

Chapter 8

The moving centre: trade and travel in York from Roman to Anglo-Saxon times

Mateusz Fafinski

The origins of York demonstrate a repetition of a well known Roman pattern: starting its career as a military site, a colony grew quickly on the opposite bank of the River Ouse, sporting elaborate wharfs and becoming a hub of prosperous and far-reaching trade. Although York was a major centre of commerce and trade activity from Roman times, and benefitted from its strategic position, to pinpoint and describe this activity is difficult; few written sources are available and though the amount of archaeological evidence is huge, it is often difficult to interpret.

Research on travel and commerce in York in this period is additionally challenging because of the variety of sources involved. For the Roman period, inquiry into inscriptions is needed and these have to be correlated with written and archaeological sources. In the period of economic decline, after the Roman withdrawal, environmental data becomes increasingly vital and finally research into early medieval centres in Fishergate and Coppergate needs careful consideration of (especially) numismatic sources, pottery, textiles and metalwork (and here the similarity of styles in the Viking *oikumene* [lit. ‘the inhabited world’, in this case meaning the world known and frequented by Vikings] is very important). Because of all this it is difficult to obtain a coherent and complete picture. In this piece I search for processes and trends rather than simply list facts.

The beginnings

Let us begin with an unusual traveller, traversing both time and space from third-century Eboracum to the mouth of the river Garonne, to Burdigala, present-day Bordeaux: the traveller is a piece of millstone grit from Northern England. Its place of origin could have been one of the Roman quarries of this material in the Pennines.¹ It bears a dedicatory inscription to the goddess Tutela Boudiga written by Marcus Aurelius Lunaris, who was a *seuir Augustalis* of the *coloniae* of York and Lincoln. Upon the start of his voyage he vowed to build an altar if he enjoyed safe passage. He built such an altar in Burdigala. It includes a consul date, so we can firmly establish the chronology of this piece – it was dedicated in the year 237. Next to the inscription a boar is carved; this may represent the emblem of Roman York – Eboracum.² The stone is material proof of a route mentioned already by Strabo, connecting Britain and the mouth of the Garonne.³ Most probably the main

commodities of the trade were tin and copper exported and wine and olive imported.

Merchants from York did not only look to the south of Gaul. From the inscription on a stone found in a post-medieval lime-kiln at Clementhorpe, part of York, we learn about a certain Lucius Viducius Placidus, originating from Rouen. He is probably the son of the Placidus known from an inscription found in Colijnsplaat in the modern southern Netherlands, dedicated to the goddess Nehalennia. Chastagnol suggested that this might be a trace of a prosperous company, whose founder – the father – was still a tribe-citizen of Veliocasses (a tribe centred in Rouen) and the son, judging from his full *trianomina*, a Roman citizen. But for us, the most important fact is that even if he did not move to Eboracum, he was at least strongly connected with the *colonia*, as he founded an arch and a vaulted passage there. His prosperity might have been due to the wine and pottery trade from the Rhineland.⁴

It is difficult to establish what were the direct trade links of Eboracum – they appear to be vast in volume, but, judging from the evidence we have, which is only fragmentary (the majority of the inscriptions which give us the most interesting details were found by chance and in re-used contexts) the links centred on the shores Gaul and Frisia. As to the materials traded, in addition to already mentioned pottery, wine and non-ferrous metals, probably military exports, played a large part. We know from the Edict of Diocletian that wool and textiles were among the main exports of Roman Britain and these could have been textiles used by the army. The waterside granary on the River Foss is also attested, though for its interpretation we can rely only on the environmental data and we have no textual information about the possible imports or exports of grain.⁵ It might have been used for the needs of the military garrison or for storage of grain from the surrounding area and it could have boasted its own jetty with a crane to facilitate the handling of goods on site.⁶ Milne has pointed out that the distinction between military and civilian functions of Roman harbours is vague if not completely irrelevant.⁷ Even if the granary served

¹ D. P. S. Peacock, ‘The Roman Millstone Trade: A Petrological Sketch’, *World Archaeology* 12 (1980), 43-53, p. 43.

² Paul Courteault, ‘An Inscription Recently Found at Bordeaux’, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 11 (1921), 101-107, p. 107.

³ *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols (London 1917-1932), 2 (1922), 253.

⁴ André Chastagnol, ‘Une Firme de commerce maritime entre l’île de Bretagne et le continent Gaulois à l’époque des Sévères’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 43 (1981) 63-66, pp. 64-65.

⁵ Harry K. Kenward and D. Williams, *Biological evidence for the Roman warehouse in Coney St* (York, 1979); Gustav Milne, *The Roman Port of London* (London, 1985), p. 68.

⁶ R. A. Hall, ‘The waterfronts of York’, in *Waterfront Archaeology. Proceedings of the Third International Conference, Bristol, 1988*, ed. G. L. Good, R. H. Jones and M. W. Ponsford (York 1991), pp. 177-84, 177.

⁷ Gustav Milne, ‘Maritime traffic between the Rhine and Roman Britain: a preliminary note’ in *Maritime Celts, Frisians and Saxons*, ed. S. McGrail (London, 1990), pp. 82-84.

primarily military functions it could also have an important role in the civilian merchant activity for the *colonia*. A large number of goods from the coastal trade conducted (at least partially) by the military may have entered into local circulation via the *colonia*.⁸

The evidence of indirect trade links, however, is impressive. The catalogue of amphorae found in the Roman context of the *colonia* reveals imports of amphorae of the North African, Southern Spanish, Rhodian, ‘black sand’ (probably Campanian) and of course Italian type. ‘Carrot type’ amphorae, which probably originated from the Levant, were also found. The most frequent is the Dressel 20 type – amphorae produced in the southern Spanish province of Baetica and used for transporting oil, an enduring pottery type used from the first to the third centuries. There was only one sherd of a successor type – Dressel 23 – found. This type was possibly in use as late as the sixth century.⁹ Although this ware may have been imported directly, a firm attestation is not possible. The general pottery finds indicate similar contacts and these are also attested in food remains found at the so called ‘General Accident’ site, including olives, figs and additionally (as an indication of some short-distance trading) crabs from the Yorkshire coast. During the excavations at Wellington Row the percentage of pottery sherds coming from outside Britain rises from 25% for layers of second to early third century and reaches 36% for the layers from the third century.¹⁰ Textile findings from the Roman sewer system on Church Street seem to confirm those assumptions. Excavations there have produced silk fragments coming from Chinese raw material, but spun in the empire, although with a peculiar, non-Syrian pattern the origin of which is difficult to pinpoint.¹¹

Another important material processed in York was jet, excavated in Whitby and exported widely to other parts of the Empire. It might have been shipped raw, in lumps found on site in Whitby, but numerous finds of worked objects in York seem to support the thesis that there was an important jet craftsmanship centre there, which exported jet in a processed form.¹²

People also travelled through or visited York on matters unconnected with trade.¹³ Probably the most famous of those were Septimius Severus in the years 209-211 and Constantinus and his son Constantine the Great in 306, but from the inscriptions found, others are also attested.

⁸ Stephen Rippon, ‘Coastal Trade in Roman Britain: the investigation of Crandon Bridge, Somerset, a Romano-British transshipment port beside the Severn estuary’, *Britannia* 39 (2008) 85-144, p. 86.

⁹ Jason Monaghan, *The Roman Pottery of York* (York, 1998), p. 968.

¹⁰ Patrick Ottaway, *Roman York* (Stroud, 2006), p. 107.

¹¹ Arthur MacGregor, *Finds from a Roman Sewer System and an Adjacent Building in Church Street* (York, 1976), p. 15.

¹² Malcolm Todd, ‘Jet in Northern Gaul’, *Britannia* 23 (1992), 246-248, p. 246.

¹³ A very good account of the travels in the late antiquity can be found in M. A. Handley, *Dying on Foreign Shores. Travel and Mobility in the Late-Antique West*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series* 86 (Portsmouth, RI, 2011).

A certain Nikomedes, a freedman from Greece, erected a dedicatory statue of Britannia around Micklegate Bar (the inscription is in Latin).¹⁴ One inscription in Coptic/Greek on a gold leaf, bearing the curious text: *ΦΝΗΒ ΝΝΟΥΘΙ* – The Divine Lord – may be an early example of a Christian dedication.¹⁵ There are at least two inscriptions in Greek (both on a bronze plate) signed by a certain Demetrius.¹⁶ They could refer to of the voyage of Demetrius, mentioned by Plutarch in his work *Περὶ τῶν Ἐκκλησιολόγων* (*On the Obsolescence of Oracles*). This Demetrius was supposed to examine islands surrounding Britain on the bidding of Vespasian; York may have been the base for his voyages or he could simply have passed through the *colonia* on his way.¹⁷

From the inscriptions we can also obtain an occasional international flavour – such as the one found near the Holy Trinity church, to the ‘African, Italian and Gallic Mother Goddess’, the only dedication to an African Goddess in Britain.¹⁸ While this does not prove the existence of a cult of that goddess in Eboracum, it gives a feel of the multicultural and international character that may have been present in the *colonia*.

The list of provincial governors of *Britannia Inferior*, a province created in 214 with York as its capital, gives us an interesting cohort of names, including Marcus Antonius Gordianus, a governor in 216 and later emperor Gordian I in 238, coming from Cappadocia.¹⁹ Others are more difficult to describe, but might have included people from Lycia, Ostia and Greece.²⁰ Such a wide variety of origins was not, of course, unusual at this time in the Roman Empire and one may speculate that the officials in York may have come from every corner of the Empire.

Towards the end of Roman period evidence of the travels of Church officials can be found. Although not mentioned in the inscriptions, a bishop from York identified as Eborius was signatory of the synodical documents and travelled with bishops from London and Colchester to the synod of Arles in 314.²¹

A crisis?

The fourth century brought a general crisis in the economic life of the British provinces and in the foreign trade conducted via urban centres in Britain. There is strong archaeological evidence from the excavations in Hungate from the 1951-52 season that the port of York had

¹⁴ [*Inscriptions on stone*, ed. R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright] *Roman Inscriptions of Britain*, ed. R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, 2 vols (Oxford, 1965-1983), *RIB* 643.

¹⁵ *RIB* 706.

¹⁶ *RIB* 662, 663.

¹⁷ *Plutarch's Moralia*, ed. and trans. Frank C. Babbitt, Phillip H. De Lacy et al., *Loeb Classical Library*, 10 vols (London, 1927-1976), 5 (1936), 403.

¹⁸ *RIB* 653.

¹⁹ Ottaway, *Roman York*, p. 83.

²⁰ Anthony Birley, *People of Roman Britain* (Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 42.

²¹ S. N. Miller, ‘The British Bishops at the Council of Arles (314)’, *The English Historical Review* 42 (1927), 79-80, p. 79.

largely silted over by that time; but perhaps the evidence for a total decline has been exaggerated. The tripartite transition from Roman into sub-Roman and then Anglo-Saxon settlement is difficult to assess, but there is enough archaeological evidence to see that the site was never fully abandoned and subsequent settlements took place in the context of the previous ones. Indeed, H. G. Ramm wrote that the question asked should not be how or when the Roman York ended but how and when did it cease to be Roman?²²

Maritime activity could have been 'defeated' by natural phenomena. The slow silting over of the port (a process which occurred also in fourth-century London) has been already mentioned; but probably the most disastrous events were frequent floods, which coincided with rising of the sea level and backing up of rivers. The main Roman wharf was probably flooded already at the beginning of the fourth century and this particular area was not reused until the beginning of the tenth. The period of probable flooding coincided with the climate change present in the other parts of the Roman world, including the Mediterranean and even the Caspian Sea.²³

The flooding did not affect the fortress and the *colonia* – the highest levels of water found are around 35ft. (*circa* 10.7m) while the *colonia* and fort were situated around 35-36ft (*circa* 10.7m to 11m), additionally protected by the walls.²⁴ One has to be cautious about the flooding theory giving a complete answer or a complete picture. To what extent the man-made structures provided shelter from this natural catastrophe or even what the exact extent of such phenomenon was, is unknown, but the economical and demographical situation probably rendered their manning and repairing not viable in the long-term. Nevertheless, the occupations of both sites probably continued, although on a much-diminished scale and with a steadily changing character, slowly losing its predominantly urban feel.

Thus overseas trading was in these circumstances nearly impossible or at least infrequent. In the *colonia* North Gaulish grey pottery and even a piece of African red slip ware were found.²⁵ For the first time pottery from the Yorkshire Dales is attested and there is an increase in Lower Nene Valley ware²⁶ – its appearance may have been connected with a need to compensate for a shortage of imports with locally produced work. Its lower quality might not only reflect the lower standards of the production, but also much lower expectations of the population, which in turn suggests a sign of social change.

In addition the problem of navigation becomes even more important than in the Roman era. We know from the testimony of the military river pilots on the Ouse in the inscriptions²⁷ that going through the waterway was not a straightforward matter even in the heyday of merchant activity at York and that ships needed guidance at least from the point when they entered the Ouse from the Humber estuary. Annual winter flooding, which changed the watercourse, silted it and annually shifted the river-shallows, would have made river traffic nearly impossible even at the best of times. Moreover the bridge connecting the fortress and *colonia* was destroyed around the end of the fourth century and was not rebuilt. Flooding also affected other ports in the area like Brough-on-Humber. These conditions show that the economy of the region suffered a major blow; but local economic systems do not disappear without a trace and overnight. The paucity of evidence does not prove a lack of *any* commercial activity in the area. Late fourth- and early fifth-century archaeology shows buildings covered with the so-called dark earth deposits, which might have resulted from garbage deposits and indicate a more sparsely populated town, with garbage being thrown into those buildings that fell into disuse.²⁸

The history of York after the probable flooding suffers from a lack of firm written sources and problematic interpretation of the archaeological ones, so the precise facts are difficult to establish. Certainly the evacuation of Roman legions must have had a profound impact on the economy and international links of the region, but the paucity of sources available makes it difficult to assess the extent of that impact. Roman authority probably slowly devolved into the hands of local rulers and did not necessarily end in an abrupt way. Similar logic might be applied towards trade conditions.

The evidence of continuity of settlement is further suggested by a number of cemeteries around the fortress and by supposed continuous maintenance of some of the *principia* buildings. The cemeteries may well have had some form of continuity of association with their Roman counterparts but such evidence is speculative.²⁹ Welsh literary sources like *Annales Cambriae* also apparently attest at least some (presumably British) rulers on the site.³⁰ Overall, the trade conditions must have been poor

²² H. G. Ramm, 'The end of Roman York' in *Soldier and civilian in Roman Yorkshire, essays to commemorate the nineteenth centenary of the foundation of York*, ed. R. M. Butler (Leicester, 1979), p. 179.

²³ Michael E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (New York, 1996), p. 200.

²⁴ Ramm, 'The end of Roman York', pp. 181-2.

²⁵ J. R. Perrin, *Roman Pottery from the Colonia: 2* (York, 1990), pp. 268-9.

²⁶ Perrin, *Roman Pottery*, pp. 256-7.

²⁷ *RIB* 653.

²⁸ Ottaway, *Roman York*, p. 148.

²⁹ Ottaway, *Roman York*, p. 150.

³⁰ The evidence is debatable and relies on the correlation between the name of the father of Peredur, whose death is recorded by *Annales Cambriae* s.a. 580 and the Welsh name for York; if the Welsh romances are taken into account purely as place-name evidence, then it is possible to correlate the Peredur son of Elifer with Peredur fab Efrawg (Old Welsh: York) (which is in itself an error of attributing a place as a name of the father); this would hint that the local Welsh dynasty connected with the area of York was still in existence (which does not, of course, mean still in power), although the almost purely linguistic basis for this assumption makes it debatable and in need of further analysis. See *Annales Cambriae*, ed. John Williams (London, 1860), s.a. 580, p. 5; J. T. Koch, 'Peredur fab Efrawg' in *Celtic Culture: a historical encyclopedia*, ed. J. T. Koch (Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, CO, Oxford, 2006), pp. 1437-8.

at the time and although there are clues pointing towards continuity, conclusions remain speculative.

The moving centre: Frisians

York emerges again as an ecclesiastical and administrative centre from the year of Edwin's baptism in 627. It seems that the fortress was the site of government and cathedral while some settlement and ecclesiastical occupation continued on the site of the *colonia*; but the centre of commercial activity must have been located somewhere else. Its existence is attested in written sources, like the poem of Alcuin *De Pontificibus et Sanctis Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, where the poet speaks of York as a 'haven for ocean-going ships from the farthest ports'.³¹ This description appears to be a conscious parallel to Bede's description of London,³² so perhaps the prosperity of York at this time allowed for such a comparison. Another source, which speaks about the commercial area in York, is an episode from the *Life of St. Liudger* concerning a murder committed by a certain Frisian merchant in York and subsequent fleeing of his compatriots.³³ It also demonstrates the presence of the most important trade agents of the period: Frisians.

Recent finds confirm water-based activity in the Yorkshire region. The finding of the early medieval logboat and trackway in Welham Bridge is particularly important. The boat has been radiocarbon dated to c. AD 455 (+/- 155 years).³⁴ The trackway and the boat may well have been connected somehow to the Bursea trading post on the River Foulness, which in itself would demonstrate continuity with the Roman period.³⁵ The use of water tracks and the maintained navigability of rivers form a vital part of evidence and assessment of trade at this period, because of the importance of redistributing goods and travel in the hinterlands. Also, the higher efficiency of waterways was a major factor in the development of trade activity at this period, including the low-volume hinterlands exchange, vital for the local economy.

The site of such merchant and trade activity in York for this period has been pinpointed by the excavations on Fishergate in the 1985-86 seasons as occupying the site between the rivers Foss and Ouse. Previously it had constituted a farming area of the Roman *colonia*.³⁶ It is believed that this was one of the *wics* of Anglo-Saxon

England, although Bullough suggests that this was actually a Frisian colony, albeit established on a different basis from a typical continental *vicus Fresonum*.³⁷ This seems plausible, but the extent to which the Frisians shared the same situation, especially in the terms of equal treatment under the law as local citizens (as again Bullough sees it)³⁸ is problematic. The text gives us evidence of some judicial exemptions of the Frisian community on the one hand and on the other displays their presumably peculiar position in the system of *wergild* as they are not afraid of local justice but of '*iram propinquorum interfecti iuuenis*'³⁹ – 'the wrath of the kindred of the slain young man'. Therefore, some kind of royal, or at least authoritative, patronage over the *wic* must have existed already, even if its character was largely informal and not codified as in the later, continental *vici*. The date of the first abandonment of the Fishergate colony roughly corresponds with the date of the departure of Frisian merchants from York according to the *Life of St. Liudger*.⁴⁰ All this builds up substantial evidence for a vibrant Frisian colony there, which engaged in both trade and craft activities.⁴¹

Moving on to the contacts of this settlement, we can start with pottery. York was probably the port through which Tating wares and pottery from northern Francia reached Northumbria.⁴² Pottery from the site of Fishergate included Ipswich ware, but in scarce amounts, ranging from 5% to 6% of the finds.⁴³ The so-called 'black-burnished wares' found in large quantity were identified as coming to York through Quentovic. Other large amounts include pottery from Ghent and Mayen wares from Rhineland. Again these imports seem to have come to York through a Frisian medium, which supports the notion that Fishergate was a Frisian colony. Only one sherd of a glazed ware was found in a stratum dating from the later eighth century.⁴⁴ This kind of ware is usually associated with Muslim Spain, which at least indicates an indirect trade link with that area, although the appearance of that find may have been accidental, thus diminishing its usefulness in research about trade contacts.

Three very early golden *tremisses* struck in York, dated around 640⁴⁵ may also indicate early trade contacts (although silver coinage would have been much more convincing as the golden coins may have simply been indicators of status). This stands in opposition to the view

³¹ Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Peter Godman (Oxford: 1983), p. 5.

³² Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Judith McClure and Roger Collins, trans. Bertram Colgrave (Oxford, 1999) p. 74.

³³ *Die Vitae Sancti Ludgeri*, ed. Wilhelm Diekamp (Münster: 1881), p. 17.

³⁴ A. Hall, B. R. Gearey, H. Kenward, Ö. Akeret, J. Carrott, J. Mant, D. Jaques, K. Johnson, 'Evaluation of biological remains from excavations at Welham Bridge, East Riding of Yorkshire (site code: ERYMS 2004.19)', *Palaeoecology Research Services Report 2004/74*, p. 2.

³⁵ Lemont Dobson, 'Time, Travel and Political Communities: transportation and travel routes in sixth- and seventh-century Northumbria', *A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 8 (June 2005), §7.

³⁶ Nicola S. H. Rogers, *Anglian and Other Finds from 46-54 Fishergate* (York, 1993), p. 1206.

³⁷ Donald Bullough, *Alcuin: achievement and reputation* (Leiden, 2004), p. 161.

³⁸ Bullough, *Alcuin*, p. 161.

³⁹ *Die Vitae Sancti*, ed. Diekamp, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Dominic Tweddle, Joan Moulden and Elizabeth Logan, *Anglian York: a survey of the evidence* (York, 1999), p. 138.

⁴¹ For a moment setting aside the discussion about the meaning of the word 'Frisian', summarised in S. Lebecq, 'On the use of the word 'Frisian' in the 6th-10th centuries written sources: some interpretations' in *Maritime Celts, Frisians and Saxons*, ed. S. McGrail (London, 1990), 85-90.

⁴² J. G. Hurst, 'The Wharram research project: results to 1983', *Medieval Archaeology* 28 (1984), 77-111, p. 82.

⁴³ A. J. Mainman, *Pottery from 46-54 Fishergate* (York, 1993), p. 568.

⁴⁴ Mainman, *Pottery*, pp. 570-5.

⁴⁵ R. A. Hall, 'York 700-1050' in *Rebirth of Towns in the West AD 700-1050*, ed. R. Hodges and B. Hobley (London: 1988), p. 128.

of Maddicott who excluded the city as a possible entry-point to Northumbria for mid-seventh-century plague, settling rather on some monastic port and arguing that there must have been little commercial activity in the town.⁴⁶ Although the monastic communities may well have had larger and more widespread connections at the time, still York was important enough to attract traffic that could have brought the plague. This same plague, however, could help to explain why activity was so scarce at the end of the century. Slightly later numismatic evidence, a Frisian *sceat* from the so called primary series, dated around 705-715, found in the Coppergate excavations, suggests early contacts with Frisia, perhaps already in the age of the merchant *terpen* and beach markets.⁴⁷ This is a bold assumption, but the area could well have been in the Frisian zone of interest from the very early period of Anglo-Saxon presence. Small finds, like, for example, Frisian combs, also seem to uphold this thesis. The dating of this coin correlates also with the end of Kentish monopoly of the continental trade.⁴⁸

When we examine the trading network of York one thing is striking: the primary areas of direct trade contact (northern Gaul/Francia, Rhineland) stay roughly the same from Roman times till the Viking conquest. Yet, although in the discussion about settlement, the more-or-less continuous existence of occupation can be confidently argued, the decline of overseas commercial contacts if not complete, then at least serious, is also evident. In the re-emerging of the trade links nature plays an important role, in the same way that it caused the decline in the sub-Roman period. Winds must have been an important factor – it is easier to sail from the aforementioned regions to York than from any other location, and winds and currents help travellers following a route close to the coast.⁴⁹ But one should not forget the main trade agents of the region and the impact they had – the Frisians. Apart from natural factors, the revival of the trade routes seems to be mainly due to them. By entering the markets of Northern Gaul they in a way ‘inherited’ the knowledge of previous trade routes and being acquainted with the Anglo-Saxons probably even before the migration only helped to re-establish them. Also the factor which allowed them to establish their monopoly – sixth-century Slavic tribes interrupting the old trading routes from Scandinavia to Byzantium – proved to be one of the reasons for their success in York. When again the need for those imported commodities produced on the Continent arose in a greater volume, Frisians found themselves virtually the only importers of them between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

The moving centre: Anglo-Scandinavians

With the Viking conquest (although the process of shifting the commercial importance might have started shortly before) York’s centre of commerce moved again. This time it seems that an area of previous industrial activity around Coppergate started to play an important trade role as the Fishergate colony declined. The last coin found in the Fishergate deposits is from the reign of Æthelberht of Wessex (reign 860-865).⁵⁰ The area of Coppergate was probably deserted from the fifth century and reoccupied shortly after the Viking conquest, somewhere around the mid-ninth century.

The Coppergate area had a strong on-site industry, thus its volume of exports might have been much greater than that of the previous settlement. Textile production is of particular interest here: a number of workshops were found around Coppergate. Judging from the materials used, the existence of trade in raw materials was essential for the industry. Wool and flax were acquired locally as well as dyeplants, but madder, for example, may have been imported from Northern France. Clubmoss, essential for mordanting, was imported from Scandinavia or Germany. There is also evidence of working with silks on the site (22% of the woven textiles from the Coppergate site were silk).⁵¹ Local workers made the garments on site using imported silk material – like the cap made from textile identified as being Byzantine silk.⁵² This demonstrates that York had its place in the network of commodities traded ‘from the Varangians to the Greeks’ route.⁵³

Cloth, similar to textiles discovered among grave-goods from Birka, has been found – perhaps a trace of a trade route stretching as far as Hedeby and maybe even further up, to the Baltic. While this could simply be a stylistic similarity, with no evidence of direct trade contacts,⁵⁴ it could equally be interpreted as evidence of contacts or visits of itinerant craftsmen. The links between southern Scandinavia and York become more evident later on with the emergence of Danelaw, including even certain similarities between the grave styles.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Richard A. Hall, ‘The decline of the Wic’ in *Towns in Decline, AD 100-1600*, ed. Terry R. Slater (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 120-36, 126.

⁵¹ Penelope Walton Rogers, *Textile Production at 16-22 Coppergate*, *The Archaeology of York: the Small Finds* 17.11 (1997), pp. 1825-6.

⁵² Penelope Walton, *Textiles, Cordage and Raw Fibre from 16-22 Coppergate*, *The Archaeology of York: the Small Finds* 17.5 (1989), p. 419.

⁵³ The phrase comes from the chronicle originated in Rus’, *Powieśt’ wriemiennych let*, also known as the *Primary chronicle*. A debate has ensued whether the term actually means a trade route or is just a geographical description. For the arguments in this debate, see Dennis Ward, ‘From the Varangians to the Greeks and Other Matters’, in *Gorski Vijenac: a garland of essays offered to Professor Elizabeth Mary Hill*, ed. R. Auty, L. R. Lewitter and A. P. Vlasto, Publications of the Modern Humanities Research Association (Cambridge, MA, 1970), pp. 303-21.

⁵⁴ Walton, *Textiles, Cordage*, p. 333.

⁵⁵ Mary Alexandra McLeod, ‘Viking age urbanism in Scandinavia and the Danelaw : a consideration of Birka and York’ unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 1999, p. 262.

⁴⁶ J. R. Maddicott, ‘Plague in Seventh-Century England’, *Past and Present* 156 (1997), 7-54, p. 29.

⁴⁷ E. J. Pirie, *Post-Roman Coins from York Excavations 1971-81* (York, 1986), p. 51.

⁴⁸ Mark Gardiner, ‘Continental trade and non-urban ports in mid-Anglo-Saxon England: excavations at Sandtun, West Hythe, Kent’, *Archaeological Journal* 158 (2002), 161-290, p. 276.

⁴⁹ M. O. H. Carver, ‘Pre-Viking traffic in the North Sea’ in *Maritime Celts, Frisians and Saxons*, ed. S. McGrail (London, 1990), pp. 117-25, 120.

It is also worth noting here that Coppergate might have been the place of the manufacture and trade of the famous *pallia Fresonica* (the debate as to exactly what this cloth was in nature is not yet resolved),⁵⁶ and it seems highly probable that it was so. This would have connected York to a wide network of recipients of this particular commodity and given it an important place in the international trade systems of the time.

This amount and variety of production must have spurred a lively trade – reflected perhaps in the name ‘Market Shire’ given to the adjacent zone before Doomsday, as the area could well have been the centre of the commercial activity already in Anglo-Scandinavian times (though later known as ‘the Pavement’, it nevertheless maintained its primarily commercial role).⁵⁷ Even if it was only the *surplus* of the production that was designated to be sold (so that the production for trade was not the main aim of the settlement) it still demonstrates that the economic pattern set in the early Anglo-Scandinavian period proved to be long lasting.

Coppergate was a site of considerable minting activity during the Anglo-Scandinavian and later periods. Two dies were found, one of Athelstan (reign 924/925-939) and one for St Peter’s pence.⁵⁸ The foreign finds were also interesting – beside Carolingian and Scandinavian they included one Arabic dirham from the beginning of the tenth century.⁵⁹ Such coins were generally not accepted at the time south of the Humber⁶⁰ – but merchants using this kind of currency may therefore have been attracted to York.⁶¹ The evidence of merchant activity is supplemented by finds of scales (four of them discovered on the Coppergate site) and weights.⁶²

Anglo-Scandinavian York was a part of wider, Scandinavian trading system in a similar way that the Fishergate *wic* was part of the Frisian network. This network came into existence with the discovery of two new trading routes from Scandinavia – one leading to England from Norway through the Shetlands and the second from Sweden via the Dnieper and Volga rivers to Byzantium and the Muslim

world. These largely supplemented the previous Frisian contacts.

Metalworking from the period provides interesting evidence to confirm this. During the excavations in Dublin some sherds were found which are strikingly similar to the parting vessels⁶³ found on the Coppergate site in an Anglo-Scandinavian context.⁶⁴ This could be nothing more than a coincidental similarity, but given the stylistic resemblance, these may well have been York exports or materials made by itinerant craftsmen, who visited the Coppergate colony or originated from there.

Just before the Norman Conquest, when this part of the story of York’s international contacts draws to an end, two reeves of Harold Godwinsson were present in the city and some additional commerce-connected activity is recorded near the river Foss.⁶⁵ Economic conditions therefore must have been propitious.

A settlement in transition

Defining the nature of York in transition is problematic. It is tempting to call a site with such a lively commercial activity an ‘emporium’. But Samson argues persuasively that an emporium is a coastal hamlet with an important economic role⁶⁶ – more or less like a Frisian *terp*. York was a much more complicated organism. It did not lose its urban functions throughout the period (the word ‘functions’ is used here, because during the crisis period of the fifth and sixth centuries there was certainly some activity on the site, which upheld those functions, but the site itself was not necessarily urban in *character*). And it was certainly more than just a place of meeting for merchants. The functions included being a place of exchange, possibly a focus point of local authority, a manufacturing centre, a shelter for the local population in times of distress. Throughout the sixth century it certainly played a much diminished role, but there is no definitive argument (taking into account both archaeological and written data) that there was no occupation and no continuity. As is shown by, for example, the poem of Alcuin, it was considered as an urban centre and any perceived break in continuity might have been a result of the general crisis, which affected the area, in conjunction with a series of natural phenomena. York certainly retained its position as a point of reference for the local population.

⁵⁶ The debate centres around the question of whether the *pallia* were ready-made cloaks (e.g. Henri Pirenne, *Medieval cities: their origins and the revival of trade* (Princeton: 1980), p. 33; *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe: Trade and industry in the Middle Ages*, ed. Michael Moïsses Postan and Edward Miller (Cambridge: 1987), p. 624) or whether the word was just an umbrella term for a type of cloth (e.g. William H. TeBrake, ‘Ecology and Economy in Early Medieval Frisia’, *Viator* 9 (1978), 1-31, p. 25; Dirk Jellema, ‘Frisian Trade in the Dark Ages’, *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 15-36, p. 32).

⁵⁷ Walton, *Textile Production*, p. 1826; George Sheeran, *Medieval Yorkshire towns: people, buildings and spaces* (Edinburgh: 1998), p. 35.

⁵⁸ Pirie, *Post-Roman Coins*, pp. 33-43.

⁵⁹ Pirie, *Post-Roman Coins*, p. 55.

⁶⁰ The ‘generally’ might be highly disputable. The extent of the prohibition depends on the enforcement of Athelstan’s law establishing single, centrally-controlled currency in his kingdom, see *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. and trans. F. L. Attenborough, (Cambridge: 1922) pp. 134-5.

⁶¹ Pirie, *Post-Roman Coins*, p. 77.

⁶² Patrick Ottaway, *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life: finds from medieval York* (York, 2002), pp. 2952-5.

⁶³ Parting vessels are a type of ceramic containers used for purification of gold (especially removal of copper and silver residues) by a process involving usage of salt. For a detailed description of the aforementioned process, including the chemical reactions involved, see Justine Bayley, ‘Medieval precious metal refining: archaeology and contemporary texts compared’ in *Archaeology, History and Science: integrating approaches to ancient materials*, ed. Marcos Martínón-Torres and Thilo Rehren (Walnut Creek, CA, 2008), pp. 141-5.

⁶⁴ Justine Bayley, ‘Anglo-Saxon Non-Ferrous Metalworking: a survey’, *World Archaeology* 23 (1991), 115-130, p. 123.

⁶⁵ Hall, ‘York 700-1050’, p. 130.

⁶⁶ Ross Samson, ‘Illusory emporia and mad economic theories’ in *Anglo-Saxon Trading Centres: Beyond the Emporia*, ed. M. Anderton (Glasgow, 1999), pp. 75-90, 84.

In assessing trade and commercial activity we must remember that these are activities in permanent transition. Even a cursory look at the shifting of the York merchant centre at the time from *colonia* on the bank of the Ouse, to Fishergate and then to Coppergate with probable markets and places of less vibrant activity in the area, reveals that the economy of the city did what was essential to its survival: it adapted. Adaptation might be due to natural circumstances, like the changing water levels of the Ouse and Foss, encouragement from authorities or proximity of craft centres; but was it also in answer to demand? The economy of York of this period was not a stable entity – it was, as I have argued, a process. In earlier interpretations, ceasing of activity in certain areas or silence in the sources about it were interpreted as total breaks. In fact, the period up to 1066 saw York in nearly constant internal economic transformation, while retaining some recurring characteristics – like jet processing in a fashion similar to the Roman practice.⁶⁷ Sometimes external trade routes proved to be more stable than commercial zones inside the area of the city, understood as involving different centres to which the focus point of York's settlement shifted throughout the period of this study.

It seems a truism to emphasise the amount of information which is missing, lost or not recorded, but in the case of research into trade and commerce we can never over-emphasise this lack of evidence. The kinds of activity I have described, or surmised, represent the busy, but difficult to distinguish, background of every successful centre.

Often neglected in interpretation is the problem of the hinterland and economic background. For example the food supply of the Fishergate colony was extremely monotonous: the bones found are of only a couple of types of animals, mainly cattle (consisting 82% of the meat weight) and some sheep; there is almost no wild game.⁶⁸ There was no elaborate food like the Yorkshire coast crabs known from the Roman *colonia*. However, Frisians (as judged from the excavation of their dwellings on the Continent) did not eat crabs at the time. (They do now.)

Wool for garments came from sheep pastured in the nearby hills. At times, as in the case of Dales ware appearing in the time of economic decline at the end of the Roman period, the hinterland was broadening its support by commodities which would not have found their way into the urban market in better periods. Research in places like Wharram Percy and Cottam shows that more work is needed on the Anglo-Saxon settlements in the York environs especially during the seventh and eight centuries.⁶⁹ Projects like the Viking and Anglo-Saxon Landscape and Economy Project, which started from the The York Environs Project, offer a very good opportunity to bridge this gap in our understanding, so vital for the understanding of the trade and economic activity of this period.⁷⁰

Because of so many gaps in our knowledge we catch only a glimpse of the enterprise present in the urban area of York during the period. When the hinterland was not able to provide enough surplus for the craftsmen and merchants, trade in the commercial zones shifted or shrank, adjusting to that fact. Even a short-lasting disappearance does not necessarily mean a decisive break, if after that time a similar pattern of trade contacts is resumed. Invasion, natural disaster on a large scale, or change of authority or population (which is really rarely complete or definitive) does not mean that everything has to be learned from the beginning – it is more a matter of adaptation and transition to a new form of knowledge (sometimes done through and with the help and participation of external actors, like the Frisians). This transition of knowledge is the key to understanding the phenomenon of York. To a certain extent it took the form of a moving centre – York can be therefore be seen as an entity which adapted its 'centre of gravity' to the changing circumstances.

At a time of constant changes in the urban area, commercial activity, trade links with the hinterland and at least some of the routes of far-trading seem to be recurring throughout the period. Economic and social history must then conclude that this change was actually a way of preserving links. What adapts, survives.

⁶⁷ Ottaway, *Craft, Industry*, p. 2745.

⁶⁸ Richard L. Kemp, *Anglian Settlement at 46-54 Fishergate* (York, 1996), p. 74.

⁶⁹ J. D. Richards, 'Anglo-Saxon settlements and archaeological visibility in the Yorkshire Wolds' in *Early Deira: archaeological studies of the East Riding in Yorkshire, in the fourth to ninth centuries AD*, ed. H. Geake and J. Kenny (Oxford, 2000), pp. 27-39, 27.

⁷⁰ J. D. Richards, 'The York Environs Project: an early medieval town and its hinterland' in *The Development of Urbanism from a Global Perspective*, ed. P. J. J. Sinclair (Uppsala, 1996), pp. 1-9.