



## Leeds Medieval Studies

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Obituary: Peter Hayes Sawyer (25 June 1928 – 7 July 2018)

Ian N. Wood

corresponding email: [i.n.wood@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:i.n.wood@leeds.ac.uk)


*Leeds Medieval Studies*, 1 (2021), 101–104

DOI: [10.57686/256204/11](https://doi.org/10.57686/256204/11)

ISSN: Print 2754-4575

ISSN: Online 2754-4583

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## Obituaries

### **Peter Hayes Sawyer (25 June 1928–7 July 2018)**

Peter Sawyer is perhaps best known as a scholar of the Vikings and their activities. It was, however, as an Anglo-Saxonist that he first established himself. Born, brought up, and educated in Oxford (apart from a short time during the Second World War when he lived with relatives in Milford Haven), he studied at Jesus College, from 1948 to 1951. After obtaining his BA he secured a Research Studentship at the University of Manchester. He worked there until 1953 alongside the young Eric John, and was deeply influenced by Florence Harmer, at the time that she was working on her edition of *Anglo-Saxon Writs*. He took advantage of his Studentship not to embark on a doctorate, but instead began to work on Domesday Book, which was the subject of his first two published articles. As a result he earned himself the nickname of ‘Domesday Sawyer’. Two issues in particular attracted him: one was the composition and make-up of the Anglo-Norman survey, and the other was the evidence it provided for settlement, especially of the pre-Norman settlement of Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons. Domesday Book would remain a central interest through much of the next thirty years, and in 1985, to pre-empt the celebrations of the nine-hundredth anniversary of the compilation of the survey, he edited an important collection *Domesday Book: A Reassessment*.

In 1953 Peter left Manchester for a temporary post at the University of Edinburgh, where he was deeply impressed by the lecturing of the Professor of History, Richard Pares. He used to say that Pares taught him that a good lecture was like an onion: it should be possible to appreciate it at every level. It was also in Edinburgh that he married Ruth Duncan, the sister of the Scottish historian A. A. M. (‘Archie’) Duncan. Peter and Ruth had four children, two sons and two daughters. While in Scotland he developed a love of the west coast, buying a house on Mull, and becoming an enthusiastic sailor, which surely fed into his interest in and understanding of Viking ships. From Edinburgh he moved first to Leeds, and then to Birmingham, before returning to Leeds again in 1964, where John Le Patourel, Professor of Medieval History, further excited his interest in eleventh-century England.

Domesday was not Peter’s only entrée into Anglo-Saxon studies. He had a particular passion for the charters and the coinage of the Anglo-Saxons, which brought him into contact with Sir Frank Stenton, to the fury of Lady Doris, who took a dislike to anyone who challenged any aspect of her husband’s work, as Peter did in some of his discussions of both coins and charters. Equally protective of the older historian’s reputation was Dorothy Whitelock. But Sir Frank himself was much more amenable to discussion, as Peter himself was happy to relate:

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on one occasion Lady Doris found Sir Frank and Peter kneeling on the floor, surrounded by copies of charters.

Peter's first major book was a two-volume edition of the *Textus Roffensis* (1957–62), the great collection of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman legal and diplomatic material put together in Rochester in the early twelfth century. This was not his only significant work of textual editing. In 1978 he published an important edition of the charters of Burton Abbey. He also played a central role as secretary to the British Academy Charter Committee from 1966–82. For many, his most important contribution to scholarship is his *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List* (1968). The handbook he produced provided the basic information on the charters, the manuscripts in which they survive, their date and their authenticity. Its contents have been regularly updated and are now available electronically as *The Electronic Sawyer: Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters*.

Charters and coins led Peter increasingly to ponder the question of the late Anglo-Saxon economy. He first set out an overall interpretation, which pointed to the significance of English wool already in the pre-Conquest period, in a seminal article on 'The Wealth of England', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1965). Again this was a topic to which he returned throughout much of his working life. It was the subject of his Ford Lectures delivered at the University of Oxford in 1993, which were eventually published as *The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England* (2013). What delayed the publication of the lectures was Peter's determination to keep abreast of archaeological findings. Although he is remembered as having stated during a conference that archaeology is an expensive way of learning what we already know, he was far more alert to the value of archaeological material than were most historians of his generation. Over the last decades of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first the quantity of material evidence increased radically, as a result of major academic projects, rescue excavations, and above all – at least in terms of the coin finds – because of the onset of metal-detecting. At the same time Peter's move to Scandinavia in 1982 meant that his contact with English archaeologists became somewhat more spasmodic. All this delayed the revision of the text of the Ford Lectures, and one result was that their basic argument was in circulation long before they appeared in their printed form.

In addition, Peter's concern with charters, coins and archaeology led him to pay considerable attention to local history, which prompted a commission from Kathleen Major to write a history of Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire, which was published in 1998. He also collaborated with Alan Thacker to provide an account of the Cheshire Domesday for the *Victoria County History*, which appeared in 1987. However, he always insisted on putting local history in its broader context, as he demonstrated in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval History at Leeds: 'Baldersby, Borup and Bruges: The Rise of Northern Europe', published in the *University of Leeds Review* in 1973. He set down his own view of the overall picture of Anglo-Saxon England in *Roman Britain to Norman England* (1978). There, deliberately following the approach pursued by F. W. Maitland in *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1907), he began with the relatively well-evidenced Normans, before turning to the earliest Anglo-Saxon centuries.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, while establishing himself as one of the leading Anglo-Saxonists, Peter also steadily built up contacts with the Scandinavian world, getting to know all the major Swedish and Danish archaeologists, historians and numismatists of the mid-twentieth century, as indeed he would befriend many of his own contemporaries, as well as emerging scholars of the next generation. He was, therefore, fully appraised of the latest

discoveries at such sites as Helgø, Valsgärde and Birka, and of their interpretation, before they were well known outside Sweden. These Scandinavian connections bore fruit most dramatically in what is his best-known monograph, *The Age of the Vikings* (1962), which radically challenged what was the current orthodoxy, presenting the Vikings as ‘traders not raiders’. Peter did not deny their destructiveness, but he questioned the scale of their raids by looking hard at the question of Viking numbers, at the size of their ships, and by pointing to the destruction carried out by their contemporaries. At the same time he stressed the Viking technological achievements, especially in the field of boat-building. The debates opened up by *The Age of the Vikings* have lasted through to the present, and although individual arguments have been challenged there has been no successful full-scale resurrection of the earlier image of destruction. As the runologist Ray Page noted in his review, ‘The Vikings will never be the same again’. Peter, whose ideas were constantly developing, himself made further major interventions in his *Kings and Vikings* (1982), which looked more closely at the political structures of the Viking Age, and in work published jointly with his second wife, Birgit (Bibi), notably *Die Welt der Wikinger* (2002). In 1997 he also edited the highly regarded *Oxford History of the Vikings*.

Peter remained at Leeds from 1964 to 1982, becoming Professor of Medieval History in 1970. There was, however, a brief interval in 1966–67, when he held a post as Visiting Professor at the University of Minnesota, where with the encouragement of Stuart Hoyt, and some significant American financial backing, he developed the idea of founding an annual medieval bibliography — initially only of journal articles. The first fascicule of *The International Medieval Bibliography* was published by the University of Leeds in 1967. Its annual publication, at first in print and later in electronic form, has continued to provide a key bibliographical resource for medievalists ever since. Peter would return to Minnesota in 1984, and also spent a year as Visiting Professor in Berkeley in 1985.

Having rejoined the Leeds staff as Reader in Medieval History in 1967 Peter organised a number of seminar and lecture series, the results of which are to be found in a sequence of edited books. *Medieval Settlement* (which also reflects the interests of his Leeds colleague, the historical geographer Glanville Jones) was published in 1970; an abridged version, *English Medieval Settlement*, appeared in 1979. *Early Medieval Kingship* (edited jointly with Ian Wood) was published by the University of Leeds in 1977. It was followed two years later by *Names, Words and Graves*, a volume which reflects Peter’s determination to disseminate new ideas relating to settlement history, and especially to the problem of the relationship between place-names and the origins of the communities to which they are attached. His earlier work on Viking settlement had led him to the firm opinion that the date of a place-name did not provide the date of the original settlement to which it was attached, and he regarded John Kausgård Sørensen’s contribution to the volume as providing the support of a great onomast for his position.

In 1982 Peter left Leeds for Scandinavia, to join his second wife, Bibi. At the time she held a post at the University of Göteborg, where he became an unpaid Docent, inspiring a generation of graduate students, as he had already done in Leeds. In Sweden he continued to organise seminars and conferences, including one held at Kungälv, which resulted in the publication of *The Christianization of Scandinavia*, which he, Bibi and Ian Wood jointly edited in 1987. In addition he played a role in organising a conference in Göteborg, the fruits of which were published as *Rome and the North* (1996).

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Peter and Bibi also set up a small publishing house, Viktoria Bokförlag, which was run from their home in Alingsås (much as the *International Medieval Bibliography* had initially been established in his house in Headingley). Among the imprints were Peter's own *Making of Sweden* (1988). Here, following his contacts with local historians, he paid more attention to the importance of Vestergötland, and the centres of Skara, Husaby and Varnhem, than was commonly the case in a field that had been dominated by the perspective of Uppsala and Svearland. He and Bibi produced a more wide-ranging survey, *Medieval Scandinavia*, which slightly modified this position, in 1993.

Three years later Bibi was appointed to the chair in Medieval History at the University of Trondheim, where she and Peter lived until her retirement in 2007, when they retired to Uppsala. Throughout this period, down to Bibi's death in 2016, they worked together, discussing each other's ideas about medieval Scandinavia and its sources, above all its runic inscriptions, its Latin histories and its saga material. It was also during these years that Peter finally completed *Anglo-Saxon Lincolnshire* and *The Wealth of Anglo-Saxon England*.

Peter's contribution to historical scholarship was manifold. He was an influential Anglo-Saxonist as well as a leading interpreter of the Vikings and of Medieval Scandinavia. He was a significant editor of texts (notably of the *Textus Roffensis* and of the Burton Charters), and a keen student of the manuscripts in which those and related texts are to be found, and above all of Domesday Book. But he also played a major role in what the Germans would call *Hilfswissenschaft*, with the creation of the *International Medieval Bibliography* and the compilation of the handlist of Anglo-Saxon Charters, for which future generations of scholars will long remain indebted to him.

*Ian N. Wood (University of Leeds)*