

A Minster in the Danelaw: **The case of Horningsea**

When considering the effect of the Vikings on minsters, a particularly instructive text is to be found in the *Liber Eliensis* (a collection of documents relating to the property acquired by the 'reformed' monastery at Ely), describing the minster at Horningsea (Cambridgeshire).

Before the fury of the pagans who devastated East Anglia had raged through Cambridgeshire, and consigned the land to waste and desolation [874-5?], there existed at Horningsea a minster of royal dignity, in which was a substantial community of clergy (*non parva congregatio clericorum*). At the very time that the army was rampaging in that place, Cenwold the priest discharged the sacerdotal office there. Then those who flocked together there from paganism to the grace of baptism gave that minster five hides at Horningsea and two at Eye. Cenwold died, and Herewulf the priest succeeded in his place; he made suit to King Æthelstan [924-39], who took that place under his care and protection. In those days Wulfric the provost (*prepositus*), who was Cenwold's kinsman, unjustly took away the two hides at Eye by force from the minster. Then in King Eadgar's days [957-75], Æthelstan the priest, Herewulf's kinsman, obtained as his deputy the sacerdotal office which he exercised in that minster... [Æthelstan was implicated in a burglary, but Herewulf bribed the authorities with] treasures of the church, which good men devoted to God had given to the minster for their souls in ancient times..., on the understanding that mercy would be shown to him and that he might possess his minster for the rest of his life; and he gave the bishop certain ornaments so that Æthelstan the priest might be neither executed nor degraded. After a certain time Herewulf the priest passed away, and Æthelstan succeeded him. After these events, St Æthelwold went forthwith to King Eadgar and bought Horningsea from him for 50 gold [coins]... [*Liber Eliensis* 105-6, translated in Blair *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* p. 294].

The evidence in this account provides an unusually detailed picture of a minster weathering the storm of the Viking age. Horningsea was evidently a pre-Viking minster connected to the East Anglian royal family and with sufficient land to support a significant community. Blair's study of East Anglian minsters suggests that larger numbers of small minsters was the norm in the pre-Viking period, with a correspondingly high survival of small collegiate churches into the post-Viking period (a large number became small Augustinian priories after the Conquest).

There is no suggestion that the minster at Horningsea suffered destruction or damage at the hands of the heathen (regardless of the devastation they wrought in the rest of the area). Rather, the minster was the place where a number chose to be baptised. Presumably its royal connections made Horningsea an appropriate place for the new aristocracy to emphasise its connection with the old, Christian rulers. Following conversion the minster was given five hides of land at Horningsea and two at Eye, by unspecified parties. It is tempting to suggest that the land at Horningsea was the 'inland' immediately around the minster, i.e. the gift involved a confirmation of the community's existing property rather than an augmentation

of it. There is no comment about the rest of the estates which might be expected to pertain to a 'minster with royal dignity' capable of supporting 'a substantial community of clergy'. It seems likely that there was some degree of alienation of Horningsea's property, though its seven hides are comparable to the $8\frac{3}{8}$ hides (25 virgates) owned by Christ Church, Hampshire at the Domesday survey, which supported 24 canons and an 'elder', yielding £6 TRE and £8 TRW. Five hides of land was the minimum estate for a late Anglo-Saxon thegn, i.e. a significant amount of land.

Wulfric the 'provost' (*praepositus*) 'who was Cenwold's [the priest's] kinsman, unjustly took away the two hides at Eye by force from the minster' at some time around the reign of Æthelstan. We are not told whether Wulfric was a cleric at the minster, and though his post of *prepositus* suggests some importance, it seems that the priest ruled the roost at Horningsea. What is interesting is his kinship with Cenwold the priest and his apparently contested and unlawful occupation of a sizeable chunk of the minster's estates (admittedly properties some distance away in Suffolk). Likewise, the priest Herewulf ensured that his kinsman Æthelstan would inherit the priesthood at the minster despite a chequered past and unproved accusations of theft (a serious crime). The polemics of the monastic 'reform' movement made much of the 'laxity' of clergy and the crime of clerical marriage; in practice it was perfectly normal and largely tolerated in Anglo-Saxon England (barring periodic outbursts by idealistic clergy).

It would be fair to read the Horningsea narrative as the story of a minster dominated by a family of clergy who lived there and considered the minster's estates and possessions their own. Herewulf's use of unspecified wealth and 'certain ornaments' to bribe the authorities on his kinsman Æthelstan's behalf suggests that the priest had considerable leeway in disposing of the minster's property. The circumstances in which the *prepositus* Wulfric took two hides at Eye are far from clear, but it appears that, following his kinsman Cenwold's death, he had some form of disagreement with the new priest Herewulf and presumably left the community, taking two hides of land upon which he had some claim. It is possible that Cenwold regarded the two hides at Eye as his property and bequeathed them to Wulfric, only for the minster to dispute the bequest, leaving Wulfric to occupy the land, getting a satisfactory result at the minster's expense. Interestingly, the Laws of Alfred suggest that minsters held property in common, but newcomers had to 'buy' (or inherit?) a share in the communal property. Perhaps the Horningsea example shows the residual bad feeling when a member (or a kindred) chose to 'buy out' of the arrangement.

The role of royal power is also illuminated by the Horningsea narrative. If it was once a 'royal' minster, the connection was lost when the East Anglian royal line came to an end with King Edmund. As the West Saxon kings began to expand their power into the Danelaw in the early tenth century, they appeared on the horizon of minsters; Herewulf the priest seems to have been willing to submit to King Æthelstan's protection, but there is no indication that the relationship was close or important. During the affair with Æthelstan the priest, the most important person was not the king but the bishop, suggesting that Horningsea occupied a relatively small and localised arena. The occasion on which a king took any serious interest in Horningsea was when Bishop Æthelwold bought the minster

from King Eadgar (presumably once the 'respectable' priest Herewulf had died and been succeeded by the 'disreputable' Æthelstan). That the minster was worth 50 mancuses suggests that it was either of some importance or possessed substantial assets beyond the five hides at Horningsea. At Domesday Horningsea was assessed at seven hides (land for 17 ploughs), including 3 ½ hides demesne (8 ½ ploughs), worth £18 but paying £14; the estate 'always pertained to the demesne of the Church of Ely'. There is no mention of a church, and we can only guess at the fate of the minster after its acquisition by Ely.

This article is © 2005 members of 'The Vikings' Ecclesiastical team and October 25th 2005.

Copies of this document must not be sold or otherwise used for commercial gain, but free use and distribution is allowed for non-profit use. All other rights reserved by the authors.