

Life on the Edge:  
Social, Political and Religious Frontiers  
in Early Medieval Europe



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By Babette Ludowici

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# Life on the Edge: Social, Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe

Edited by Sarah Semple, Celia Orsini and Sian Mui

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## Preface

The sixth volume of the series 'Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung' presents 36 papers presented originally at the 63<sup>rd</sup> Internationales Sachsensymposion, held in St John's College at Durham University, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2012. These proceedings have been published with the Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum and the Internationales Sachsensymposion.

The theme of the conference 'Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe', was stimulated by the situation of Durham in the ancient kingdom of Northumbria. Formed from a series of smaller British polities in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this political unit, at its greatest extent, reached from the Irish to the North Sea and from the River Humber north to the Firth of Forth, now in Scotland. It brought together British and Anglo-Saxon communities, but also at times encompassed Pictish populations. To the south, the kingdom spanned the old Roman frontier, and its legacy of fortifications, some of which continued in active use in the 5<sup>th</sup> and perhaps even 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. This frontier continued to exert an influence on the early medieval populations of the region, and Hadrian's Wall, the stone-built limit of Britannia, ultimately came to form a building medium for some of the remarkable early Christian churches and sculptures that survive in northern England today.

As a result of Roman and Romano-British legacies, cultural exchanges and contacts with Irish and North Sea communities, and conflicts and political alliances with British and Pictish territories, the region offers a unique landscape in which to consider issues of politics and identity in early medieval society. This gave rise to the conference theme, with the hope that members might contribute papers that touched on liminality, frontiers and boundaries, centres and peripheries and borderlands, as well as stylistic, artistic, linguistic and cultural divides. In total 42 members and invited speakers presented at Durham, with six poster presentations. Although not all participants chose to publish in the volume, this proceedings represents a rich and varied repertoire of papers that capture the temporal and geographic breadth of the event.

The articles included range widely, dealing with archaeology, art, and at times written sources, and cover the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Geographically the papers touch on sites and finds from Britain and Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Poland. Articles

encompass many topics, including exchange at the North Sea edge, the building of linear divisions and defences, central places and production, religious transition, cultural borders, burial and identity, and the limits between real and imagined worlds. A number of invited participants and contributors also provide a specialist view of northern mainland Britain, focussed on key political and religious transitions and important discoveries of sites and objects.

The conference organising committee comprised Sarah Semple, Becky Gowland, Richard Gameson, John Henry Clay and David Petts (all Durham University), who were ably guided by the Internationales Sachsensymposion UK Co-ordinating Committee: Charlotte Behr, John Hines and Chris Scull. In addition the event was made possible by the hard work of a group of Durham doctoral student volunteers: Jocelyn Baker, Brian Buchanan, Lisa Brundle, Celia Orsini and Tudor Skinner.

An important feature of the Durham meeting was the attendance of a group of Polish members, whose papers appear here under Section III. Space, Place, Frontiers and Borders. It seems apt that our conference on frontiers witnessed the bringing together of scholars working on early medieval archaeology in northern and eastern Europe. Another distinctive provision was funding from the Internationales Sachsensymposion, Durham University and Durham's Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies, to support scholarships for PhD students and early career researchers, allowing them attend and present their work. As a consequence this volume includes articles by number of new researchers from different countries.

During the conference, an excursion was made to some of the key sites in Northumberland and County Durham: to Holy Island, Lindisfarne, to see the site of the early Christian monastic community, the surviving sculptures and the medieval priory; to Bamburgh Castle, a seat of power from late prehistory, through to the Viking and Norman periods; to Yeavering or Gefrin, a central place and site of royal power and conversion in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD; and to the Anglo-Saxon church at Escomb, Co Durham. The organising committee would like to thank Historic England for facilitating access to the exhibition at Lindisfarne, and David Petts for site tours of the abbey. Thanks are due to Graeme Young for the tour of the Bamburgh excavations, Eric Cambridge for introducing conference participants to Escomb, and The Gefrin Trust for an on-site tour of Yeavering and the

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exhibition, coffee and traditional Northumbrian tart served up at Kirknewton Village Hall.

This volume is edited by Sarah Semple, Celia Orsini and Sian Mui, and we are grateful for the goodwill and patience of authors, and their willingness to publish in English. Authors worked hard to meet the conference theme and the articles presented here are split into sections, to reinforce the connections and synergies between papers. An introduction to the volume comments on key common findings. The papers represent the state of study in 2013 when most contributions were submitted for publication, but many authors took the opportunity to update their articles in 2015–16. This is a double peer-reviewed volume, a process which takes time, but has significantly strengthened the cogency of the book, making it an original contribution to current thinking on the theme of social, religious and political frontiers in early medieval Europe.

The editors would like to thank Alejandra Gutiérrez for typesetting the volume, Babette Ludowici for assistance throughout the production process and Tina Jakob for assisting with translation. The conference was made possible through funding from the Internationales Sachsensymposion, the Department of Archaeology and the Institute of Medieval and

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## Abstract

*Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe* brings together articles from specialists from across eight countries. Resulting from the 63rd meeting of the Sachsensymposium in Durham in 2012, this volume takes its inspiration from the position of this city close to the Roman frontier, and its instrumental role in the development of early Northumbria. The 7<sup>th</sup>-century kingdom of Northumbria at times united British, Anglo-Saxon and Pictish populations. To the south, it spanned the old Roman frontier and its legacy of fortifications; to the north, it stretched into modern Scotland. As a consequence Northumbria offers a unique landscape in which to consider issues of frontiers and boundaries, centres and peripheries, and the kinds of events, allegiances, political and religious changes, that helped shape the northern European early medieval identity. Articles deal with archaeology, art, and at times written sources, and cover the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Geographically the papers touch on sites and finds from England and Scotland, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Poland. Articles encompass topics including: trade and exchange at the North Sea edge; the building of linear divisions and defences; central places and production; the delimitation of settlements; religious transition; cultural borders; burial and identity; and the limits between real and imagined worlds.

### Zusammenfassung

*Leben am Rande: Sozialpolitische und religiöse Grenzen im Europa des Frühmittelalters (Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe)* vereint Beiträge von Fachleuten aus acht verschiedenen Ländern. Dieser Band, der aus dem 63. Treffen des Sachsensymposiums in Durham 2012 resultiert, erhält seine Inspiration aus der Lage der Stadt nahe der römischen Grenze und ihrer bedeutenden Rolle in der Entwicklung des frühen Northumbrias. Das Königreich des 7. Jahrhunderts vereinte zeitweise die britische, angelsächsische und piktische Bevölkerungen. Im Süden umfasste es die alte römische Grenze und seine hinterlassenen Befestigungen, im Norden erstreckte sich das Reich bis in das heutige Schottland. Infolgedessen hat Northumbria eine einzigartige Landschaft zu bieten, in der Fragen zu Grenzen und Begrenzungen, Zentren und Peripherien, sowie Ereignissen, Allianzen, politische und religiöse Veränderungen, die halfen die Identität des frühmittelalterlichen Europas zu prägen, gestellt werden können. Die Beiträge befassen sich mit Archäologie, Kunst, und gelegentlich Schriftquellen und umfassen zeitlich das 1.-13. nachchristliche Jahrhundert. Geographisch betrachtet gehen die Beiträge auf Fundstellen und Funde aus England und Schottland, Deutschland, den Niederlanden, Dänemark, Schweden, Norwegen und Polen ein. Thematisch befassen sich die Beiträge mit Handel und Gütertausch am Rande der Nordsee, dem Bau von linearen Begrenzungen und Befestigungen, Zentralorten und Produktion, der Abgrenzung von Siedlungen, religiösen Überritten, kulturellen Grenzen, Begräbnis und Identität, und den Grenzen zwischen der realen und imaginären Welten.

### Résumé

*Life on the Edge: Social Political and Religious Frontiers in Early Medieval Europe* rassemble les contributions d'archéologues spécialistes du haut Moyen Âge de huit pays différents. Ce volume est né de leurs échanges lors de la 63e rencontre du Sachsensymposium à Durham en 2012. La proximité de la ville de Durham avec le mur d'Hadrien et son rôle dans le développement du royaume de Northumbrie, a inspiré le thème de cet ouvrage. Ce royaume rassemble et unit, durant le 7<sup>e</sup> siècle, des populations bretonnes, anglo-saxonne et pictes. Au Sud, il comprend l'ancienne frontière romaine et l'ensemble de ces monuments et forts ; au Nord, il s'étend jusqu'en Écosse. Sa diversité et sa topographie créent un paysage unique qui s'adapte particulièrement bien à l'étude des frontières et des marges, des centres et des périphéries, et en outre, à l'étude des transformations sociales, politiques et religieuses, qui participent à la création de l'identité des groupes sociaux du haut Moyen Âge dans le nord de l'Europe. Dans cet ouvrage, différentes disciplines se côtoient pour répondre à ces questions, à partir des données archéologiques, de l'histoire de l'art et des sources écrites du 1<sup>er</sup> au 13<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère. Au niveau géographique, les articles portent sur les sites et les objets d'Angleterre, d'Écosse, d'Allemagne, des Pays-Bas, du Danemark, de Suède, de Norvège et de Pologne. Les discussions portent : sur les échanges autour de la Mer du Nord, les divisions internes des bâtiments et des habitats, les systèmes de défenses, les lieux de pouvoir et de production, les transitions religieuses, les tombes et les questions d'identité, les limites des cadres culturels et les limites entre les mondes du réel et de l'imaginaire.

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