

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SCULPTURE

INTRODUCTION

The area covered by this volume completes the survey of the kingdom of Wessex through its consideration of the pre-1974 historic counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset (together with Bristol, a county then as well as a city), and Wiltshire (Figs. 1–3, 25–8), which together with Berkshire and Hampshire (included in Volume IV, *South-East England* — Tweddle, Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1995), make up the heartland of that kingdom. The western part of Somerset and Devon (the old British territory of the *Dumnonii*) may have been on the periphery of the kingdom until the ninth century, since British rulers, based in the land of the *Cornovii* (what is now Cornwall), maintained some independence and the ability to harass the West Saxon kings until finally defeated by King Egberht in AD 838. Cornwall is the subject of a later volume in this series.

The area west of Selwood (Fig. 16), which constitutes the major part of the region covered by this volume, is one where there seems to have been considerable British survival into the post-Roman period, not only of population but of language and custom, and this is reflected in the sculptures of the region, as is also the cultural shading east and west, so that Wiltshire monuments have much in common with Hampshire and the Thames Valley in the later period, and some Devon monuments have common links with Cornwall. Nevertheless the picture is not clear cut: there is good evidence for the survival of the British language and monument types as late as the seventh/eighth century at Wareham in Dorset, and there are examples in Devon of monuments with animal ornament and with plant-scrolls which reflect fashions found right across the region in the eighth to tenth centuries (Figs. 19 and 21).

The coherence of the area west of Selwood (Dorset, Somerset and Devon) was recognised in AD 705 when, after the division of the huge southern diocese based on Winchester, it became the Diocese of Sherborne with Aldhelm as its first bishop. In 909 new bishoprics were created, with Wiltshire and Berkshire served by Ramsbury, Somerset by Wells, Dorset by Sherborne, and

Devon by Crediton — later still Exeter. The division between east and west of Selwood however remained important in the ninth and tenth centuries, so the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for AD 893 describes how the ealdormen and king's thegns assembled an army against the Danish force, including men 'from every borough [*burh*] east of the Parrett, and both west and east of Selwood' (Whitelock 1979, 203). The division was further recognised in the reorganisation of the shires in the tenth century when the ealdormen were divided into Western Wessex (Dorset, Somerset and Devon) and Eastern Wessex (Hampshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire) (Yorke 1995, 100, fig. 24).

These divisions are fitfully reflected in the sculptures of this volume, but the new bishoprics and the reformed monasteries of the tenth and eleventh centuries seem to have shared a common Christian culture which involved the whole of Wessex and the old kingdom of Kent. Moreover, particularly in the eleventh century, the close political ties of Wessex and Normandy encouraged the adoption of new styles of art and architecture, which are perhaps not as clearly demonstrated in the surviving monuments as they might be if the legacy were not so patchy and unrepresentative of major sites (p. 27).

THE ROMANO-BRITISH HERITAGE

There is some relevance in briefly considering the centres of Roman power, both in their relationship to one another and as foci of later settlement. The major legionary fort in Devon was at Exeter, *civitas* capital of *Dumnonia*, and this has been defined also as a town (Cunliffe 1993, fig. 7.1), as have Bath, Ilchester, and Dorchester, which were centres in the country of the *Durotriges*. Despite the decline of these Roman towns they remained as focal centres in the post-Roman period, linked by major road networks. Ilchester and Dorchester have provided evidence of late Roman Christianity and seem to have had important pre-Conquest churches, but with little surviving material remains in the post-Roman period, whilst Bath and Exeter (see below) were

important monastic and administrative centres in the Anglo-Saxon period and both have produced sculptures.

The extensively excavated villa at Holcombe in Devon lies on the western borders of Romano-British villa settlement (Branigan 1976, 136–41; Costen 1992a, 32–42), but east of this the region was well settled with villas which are distributed on good agricultural land, avoiding the most hilly and marshy regions, except on the top of the Mendips where settlement is linked to the exploitation of lead. As has been frequently pointed out, the distribution of settlements of the Roman and sub-Roman period is much the same as today. Notable villas in Somerset include Banwell, Chew Stoke, Congresbury, Keynsham, and Langridge, all parishes in which Anglo-Saxon sculpture has been found, but how much continuity there was in the post-Roman British controlled areas is uncertain.

The toponymy of the region in some measure reflects its Roman past. As well as Devon, which ultimately derives from the name of the British kingdom of *Dumnonia*, the *Domsaete* of Dorset derive their name from a combination of the Anglo-Saxon name for settlers and the first element of the Romano-British name for Dorchester, *Dumovaria*, whilst Somerset seems to derive its first element from the royal vill of Somerton, but this was within the bounds of the Roman town and probable *civitas* capital of Ilchester. It is therefore possible that the three western shires are based on ancient sub-divisions, formed from territories dependent upon the three *civitas* capitals of Exeter, Dorchester and Ilchester. Wiltshire, where there is greater evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement, took its shire name from the settlement of Wilton, which was not an administrative centre in the Roman period, but it was a burgal centre in the later Anglo-Saxon period and the site of a reformed nunnery (see Figs. 6 and 7).

The redistribution of land which must have taken place after the decline of Roman power and the economic changes which that brought about, probably did result in estates which can be roughly related to the territories of earlier villas, but re-orientated towards new centres, as Costen has proposed for the Brent estate (1992a, 61–2), which in the seventh century was transferred to Glastonbury monastery. A similar estate is postulated for the region around Cannington, which has a cemetery that spanned the period from later Roman times to the seventh/eighth century (Rahtz 1977, 56–9; Rahtz *et al.* 2000). In Somerset it has been suggested that authority may have passed from some Roman centres to reoccupied hillforts such as South Cadbury or Cadbury Congresbury (Rahtz *et al.* 1992, 230–47), but these hillforts did not develop into major settlements in the later period. On

the other hand, in Wiltshire, Amesbury, Mahnesbury and Old Sarum are possible developments from forts to major estate centres (Haslam 1984b). The political configuration of the south-west in the fifth to mid-sixth centuries remains difficult to decipher, but it is significant that many parish boundaries of the later period do seem to enshrine the boundaries of earlier estates (see Finberg 1964a or Pearce 1982b). Nevertheless, as Pearce says, ‘It is, and no doubt always will be, impossible to actually prove that any given late-Roman landed estate survived more or less intact to become an early-English minster’s endowments or a thegn’s bookland ... Nevertheless the trend of an increasing body of evidence, and its cumulative effect point in this direction’ (Pearce 1982b, 133).

The evidence for Christianity in this region in the Roman and sub-Roman period (Fig. 4) is not strong in relation to public buildings, although it has been postulated that the late Roman temples at Lamyatt Beacon and Brean Down, Somerset, could have been succeeded by Christian churches (Leech and Leach 1982, figs. 8.18, 8.19). The small rectangular buildings with their associated east–west burials could however be mausolea. Nevertheless there does seem to be increasing evidence for the transition from hilltop temples to Christian foci in the way that is more clearly evidenced just outside the area at Uley in Gloucestershire (Woodward and Leach 1993; Yorke 1995, 156–7) and also Nettleton in Wiltshire (Rahtz and Watts 1979, 189–90). Rahtz’s excavation at Glastonbury Tor also demonstrated that the hilltop was used, possibly by a Christian religious community, in the late fifth/early sixth centuries (Rahtz 1970). There is little evidence for how such sites fitted into an organised Christian structure however and also no documentation for Christian bishops; moreover, although villas such as Frampton, Hinton St Mary, and Fifehead Neville have been suggested as providing evidence for Christian communities (Thomas 1981, 104–6), there seems to be no continuity into later periods (see Frend 2003).

The most positive evidence for the acceptance of Christianity, and its transition into the post-Roman period seems to be in burial grounds. Cannington has been mentioned above (and see p. 147), but an important Roman cemetery with evidence for Christian burial practice, including mausolea, at Poundbury near Dorchester, Dorset, came to an end in the fourth century. As Yorke stated, ‘There now seems to be evidence to suggest that Christianity could be found at all levels of society in late Roman Wessex and not just among the urban and rural elites represented by the Roman villas in Dorset and the mausolea of Poundbury’ (Yorke 1995, 152). It is however difficult to make the transition

between Roman and Anglo-Saxon organisation. Settlements at Bath, Camerton and Shepton Mallet are all on Roman roads, and the cemetery at Shepton Mallet indicates a transition from pagan to Christian burial practice (Leach with Evans 2001, 312–13), but like the extensive burial ground at Camerton (Rahtz and Fowler 1972, 200), comes to an end in the sixth/seventh century. Nevertheless, as Rodwell has suggested in relation to the Roman mausoleum at Wells (Rodwell 2001a, 40–50), even if there seems to be a hiatus at that site between the Roman and Anglo-Saxon Christian activity, it is possible that there was a continuity in the knowledge of certain holy places, that could be transmitted and transmuted through British intermediaries. Moreover, knowledge of pagan holy places was not necessarily obliterated by the more general acceptance of Christianity after the period of the Anglo-Saxon conquest and settlement; ‘holy trees’ are mentioned in charters into the ninth/tenth century and Costen has suggested that the place-name Batcombe (see p. 97) which is found in both Somerset and Dorset, could be derived from the Old English *bata*, a club or phallus (Costen 1992a, 100–1).

The evidence of Christian practice and continuing literacy in the post-Roman period is most clearly provided by the inscribed pillar stones which exist in Devon and Somerset (Okasha 1993, fig. 1.1; Thomas 1994, 328–31). These monuments (see Fig. 4, and John Higgitt’s commentary in Chapter VIII and Appendix H, p. 245) are to be seen as ‘outreach’ from the British Church in the west which did develop and put down roots in what is now Cornwall and Wales. Several strands of influence have been suggested for the Category 1 stones: standing Roman memorials, direct Gaulish influence to be seen in script and formulae, and direct Irish influence seen in ogham script and primitive Irish personal names (Okasha 1993, 41–2). The coasts of the three western shires, as well as Cornwall, could all provide easy access to Gaul and the western seaways, and along the sea routes missionaries as well as merchants could have visited the south-west. There were indeed isolated pockets of Christians who apparently retained into the eighth century a tradition of insular British inscriptions and grave-markers of a type which I have suggested are derived from contact with Merovingian Gaul — contact which begins in western Britain in the sub-Roman period (see Wareham catalogue pp. 116–24).

There is little firm evidence for British monastic centres in this area of the south-west in the fifth/sixth centuries as there is in Cornwall and Wales, although claims that Irish monks were established by the seventh century may be true and represent a later missionary activity independent of the British Church. The main monastery

in this region for which such a claim has been made is Glastonbury, and the name was certainly known in Irish tradition (Thomas 1994, 44–6) as well as English, but the evidence is debateable (Costen 1992a, 77–8). And there is nothing in the area so far excavated which is unambiguously Irish in type. On the evidence recovered from the excavations at Glastonbury Tor, however (Rahtz 1970; id. 1993, 51–65), the occupation on that site is earlier than at the Abbey in the valley. The nature of this occupation, as Rahtz has said, is debateable although he would incline to see it as an early eremitical site (1993, 59–61) of c. sixth-century date, followed by an Anglo-Saxon monastery in which the tenth-century cross was a feature (*ibid.*, pl. 7; and see catalogue p. 158, Ills.255–7). At Glastonbury Tor, then, there is no suggestion that the earliest occupation could have been Irish rather than British. At another dependency of the Anglo-Saxon and medieval abbey — Beckery — there is a tradition, first recorded in the twelfth century, which links Beckery with the Irish saint Bridget. She is supposed to have visited the site in AD 488 and to have left behind some of her possessions which were displayed there. Rahtz’s excavations and his analysis of the evidence do not support this claim (*ibid.*, 119–22, fig. 89; Rahtz and Hirst 1974), and the cemetery and timber chapel he revealed have been assigned to the Anglo-Saxon period, probably originating from Cenwalh’s grant of c. 670 (Scott 1981, 90–1, 98–9).

Nevertheless there is a persistence about the claims for Irish presence in this area, which may be indicative; and the fact that the *Life of St Dunstan* records that he was instructed at Glastonbury by Irish teachers at a period when regular monastic life was in decline amongst the Anglo-Saxons could point to an earlier and continuing contact. Scott cautiously says, ‘The great Irish saints are not thought to have been associated with Glastonbury ... but it seems likely that there were Irish scholars there in the tenth century and there is no doubt that as early as that Glastonbury was venerating Celtic saints’ (1981, 2). An Irish monk Maildub is however reliably attested at Malmesbury, and according to William of Malmesbury (1870, 333–5) was the first educator of Aldhelm, but his presence may represent a post-Roman initiative. Yorke makes the interesting suggestion that ‘the contacts seen in Aldhelm’s letters between his circle and Ireland may well continue links first established before the Anglo-Saxon take-over of the south-west and its churches’ (Yorke 1995, 162).

Nevertheless in comparison with areas further west, with the exception of Congresbury there are no major churches dedicated to Celtic saints. The picture seems to be of a wholesale re-establishment of ecclesiastical

organisation under the Anglo-Saxon rulers, and Hall's conclusion for Dorset concerning the relationships between villa estates and minster sites seems to apply to the whole region: examination of the evidence shows 'that there are few if any definite examples' (Hall 2000, 83).

THE ANGLO-SAXON IMPACT

The Anglo-Saxon conquest and settlement of this region was effected against a background not only of resistance from Britons in the west, but from more powerful rulers of other tribes, notably the Mercians and the *Hwicce*, as well as the fragmented allegiances of those who were later to call themselves West Saxons. It is generally accepted that conquests by the rulers of the *Gewisse* during the seventh and eighth centuries brought about the formation of the West Saxon kingdom, but almost all the details of these events, as recorded in the ninth-century compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* have been subject to debate (see Yorke 1995, 52–84 for a useful summary). The legendary founders of the dynasty, Cerdic and Cynric, seem to have had anglicised British names, and this extended to later members of the royal house: as Yorke says, 'The West Saxon dynasty was not the only one to claim ancestors with British names, but the use of Brittonic name-elements seems more pervasive than anywhere else' (Yorke 1995, 49, fig. 22). Securing the right to land through intermarriage into a ruling British family, as was claimed in folk tradition for Hengist of Kent, is a possible explanation, but the adoption of new names to accommodate to a largely British population is also possible. The *Gewisse* had established themselves first in the Thames valley, but Mercian power kept their expansion to the south of the Thames and around the Avon. Battles in the mid seventh century at sites such as Bradford-on-Avon (652) and Penselwood (658) may have secured much of western Wessex into Anglo-Saxon control, and parts of the area to the west (notably Exeter where Boniface was educated c. 680) must have been in their control, but their hold on lands to the west of the river Parrett was precarious until, during the eighth century, they secured land around and west of the Parrett. During the seventh century there is evidence for elite burials according to Anglo-Saxon custom in Wiltshire such as Roundway Down (Yorke 1995, 175), and further west in Dorset there is a little evidence for similar furnished burials, inserted into a Bronze Age barrow at Launceston Down, Long Crichel, or in small groups as at Hambledon Hill (Hinton 1998, 38). Hinton's opinion is that 'the wealth and location of these graves suggest aristocrats moving into the Dorset heartland, perhaps

given estates in reward for their support of the West Saxon kings' (ibid., 41–2), but many of the incomers may have adopted the customs — and religion — of the Christian Britons.

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

The first Christian king of the *Gewisse* was Cynegils (611–42), baptised with the Northumbrian king Oswald as his sponsor. Oswald's subsequent marriage to Cynegils' daughter brought about a link which continued through the contacts of his sons Cenwalh and Centwine — the last married a sister of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria. Later, King Aldfrith of Northumbria (686–705) married Cuthburgh, the sister of Ine of Wessex, and was the godson of Abbot Aldhelm of Malmesbury, the first bishop of the area west of Selwood where there was a substantial British population whose legal rights and status are fully set out in Ine's Law Code (688–726) (Whitelock 1979, 398–407). By this time the kings were no longer styling themselves 'of the *Gewisse*' but 'of the Saxons' and by the second half of the eighth century, commonly, of the 'West Saxons'. This contact with Northumbria at the level of rulers and high ecclesiastics at a time when Christian culture there was at its zenith is important in explaining some common themes discernible in the sculptures of the two areas. It is also interesting that the expansion westwards into the old British territories coincided in the two kingdoms at this time (no doubt bringing similar problems), and both kingdoms established public monuments with their distinctive form and decoration in the newly controlled areas. Monasteries, some of which may have been British, were also recorded as under West Saxon patronage at a comparatively early date: Cenwalh (642–73) was traditionally a benefactor of Sherborne in Dorset, and Centwine (676–85) of Glastonbury (Edwards 1988, 15–17, 65–6, 243–53). Indeed the possession of such sites on royal estates seems to have been important for royal prestige, and the Mercian kings could also hold power in key ecclesiastical centres such as Bath and Glastonbury (see Fig. 5). Indeed through much of the early history of these sites, both the Mercian and West Saxon kings included them in their itineraries and used them as centres for councils (Hill 1981, figs. 145–6). In the later period different sites were part of the royal itinerary, both manors and monasteries (see Fig. 6). King Centwine retired to a monastery c. 685 and other West Saxon kings are distinguished by their independent interest in Rome from the time of Caedwalla to King Alfred. Caedwalla went to Rome as a pilgrim and died there in 689 after a lifetime of ferocious fighting to enlarge

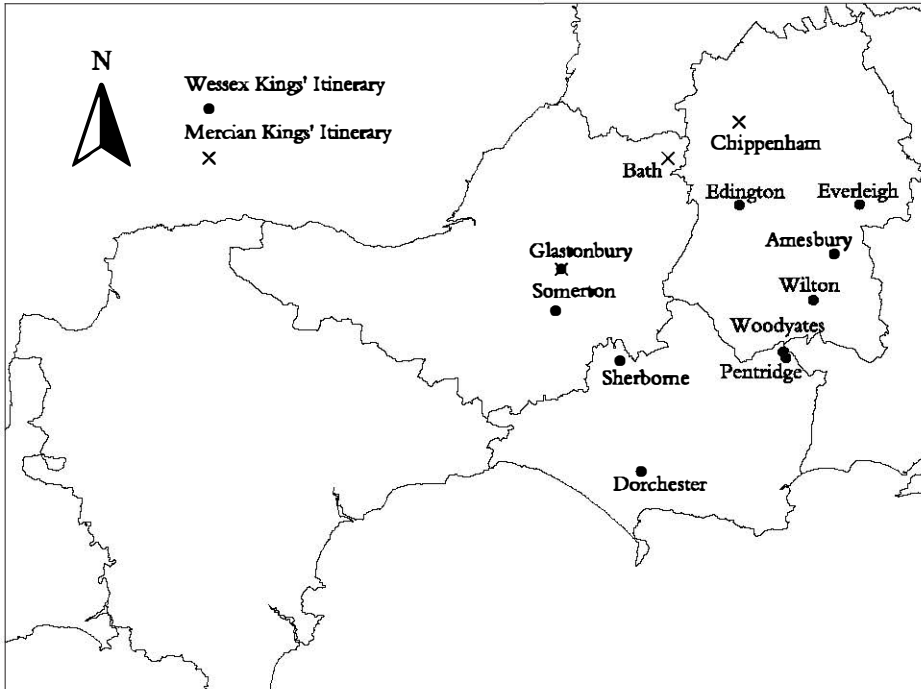


FIGURE 5
Sites mentioned in the itineraries of the kings of Mercia and Wessex before 871 (after Hill 1981)



FIGURE 6
Sites mentioned in the itinerary of Athelstan (after Hill 1981)

his kingdom, and a successor, Ine (688–726), also travelled there after his abdication in 726.

Ine's Law Code has been mentioned above, and this is important in demonstrating not only the relative social positions of his subjects but also the measures needed to enforce Christian practice such as infant baptism. It was Ine who created the new see for the area west of Selwood in 705, basing it at Sherborne with Aldhelm its first bishop (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: Whitelock 1979, 170). The choice of Sherborne so near to the eastern edge of the diocese has been much discussed, but there seems general consent that there must have been there, or nearby, an existing ecclesiastical foundation — either a British monastery (the elusive *Lanprobi*) or one founded in the mid-seventh century in the reign of Cenwalh, when his bishop Wine worked closely with British bishops (for a discussion of the problem see O'Donovan 1988, 83–8). For whatever reason the site was chosen, its establishment must have been accepted by the British population and its existence created some sort of unity for the area for the next two hundred years, until 909. It was then (see below, p. 9) that the independence of the shires was recognized, and Sherborne became the bishopric only for the people of Dorset, whilst the people of Wiltshire and Berkshire were served by the bishopric based on Ramsbury, the people of Somerset by Wells, and of Devon by Crediton, later Exeter (see Fig. 7).

MERCIAN AND WEST SAXON ROYAL INTERESTS

During the eighth century, plausibly in the reign of Ine, the many sub-kingdoms of Wessex, which are hinted at by Bede (*H.E.*, IV.12: Bede 1969, 368–9) were reorganised into shires, and although this did not put an end to struggles for power between the royal kin, the importance of lordship stressed in his laws should not be underestimated. Ine's political strength was considerable: he extended the boundaries of Wessex to the west of the Tamar (Finberg 1964a, 95–115) and established firm relations with the East Saxon and Kentish kings as well as maintaining his borders against the most powerful of the South Humbric kings, Æthelred of Mercia. At that time, as noted above, the patronage of monasteries is probably to be seen as an essential element of royal power. Bath and Malmesbury were both patronised by *Hwiccean* and Mercian potentates as well as West Saxon. As Yorke says, 'Although Malmesbury's position in a border zone meant that it might benefit from the patronage of both sides, there were clearly potential dangers as well. Aldhelm,

abbot of Malmesbury, obtained a grant of privileges from Pope Sergius I which he got both Ine of Wessex and Æthelred of Mercia to ratify and further secured their agreement that Malmesbury should not suffer in wars between the two kingdoms' (Yorke 1995, 61). Ine was a patron of Malmesbury, Muchelney and also Glastonbury, where he is credited with building the first stone church c. 700 (Rahtz 1993, 31, ill. 45), and this clearly did stamp the authority of the West Saxon kings on that place. Ine was however on good terms with the leading churchmen of his age and acknowledges the help of his bishops in the Prologue to his Laws (Whitelock 1979, 399); and according to the *Life* of St Boniface, Wynfrith, later known as Boniface, monk of Exeter and later missionary to Germany, served as the king's envoy to the archbishop of Canterbury (*Vita Bonifatii*, ch. 4: Levison 1905, 13–14). Kirby sums up his reign in the following terms: 'There can be no doubt that it was Ine who set the seal on the creation of the historic kingdom of Wessex and defined its horizons as a Christian realm in which monasticism and men of letters flourished amid active involvement in an overseas mission' (Kirby 1991, 126).

After Ine's death the Mercian king Æthelbald not only invaded Somerset and occupied the head settlement of Somerton, but seems to have reasserted control over Glastonbury and Malmesbury. His powerful successor King Offa, in 781, took back Bath into his control (Edwards 1988, 122) and it became a royal proprietary monastery, and, despite the winning back of territory by the West Saxon king Ecgbert in the opening years of the ninth century, which successfully put an end to Mercian control of Glastonbury, Bath remained a place where the Mercian kings held their court into the mid-ninth century. Ecgbert's reign consolidated West Saxon power, and he received the temporary submission of Mercia in 829 (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: Whitelock 1979, 186), but it was not until the reign of his son Æthelwulf (839–858) that all the southern shires in the south-east which had been claimed by Mercia came under West Saxon control. Greater co-operation between Wessex and Mercia came about however by the mid ninth century, partly as a result of intermarriage (Burgred, king of Mercia married King Æthelwulf's daughter Æthelwith, in 853 (*ibid.*, 189)), and partly by the growing threat from the Vikings and the unrest of the western British. From the period of King Alfred's reign onwards English Mercia and Wessex had to make common cause against external threat, and the eventual union of Wessex and western Mercia came about by the marriage of Alfred's daughter Æthelflæd to the ruler of western Mercia (see below).

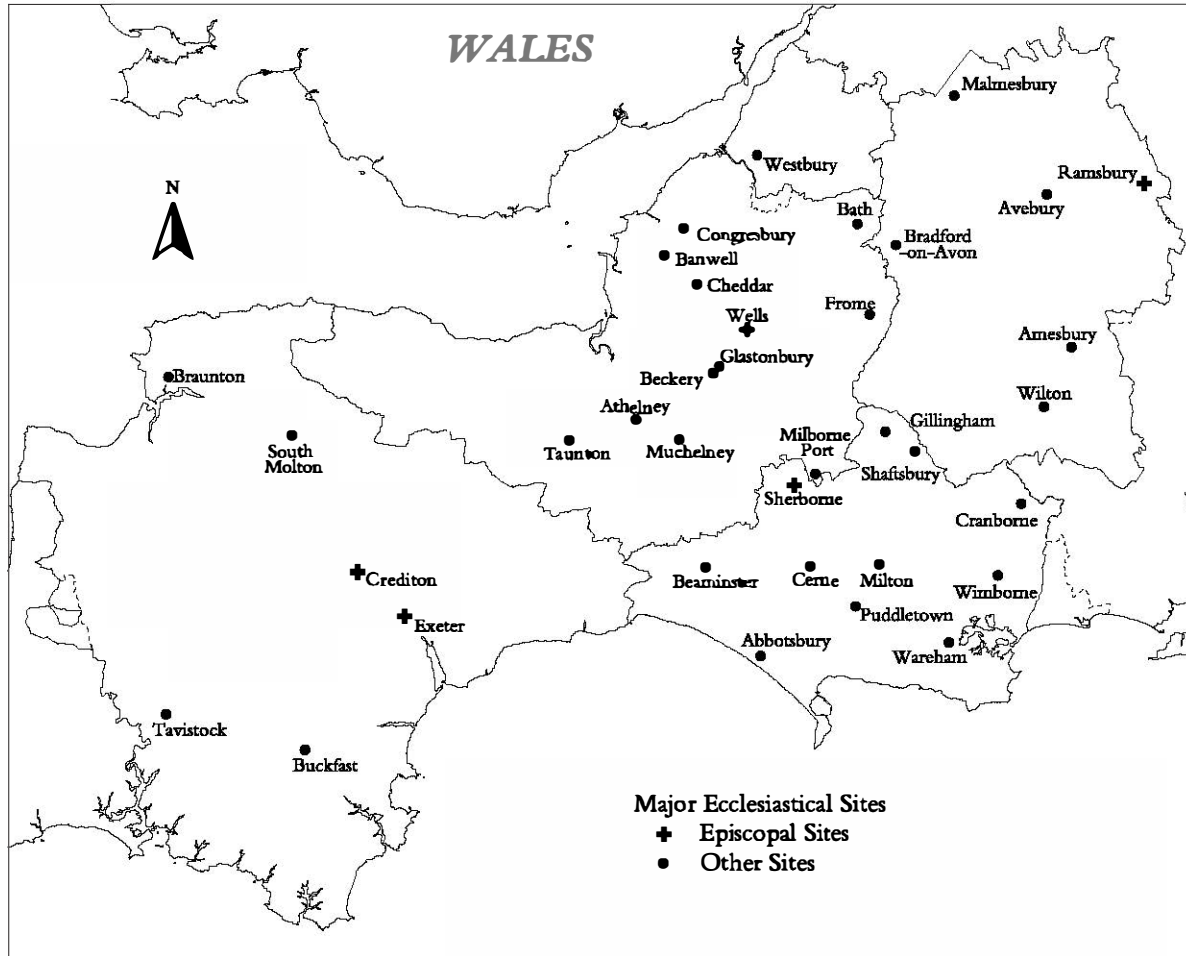


FIGURE 7
Major ecclesiastical sites in south-west England

THE WEST SAXON HEGEMONY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ECCLESIASTICAL CENTRES

The establishment of a see at Sherborne was probably preceded by the foundation of monasteries, and there are three monastic sites in Somerset which were in existence by the end of the seventh century: Glastonbury, Muchelney and Frome, the last being a daughter house of Mahnesbury (Fig. 7). The landholdings of Glastonbury from the late seventh to mid eighth century were fairly dispersed, but those of Muchelney clustered more closely to the monastery (see Costen 1992a, fig. 4.7). Of the twenty-nine church sites possibly dating before AD 750 which Costen has assembled from a variety of criteria, the four at the top of the list are the monasteries just mentioned, together with Wells (ibid., fig. 4.1). Of the other twenty-five only three so far have provided sculpture: Congresbury, Banwell and Keynsham (Fig. 27, p. 132). For Dorset, Theresa Hall has established a league table of possibilities for thirty-seven high status churches, in which Wimborne, Sherborne, Beaminster and Shaftesbury are distinguished by literary evidence that a religious community existed before 950, though unfortunately sculpture has only been found at Shaftesbury. In the group of fifteen which score between 20 and 62, Whitchurch Canonicorum, Wareham, Gillingham, Cranborne, Puddletown and Yetminster have produced sculpture, and in the 10 to 19 group only Milton Abbas, Buckland Newton, Shaftesbury and possibly Corfe have produced sculpture (Hall 2000, fig. 1 and table 3). Of course one cannot deduce anything useful from negative evidence, but the lack of sculptural and indeed architectural evidence from ecclesiastical sites where one would expect to find it is notable in this area, and it is difficult to see a pattern in those sites where sculpture does survive (Fig. 26, p. 94). The initial distribution of minster churches serving a *parochia* based on a large royal or ecclesiastical estate is complicated by the donation of land for minsters from other lay landowners, such as is suggested for Beaminster or Yetminster, but is also overlaid by the creation or re-creation of churches in Alfred's reign, often in his new *burhs*.

ALFRED, REFORMS AND REFOUNDATIONS

When Alfred became ruler of Wessex in 871 the kingdom had been under attack from Viking armies almost every year since the mid 830s, and in 871 and 876–8 the savagery of the attacks almost brought about the collapse of English rule. The West Saxons' defeat of the

Scandinavian army at the battle of Edington, Wiltshire, in 878, and the subsequent treaty of Wedmore (Dumville 1992, 1–23) which included the conversion to Christianity of their leader, Guthrum, brought about a period of stability which allowed the king to rethink his defence policy and also to plan for the rebuilding of learning and culture. Alfred's wars in his early days as king had demonstrated how essential it was to have, in addition to a mobile army, strong points manned by a standing force which could provide shelter for the surrounding population, and protection for markets and mints in times of war, so that the whole economy would not collapse. He had travelled abroad and had sufficient contacts on the Continent to know about the defensive works there, some of which had existed from Roman times, but many of which were new and grandiose works whether as boundaries or enclosures of towns. The Danish invaders had also proved the value of defensive encampments, and for all of these reasons he set in train the construction of a series of defended sites (*burhs*) encompassing the whole of southern England and leaving no centres of population too isolated (Hill 1981, 85–6, fig. 150). The territory of these *burhs* provided for their upkeep and defence, and much of this was taken from the royal estates and was maintained by Alfred's successors. On the other hand, as has been widely discussed, these centres were obviously of varied status and had different provision (see Yorke 1995, fig. 29). In Devon the four *burhs* of Exeter, Lydford (a promontory), Haswell and Pilton (like Watchet in Somerset, originally Iron Age forts) were only lightly provided with hidage allocations. Exeter, which like Winchester was a refurbished Roman town and an important ecclesiastical and royal centre, seems to have been especially poorly provided, although on a par with Shaftesbury and the Dorset site of *Brydian*, probably Bridport. The royal centre of Wilton was well provided for, as were Wareham and Cricklade which appear to be *de novo* fortifications of a substantial rectangular type. The ancient royal and ecclesiastical centres of Bath and Malmesbury were similarly well provided. The system appeared to work, and the extensive rebuilding which Alfred initiated is perhaps what Asser refers to in Chapter 91 of his *Life*: 'What of the cities and towns he restored, and the others, which he built where none had been before?' (Whitelock 1979, 298). Asser there also credits Alfred with royal residences in timber and in stone, but none have been identified.

It is also difficult to identify, in western Wessex, surviving church building which might be assigned to his reign. Alfred tried indefatigably to reinvigorate the life of the Church and the learning and craftsmanship which had been lost in the turbulent years of the ninth century, and

even if the picture was not as bleak as he painted in the introduction to the *Cura Pastoralis* (Whitelock 1979, 888–90) there is no doubt that regular religious organisation had been disrupted. From the mid 880s he was able to import learned ecclesiastics from western Mercia, and this link with western Mercia is apparent also in the art of the period, and I would suggest in the animal ornament on West Saxon crosses (see Chapter VI, p. 42). His efforts at the revival of regular monastic life were less successful, however. He had significant power over ecclesiastical sites, as his will demonstrates, and he ‘gave’ the two monasteries of Banwell and Congresbury to Asser, bishop of Sherborne, as well as Exeter ‘with all the diocese belonging to it’ (*Life*, ch. 81: Whitelock 1979, 297; see Fig. 7). He also founded a new monastery in Shaftesbury as a nunnery to be presided over by his daughter Æthelgifu (*ibid.*, 300), which augmented the small group of Wessex nunneries in late Saxon England, two of which in this region, Wimborne and Wareham, had survived from the period of double monasteries (Yorke 1995, 206, fig. 53). But he could not encourage the English nobles and freemen to undertake the monastic life. Having therefore constructed a monastery in the swamps of Athelney, he collected together monks and postulants of various races and set in charge John the Old Saxon, adding many from overseas of the Gallic race (Whitelock 1979, 299–300). The attack by some of the monks on their abbot with the intention of killing him was perhaps not an unexpected outcome from this isolated multi-ethnic group. Many of Alfred’s initiatives were in advance of his time and were developed later by his successors who were to become kings of all England not just of Wessex, but there is no doubt that his reign was a turning-point in the history of the kingdom.

REFORMS AND REVIVALS IN THE TENTH TO ELEVENTH CENTURIES

The power of Alfred’s successors to shape ecclesiastical provision in western Wessex is demonstrated by Edward the Elder’s division of the extensive sees of Winchester and Sherborne in 909. Now Wiltshire (with Berkshire) had a new see at Ramsbury, Somerset at Wells, and Devon (and Cornwall) at Crediton (see Fig. 7), whilst Sherborne remained with Dorset although shorn of many of its earlier landholdings (O’Donovan 1988, xxii–iv, figs. 2, 3). The choice of Crediton rather than Exeter may be because the monastery there, which was founded in 739, was already well endowed, the tenth-century bounds outlining an area calculated as being about 50,000 acres (*ibid.*, xlvi). By 1050, however, the advantages of Exeter

as a major port and trading place, with a mint as well as an ancient Christian centre, caused Bishop Leofric to move his see there from Crediton.

Significant of the new world that was to take shape in the tenth century was the fact that the first bishop of Ramsbury, Oda, was a monk who had made his profession of obedience to the Benedictine monastery of Fleury-sur-Loire. He, together with Bishop Alfheah of Winchester and his kinsman Dunstan, had benefitted from the foreign travels and contacts provided by royal marriages with foreign princes and the appointment of foreign churchmen to positions in Wessex during the early tenth century. Such contacts had been actively promoted by Alfred, but now gathered momentum under his grandson Athelstan (Dumville 1992, 159–161). Equally important for the revival of the arts in his reign was the king’s interest in the acquisition of manuscripts and relics, and his re-distribution of them throughout his kingdom, thus disseminating new styles of ornament and iconography. In Wessex his patronage was extended to Bath and Malmesbury but he also founded two new monasteries at Milton Abbas and Muchelney (Fig. 7), and in his works not only continued the reforms of Alfred but laid the foundation for the revival of regular monasticism and the cultural revival promoted by his successors, in particular Edgar.

Athelstan’s immediate successor, Edmund, was not distinguished by any outstanding patronage of the Church, but his appointment of Dunstan to be abbot of Glastonbury set in train the Benedictine reforms and established that house as the major monastery of Wessex — a position which it held until the Norman Conquest. In another move which could be seen as encouraging a variety of religious practice, but which must have produced a direct Continental influence at an important centre, he introduced to the church at Bath a group of exiles fleeing from the Benedictine reforms at St Bertin.

Yet these reforms of the religious life to achieve a degree of uniformity, which had been accepted on the Continent in the ninth century but further reformed in the tenth, were soon promoted in Wessex under the three influential monk-bishops, Dunstan, Oswald, and Æthelwold, and were actively encouraged by King Edgar. This movement culminated in 970 with the national agreement to adopt an code of monastic law based primarily on a version of the rule of St Benedict, which was known as the *Regularis Concordia* (Symonds 1975). Concurrently with the adoption of a stricter adherence to a common rule, the monasteries set about attempting to recover lands for their economic support. In the chaos of the Viking Age wars many of the land-holdings supporting religious establishments had passed into lay hands, and now the

reformed establishments needed the generosity of the laity to win land back. In the reign of Edgar the king's promotion of the reform movement was obviously of great importance and many institutions were conspicuously successful in gaining endowments. There must have been extensive rebuilding although the evidence in this region is woefully sparse, but it is clear from Glastonbury (the one monastic site in the region which has been extensively excavated) that there was expansion and reordering (Rahtz 1993, figs. 42–5 and 67). Unfortunately the series of excavations which have taken place on this site (*ibid.*, 67–82) have not left a clear picture of the site's development, and it has not been possible to assign any of the sculptures to the period of Dunstan's reforms. Nevertheless the new styles of ornament, in particular the acanthine (p. 51), and the more humane figure styles which are to be found both in the manuscripts and sculptures, were widely disseminated (see Chapters VI and VII). The figure carvings such as the Bradford or Winterbourne Steepleton angels, the Christ figures at Congresbury and Bristol or the fragment of a rood from Muchelney are random survivals and not always in the most influential of the reformed centres, but their grand scale and refinement of carving provide one with some idea of the achievement of the movement by the end of the tenth century.

Nevertheless the close dependence of the reformed houses on royal and noble patronage and support, the limitations of the monks' intellectual achievements, as well as their involvement in regional and family politics, were weaknesses which have often been pointed out as a source of decline (Farmer 1975, 15–19). In the immediate aftermath of Edgar's death, in 975, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* D, E, F records that Ealdorman Ælfhere destroyed many monastic foundations which Edgar had ordered Bishop Æthelwold to institute (Whitelock 1979, 229), and Æthelwold was alive until 984. But in the reign of Æthelred more problems arose, in the probing attacks of Scandinavian fleets: in 982 the *Chronicle* C records that 'three ships of vikings arrived in Dorset and ravaged in Portland' (*ibid.*, 232); in 988 (the year in which Dunstan died) Watchet was ravaged and many men of Devonshire were killed (*ibid.*, 233). In 997 the Danish army again attacked Watchet, having entered the mouth of the Severn, and having inflicted damage there entered Devon from the mouth of the Tamar on the south 'and went inland until they reached Lydford, burning and slaying everything they came across, and burnt down Ordwulf's monastery at Tavistock and took with them to their ships indescribable booty' (*ibid.*, 236). In 1001 and 1003 Devon was again attacked but western Wessex did not fare as

badly as the east, and in 1011 after a series of disastrous battles and political decisions by the English the Danes had occupied the kingdom south of the Thames as far west as part of Wiltshire (*ibid.*, 244). It was not until Cnut succeeded to the English throne in 1017, a year after King Æthelred's death, that stability was restored. In Cnut's division of the kingdom into four he kept Wessex for himself, but there is little to see in the surviving sculpture of the western area that illustrates Scandinavian taste, in the marmer for example of the slabs from London St Paul's or Rochester in Kent (Tweddle *et al.* 1995, ills. 351 and 147). Perhaps the clearest evidence of Scandinavian influence in this region may be seen in the rider figure on the Copplestone cross (Ill. 12), but that monument could be earlier.

The reshaping of Cnut into a credible pattern of a perfect Christian king was substantially effected by churchmen such as Archbishop Wulfstan, and the patronage of the king and Queen Ælfgifu is manifest in manuscripts such as the New Minster *Liber Vitae* (Temple 1976, no. 78, ill. 244). The art of Wessex that emerges in the eleventh century appears then to derive seamlessly from the styles laid down in the later tenth. This is not easy to illustrate from sculpture however (see Chapter IX), although it is possible to see the foreign influences which were introduced to England by Cnut's successor Edward the Confessor. As Stenton said, 'Between the accession of Cnut and the Norman Conquest political exchanges between the English court and foreign powers were more frequent than at any period since the reign of Athelstan' (Stenton 1971, 463–4). In 1033 Cnut gave the bishopric of Wells to a Lotharingian priest, and the appointment of Norman clerics to major English sees such as Robert of Jumièges to Canterbury, although unpopular in many quarters, must have opened up the English Church to Continental influence.

From the time of Æthelred II the English kings seem to have spent less time in western Wessex, which for Æthelred and his son Edward the Confessor, as well as the Dane Cnut, had never been the dynastic homeland and haven that it was for Alfred and his successors in the tenth century. Yorke notes that 'By the middle of the eleventh century—that is before the Norman Conquest—the six Wessex shires had lost the distinctiveness they had enjoyed in the tenth century', but she concludes that the shift of attention towards London was inevitable since its good communications to all parts of the country made it a desirable centre of government (Yorke 1995, 147). It was the burial place of Æthelred, and also of Edward, whose major building programme was centred on his palace and abbey at Westminster. After the Conquest Norman clerics found much to criticise in

the English Church, not least its architecture, and a massive programme of building began (Gem 1988). In the destruction of pre-Conquest buildings, much of the panel sculpture which is a characteristic feature of the sculpture of Wessex in the pre-Conquest period must have been lost, but that provoked less contemporary comment than the large-scale removal to Normandy of the objects of gold and silver which had enhanced the interiors of the Anglo-Saxon churches (see Dodwell 1982, 216–34); for example, ‘At Glastonbury, twenty-six crosses or Crucifixes, an altar, a censer “of wonderful size” and other objects of gold or silver were stripped down’ (ibid., 218). Nevertheless the new buildings were on a much grander scale and not all of the Anglo-Saxon traditions were lost in the new forms. In this region outstanding architectural sculpture as is to be found at Knook or Milborne Port (see Ills. 556–62, 563–5) demonstrates not only new ideas but a continuing English tradition.

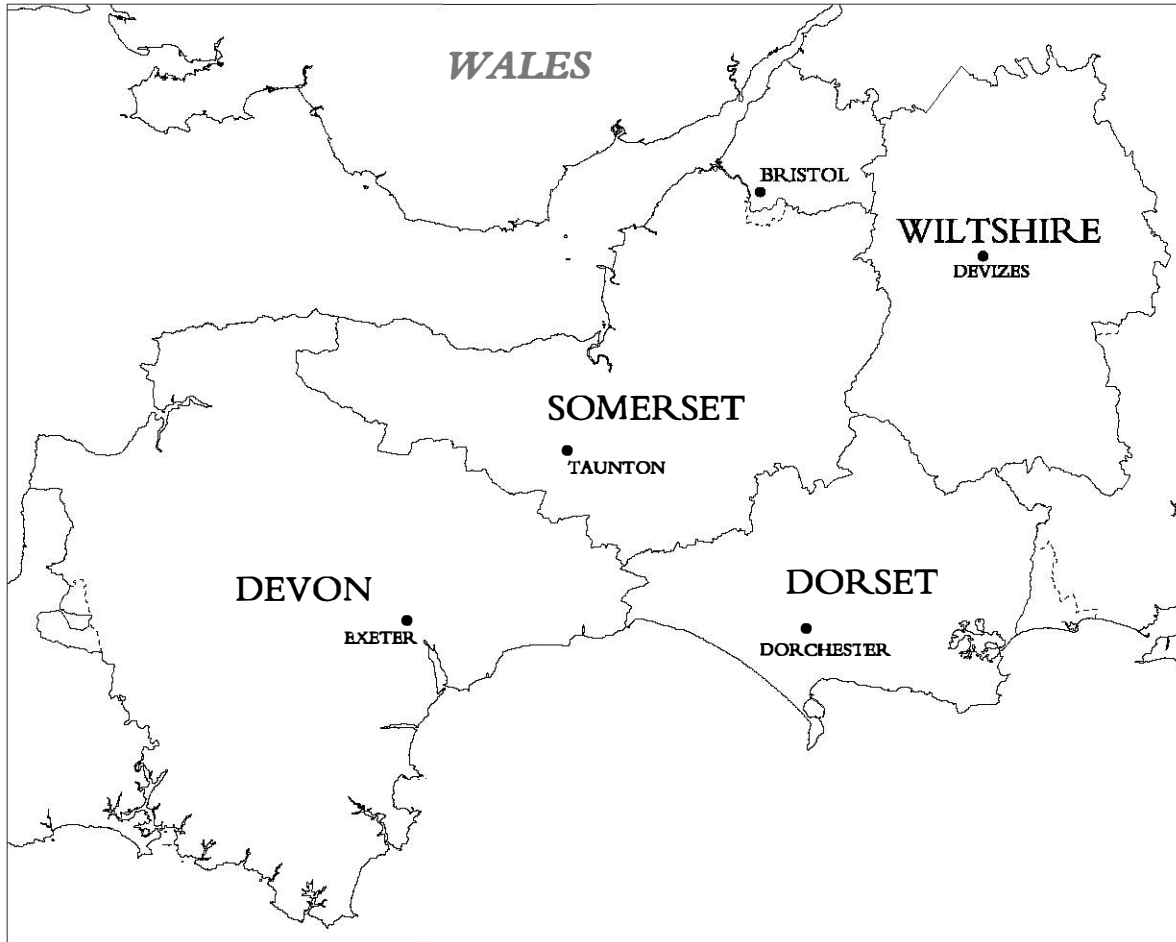


FIGURE 1
The counties included in Volume VII, *South-West England*

The volume covers the pre-1974 counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire. Bristol at that period was both a city and an administrative county, but for convenience, the single piece of sculpture from Bristol has been placed here in the Somerset part of the catalogue. The borders shown in solid lines are common to both the pre-1974 and modern administrative counties. The broken lines show the modern administrative borders.

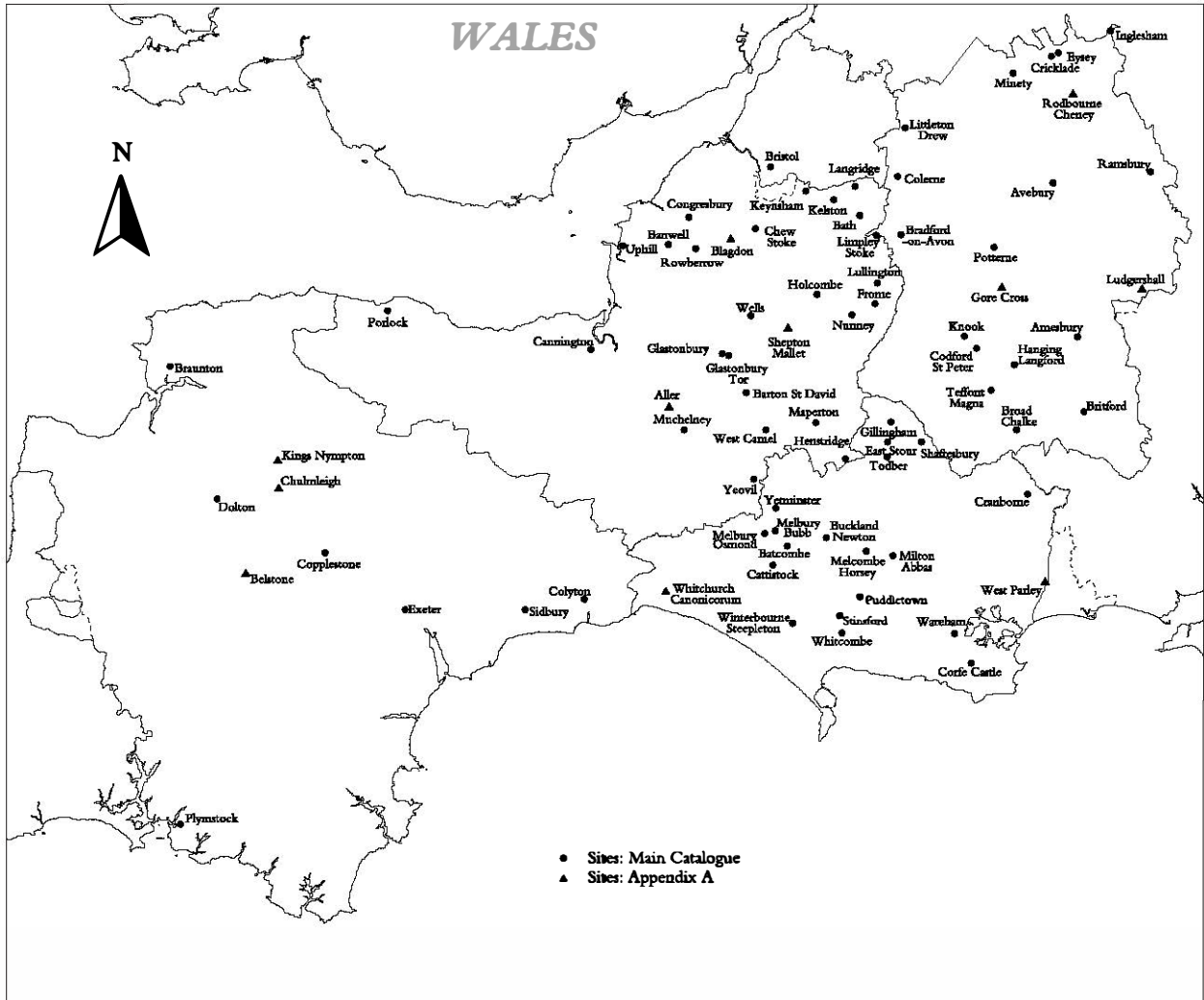


FIGURE 2
Sites with Anglo-Saxon sculpture in south-west England

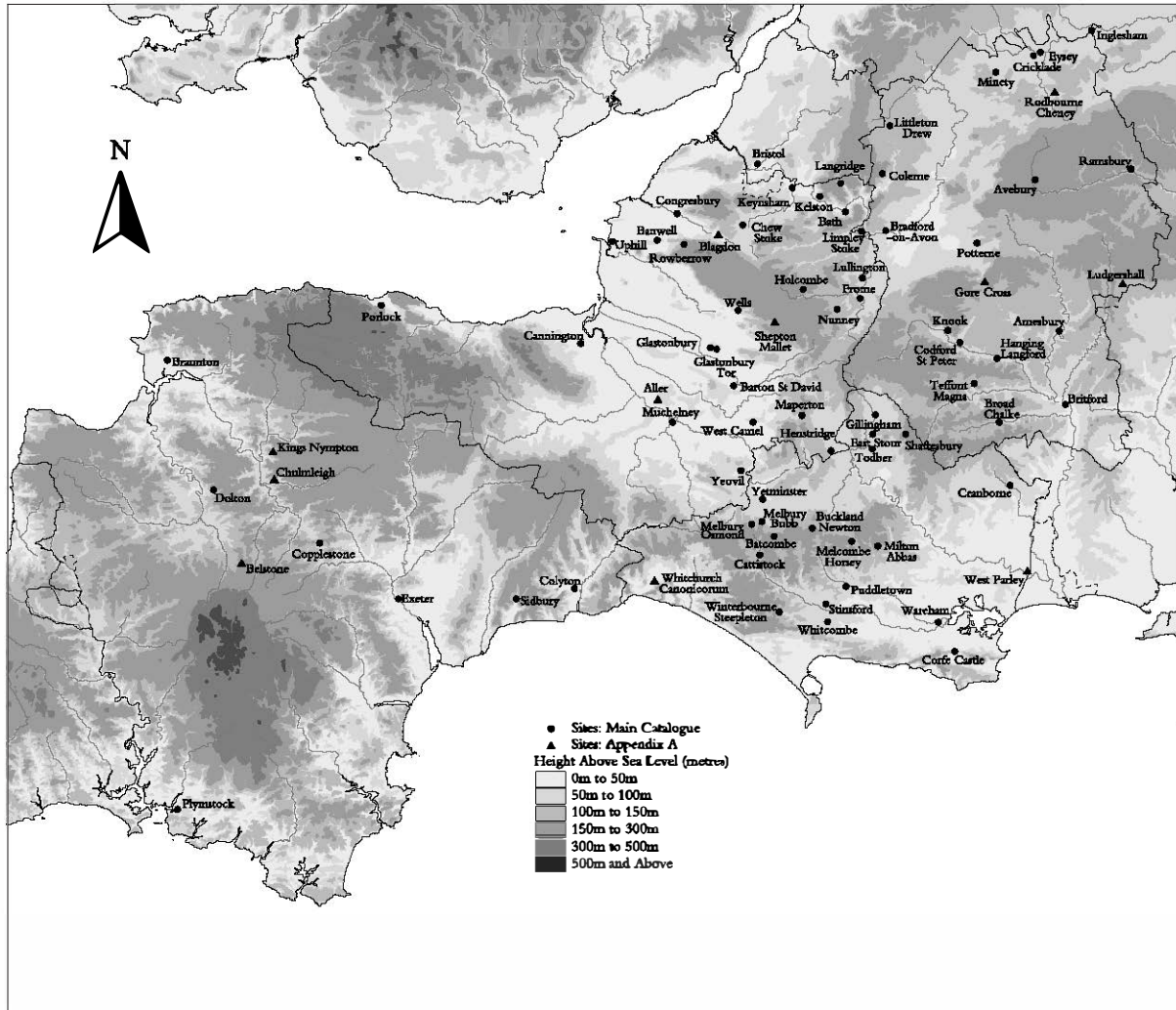


FIGURE 3
 Sites with sculpture in south-west England, with topography

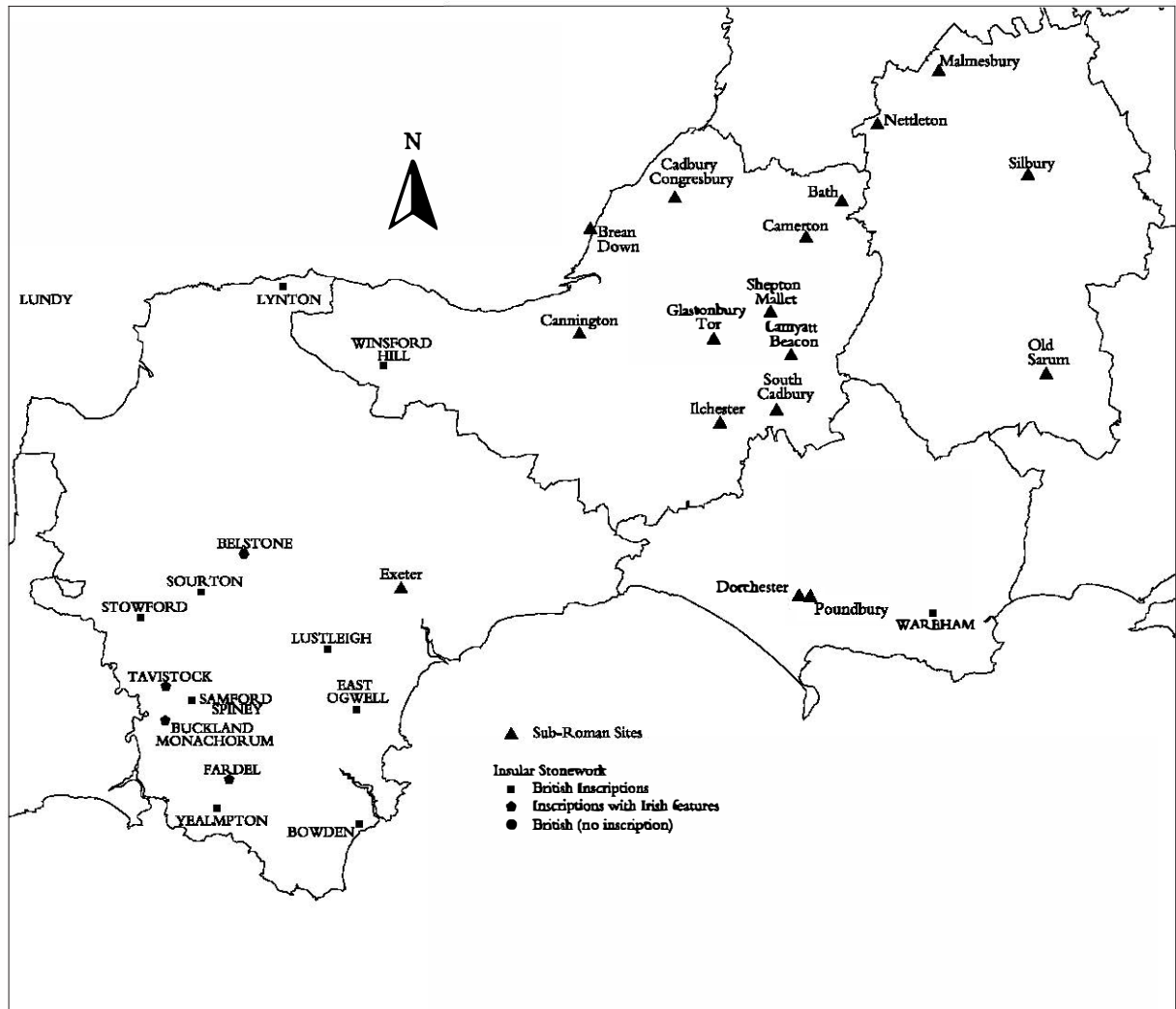


FIGURE 4
Sites and monuments in the region during the sub-Roman period

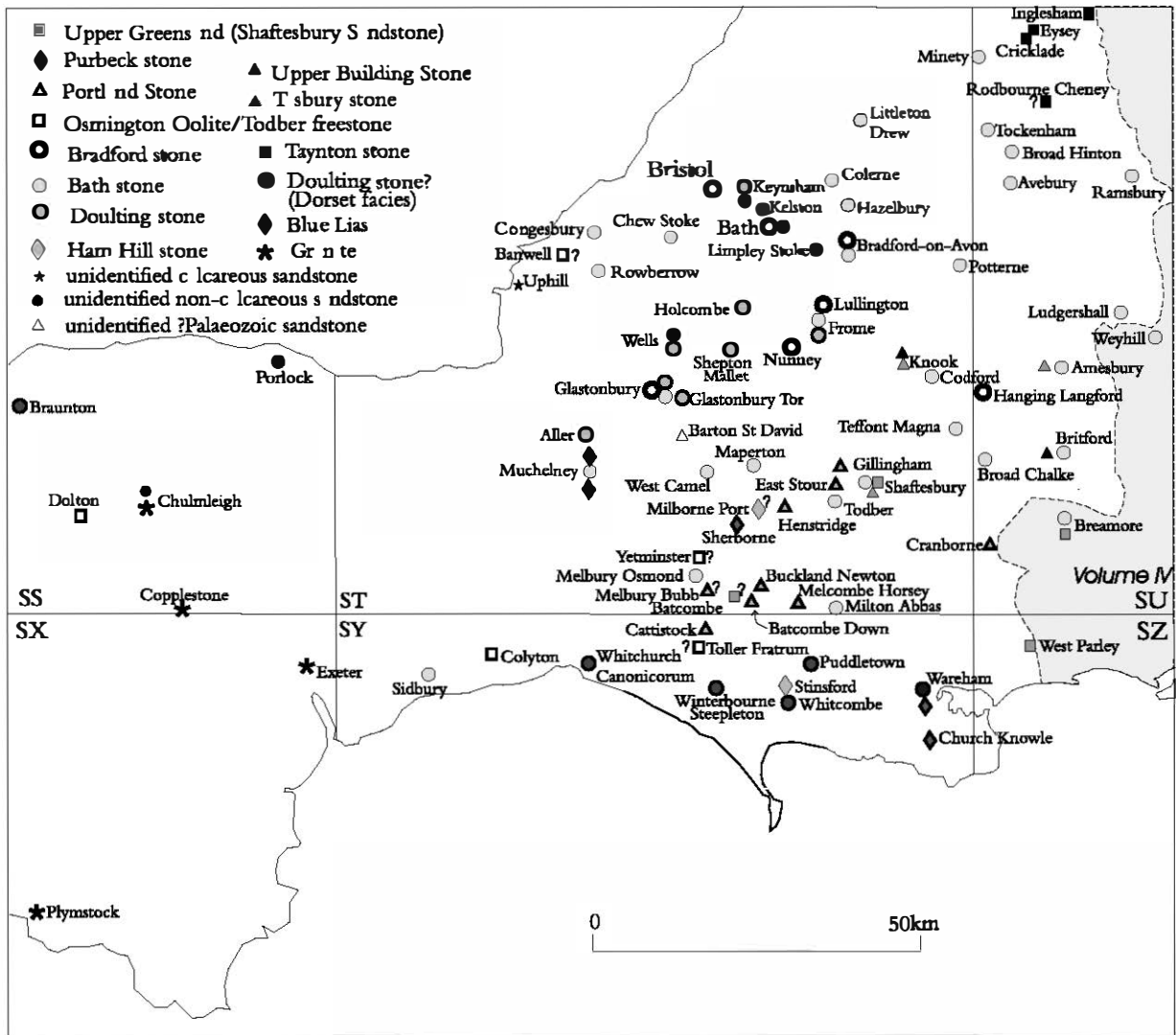


FIGURE 8

Distribution of stone types used for Anglo-Saxon sculptures in south-west England