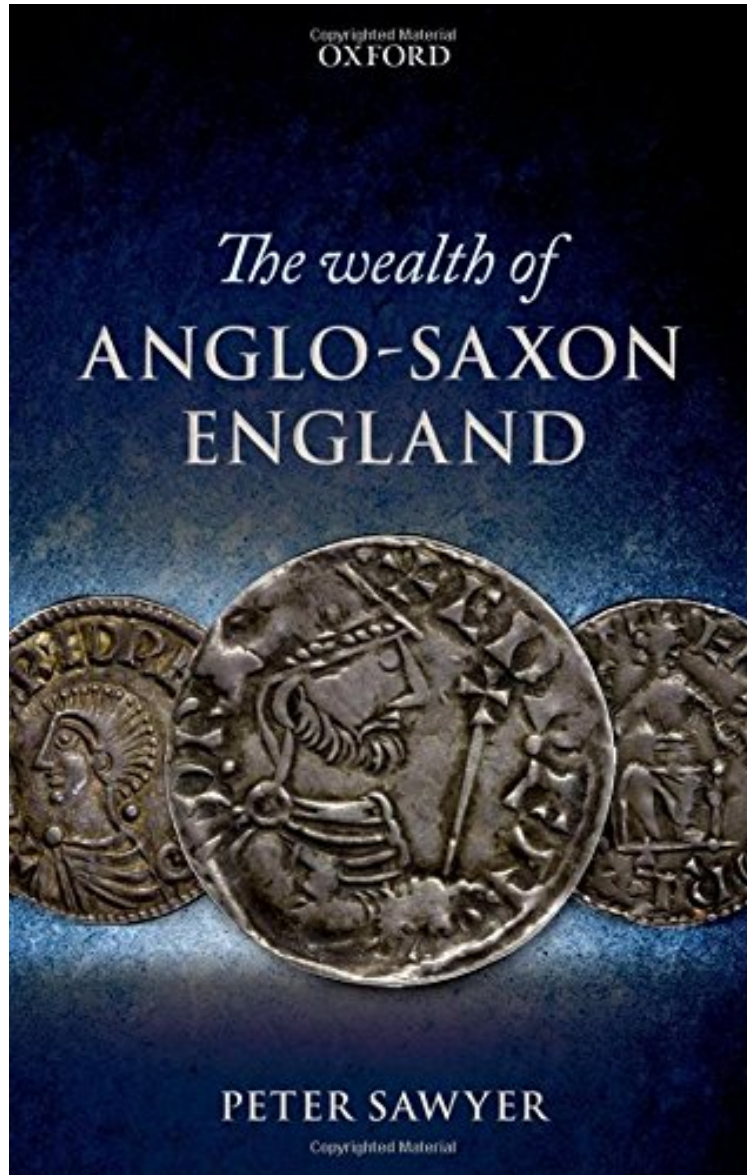


(Get free) The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England

## The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England

*Peter Sawyer*

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**Peter Sawyer : The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Where did the money come from? By JPS With this short little book (less than 120 pages of text) derived from a lecture given in the 1990s and updated since, Peter Sawyer seeks to explain how England managed to pay the Danegeld time and time again between 980 and 1018. The premise to this

quest is that Britain had no gold mines and its lead and tin mines yielded little silver by the times the Romans left. The author's main contention is that the vast amounts of silver that are known to have been paid to the Vikings had to be imported and obtained by trade. The next series of questions are to identify where this silver came from and against what goods was it obtained. Here the author identifies three periods. From the seventh to the middle of the ninth century, the main source was "Francia", by which the author seems to mean the Western part of the Frankish Empire (i.e. modern France, but perhaps also Belgium and the Netherlands). One of the main "English produce" that was exported from the wics - which started off as safe moorings before becoming ports - seems to have been slaves. These were a "high value export good" that was in high demand in Byzantium but also in Muslim Spain, well beyond the Frankish Empire. The second period was one of decline in this trade and it started around 850. According to the author, this was not mainly caused by the Vikings, but by a general shortage in silver in Western Europe. This shortage is, according to the author, reflected in the debasement of both Frankish and Anglo-Saxon coinages. This is where I found the book not entirely convincing, simply because both components could have come into play, interacted and reinforced each other. The increasing scale of the Viking raids must surely have had an impact, if only through the transfer of vast amounts of silver to Scandinavia and to the Danelaw (as the book in fact shows). That this occurred during a period when mining yielded less silver than before can only have increased the shortages, with both factors possibly explaining coinage debasements and being at best difficult to distinguish. The third period was one of growing prosperity up to the 1066 Conquest, again according to the author who attributes this to the import of silver into England by the Danes who settled there in the late ninth century and to the discovery of important sources of new silver in Germany during the mid-tenth century, which created demand for raw materials and food from England. Again, these theories, while very interesting, are difficult to demonstrate and reconcile with the known facts. Danes, and Scandinavians more generally, certainly did settle in England in large numbers in the aftermath of the "Great Army's" rampaging through England. At least part of their silver, and possibly all of it initially, was what had been looted from Angles, Saxons, Scots, Welsh and others, rather than imported. It is only after they had settled and started producing their own goods for export (mostly, but not only, through York) that they would have been likely to import silver from the Continent. One of the main interests of this study is to show "very soon England's towns expanded and its trade, internal and external, grew. Its new wealth attracted Vikings, but trade continued and, although they extracted a great deal of silver, new supplies from Germany enabled the English to maintain their currency", to quote the book's description. This, which mirrors very well the contents of the book, seems difficult to believe, could be a bit of an oversimplification, and is not really demonstrated by the author. It could, however, be perfectly true and would, if this was the case, largely vindicate paying of the Danegeld as long as such payments preserved the all-important trade with Europe from being disrupted, and were significantly lower than the income generated by such trade. Unfortunately, the author does not discuss yet alone mention this interesting and crucial assumption which underpins his statement. A description of the goods which allowed for such new supplies of silver to be gathered would also have been worth developing and is unfortunately mostly missing, apart from a few hints about the wool trade which is known to have flourished in the 12th century but the extent of which is not really discussed and perhaps not known between 950 and 1066. These significant limitations are largely derived from those arising from the sources - mainly Domesday Book (or more accurately the multiple books which, together, cover just about the whole of England). Domesday Book does indeed confirm that England was richer before the Conquest than in the few decades that followed it. It also shows that the Norman Kings - that is from William the Conqueror up to Henry I Beauclerc at least - were much more "heavy-handed". They extracted much more wealth out of England than Edward the Confessor or Knut had, largely because they were almost constantly at war, contrary to their predecessors. Whether Domesday Book confirms that "on the eve of the Norman Conquest England was a very rich, highly urbanized, kingdom with a large, well-controlled coinage of high quality" and that "English government was then remarkably effective" is perhaps more disputable. To be more precise, the statement and the part of the book that it reflects to, would have gained by being expanded and qualified. For instance, it fails to explain exactly what is meant by "very rich", "highly urbanized" and benefiting from a "remarkably effective" government. Not only is the later term not defined but, more importantly, the bases for comparisons are not provided. All in all, this is a good little introduction and overview to the economics of Anglo-Saxon England although it suffers a bit from being too brief and from leaving a number of areas largely unexplained. Four stars (after some hesitations between three and four).

How did the Anglo-Saxons obtain the treasure that tempted Vikings to raid England frequently in the ninth century and again between 980 and 1018? As Britain then had no gold mine and its lead mines yielded very little silver, this treasure must have been imported. Some may have been given, but most was obtained by trade. Until the ninth century the main source was Francia where there was a lively demand for English produce. Cross Channel trade flourished, much of it passing through the major ports, or wics, that developed in the seventh century. The rapid decline of this trade in the ninth century was caused, not by the Vikings, but by a general shortage of new silver in western Europe after c. 850, reflected in the debasement of the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon coinages. Silver was, however, imported to England by the Danes who settled there in the late ninth century. A very important source of new silver was

discovered in the 1960s in Germany. This led to a rapid expansion of the German economy that created a demand for raw materials and food from England. Very soon England's towns expanded and its trade, internal and external, grew. Its new wealth attracted Vikings, but trade continued and, although they extracted a great deal of silver, new supplies from Germany enabled the English to maintain their currency. Recent studies have shown that it grew to a peak under Edward the Confessor. This confirms the evidence of Domesday Book that on the eve of the Norman Conquest England was a very rich, highly urbanized, kingdom with a large, well-controlled coinage of high quality. This coinage, and Domesday Book itself, are indeed good evidence that English government was then remarkably effective. Peter Sawyer offers an account of the ways wealth was accumulated and the forms it took in Anglo-Saxon England, with emphasis on recent developments in the study of Anglo-Saxon coins and Domesday Book, and some of their surprising results.

It is testimony to the strength of Sawyer's original ideas that so much has not only survived decades of research, including his own extensive contributions, but has been corroborated by it. \* Scott Ashley, English Historical \* For nearly fifty years, Professor Sawyer has expounded on the riches of late Anglo-Saxon England ... It is a mark of the quality of Sawyer's scholarship that, nearly half a century later, his central argument not only stands, but has been bolstered. \* Alex Burghart, Times Literary Supplement \* Sawyer handles the evidence masterfully and his work is as engaging and thought-provoking as ever. \* BBC History Magazine \* About the Author Peter Sawyer has taught at the universities of Edinburgh, Birmingham, Leeds, Gothenburg, Minnesota, and California-Berkeley. He was Professor of Medieval History at Leeds University from 1970 till 1982, and took early retirement to live in Sweden and devote more time to early Scandinavian history. He was awarded an Honorary DPhil. from the University of Copenhagen in 2005.