Nobility in pre-Norman England. The evolution and transformation of the “thengly” class from the end of the 9th to the beginning of the 11th century.


The study of the role of aristocracy in Anglo-Saxon society has a long and rich tradition. Early essays on this problem, as a part of wider projects, appeared in the 19th century. Following the general enthusiasm for social studies, the major fields in that time were those of Constitutional History (formulated by Sir W. Stubbs) and agrarian history, but both employed nobility as an important argument for one standpoint or the other. This can be revealed, for instance, by the classical dispute between ‘romanists’ and ‘germanists’ and the most famous representative of the latter, F. Seebohm, who argued for the existence of a manor among Germanic tribes in the age of Tacitus.

20th century historians also researched the topic of Anglo-Saxon nobility. Such famed scholars as F. Stenton, E. John, H. Loyn defined the very nature of the Anglo-Saxon state as ‘aristocratic’, following the idea of a class of military nobility, deliberately created by Germanic kings. The next generation, represented by such respectable historians as D. Whitelock, P. Blair, H. Richardson, paid special attention to the role of the aristocracy in local government and to the formation of feudalism in England. From the 60’s onward, research has also concentrated on more narrow topics, such as the political, military and economic functions of noblemen. A study by S. Keynes, “The diplomas of King Aethelred 'The Unready' 978-1016: A study in their use as historical evidence” (1978), dedicated to the nobility from the reign of that king, was an important milestone among other works of the second half of the 20th century.

Alongside general trends in mediaeval history, this strong, undiminishing interest can be explained by the fact that one sees a certain stratum of nobility throughout the whole Anglo-Saxon period: we can find noblemen in the law code of king Æthelbert of Kent (602), in the laws of king Alfred (880-890-s), in the letter of king Cnut (1027), and many other various sources. It seems that, while it might have changed names, this class never disappeared from the historic arena. Scholars agree that Anglo-Saxon society was never static and that its development was never linear. The unanimous consensus is that its social division was heterogeneous and that society understood itself not only as composed of ‘freemen’ as opposed to ‘the unfree’, but also as ‘noblemen’ versus ‘commoners’. Hence, no work, be it strictly academic or more accessible, that touches this problem, can avoid a chapter, that has, typically, king Alfred’s alliterated phrase ge ceorle, ge eorle (“the highborn and the lowborn”) as its title.

My work is also dedicated to this topic. Specifically, I am going to examine the position of the so-called ‘thegns’ (Old English þegn, ‘a servant’) in late Anglo-Saxon society. It is noteworthy that this field, as I mentioned before, has a long tradition of research, but the role of the thegns in political structures of the time has always stood on the centre. In my dissertation, I’d like to view them from a different angle: how did this social phenomenon emerge and develop?

The chronological period I am going to examine commences in 899 with the death of king Alfred and concludes in 1035 with the death of king Cnut, including the reign of eight monarchs, seven of whom came from the West Saxon dynasty. This age is usually regarded as being of dual
interest: first, Alfred’s descendants pursued the Scandinavian threat and thus gradually united the country under their scepter by 954 with the annexing of the Viking kingdom of York, after which there emerged the very concept of *Englalond* and the following three decades promised to be a time of peace; second, after the death of king Edgar in 978, the murder of his elder son Edward the Martyr and the accession to the throne of Edgar’s younger son, Æthelred, there soon started a period of crisis, caused by the second wave of Scandinavian raids in c. 980-1016, which culminated in a full-scale conquest by king Swein the Forkbeard and his young son, Cnut. The most important fact to mention straight away, is the breakdown of social bonds in the late 10\textsuperscript{th} century due to the Danish conquest where a vast majority of *thegns* were slain in battles and the anarchy that followed the temporary collapse of central government.

The sources I am using can be divided into three categories.

1) **Law codes.** To the present day, we have approximately 80 extant texts before 1200, which contain Anglo-Saxon laws, written in vernacular or translated into Latin. Two of them particularly stand out as the most complete: the Textus Roffensis and the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 383. The codes I am using fall into three further groups: a) royal laws, b) local laws, and c) ‘private’ compilations.

2) **Diplomas.** Most historians agree that diplomas (or charters) were introduced in England in late 7\textsuperscript{th} century under archbishop Theodore of Tars. Originally, a charter was a fixation of a grant of land from a king to a monastery (the so-called *bocland*), usually composed in Latin but, later on, this praxis also embraced grants to laity, and among them – *thegns*. The overwhelming majority of extant diplomas (with the total number of c. 1500) were preserved in monastery archives, but unfortunately, after the Reformation, many documents were irretrievably lost.

3) **Narrative sources.** These are represented by two subgroups, the first being Anglo-Saxon translations of some Latin sources (*Cura Pastoralis*, works of Paul Orosius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, etc.), thoroughly examined by H. Loyn in the present context, and the second being the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Strictly speaking, these sources are of auxiliary importance in my paper, but they have well illustrated my conclusions so far.

Within my diploma thesis research, I first of all examined the long-established view of *thegns* in earlier historiography. It can be summarized as follows. During the pre-Alfredian period, the elite of the early Anglo-Saxon society was referred to as *gesiths*, which is said to be a synonym of *thegns*, and denoted noblemen, whose *weregild* (a *weregild* was a widely spread fine for murder among Germanic peoples) was six times greater than that of a commoner (*ceorl*), that is 1200 shillings against 200. Yet by the 9\textsuperscript{th} century, being archaic, the word *gesith* went out of use, and the term *thegn* was applied to that social group from then on. The origin of this concept goes back to ‘Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions’ by H. Chadwick, published in 1905. In addition, it is widely accepted that any free holder of five *hides* (a *hide* was a measure of land, supposed to be enough to provide for one family during a year, depending on soil’s fertility; it varied from 40 to 120 acres) was awarded the rank of a *thegn*.

After comparing this view with the original sources, I came to the conclusion that this is a generalized perspective is, composed of uneven and inconsistent sources. It is unfortunate, but many authors tend to mix up pieces of evidence from different periods and geographical
regions thus creating a synthetic portrait of an ‘average thegn.’ This is inappropriate because the very idea of an ‘Anglo-Saxon England’ is a modern-day construction of historians. Throughout the whole Anglo-Saxon age, the country was never a monolithic political entity, and, even after the unifying by West Saxon monarchs, there remained strong local features which varied from region to region and were still present in the early 12th century. Moreover, in the case of Danelaw, we have to deal with a synthesis of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian institutions.

After a very close and careful examination of the available sources, I came to the conclusion that the evolution and transformation of the thengly class over the course of the 10th century was more complex than it first appears. In my interpretation, by 900, the word thegn was applied to the king’s military retainers, warriors, whose service was considered honourable and worth rewarding, but at that time, this term was not yet used to denote a member of the social elite. Due to vast grants to thegns under king Æthelstan and his immediate successors, a few generations of thegns owned a substantial portion of land in the country, and by the 960’s, this word obtained the meaning ‘a noble landowner’, and, only by the end of the century, did it start to simply mean ‘a nobleman’, be he a king’s tenant or not, which is reflected by good evidence in the terminological usage in official documents of the time. Next, I argued, that because of the social chaos, caused by Swein’s invasion and a severe decimation of the lay elite in the early 11th century, the whole class of thegns was reshaped: there emerged different subdivisions in this stratum, which is well illustrated by the laws of Cnut. Due to the complexity of this new situation, archbishop Wulfstan, a very notable figure of the time, was perhaps trying to somehow give it a framework that was extended by scholars on the preceding period, although this remains only a hypothesis.

A new dimension for research in my PhD paper is a wider scope of work with a more detailed examination of the gathered data. Namely, I intend to pay special attention to the heterogeneity of the thengly class and explore more of the available Scandinavian material. It appears that the question of Scandinavian influence upon the formation of the lower stratum of Anglo-Saxon nobility has not yet received due examination. In my MA thesis, while analysing geographical distribution of land grants, I noticed that the overwhelming majority of all grants to thegns (c. 90-93%) were made in Wessex and adjacent territories, only a few in Western Danelaw, and none farther than Cambridgeshire. On the other hand, there is well-attested evidence of the presence of thegns in the area of Viking settlement throughout the whole studied period. Further addressing Viking material; I have discovered similarities between social circumstances in Danelaw and Scandinavia. For instance, after comparing the so-called Thegns’ Guild of Cambridge with the Scandinavian fellag (‘a trading fellowship’), I concluded they shared the same nature. If we admit that the named guild was a fellag, then it falls in well with archeological data that places the rise of Cambridge as a trading centre in the middle of the 10th century. Moreover, I would like to pay special attention to prosopographical data, i. e. to Scandinavic names among royal recipients of land.

Exhaustive research in this field can give historians a new vision of social dynamics in pre-Norman England and bring new perspectives for further studies of aristocracy in mediaeval Europe.