsessione* also has much to say of Thurbrand *hold*, another York magnate, whose son and grandsons were prominent landholders in Yorkshire down to the Norman Conquest.⁶⁷ It was Thurbrand who at King Cnut's behest killed Earl Uhtred at *Wiheal* in 1016, and was himself killed by the earl's son and successor, Earl Ealdred.⁶⁸

Clearly such men, whose lands and interests lay in regions far from the centre of royal authority in Winchester, would not only be less likely to receive the king's patronage, but also less likely to desire it; Uhtred's kin had been high-reeves of Bamburgh since the days of Alfred, and had no need of West Saxon patronage to maintain their position.⁶⁹ Yet what little we know of the thegns of Northumbria suggests that even they were not immune from the enticing glamour of the king's court and circle. It could be a fatal attraction; Sigferth and Morcar, having been the recipients of royal patronage, were murdered at a *witenagemot* held at Oxford in 1015. The crime is laid at the door of the ealdorman of Mercia, Eadric *streona*, but since King Æthelred immediately seized the brothers' property and arrested