

CHAPTER III

TOPOGRAPHY AND DISTRIBUTION

In an area as extensive as that covered by Wiltshire to Devon only the most superficial account of the region's topography can be provided here, and this concentrates on the way in which it seems to have affected the Anglo-Saxon settlements and the sculptural distribution. One must however remember at the outset that this distribution must have many lacunae (see Chapter IX).

There is little very high ground above 500 metres except on Dartmoor, but there is a considerable amount of land between 150 and 300 metres dissected by a network of river valleys and this is in sharp contrast with areas of low-lying marshy land in the region, particularly in Somerset. If one considers the counties in turn, south of the broad valley of the Thames and its tributaries Wiltshire is traditionally divided into upland and valley; separated off on the north and west by higher land, there is a swathe of lower-lying clay land running north to south with many small streams flowing into the Thames and the Bristol Avon, whilst higher chalk-lands border the forested areas to the east (Welldon Finn 1967a, fig. 17; and Chapter II above). But it is striking that it is the land between 100 and 300 metres and its lower lying river valleys which has attracted Anglo-Saxon settlement (see Figs. 3 and 16).

In Somerset there are great contrasts between the Mendip hills in the north, and the bleak reaches of Exmoor to the south and west, with marsh land around the estuary of the Severn and around the rivers Brue, Parrett and Axe, where great tracts of country stretching from the Bristol Channel to the base of the Mendips are hardly above sea level. Some of the areas which the Domesday survey indicates were most prosperous, notably the Taunton region south of the Quantocks, have not yielded sculptural evidence, but the northern hills, the slopes of the Mendips, and the oolitic scarplands to the east which were also prosperous in the Domesday survey have yielded evidence for major ecclesiastical centres (see Welldon Finn and Wheatley 1967, 213–20, fig. 50). Again the river valleys are the preferred areas for Anglo-Saxon settlement, with a network of rivers flowing into the Bristol Channel and providing access northwards into

western Mercia. But within the low-lying marshlands, ecclesiastical settlements like Athelney, Beckery, Glastonbury and Muchelney were established on islands of slightly higher ground. Much of the land in the last-mentioned parish is below 7.5 metres above sea level, and is truly an island as its suffix indicates. This isolation was no doubt a matter of preference for those religious communities, but the marshes were also a valuable resource for the provision of fish and reeds. Dorset, with its steep valleys and varied soils, has always contained some rich pastoral and agricultural territory. The area of the heathlands to the south-east is markedly less well settled except around the estuary of the river Frome, whilst settlements cluster most markedly along the river valleys which dissect the chalk uplands and the Vale of Blackmoor (see Darby 1967, 127–30, fig. 32).

Dorset has a very accessible sea-board, but, at this period, we know little about its ports or indeed other ports around the coast of this region. Nevertheless the estuary of the Frome and the Piddle below Wareham was an obvious point of entry and had perhaps served as such in the pre-Anglo-Saxon period. It was a port used by the Danes, as was demonstrated in the campaign of 876 when the Danes advanced from Wareham to Exeter (Hill 1981, 40, map 59), and again in 1015 when the same point of entry was used by Cnut to penetrate Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire. Wareham was one of the fortified *burhs* of Wessex, and there does seem an attempt to protect, by the building of *burhs*, the obvious coastal points of entry as well as the northern boundary of this region (see Hill 1981, 86, map 150, and Chapter I, p. 8). Some of these ports must also have been important trading centres, although as Hinton points out, Wareham had only a limited agricultural hinterland and this as well as the narrowness of the river may have contributed to its later decline (Hinton 1977, 181–2).

In Devon the river valleys which lie between the higher land of Dartmoor and Exmoor, as well as the coastal regions around Plymouth in the south, and the Taw and Torridge lowlands in the north west around Braunton, are the most accessible for settlement (Welldon Finn

1967b, fig. 66). This is where the sparse evidence for Anglo-Saxon sculpture is to be found, but on the other hand the monuments which have been assigned to the Britons or Irish cluster to the south around Dartmoor and on rather higher ground (Fig. 4). This may have been a British preference, and indeed the situation of the Wiltshire sites as noted long ago by Crawford (1928, 8; see Darlington 1955, 10) pertains for other areas in the region: he observed that nearly all the Romano-British settlements were situated on uplands away from streams, 'while, with the exception of a tiny group ... not a single village of the Saxon kind occurs away from the immediate verge of a stream'. (The major villas and their estates did however usually occupy good farming land (see Chapter I, p. 2).)

In this region it is difficult to find any Anglo-Saxon site which is not within easy distance of a Roman settlement, but how far the Roman estates survived as entities and how useful the communications between the major Roman sites remained is impossible to say on present evidence (Finberg 1964b). Early burials in Wiltshire were often aligned along Roman roads (Eagles 2001, 225–6) and there is a noteworthy coincidence between sites with sculptures, evidence for early Anglo-Saxon settlement and Roman routes. There is a marked concentration of early Anglo-Saxon sites around Old Sarum (*ibid.*, fig. 11.3). The important ecclesiastical site of Ramsbury could have been sited in the estate of Littlecote Roman villa (Grinsell 1957, 98). At Bradford-on-Avon there was a Roman cemetery (*ibid.*, 45), also at Teffont (*ibid.*, 113) and this is a site for which the place-name incorporates the Latin word *fanta*, spring or fountain, and means 'spring on a boundary' (Gelling 1978, 83); at Broad Chalke there is an early cemetery (Grinsell 1957, 50); also at Knook (*ibid.*, 80), which seems to be a Brittonic place-name (Gelling 1978, 79). There are pagan Saxon barrows at Codford St Peter (Grinsell 1957, 59); likewise there are Roman finds at Colerne and on the Fosse Way which forms the western boundary of the parish (*ibid.*, 59); Cricklade also is on a Roman road as are Teffont Magna and Winterbourne (*ibid.*, 61, 113, 124).

The reuse of Roman stone is widespread here, as elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England, and this applies not only to sites like Bath and Exeter where the Anglo-Saxon settlement overlies part of the Roman town, but also on many ecclesiastical sites such as Kynsham the stone may have been reused from nearby buildings. The area east of Devon is rich in good building stone (see Chapter II above), yet there are various anomalies in its use, such as the use of Bradford stone at Bristol and Bath which hints

that it was available in a form already quarried; but it has not been possible to define geologically whether stone was freshly quarried and so part of the putative Saxon building stone industry, or reused Roman blocks.

The movement of stone for major building programmes or indeed for the construction of high crosses may have been a complex problem if the choice was made to use stone from a distance. Clearly local communications between settlements must have followed the river valleys, but Roman roads probably remained useful for longer distance transport. Major routes such as the Fosse Way, which linked Exeter to Cirencester and through Leicester and the Midlands towards the Humber, obviously continued as an important north/south link through the region, and it is possible that other military roads running east/west, which linked Silchester to Dorchester or Winchester to the Mendips and the Bristol Channel, were also important for the movement of goods and encouragement of trade (Hindle 1993, fig. 11). It is not easy however to reconstruct the post-Roman road system from Anglo-Saxon sources, as David Pelteret showed in his map of Wiltshire roads based on documentary evidence. In fact his map (Pelteret 1985, fig. 1) serves to emphasise the fact, discussed above, that the settlements cluster along the river valleys and the major Roman roads are less relevant to habitation, although minor roads and prehistoric tracks could have been. Nevertheless, to get heavy items such as stone to these settlements, the sort of mixture of transport documented for the rebuilding of Exeter Cathedral in the period 1279–1353 may have been used. Here, Purbeck, Portland, Beer and Branscombe stone were all brought to Exeter by sea to the Exe and then up the estuary as far as Topsham, whilst only Ham Hill stone from Somerset and stone from the quarries close to Exeter was transported by land (Pounds 1990, 233–6, fig. 99). On the other hand the present picture of rivers which were navigable does not take us far into the heart of western Wessex (Hindle 1993, fig. 34), although individual blocks of stone could possibly have been floated by raft on shallower rivers, and it is interesting how many of the cross-shafts seem to have been built up in dowelled blocks, perhaps for easier transport.

As well as the quality of the roads, other natural features such as marsh and woodland could have had an effect on the routes of communication. The region seems to have been well wooded in antiquity, although not as densely as in counties to the north and east. Rackham has calculated from the Domesday returns that about 13% of Dorset and Wiltshire was then covered by woodland and wood pasture, 11% of Somerset and 4% of Devon (Rackham 1986, table 5.1). Managed woodland was

obviously an important resource for all communities, but how much of a barrier large tracts of woodland were is difficult to assess. The greatest area of woodland in south-west England was about 15,000 acres south of Taunton later known as the Forest of Neroche (ibid., 80). This seems to have contained many small settlements, but it must have been a major impediment to safe travel. The 'great wood'—the *Coit Maur*, Selwood (Stenton 1971, 65), is not one of Rackham's major areas of English woodland, but was obviously seen as a form of boundary, since it defined the eastern edge of Aldhelm's diocese as 'west of the wood' (see Chapter I, p. 6). Its actual area cannot be closely plotted today, but on the Wiltshire border it seems to have stretched between Frome and Wincanton (see Hill 1981, fig. 23).

Looking at the relative economic wealth of the region it is clear that as one proceeds further west resources are less, and it is possible that the life-style of the post-Roman Iron Age survived in the countryside. For example it has been noted in the Domesday survey that there are strikingly fewer mills in Devonshire than in Somerset and Dorset (in only 80 out of 983 settlements). They are in fact clustered in the river valleys of the south-east,

with a sprinkling in the river valleys of the north-west draining into the Irish Sea (Weldon Finn 1967b, fig. 64), which is precisely where the Anglo-Saxon settlements occur, and it is of interest that Finn in remarking on the lack of reference to mills elsewhere says '... we can only wonder whether they were omitted from the Inquest or whether water power was but little used for grinding corn over most of the county' (ibid., 278). In relation to the monumental distribution, which indicates the location elsewhere of those who preserved the insular Celtic forms of memorial (see Fig. 4), one wonders whether these peoples continued to use hand querns in the more inclement areas.

Obviously, as stated at the beginning of this section, a distribution of stone monuments as probably unrepresentative of their original locations as those catalogued here, can hardly be used to chart the pre-Conquest pattern of settlement or relative economic strength of this region; but the surviving distribution, although lacking in centres we know to have been important, such as Dorchester, Mahnesbury, Sherborne, Wilton or Wimborne, does help to fill out some part of the picture.