Chapter 13

Cambridgeshire and the Peat Fen. Medieval Rural Settlement and Commerce, c. AD 900–1300

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Introduction

The origins and development of medieval settlement in Cambridgeshire have been well explored, principally by Christopher Taylor, both in overview and through a series of important case studies. The range and detail of this body of scholarship, still widely accepted, allow a different approach here: building on Taylor’s work, this chapter explores the influence of rivers and canals on the location and morphology of rural medieval settlement in the Cambridgeshire peat fens between about AD 900 and 1300 where, as in western Suffolk and Norfolk, ‘most of the villages along the fen-edge had any number of small staithes and hythes to facilitate the loading and unloading of boats’. Strikingly, the Cambridgeshire peat fens appear to be one of the few English regions in which water transport remained dominant throughout the Middle Ages. This is not difficult to explain. The great fenland rivers linked Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire with Rutland, Leicestershire and Bedfordshire in the west, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Essex in the south, and Suffolk and Norfolk in the east across the fenland basin (Figure 13.1). Furthermore, the comparative cheapness of carriage by water was most explicit in the fens, where the necessity to skirt large tracts of marsh often made road journeys particularly indirect. The network of natural watercourses which drained the fen had, by the mid-thirteenth century and probably some time before, been augmented by a large number of artificial waterways, locally called ‘lodes’, most of which (with their catchwater drains) exhibited at their landward ends at least one hythe, frequently several, supplemented by small private cuts which led up into individual properties. Rivers and canals were indeed interlinked in a complex and far-ranging pattern, which extended both the range of goods traded, and the areas from and to which goods could be supplied.

Regional geography

The peat fens cover about 4,000 km², providing a delta not only for the major river systems of the east Midlands (the Nene, Ouse and Welland), along which the tides could be felt up to 48 miles inland, but also for the rivers of the South and East: the Cam (Granta), Lark, Little Ouse, Wissey and Nar. The floor of the fen basin generally undulates between a few metres below or above sea level, within inland verges which frequently lie at around 5 m above Ordnance Datum, the winter floodline; only in a few places does it rise to form clay and gravel ‘islands’ which rise above 5 m above OD – some substantial, like Ely, Chatteris and March, and others smaller, like Quanea, Apesholt or Shippea. Raised areas of peat bog had begun to form from the sixth millennium BC between sea level and the 5 m contour where the fen basin was permanently damp or flooded for extended periods in autumn, winter and spring; by the eleventh century AD, it had reached a depth of around 3 m and continued to grow until drainage in the seventeenth century, forming large tracts of wetland between the islands and the fen-edge.

Such low-lying land, sensitive to minor variations
Cambridgeshire and the Peat Fen

in water-level and too damp for arable cultivation, could nonetheless support a wide range of rich, natural resources: grazing for large herds of cattle and sheep, as well as reeds, rush and sedge, hay, woods, peat and vast quantities of fish and wildfowl. This productive environment appears continuously exploited from prehistory onwards. Medieval customs of intercommoning between vills seem so ancient that they may even have pre-dated the establishment of the seventh-century monastic estates at Peterborough, Crowland and Ely.

The cohesive geography of the region appears to have been reflected in physical patterns of settlement and land-use. Medieval field systems in the fen
parishes tended to be divided into a multiplicity of irregular subdivisions, like those in East Anglia: the Bishop of Ely’s demesne at Doddington in 1251, for example, was made up of ten fields with names like Byrswrong, Estcroft and Akermanslond, while in only five of his fenland estates were arable fields arranged in the regular two or three divisions of the Midland System. On the other hand, settlement throughout the fen was predominantly nucleated, even in along the eastern edge of the fen in west Norfolk and Suffolk. By the late eleventh century nucleated settlements largely took the form of a single focus (for example, Witchford, or Yaxley, Hunts.) or polyfocal clusters like Haddenham (with its additional nuclei at Hinton, Linden End, Aldreth, and Hill Row), Burwell (including Church End, High Town, Newnham, and North Street) or March (made up of Knight’s End, Town End, West End, Well End, and High Street, Westry, and Estwode). Many settlements contain one or more regular planned elements, each characterised by properties of uniform area arranged into blocks which share front and back boundaries (the latter often labelled Back Lane), into which the parish church is often integrated. Some are explored in more detail below. Informal settlement with no sign of planned settlement is less common: the almost deserted settlement at Fenton in Huntingdonshire (first documented in 1236), for example, seems to have grown up along one side of a small green near the head of Fenton Lode, itself first mentioned in the early thirteenth century.

Transport and trade by water in the medieval peat fens

That waterways were used for trade and transport in Anglo-Saxon England (and earlier) is well established: although hythes were first recorded in the later ninth century when documentary evidence becomes more common, archaeology consistently demonstrates the everyday quality of river-borne trade throughout the period. Water transport in the fens expanded after the Norman Conquest and especially from the later twelfth century, building upon and extending many already old trading patterns. The importance to the development of medieval commerce of access to and transport by water has been demonstrated in Essex, where a good proportion of post-Conquest markets were located at coastal ports. Watercourses supporting similar inland trading networks have been described as a ‘dendritic path’. This phrase is particularly apt for the Cambridgeshire peat fens where rivers and canals linked a subtly differentiated hierarchy of places of greater or lesser importance through formal or informal trading networks, which might be regular, seasonal or intermittent, and local, regional, national or international. By the twelfth century, for example, King’s Lynn (Norfolk) had become a leading national and international port at the mouth of the river Ouse through which passed salt, grain, lead and wool as well as spices, wine and luxury goods. More regional networks emerge in the carrying duties imposed by the Bishop of Ely on his customary tenants: thus those from his manor at Doddington were required to transport goods across an area bounded by Cambridge, St Ives and Ramsey (both Hunts.), and Peterborough (Northants.), while those from Wilburton additionally went to King’s Lynn and Brandon (Suffolk). Nor did local exchange necessarily require formal outlets, since evidence from Ramsey (see Feature Box 1) and the Suffolk Breckland demonstrates that informal trade could be as vibrant and complex as that in places with a market grant.

Opportunities to travel by water were almost ubiquitous across fenland by the High Middle Ages. The fenny environment and manorial carrying duties meant that most free and customary tenants, many of whom owned their own boats, were required to travel by water for their manorial lords, while the small cuts which lead up to many medieval properties from the lodes demonstrate the extent to which they also used waterborne transport on their own accounts. The fen offered such men a wider range of employment than those in predominantly arable parishes, including the possibility of exploiting fen products either directly for sale or after processing: reeds, grazing, rushes, sedge, osiers, fish and wildfowl each contributed to the relative prosperity of peasant communities here. Even the landless were better off: at Waterbeach, for example, ‘men with little or no land could support themselves through their rights over the extensive common pastures and fens, listed in 1340 as fodderfen, turffen, fodderlot and sheeplot’. Pottery, another seasonal (though not specifically a fenland) craft, offers further insight into
distribution and production: in 1070 Hereward ‘the Wake’ is said to have disguised himself in order to infiltrate the Conqueror’s camp by borrowing from an itinerant potter his torn and dirty clothes, his stock of pots, and his small boat. Whether or not this story is true, it indicates how such small producers and sellers were so common as to be unremarkable – a conclusion perhaps supported by the wide dispersal of Ipswich and then St Neots and Thetford wares across the fenland basin between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The primacy of carriage by water for these activities has led to a consensus that, in Cambridgeshire, a ‘primary function’ of the lodes was trade and transport. The section that follows examines this conclusion through the morphology of medieval settlement in the Cambridgeshire peat fens first through planned commercial centres, and second through rural settlement.

Planned commercial centres
The planned market towns of the fens, laid out between about AD 1000 and 1300, are so well known as to be type-sites. I do not, therefore, intend to linger upon them here, except to establish the influence of access to water on their locations and plans. Generally speaking, such planned towns were formally established on or alongside existing settlements, where grants for markets and fairs had already successfully been achieved or where trade was already taking place. They tended to be laid out along riverbanks where water- and land-routes intersected, providing a focus for traffic from a wide hinterland. Frequently, substantial investments were made for improving such nodal points through the canalisation or embankment of rivers, and/or the improvement of roads by the construction of substantial bridges or causeways. In the fens, the integration of port and market seems to have been an additional premise of such foundations. The choice of suitable locations appears therefore to have been made on the basis of three criteria: (i) the opportunity to capitalise on traffic passing along the major rivers of the region; (ii) an identification of appropriate intersections of road and water; and (iii) a site allowing as short a distance as possible between the market and the port, thus reducing or eliminating the costs of transporting goods to or from the river to the market.

The successful examples are famous: King’s Lynn (Norfolk) was founded c. 1096; St Ives (Hunts.) was reinvented as a centre for commerce around 1107–1110, at the same time that a new bridge was constructed over the Ouse to funnel traffic into the town; Ely underwent a similar metamorphosis between 1109 and 1131 through a series of strategic investments – the award of a seven-day fair (almost certainly formalising an earlier market), the deliberate diversion of the Ouse in order to bring river traffic right up to the island at Ely, and the construction of a causeway between Ely and Stuntney, bringing road traffic from Suffolk and north-east Cambridgeshire into the port; and at Crowland (Lincolnshire), the river Welland was diverted in the late Saxon period to run through the centre of a planned settlement laid out outside the monastic gates. By about 1200, when a market was granted, the Abbeys of Ramsey laid out a planned market and settlement integrated with their newly constructed lode (the Great Whyte) from which they appear to have traded in tile, horses, cattle, grain and other produce. Not all planned markets were successful: Reach was a collaborative foundation by the abbeys of Ely and Ramsey of, perhaps, the early twelfth century, and is the best-known Cambridgeshire example to have failed – to the extent that it did not develop into a local market and does not even appear in the list of inland ports in England between 1294 and 1348, although its annual fair survived into the modern period.

The priors and bishops of the large monastic estates who founded these towns were not the only manorial lords with aspirations to commercial success. The attempts of minor lords to emulate them can be seen in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century market grants made to rural fen-edge settlements which were connected to the larger rivers by lodes. The location and layout of these settlements reveal that comparable criteria were applied to the choice of their sites: the possibility of enticing passing river traffic down the lode, the intersection of road and water transport systems, and the potential for ensuring close proximity of market and hythe. Most such foundations were relatively unsuccessful, perhaps because lodes were in practice culs-de-sac and had few intersections with major land routes. Swavesey, for example, had evidently been a trading centre for at least two centuries before it received a
Little is known about the construction of the lodes, or the maintenance of water levels within them. At Ely, their sides were revetted with oak timbers secured by a wattle fence. Ponds and tanks at Ramsey (and Burwell) may have been holding tanks intended to restore water levels behind flash-locks or sluices after use, although chamber- or lift-locks are known from the late twelfth century. Ramsey is one of the few fen-edge settlements where the relationship between a settlement and its canal has been explored in detail through excavation (Figure 13.2). The estate centre for one of the major fenland abbeys, notorious for their wealth, and the site of a medieval planned town and market, it is atypical of the minor rural settlements of the region which have principally been explored by fieldwork.

The settlement lies on a promontory reaching northward from Huntingdonshire into the peat fen, linked to the mainland by a narrow neck of land to the south, and bounded on the west by the Bury Brook, and by peat fen to the north and east. The Abbey was founded in the late tenth century, and became 'one of the richest in the fens – Ramsey the Golden'. The depredations of the Anarchy in the mid-twelfth century may have stimulated

the Abbey into investment in a series of commercial developments in order to regain its earlier wealth, and included a substantial replanning of the landscape both inside and outside the precinct. In the mid- to late twelfth century the Bury Brook was canalised (becoming Ramsey Lode), leading to Ramsey Mere and thence to the Nene; Ramsey Lode was widened at the fen-edge to create hythes on either bank (the area called the Great Whyte); and a causeway was constructed across the fenny meadows that bordered the Bury Brook, including a bridge (replaced in stone in the thirteenth century) to facilitate road access to Huntingdon and Peterborough. Since High Street continued the alignment of the causeway right up to the Abbey gates, it became the main access route into the town. The Abbey obtained a market grant in about 1200 when a market place may have been laid out between High Street and Little Whyte, and at the same time a planned settlement was laid out on either side of the High Street, flanking the market place.

The success of the market at Ramsey may be judged from the construction, in the early or mid-thirteenth century, of two large additional lodes leading east from the Great Whyte to new wharves within and on the edge of the precinct (perhaps replacing an earlier lode further to the east). Where the more northerly of these secondary lodes met the precinct boundary, excavations have revealed traces of what may be a crane and storehouse; these structures may be related to the import of Barnack stone for the extension and refurbishment of the monastic church and the domestic buildings, as well as for more general trade – the Abbey exported corn, wool and tile from its own manufacturies, as well (perhaps) as riding horses.

formal market grant in 1244, since the name itself records a hythe (Suauesheda, 1086). The grant more or less coincided with the construction of two large docks, around which burgage plots were laid out and to which the settlement focus appears to have shifted. At Cottenham, the rector rather than the manor of Crowland acquired a market grant in 1265, either capitalising on the hythe behind his rectory at the north end of the settlement, or constructing it at the same time. The market may have been held in the wide street which separated the rectory from the church, and appears to have stimulated the development of a new settlement focus over arable strips nearby. There is little to distinguish the morphology of such settlements, with their formal market places and the regularity of their planned messuages, from similar places elsewhere on the uplands – except for the inclusion of a hythe in their settlement plans. In both cases, lordship and commerce came together to influence settlement form and development either by creating an extension to an existing village or by re-forming its layout.

On the other hand, there are two, or perhaps three, places in fenland which never received a market grant, but which nonetheless achieved a moderate commercial success – Littleport, March and (possibly) Aldreth. All three appear to have been initiatives of the Bishop of Ely intended to exploit and control existing trading activities, while protecting the major markets at Wisbech and Ely. Of the three, only Littleport was a vill in its own right in 1086, the other two being subordinate to other centres; and all lie either on the boundaries of the Ely estates or facing a significant area of fen.

A planned settlement was laid out at Littleport on the banks of the Old Croft River, possibly in the eleventh century, almost certainly replacing earlier ribbon development. It was set out around a large rectangular open space, bordered on the north by the river and its riverbank hythes (whose alignments are still preserved in Hythe Lane). The church lay at the south-west corner of this space, and was itself flanked to the south and east by regular, planned blocks. The initial nucleation at March may have been around the parish church of St Wendreda at Town End; by the mid-thirteenth century, a sizeable planned focus (Mercheford) had appeared well over 1 km to the north at a ford over the river Nene, now redirected in an artificial course across, rather than around, the island on which March stands. Aldreth lies where a substantial medieval causeway across the fen enters the Isle of Ely. The maintenance of the causeway formed part of the labour dues of very many fenland vills – a substantial investment by both
the Abbots and Bishops of Ely. The boundaries of 15 properties lying in a block along the eastern side of the catchwater drain at the head of Aldreth Lode, together with their shared Back Lane, suggest a planned settlement, although the aratral (reversed S) curves of their boundaries perhaps show that they were laid out over former open-field strips. The only evidence that such planning was intended as a commercial centre is that, by the nineteenth century, this area was called The Borough. A large triangular hythe survives in the angle where lode and catchwater meet, and a large triangular green at the head of the causeway. Aldreth appears, though, always to have been a small, insubstantial place.

The history of Reach at least may demonstrate the inhibiting influence on the development of a trading settlement of a location at the end of a lode where it was more difficult to attract passing traffic compared with settlements along the major rivers, even if (as at Aldreth) there was a link to a major through-route. March and Littleport, perhaps because they lay on substantial natural watercourses, grew into large villages even without market grants and connections with the upland by road; however, being isolated by the surrounding fen before drainage in the seventeenth century, they never expanded into trading centres which could rival the planned towns. They do show how nuanced the effects of communications by water might be in the commercial development of the fens.

The peasantry and commercial development

It is clear that peasants also generally understood the importance of waterborne transport to the local economy. Freeholders and lords, for example, together constructed the thirteenth-century lode and hythe on the northern edge of Landbeach; in 1376 villagers at Swaffham Bulbeck ‘asserted their immemorial right to carry merchandise along [Swaffham Lode] by boat … while Cambridge men were using boats on it c. 1435’. This importance is also evident in the gradual colonisation of common-field strips along the catchwater drains leading into the lodes which can be seen in many fenland settlements like Aldreth, Reach, Burwell, Wicken and Isleham, or along the northern bank of the Nene at March. Many of the properties backing on to these watercourses still contain the remains of private cuts. On the other hand, the public pools and hythes which survive along such catchwaters in many of the places already cited may have been dug by communities for their own use, rather than at the direction of lords, since many are not in any sort of proximity to manorial centres. At Isleham, for example, while it is true that both manor house and priory were each served by their own cut leading up from the catchwater, there were at least two other larger quays which were most easily reached either from public roads or from peasant tofts created by encroachment on open or agricultural land.

Participation in local or regional trade, either by selling fen products or by undertaking some craft specialisation based on them, seems to have been so common as to be unremarkable. The larger proportion of tenants listed in the Ely Coucher Book in 1251, for example, had no surnames, while the surnames which distinguished the remainder recorded the conventional occupations of any village, fen or upland (shepherd, cowman, etc.). Indeed, only a few had craft names – like the weaver and felter at Wilburton, or the harness-maker at Lyndon in Haddenham. An even smaller number were listed as merchants or traders. Some, such as Osebius mercator at Bottisham or Raduly mercator at Burwell in 1279, were based in settlements with a market; however, also included similar men, such as John mercator at Stretham, John le Chapman in Doddington, and Peter chapman in Merchforde. A hoker, perhaps a hawker, lived in Willingham at the same date. As in Breckland, there is some evidence of specialists in transport, like the maryner based in Haddenham in 1251, Adam semen at Isleham in 1279, or the carters at Somersham, March and Fen Ditton in 1251. Such men were mostly customary tenants, although, perhaps significantly, a few paid a commuted rent, like Vincent mercator at Littleport in 1251. Trade must have been an integral part of daily life even though it is difficult to quantify.

Smaller rural settlements

Despite all the evidence for medieval peasant trade and transport along the lodes and rivers of the Cambridgeshire fens, a significant difficulty soon becomes apparent when one moves to consider the
relationship between the lodes and rural settlement. Generally speaking, medieval settlement in or on the edge of the peat fens was not focused on the lodes – most, in fact, was separated from them by some distance. Where settlement was polyfocal, it was the subordinate hamlets that lay in proximity to the hythes rather than the major centre in each community where the church and manor(s) were located. Take, for example, the best known of the Cambridgeshire lodes – those running from the Cam towards the eastern fen-edge: Bottisham Lode, Swaffham Lode, Burwell Lode and Wicken Lode. The churches and older manorial centres of the medieval settlements at Bottisham, Swaffham Bulbeck, Swaffham Prior, Burwell and Wicken lie between 1.5 and 3 km from the ends of their respective lodes. The lodes’ ends were far more likely to be characterised by minor, peasant settlement which remained small. In Bottisham, for instance, a secondary settlement actually called Lode had developed around a small triangular basin at the lode’s end by the mid-twelfth century. At Swaffham Bulbeck, the earliest known settlement focused on the lode is a late twelfth-century Benedictine priory, which may itself have formed the focus for a lesser settlement called Newnham by the late fourteenth century. The medieval manor house and settlement around the early thirteenth-century church at Swaffham Bulbeck is about 2.5 km from the Lode. Swaffham Prior lies almost halfway between the landfalls of Swaffham Bulbeck and Reach lodes. The twelfth-century church and castle at Burwell appear to succeed a mid- to late Anglo-Saxon settlement focus about 3 km south of the end of Burwell Old Lode. Although two subsidiary foci lay a little way to the north, the first was closer to the church than to the lode, and the second (North Street, 1351) was the result of the gradual colonisation of open-field strips along the catchwater drain which fed the lode, and was at least 1 km from the end of the lode. Although Burwell was one of 62 ‘important inland ports’ in England between 1294 and 1348, this is not reflected in its settlement plan when compared with, for example, Cambridge, Ely or St Ives.

The problem of the connection between settlement and lodes receives more force from Taylor’s twin conclusions that medieval settlement along the fen-edge tended to be polyfocal, and that each focus had ancient antecedents. If this interpretation is correct, then settlement foci in each parish should be distinguished as dominant and subordinate, rather than primary and secondary. Thus, at Bottisham there were eight or nine settlements in the twelfth and thirteenth century, each with some evidence for earlier origins; similarly, each of the four medieval manor houses at Swaffham Prior lay close to the site of a Roman settlement. The Bishop of Ely’s manor at Doddington included Wimblington and March, both recorded well before the Norman Conquest, while the three components of Haddenham – Linden End, Hill Row and Haddenham – were each mentioned in Domesday Book, yet Aldreth (at the end of the lode) was not recorded until the late twelfth century. In no case was the dominant settlement located at the end of the lode; nor, as commerce expanded during the High Middle Ages, did indicators of dominance (manorial centres, churches, the major proportion of the population) shift towards the lode. Opportunities for trade and the ease of transport offered by the lodes seemingly had little general influence on the region’s rural settlement pattern, in contrast to the effects of market grants on some upland villages.

Even a market grant was not necessarily sufficient to change this pattern. Late thirteenth-century market grants were made at both Bottisham and Burwell, though most probably the market in each took place some distance from both the lode’s end and the catchwater drains; the Bottisham market was probably held on the widened village street in front of the church; that at Burwell was ‘at the manor’ of Robert Tybotot, which might mean the site of the manor house in the widening south end of the High Street near the church.

The distinction between planned commercial centres and rural villages cannot be explained in terms of lack of access to water or lack of use of watercourses for transport. Almost every fenland community had the opportunity to develop the means for waterborne transport and almost all seem to have taken it. By the mid-thirteenth century there was a multiplicity of man-made watercourses across the fenland basin connecting uplands with rivers which might be several miles distant across the fen (see Feature Box 2). In 1251 the fens around Doddington alone, for example, were crossed by Sumershamlode, Wilberwykelode, Traveolode, Hymelode, Cokeslode and Danelode, while Edyvelode, Wertelode and Alderhelode lay across the
The undrained peat fen supported a landscape of interlaced, watery micro-environments – meadow, reed, rush, sedge, osiers, wood and peat – linked by watercourses, and interspersed with lakes and meres. It is often assumed that this landscape provided its rich harvests with little or no significant human intervention. Nonetheless, there is plentiful contemporary evidence to the contrary of the careful and deliberate use of cropping regimes, timetables for access, and techniques of water management aimed at the maximised exploitation of a wide range of non-arable crops, each dependent on a specific micro-ecology, harvested for long-term environmental sustainability.

The higher parts of the fen (the ‘hards’) were perhaps only a metre or two above their surroundings and usually peatfree, but provided poorer quality grazing for non-dairy herds throughout most of the year. On lower grounds closer to Ordnance Datum rich natural water meadows ‘were dry in summer, and the winter floods, provided they did not last too long, served only to make the meadow richer for the following summer’, offering two mowings of the rich whiteseed grass called ‘fen hay’.

There was rough pasture in overgrown carr fen, while wetter areas could be exploited in varying cropping rhythms for reed, rush, sedge, osiers, wood or peat. In many fenland parishes the local specificity of such qualities is preserved in their names: Smithyfen (1343 Cottenham, smeeth, ‘marsh in smooth lowlying land’), Frith (1326 Landbeach, ‘winter fodder, brushwood’, including rough pasture), Stacks (1251 Willingham), Hasse (1404 Soham, hassuc, ‘coarse grass’), Foderfen (1325 Soham), Horsecroft (1343 Soham), or Segfrythfen (1345 Wicken, ‘sedge fodder fen’).

The greatest physical risks to this economy were winter floodwaters which might not arrive, or might not recede, in time for grass to receive its maximum benefit, depriving the dairy herds of their early ‘bite’. Unseasonal flooding in late spring, summer or early autumn posed yet another hazard.

From the late Anglo-Saxon period onwards there was widespread construction of canals, drains and ditches, to assist the flow of water across flat landscapes that were otherwise slow to drain, and of catchwaters to carry upland floodwater straight into canals or the major rivers, and re-routing or straightening of existing watercourses. They all demanded consistent maintenance and, sometimes, further construction (Figure 13.3).
Scopes for using boats, punts and other craft on these canals was extended by the catchwater drains which ran from each lode’s landward end along the contours of the winter floodline. Langdon suggests that the lodes were used as ‘feeders’ for long-distance trade along the rivers. Although he has also proposed that national trade along these secondary routes might have been intermittent or seasonal, evidence from the Suffolk Breckland suggests that they were fairly consistently used for local or regional transport throughout the year; indeed, lists of the carrying duties of the Bishop of Ely’s customary tenants are not differentiated by season, implying that these tasks might be required at any time.

That such artificial waterways were well used by boats is attested by the innumerable landing places which were recorded by the mid-thirteenth century both as place-names and as surnames. They also survive as field monuments in a variety of forms: as substantial artificial promontories facing on to a lode, and bounded on either side by a cut large enough to take a fair-sized craft (for example at Burwell and Reach); as triangular or rectangular basins in which boats might turn as well as tie up (as at Lode, Isleham and Willingham); as hythes or wharves along one or both sides of the landward end of a lode (like those at Wicken, Little Downham and Swaffham Bulbeck); and as relatively minor, narrow cuts which led from a lode or its catchwater feeder on to the tofts of medieval peasants, as can still be seen at Burwell, Reach and March. Some of these vessels were large enough to be sea-faring.

Taylor’s work on small rural markets has forcefully demonstrated the extent to which they focused on maximising the advantages of communications with traders, consumers and other markets. Yet, at the point of intersection of water and road, rural settlement in the peat fens generally remained subordinate, small and (relatively) impoverished in contrast to the layout of the planned towns. There was no shift of manorial focus, for example, from Waterbeach to Clayhithe, Cottenham to Church End, Wicken to Wicken Lode, Little Downham to Downham Hythe, Witcham to Witcham Hive, Isleham to Waterside, or from the manor house at Linden End in Haddenham to Aldreth. The populations clustering around the hythes generally tended to be small, poor and economically marginal (although there were a few exceptions like Lode which contained some prosperous trading families from the mid-twelfth to the early thirteenth centuries).

At Little Downham in 1311, for instance, Moricius atte Hethe, Nicholas atte Hethe and Thomas atte Hethe were all paupers, too hard-up to contribute towards the maintenance of the causeway from Coveney; and a high proportion of those presented in the manorial courts came from Downham Hythe: Avicia atte Hith was fined for breaking the assize of ale, Simon Morice made an illegal fishweir in the water of the hythe, and Moricius was fined for the illegal sale of 200 turves. It may be that ‘villages on the fen edge provided important debarkation posts for the passage of goods’, but if wealth was created by movement and sale of goods along the fenland waterways, this is not usually reflected in the settlements around the hythes themselves. Methwold Hythe, Suffolk, mentioned by 1277, ‘produced nothing other than a couple of concentrations of unexceptional medieval material’ even though the settlement was large enough to have its own church, while at Little Downham hythe excavation has uncovered some evidence of imports yet almost none of settlement.
Two examples, at Witcham and Wicken, one on the fen-edge, the other on the Isle of Ely, one without and one with a medieval market grant, illustrate the problem. Witcham (Figure 13.4) remained one of the demesne manors of the monastery at Ely, and later the Dean and Chapter, from the tenth to the twentieth centuries. It was never particularly productive of arable crops, but produced fair returns of wool and skins from the sheep which grazed on the fen. In the thirteenth century the site of the manor lay some distance to the east of the settlement. By the time of Parliamentary enclosure in 1838, settlement in the parish lay in two nuclei: a strongly nucleated settlement called Witcham, and two cottages at Witcham Hive (hythe) about 1.5 km north of the village. The major settlement at Witcham is dominated by a large, fairly regular rectangle bounded by Hive Lane on the west, High Street on the south, and Back Lane on the north. If surviving properties in 1838 are any indicator, the block may have been divided into about 13 properties, each of approximately the same width, into which the thirteenth-century church (and the post-medieval manor house) appears to have been a later insertion. There is a relatively close correspondence between this figure and the 12 leaseholding sokemen on the manor in 1086 which might just indicate that nucleation and settlement planning occurred in the eleventh or early twelfth centuries, although there is currently no archaeological evidence to reliably establish this inference. The vicissitudes of multiple phases of population growth and decline seem to have resulted in further expansion over the arable fields to the south of the High Street and, by the twelfth century, to the west of Hive Lane; further medieval settlement,
later deserted, lay to the east.\textsuperscript{98} Although by 1838 the greater number of dwellings lay opposite the church on the southern side of the High Street, the irregular back boundary to these properties, and uncertainty about the western and eastern limits to the block within which they lie, suggests that they fossilise later stages of the flow and ebb of population expansion, decline and shift across the settlement and its open-field strips over the past 800 years.\textsuperscript{99} The hythe lay at Witcham Hive on a catchwater drain to the north of the settlement and was first documented in 1251; Agnes \textit{atte hethe} lived there in 1306.\textsuperscript{100} In 1838 just two cottages were present of which only one remains; but there is no evidence to suggest that settlement there was ever substantially larger.\textsuperscript{101} The point is, of course, that the initial nucleation was detached from the hythe and that, even if the hythe were a later development, it does not appear in any period to have exerted any significant pull on population in the parish.

The site of the pre-Conquest and medieval manor at Wicken (Figure 13.5) and the church which it owned lie together about 800 m to the east of the core of the nucleated settlement. A few cottages line the end of Wicken Lode, about the same distance to the south-west of the centre of the village.\textsuperscript{102} The medieval settlement, both in planned and in informal arrangements, appears focused on a long W–E green between the two.\textsuperscript{103} The ten half-yardlanders and 13 quarter-yardlanders of 1279 may have been accommodated in a long block facing north on to the High Street (whose western end was called North Street in 1413), bounded at the rear in 1840 by Back Lane.\textsuperscript{104} In 1331 the manor received the grant of a market which may have taken place on the green, where two pits containing medieval pottery have been found.\textsuperscript{105} Several fifteenth-century houses and other archaeological evidence confirm that the site of the village remained fairly fixed throughout the medieval period. By the later fifteenth century dwellings had begun to encroach upon the northern boundary of the green, a process which continued into the nineteenth

Figure 13.5. Wicken. Key: Yellow: area of hythe; purple: medieval church and churchyard; red: medieval site of manor; orange: core medieval settlement; blue: medieval catchwater drain. (Ordnance Survey 1884, Sheet XXXV NE, 2½ :1 mile, with amendments)
As at Witcham, the lode may have had little influence on the settlement pattern, either in the medieval period or after.

Exploring the problem

How might the apparent indifference of rural settlement to the potential of waterborne transport be explained, when the benefits were so clearly recognised elsewhere? The produce of the estates of the Abbey and of the Bishop of Ely still had to be conveyed to the markets at Ely, Wisbech or Sutton, and to other parts of the estate (as the carrying services emphasise), even if monastic lords did not wish to establish markets in other parts of the Isle which might grow to rival their nominated commercial centres. And a man who had to undertake carrying duties for his lord, and/or had common rights in the fen, would still have to move bulky fenland products – bundles of reed or sedge, boatloads of fish or wildfowl – from the hythe back to his messuage, to the manorial centre, or outside the settlement. The costs of transferring goods between boats and carts on land could, over just a short distance, begin to nullify savings gained by carriage by water. The closer that both manor house and messuage were to the water, the cheaper and more efficient transport would be and the greater any surplus.

A number of potential explanations present themselves. First, perhaps a combination of surface geology and the relationship between the settlement and the winter floodline could create conditions which might inhibit a settlement of any size? While attractive at the outset, this possibility is soon dispelled by an examination of the maps of the Geological Survey. Second, perhaps the lodes post-dated settlement nucleation? It is certainly true that the origin of most of the lodes is obscure, and that lodes were being constructed throughout the medieval period; but, on the other hand, a fair volume of documentary and archaeological evidence exists to show at least some of the lodes were in active use before the Norman Conquest.

The most authoritative conclusion is that of Hall, who suggested, on the basis of extensive fieldwork, that the north-east Cambridgeshire lodes are of late Saxon or early medieval date. Most Cambridgeshire settlements were nucleated between AD 950 and 1250. The polyfocal arrangements at Haddenham, for example, seem fixed by the late tenth century when Haddenham, Hill Row, Hinton and Linden were all listed in a charter. An eleventh- or twelfth-century date has been suggested for settlement planning at Witchford, Wilburton, Wicken, Littleport and Witcham. Both the lodes and settlement nucleation therefore appear to have been developments of more or less the same period, in the later part of which there was rapid, if uneven, expansion of trade by water. Settlement planning elsewhere has demonstrated how willing lords were to divert roads towards a market or around a park, or to lay out a market at a distance from a settlement. The diversion of an existing land-route towards a lode’s end would certainly have been straightforward if a pre-existing lode had been regarded as an enticing location for settlement. Settlement shift towards the sites of new medieval markets in the uplands demonstrates the potential for similar processes in the fens, even if a lode was constructed after the settlement pattern had become reasonably fixed. The relative chronology of lodes and settlement history cannot explain the disjunction between the location of manorial centres and churches, and the ends of the lodes.

Alternatively one might argue that peasants did not understand the potential for transport and trade offered by the lodes. However, this seems extremely unlikely given, for example, the carrying services on the Bishop of Ely’s manors which were explicitly intended to be undertaken by water. Certainly at Ramsey (Hunts.), smallholders and landless peasants regularly communicated within a region made up of a cluster of four to five neighbouring vills, and wealthier peasants operated within a region at least 17 miles in diameter, while others have calculated that local trade generally operated in a radius of ten miles. Traders from the hamlet at Lode were able to accumulate a noticeable volume of wealth by the 1160s. The physical evidence of small, private cuts leading up into peasant tofts from the catchwater drains at places like Reach, Isleham and Burwell often occurred where there was secondary ribbon development on arable land or encroachment on open spaces (see Feature Box 3). Although they support Gardiner’s contention that new foci for waterborne trade were generally the result of peasant rather than lordly activity, they do not appear to represent a substantial shift in settlement towards such new places.
Key Sites to Visit: Reach and Burwell

There is a wealth of evidence on the ground for anyone wishing to explore the landscape of medieval water-management along the fen-edge. It is fragmentary, with some elements preserved better in some places, and others more visible elsewhere. Taken as a whole, however, they allow the visitor to reconstruct with some accuracy the extent of such works in the medieval fen. Two sites within a few miles of each other along the north-east Cambridgeshire fen-edge are suggested here: Reach and Burwell.²

As Reach Lode nears its landfall, about 100 m from the fen-edge, it divides, capturing between its arms a long, narrow promontory of higher ground. This was a huge medieval hythe reaching NNE into the fen and connected at its landward end with the site of a large planned market, also medieval, now partly obscured by encroachment. The canal along the eastern side of the promontory is now much less obvious than that to the west. A small footbridge leads south-westwards from the hythe across one of the arms of Reach Lode to the fen-ward side of the water, and it is possible to follow the catchwater drain which runs along the fen-edge, draining the upland into the lode. Careful scrutiny of the banks on the landward side of the drain reveals the remains of minor cuts along which small boats were once taken up on to the properties which lined it.

At Burwell, a few miles to the north-east, lie perhaps the most complete remains of a medieval canal system anywhere in the fens (Figure 13.6). The traveller should make for Hythe Lane in the northern part of the village, and begin his explorations by walking westwards down that lane towards the fen-edge. Hythe Lane was once, as its name suggests, a public landing place (although not the only one in Burwell). Originally it had the same structure as that at Reach: a piece of land made into a promontory by a large ditch on either side along which boats could tie up. The southern ditch has disappeared, obscured by recent building, but that on the north still survives as a large (generally dry) cut.

On the west Hythe Lane and its northern ditch meet the catchwater drain (The Weirs) which, as at Reach, runs along the fen-edge into Burwell Lode. A footpath takes the explorer across to the fen-ward side on to a track which runs on top of a raised bank along the Weirs to its junction both with Burwell Lode and with a second catchwater leading down from the north. Once more, careful

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Figure 13.6. Lode, medieval catchwater drains, and private cuts at Burwell. Key: yellow: area of hythe; blue: lode, medieval catchwater drains, and private cuts. (Reproduced with permission from RCHM 1972, fig. 25, with amendments)
A third possibility is that trade only occurred if there was a market grant and that the lodes were otherwise only used for transport within a manor. This proposition can quickly be dismissed: the presence of traders in mid-thirteenth-century settlements without a market grant has already been demonstrated, and it is clear that peasants of all status and in all communities showed some engagement in trade. Britnell has noted that ‘even over short distances trade benefited from roads or water communications of above average quality’. Perhaps the quality of transport along the lodes was too poor for a sufficient volume of trade and transport to develop? There are, for example, records of summer water shortages preventing the passage of laden boats as at Cottenham in 1431; and in the early eleventh century Cnut had to come to Ely by wagon rather than by boat because ‘of the excessive frost and ice in the locality, the marshes and meres being frozen all around’. On the other hand, it is difficult to know how frequent or exceptional such events were. The multiplicity of hythes and landing places along the lodes suggests that water transport was an intrinsic part of medieval working life in the fens, and the evidence for carrying services and for trade are all consonant with the conclusion that the ‘most convincing evidence for extensive navigation’ is between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. Yet, although this was the same period in which settlement was particularly subject to planning, the connection between rural settlements and their lodes remains tenuous.

Perhaps again, it was the character of existing activity where the lodes made landfall that inhibited settlement at that point? Gardiner has suggested that ‘new ports did not grow at estate centres or places of feudal administration, but at new places’ or at places where trading and/or industrial activity was already well established. This certainly appears to be true for the larger, planned commercial centres of the Middle Ages, but it is difficult to recognise the smaller, fenland settlements in this description. There can be little doubt of the extensive activity each rural community undertook within the fens, or of the primary and secondary products resulting from this activity; ‘trading and/or industrial activity’ even if only on a local scale surely happened in nearly every rural settlement in the peat fens, but the lodes and hythes did not provide the magnet for settlement.

Silvester has noted that along the west Norfolk fen-edge settlement patterns changed in the late Saxon and medieval periods, shifting away from the fen-edge. The argument for a move away from the fen-edge is, however, more difficult to sustain in the Cambridgeshire peat fens. While there are some places where settlement lies at a greater distance from the fen-edge, these can almost always be explained by the local topography – such as the steepness at Wilburton and Sutton of the slopes of the islands rising out of the fens. On the other hand, medieval settlement at Swaffham Bulbeck, Burwell, Isleham, Willingham and Landbeach does run along the fen-edge – but at a distance from the lodes.

That some hythes may have been intended to serve several places might explain why they were rarely located at the point of production. Fen Ditton is a good example of this: it was a major ‘local collecting centre’ for the sale of grain from the Ely manors, even though it never had a market grant or developed into a trading centre. There, the settlement lay alongside a river rather than a lode, and at least one and probably two substantial hythes were integrated into the settlement plan. The Crowland manor at Cottenham was famously a collecting centre for its Cambridgeshire estates, yet the manorial centre was not located near the head of the lode, and the market grant went to the rector rather than the manor. If manorial ports were carefully managed, this does not explain why peasants who engaged in more local trade...
did not begin to focus their settlement on their local hythes. Why did small clusters of houses at places like Downham Hithe or Witcham Hive, which served only one settlement centre, or larger developments like Burwell North Street or Lode which served several settlement foci, never develop into central places themselves? This is not, of course, to argue that every small hythe had the potential to become a large trading centre; that is plainly not a feasible proposition. But the question nevertheless remains why, if lodes and hythes were so central to trade, and if trade was such an integral part of everyday life in the medieval fenland, the dominant centres of settlement in each parish were not located at the lodes.

**Conclusion**

There are clearly, then, problems in attempting a functional explanation for the distance between hythes and the dominant medieval rural settlements of the Cambridgeshire peat fens. Access to waterborne transport does not seem to have been a primary consideration in the location of the dominant settlement in rural vills either at the time of their foundation or later, unlike the major commercial centres of the day. This is not to argue that the exploitation of fenland products and access to markets were not important to medieval peasants and their lords – just that they were not important enough to outweigh the pull of other factors. Perhaps more fruitful directions for explaining this phenomenon are those of peasant productivity, commercialism and entrepreneurship, an investigation of the perspectives of peasants who might have been planning for subsistence and/or leisure rather than for wealth. Both Chayanov and Boserup, for example, suggested that peasant productivity was proportionate to the levels required for subsistence and/or leisure rather than for wealth.

Both Chayanov and Boserup, for example, suggested that peasant productivity was proportionate to the levels required for subsistence. Dodds has reported recent research suggesting that peasant arable output may have been higher than that of the demesnes given the availability of familial labour, the probable higher level of enthusiasm for the task, and the availability of all household waste, including their own, for manuring their fields. As has already been argued, the contribution of the fen to the peasant economy through pasture for cattle and sheep, and the cropping of reeds, sedge, peat and so on were likely – just as in the seventeenth century – to assure greater levels of wealth for peasants with low acreages of arable land.

Medieval peasants along the fen-edge may have been able to achieve acceptable levels of subsistence, protected against the worst effects of land-hunger and population increase before 1300 by a combination of the higher productivity of their arable land, the variability of rich fen resources, and ready waterborne access to local and long-distance trading networks. They may, by contrast with their upland counterparts, have been able to practise rather than dream about ‘a preference for greater leisure’. As Dodds has observed, ‘having the capacity to raise productivity is not the same as actually doing so’. Among the villagers of Montaillou, for example, it was important for the head of a household ‘to be a good neighbour, but not to kill himself with work’, wherever possible shortening ‘the working day into half a day’. The consistent distances between smaller medieval centres and the landward ends of the Cambridgeshire lodes suggest that perhaps medieval peasants were as alive as we are to a ‘work-life balance’. Although the lodes clearly played an important part in the fenland economy once they had been built, in many places the production of a surplus through trade and transport does not necessarily appear to have provided the principal motivation for their initial construction.

**Further reading**

Readers wishing to explore the origins and development of medieval settlement will inevitably begin with the seminal work of Christopher Taylor. Since so much of Taylor’s work has centred on Cambridgeshire, the scholarship of medieval settlement studies is interwoven with exemplars from this county. The best overview of the discipline is still that of *Village and Farmstead* (London, 1983). An interest in planned settlement and the origins of moats underpins *West Cambridgeshire* (RCHM, 1968); the expansion of settlement forms a major focus of *North-East Cambridgeshire* (RCHM, 1972). RCHM volumes on Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire are as important, exploring the reasons behind change and continuity in settlement morphology. A series of papers on the influence on medieval settlement of market grants, of pasture, and of the designed landscapes of parks and gardens appear in *Landscape History*, the journal.
of the Society for Landscape Studies, and many more in volumes of the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*. For those interested in the impact on settlement of wetland ecology and environment, two publications by H. C. Darby provide an essential starting point – his *Medieval Fenland* (Cambridge, 1974) and *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge, 1956). The results of parish-based studies of the history of the fen landscape for the English Heritage Fenland Project, using methods pioneered by David Hall (who also completed much of the survey), were reported in *East Anglian Archaeology*, especially volumes 35 (1987), 45 (1988), 56 (1995) and 79 (1996).

Few activities are as enjoyable as exploring existing or deserted settlements on foot. Two books will set any reader off with informed enthusiasm: although now achieving the venerability of age, neither has yet (in this writer’s mind, at least) been surpassed – Maurice Beresford’s *History on the Ground* (Cambridge, 1957) and Christopher Taylor’s *Fieldwork in Medieval Archaeology* (London, 1974).

**Acknowledgements**

Christopher Taylor, David Hall, Dr Nicholas James, Dr Mark Gardiner, Professor Michael Chisholm and Dr Paul Spoerry kindly read and commented on earlier drafts, but mistakes and misconceptions remain my own.

**Manuscript sources**

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<tr>
<th>CA</th>
<th>Cambridgeshire Archives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haddenham</td>
<td>Parish Survey, 1806 TR836/E/A-B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haddenham</td>
<td>Tithe map, 1869 578/P1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Littleport</td>
<td>Inclosure Map, 1836 R57/31/40/108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Map, c. 1680 R51/23/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Tithe map, 1840 R51/28/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wicken</td>
<td>Draft Inclosure Map, 1840 152/P19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wicken</td>
<td>Inclosure map, 1840 Q/RDc 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witcham</td>
<td>Draft Inclosure map, 1838 152/P20</td>
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<td>Witcham</td>
<td>Inclosure Map, 1839 R52/10/17</td>
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<td>Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Record</td>
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<td>CUL</td>
<td>Cambridge University Library EDR/G3/27 Ely Coucher Book, 1251</td>
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**Published primary sources and printed maps**

| DB | *Domesday Book: Cambridgeshire*, A. Rumble (ed.) 1981: Phillimore, Chichester |
| OS | Ordnance Survey of Great Britain, First edition, 6 inches to the mile |
| Aldrath | Sheet XXIX SW, 1886 |
| Littleport | Sheet XXII SE, 1885 |
| March | Sheet XVI NW, 1886 |
| Wicken | Sheet XXXV NE, 1886 |
| Witcham | Sheet XXV SE, 1887 |
| OS GS | Ordnance Survey Geological Series, 1:50 000: Southampton |
| Sheet 158 | Peterborough (158) |
| Sheet 159 | Wisbech (1995) |
| Sheet 172 | Ramsey (1995) |
| Sheet 173 | Ely (1980) |
| Sheet 187 | Huntingdon (1975) |
| Sheet 188 | Cambridge (1981) |
| Sheet 189 | Bury St Edmunds (1982) |

**Notes**

1. RCHME 1968, 1972; Taylor 1974a. Christopher Taylor was the principal author of the settlement analyses in the RCHM(E) volumes on Cambridgeshire, and has also published extensively on settlement in south Cambridgeshire. A sample of his output is represented in the bibliography. See also Ravensdale 1974 and 1986; Oosthuizen 1993, 1994, 1997, 2002.
2. Figure 13.1; Bailey 1989, 153.
9. All place-names are in Cambridgeshire unless otherwise noted.
13. CUL EDR/G3/27; Miller 1951, 80. The manors with two or three fields were Little Downham, Linden (Haddenham), Sutton, Wilburton and Littleport.
22. CUL EDR/G3/27; Darby 1974, 101–106. Regional and local products can be glimpsed through those which the Bishop of Ely required to be carried by water between his manors, or between his manors and the ports: cheese, building timber, underwood and firewood, grain, hay, sheaves of reeds, wood and underwood, mill stones and livestock: CUL EDR/G3/27.
24. The material in this box is based chiefly on Spoerry et al. 2008.
30. VCH Cambs. 9, 250.
31. LE II: 106.
34. E.g. Owen 1984; Beresford 1967; Beresford and St Joseph 1979.
35. Beresford 1967, 100; Owen 1984, 7.
100. CUL EDR/G3/27; Reaney 1943, 245.
101. CA Witcham 152/P20 and R52/10/17; OS Sheet XXV SE.
102. By the fourteenth century the parish contained at least four other nuclei at Upware, Thornhall, Spinney and Dimmock’s Cote, Reaney 1943, 203–205.
103. VCH Cambs. 10, 553. See also Wicken 152/P19 and Q/RDc 69; OS Sheet XXXV NE.
104. Rot. Hund. II, 504. A figure not substantially different from the 11 villani and 8 bordarii in 1086. DB 14:74; CA Q/RDc 69, 1840.
105. CCC HER.
106. CCC HER; Wicken 152/P19 and Q/RDc 69; OS Sheet XXXV NE.
111. Hall 1996, 112.
115. Barratt et al. 2004, 627, 630; Britnell 1978, 188.
117. VCH Cambs. 10, 192.
118. Gardiner 2000a, 84.
121. VCH Cambs. 9, 51; LE II, 85.
123. Gardiner 2000a, 84.
124. The text in this box is largely drawn from RCHME (1972) North-West Cambridgeshire, London.
126. Gardiner 2007a, 91.
127. Miller 1951, 86; VCH Cambs. 10, 118.
128. RCHME 1972, 49, 63.
129. Page 1934; VCH Cambs. 9, 63.
133. Dodds 2008, 86.