The Origins of the Husting and the Folkmoot

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London has always been a special case among the towns and cities of England, not least for its peculiar institutions. The ancient core of the modern metropolis, the financial district known as ‘the City’ or ‘the Square Mile’, is still run by a unique set of administrative and legal organs with a long history behind them. When its municipal governance first becomes clearly visible in the central Middle Ages, London was already highly unusual in having two principal forums in which its citizens assembled and heard disputes: the Court of Husting and the Folkmoot.

What follows is a new case for why London possessed such an idiosyncratic constitution. It locates the roots of this arrangement in the generations following the walled city’s resettlement in the late ninth century, when London gained a stronger collective identity. Before the ninth century, the area within the Roman city walls was lightly inhabited and given over to elite, and ecclesiastical uses, while the bulk of London’s population and commercial activity could be found outside the walls in a settlement along the Strand known to scholarship as Lundenwic. The ninth century brought significant changes to this organisation of the settlement. Lundenwic became more strung out and its centre gravitated eastwards towards the city. By the time of Alfred the Great (871–99), under pressure of

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viking raids that started in the 840s, London’s population was concentrated within the old
Roman walls of the city. A campaign of redevelopment began under the patronage of the king
and other powerful figures from across England: new streets were laid out and built up, and
by the 890s the Londoners constituted an important element in the fight against the vikings. This on-going process of development peaked in 886 when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
recorded how Alfred ‘restored’ (gesette) London, and it served as the venue for a ceremonial
submission to him of all the English who were not under viking rule. Alfred’s decision to
combine these actions reflects London’s frontier position between Mercian and West Saxon
(and indeed viking) territory, as well as the city’s prestige.

London entered the tenth century as a more assertive force in southeast England than
it had been before Alfred's patronage had started, and it is at this point that its internal
organisation is first recorded, in the form of a set of precocious, locally driven communal

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Conferences (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 236–49; J. Ayre and R. Wroe-Brown, ‘The Post-Roman Foreshore and the
Origins of the Late Anglo-Saxon Waterfront and Dock of Æthelred’s Hithe: Excavations at Bull Wharf, City of
of development is proposed in J. Haslam, ‘The Development of London by King Alfred: a Reassessment’,

(London, 1979), p. 199). The eight main Chronicle texts are (as in this case) often uniform until the 890s; where
necessary in subsequent references individual manuscripts are referred to using the conventional letters A–H.
83, who describes how Alfred ‘restored (restauravit) the city of London splendidly … and made it habitable
(habitabilem) again’ (Asser’s Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots Errorneously Ascribed
to Asser, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1959), p. 69; Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other
entities revolving around the ‘peace-gild(s)’ (fríðgegyld) of all those ‘who belong to London’ (þe to Lundenbyrig hyrað). The ‘peace-gild’ is known from a legal composition put together for the approval of King Æthelstan (924–39), as London’s response to a recent burst of legislative activity. This document does not use the terms Folkmoot or Husting; these labels could have been coined some time later, or been avoided in favour of more general, function-based terminology. Indeed, the institutions of VI Æthelstan for safeguarding London are never heard from again after Æthelstan’s reign. But it is arguable that the structures within the ‘peace-gild’ represent a pioneering and less formal – if still formative – ancestor of London’s later urban government, forged in challenging conditions that gave rise to a desire for collective protection.

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE FOLKMOOT AND THE HUSTING

In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, London’s two major governing institutions served distinct functions described in a series of charters, custumals and laws that codified the city’s infrastructure and privileges. The Folkmoot was an assembly of the free population

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6 P. Nightingale, ‘The Origin of the Court of Husting and Danish Influence on London’s Development into a Capital City’, English Historical Review, 102 (1987), pp. 559–78, at p. 562. See also below, pp. XXX.

as a whole. It met beside St Paul’s Cathedral three times a year at midsummer, Michaelmas and Christmas. In the early thirteenth century these three assemblies dealt (respectively) with the prevention of fire, the election of the new sheriff and the security and organisation of the city’s wards.\(^8\) At one time the Folkmoot may have been an effective institution and a venue for asserting the city’s solidarity, but is generally thought to have been something of an archaism at the time of its first appearance in surviving texts. London’s swift growth meant that it was increasingly impractical to gather all the population in one assembly, let alone conduct the city's business in a meaningful way.\(^9\) The much smaller Court of Husting, in consequence, consolidated its position as the principal judicial entity in the city.\(^10\) Composed of leading citizens, such as aldermen of the wards and, after the 1190s, the mayor, it dealt with important business at weekly meetings. One of the first detailed records of its activities shows the Husting as the venue for the sale of land in London from Wulnoth of Walbrook to the abbot of Ramsey in Cambridgeshire at some point between 1113 and 1131. This transaction took place ‘before the whole Husting of London’ (coram omni hustingo de Lundonia), which met in the house of one Alfwin son of Leofstan, and its witnesses were said to be acting ‘on behalf of the Husting’ (ex parte hustangi).\(^11\)


The names of these two bodies provide a point of entry into their earlier history. ‘Folkmoot’ is a relic of very many *folcgemot* which once met across England. This is an Old English word usually translated as ‘public meeting’ or ‘public assembly’. It could denote any kind or scale of gathering, and is encountered frequently in legislation and other texts from the ninth century onwards.12 London’s general assembly is the only case of what had been quite a generic term becoming tied to a specific body.13 The Husting is more complicated. Pamela Nightingale has constructed an elegant case for the Scandinavian associations of the Husting, founded on the premise that its name stems from Old Norse *húsping* (‘meeting in or associated with a house’) or possibly *húskarlaping* (‘meeting of the housecarls’). The presence in London after 1012 of Scandinavian mercenaries or *liðsmen* provides a plausible context for this Old Norse input.14 Moreover, the principal recension of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the time of Æthelred II (978–1016) used *husting* to describe the gathering of drunken and violent viking warriors who slew Archbishop Ælfheah at Greenwich in April


1012. Whether this term was chosen because of its known Scandinavian derivation, because it simply denoted an indoors assembly, or because the incident took place in close proximity to London (where the archbishop’s body was brought immediately after) is not clear. Peter Sawyer, however, had already noted that husping was also entirely credible as an Old English word. An expert philological reading has since been provided by Sara Pons-Sanz. Her judicious comments lead to a much more equivocal conclusion. On the side of the Old Norse derivation is the fact that, in Old English, ping is a relatively rare term for a meeting. Yet it occurs quite widely in poetry and, significantly, in one of the seventh-century Kentish law-codes. Ping clearly never went away entirely in Old English, and the case for the origins of the word, and therefore the assembly it described, must rest on more than philological grounds alone.


No explicit references to the Folkmoot survive from before the twelfth century. In practice, if not in name, the institution might be visible in writs addressed to London under Edward the Confessor (1042–66), which were directed to the local bishop, portreeve and the citizens (burhware). The reference to the citizens implies a larger gathering, comparable to those of the shires (which were the usual recipients of writs), though it cannot be ruled out that business relating to writs was handled by the smaller Husting. The latter is clearly attested in two pre-Conquest documents. Both refer to the Husting not as a judicial or administrative body, but as anarbiter of weights and measures. Notably, neither text actually comes from London itself, suggesting that at the time of writing the city’s institutions already enjoyed a high reputation outside the city limits, especially in connection with precious metals. The later of these two documents, preserved at Christ Church Canterbury, presents few difficulties. It states that in the 1030s a piece of land in Orpington, Kent, was bought for 80 marks of ‘white’ (i.e. fine) silver ‘according to the weight-standard of the Husting’ (be

19 P. H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography (London, 1968) [hereafter ‘S’], nos. 1096, 1103 and 1149–50 (F. E. Harmer, Anglo-Saxon Writs (Manchester, 1952), nos. 43, 51 and 105–6). S 1119 (Harmer, Writs, no. 75) is directed to the bishop, the staller and the burgheinges of London.


This charter is the earliest generally accepted mention of the Husting. The other relevant document is a brief statement in the Ramsey Liber benefactorum of how one Æthelgiva comitissa had given two estates at Stowe and Brunne (Longstowe and Bourn, Cambridgeshire) to the abbey of Ramsey, along with a mark of gold and two silver vessels, each of 12 marks ‘by the standard of the Husting of London’ (ad pondus hustingæ Londoniensis). This text is undated, but a separate set of obits from Ramsey notes the death in 985 of Ethelgiva, uxor Ailwini secunda (‘Æthelgifu, second wife of [Ealdorman] Æthelwine’) who gave Bourn and Longstowe to Ramsey, providing an apparent terminus ante quem. Like much of the material that surrounds it in this section of the Liber benefactorum, Æthelgifu’s donation is said to have been rendered from Old English into Latin. Insofar as one can judge from a Latin summary of a lost vernacular charter, there is nothing which would obviously contradict a late-tenth-century date. Use of marks (as opposed to pounds) at this time and location has been questioned, leading to the suggestion that these details – and the reference to the Husting – may be a later interpolation. Yet the mark was widely known and used in eastern England in the mid-tenth century, and in any case it is not clear that the mark as such was what the inhabitants of Cambridgeshire

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24 Nightingale, ‘Origin of the Court of Husting’, pp. 559–60. For a more cautious reading, see Stenton, Preparatory, p. 30 n. 2.

measured by the London standard. To state the standard used for a payment was highly unusual in Anglo-Saxon England, and in other cases served to contextualize or qualify otherwise standard units of weight and account. Some charters from the later years of Æthelred II’s reign (978–1016) thus refer to sums in pounds according to the weight of the Danes (who would themselves have used marks and oras at this time). The point these charters made was that the metal handed over would form part of a tribute payment to the vikings, and therefore be judged according to a different standard of weight or fineness than that normally expected. The writer of Æthelgifu’s donation to Ramsey perhaps called on the Husting’s standard for similar reasons.

The contours of London’s government in the late tenth and eleventh centuries can be sketched as follows. A body known as the Husting was definitely in existence by the time of Cnut, and potentially by the early years of Æthelred II. At this point it was an authority of national standing on gold and silver, but probably had a wider remit within the city itself. In addition, a body analogous to the Folkmoot also may have appeared by the time of Edward the Confessor. It is not possible to go further back without turning to the early-tenth-century ordinance known as VI Æthelstan.

VI ÆTHELSTAN AND PEACEKEEPING AT LONDON IN THE EARLY TENTH CENTURY


27 One is also reminded of the references in Domesday Book to pounds which had to be qualified as ad numerum, de xx in ora or ad arsuram et pensum. For present purposes it does not matter exactly what the difference was between these or how it arose; simply that not all pounds were alike. R. Naismith, Medieval European Coinage, with a Catalogue of the Coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. 8: Britain and Ireland c. 400–1066 (Cambridge, 2017), p. 365, with reference to the extensive further literature.
The earliest window onto London’s infrastructure is one of the first detailed records of communal urban organisation in medieval Europe. The text known to modern scholarship as VI Æthelstan is one of several local compositions produced in that king’s reign as part of a dialogue between the king and regional assemblies, and the only legal tract of the Anglo-Saxon period to have been produced by an urban community.

That community represented itself as a sworn collective. Sworn associations between peers, known as gilds (or guilds) and fraternities, were commonplace in early medieval Europe. They had a spontaneous, informal quality, and offered a combination of security and camaraderie to those outside the high elite, but these same qualities meant that gilds also presented the risk of conflicting loyalties, at least in the eyes of some rulers. England had many gilds in the tenth and eleventh centuries, some of which have left records of their rules and functions. These were quite different from the mercantile and craft-focused gilds of later times. The late Anglo-Saxon gilds were primarily social bodies, centred on shared religious devotion or common status, as with the ‘gild of English cnihtas’ which existed in


32 English Historical Documents, trans. Whitelock, pp. 603–7 conveniently translates the four principal texts.
tenth- to twelfth-century London.³³ Their provisions focused on the reciprocal responsibilities of members, especially in the context of communal eating and drinking.³⁴

The ‘peace-gild’ of London was yet another different sort of organisation. In the first place, it seems to have been significantly larger. The contents of the other Anglo-Saxon gild statutes imply fairly small, intimate fellowships, and London’s gild of English cnihtas was said to have been formed by 13 men in the time of Edgar and dissolved by 15 members in the 1120s.³⁵ The ‘peace-gild’, in contrast, was broken down into units of ten and a hundred individuals, so must have counted at least 200 members, and conceivably a great many more.³⁶ Although clearly associated with London, members were not necessarily all resident in the city: the text opens by declaring that it applies to all those ‘who belong to London’ (pe to Lundenbyrig hyrað), among whom were multiple bishops, presumably meaning those who owned property in London as well as the bishop of London himself.³⁷ Its membership was drawn from a broad cross-section of London society. The text is introduced with the statement that it was drawn up by bishops and reeves, but ‘both nobles and commoners’ (ge eorlisc ge ceorlisc) are cited in the lines which follow. A later passage makes provision for those who could not afford horses and would stay in the city working on behalf of those who

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went off in pursuit of wrongdoers. Women were counted as members too, and ‘poor widows’ (earmre wudewan) were exempt from the annual dues of 4d per head. The overall impression is that the organisation could have embraced a large proportion of the free population of the city and its surroundings.

The ‘peace’ (frið) they were concerned with meant more than the absence of disorder: it implied a state that had to be actively worked towards, often prompted by some sort of specific wrong or defect which needed to be corrected, such as basic respect for individual and group rights. Disregard of property rights constituted an egregious challenge to these basic tenets of Anglo-Saxon society; one which loomed especially large in the legislation of Æthelstan, becoming (in Patrick Wormald’s words) ‘almost an obsession’. This was the background against which the framers of VI Æthelstan established what amount to a self-help system for seeking redress in case of theft. They probably began at a judicial level. Anglo-Saxon courts depended more on consensus than official constitution by a higher authority, meaning that any assembly could be used as a forum for hearing cases and disputes. Hence it would be in no way exceptional, or exceptionable, for the Londoners, or the conglomerate of their sworn associations, to condemn wrongdoers and then to assign punishment or to

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mediate redress. There is good evidence that somehow they did so. The opening clauses of VI Æthelstan discuss how a thief would be dealt with whom ‘we find guilty according to the public law’, and a later passage concedes that ‘those who cannot be proved guilty on the spot’ should be incarcerated, while a list of indemnities offered for various kinds of livestock suggests a degree of routinisation in handling this kind of theft. But the principal interest of the composer of VI Æthelstan was in what would happen subsequently, when dealing with an infraction committed by someone who needed to be apprehended. The bulk of the text concerns the pursuit of thieves outside the city, beyond a set of northern and southern boundaries enclosing an unspecified area. If the Londoners encountered resistance from a thief and their kin, the ordinance arranged for reinforcements to be sent; and if the Londoners caught up with their quarry, whoever actually killed the thief would earn a reward of twelve pence from the common funds.

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46 VI Æthelstan, c. 5 and 8.4 (ed. Liebermann, I, pp. 176 and 179; ed. and trans. Attenborough, pp. 160–1 and 164–5). Views on what this area might have been are conveniently assembled in P. Taylor, ‘Boundaries and Margins: Barnet, Finchley and Totteridge’, in M. J. Franklin and C. Harper-Bill (eds.), Medieval Ecclesiastical Studies in Honour of Dorothy M. Owen (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 259–79, esp. pp. 277–8. Taylor observes that the area may have been relatively small, and that the references just to northern and southern boundaries could be formulaic, meaning essentially ‘in any direction’. Middlesex is most likely, or a part of it; perhaps some or all of the area later known as Ossulstone hundred, with its meeting-place on the Tyburn (O. S. Anderson, The English Hundred Names, 3 vols. (Lund, 1934–9), III, pp. 54–5).
The image of vengeful Londoners hunting for stolen cattle, sheep and pigs across southeast England finds parallels in other Anglo-Saxon legislation, but might seem at odds with the interests expected of an urban community. Trade, minting and other typically urban concerns of Anglo-Saxon law do not feature in VI Æthelstan. It is true that London was at this time still a place of relatively limited size and scope, the inhabitants of which would be involved in cultivating crops and animals as well as commerce; nonetheless, it remained one of the principal towns of the kingdom, and other sources leave no doubt that it did support minting and markets. Rather, the reason VI Æthelstan has so little specifically ‘urban’ content is because its remit was how the Londoners dealt with others, and the groups they expected to come into conflict with were more rural than urban. Adversaries in those clashes could be dangerous: VI Æthelstan envisaged resistance from strong and powerful (to þan strang ... and to þam mycel) kin-groups (mægð) of either 1200- or 200-shilling wergild men (i.e. high- or low-status). The Londoners’ concern about forming a united front against belligerent neighbours was by no means an idle one. Disputes in tenth-century England could be bitter, violent, long-lasting and infectious. Faced with quarrels that could easily turn to

52 VI Æthelstan, c. 8.2 (ed. Liebermann, I, p. 178; ed. and trans. Attenborough, pp. 162–3); cf. III Æthelstan, c. 6 (ed. Liebermann, I, p. 170; ed. and trans. Attenborough, pp. 144–5) for men with such wealth and powerful connections that they were beyond punishment, save through forcible relocation by the king.
blows and pillage, most damaging to those with weaker resources and support, London’s population was precisely the sort of group that would have benefited from asserting its collective weight.

That the people of the city set up sworn compacts to uphold their position vis à vis neighbouring groups says a great deal about London’s establishment as a coherent force. At the time VI Æthelstan was set down, extensive habitation within the walled city of London would only have been a few decades old. In relative terms it was quite a new community, without the deep-seated allegiance and mutual dependence that other social networks based on kinship or lordship might have. For this reason the peace-gild sought to cultivate a one for all and all for one attitude in its members, with the pledge that ‘whoever it be whose hands avenge wrongs done to us all, we shall all stand together, both in friendship and in enmity – whichever may result’.

But VI Æthelstan poses two related puzzles. One is the lack of evidence on how the Londoners fared in practice, especially if they came up against any of the powerful and uncooperative kin-groups that were envisaged as potential opponents. The other is the complete absence of references to the ‘peace-gild’ beyond VI Æthelstan. On the face of it, the organisation could have been simply a paper tiger, created as a temporary expedient, and not in fact capable of standing up to any challenge. Its swift retreat into obscurity could be set alongside the apparent demise of several other late Anglo-Saxon gilds that are also never heard from again beyond their statutes. But the disappearance of the


54 … Dyde dæda se þe dyde þæt ure ealra teonan wræce þæt we wæron ealle swa on anum feondscype swa on anum feondscype, swa hwæðer hit þonne wære. VI Æthelstan, c. 7 (ed. Liebermann, I, pp. 177–8; ed. and trans. Attenborough, pp. 162–3).


56 The main exception was also a London entity: the gild of English cnihtas. See X-REF.
‘peace-gild’ and the security it was supposed to guarantee would have left a much larger, more vulnerable gap. Some mechanism for doing the same jobs very likely did persist, perhaps in a different guise.

VI ÆTHELSTAN AND THE GOVERNMENT OF LONDON

The proposition made here is that what underlies VI Æthelstan were important aspects of the system of governance which prevailed in London by the late tenth and eleventh century. The city probably already had a portreeve. This term does not occur in VI Æthelstan, yet reeves figure prominently in the preface and in the final four numbered chapters, which seem to constitute a suite of additions made in light of later royal pronouncements.\(^57\) One of these additions concerns a command that within their districts reeves fulfil the decrees of a series of legal meetings. Two named men relayed this instruction from an assembly at Thunderfield, Surrey, to London. The context suggests that these men themselves were reeves.\(^58\)

Other elements of London’s governance and protection are explored more clearly in VI Æthelstan. The units of ten and a hundred individuals each had a representative responsible for the others, and the text stipulates that these leaders were to gather regularly to discuss the business of the gild. This more streamlined body was in some ways closer to the


\(^{58}\) Keynes, ‘Royal Government’, pp. 239–40; though cf. Wormald, Making, p. 298 for a different view. It is possible that the two reeves represent London and Middlesex. The special relationship between the town and shire was of long standing (Taylor, ‘Boundaries’, p. 264), and in the mid-eleventh century one portreeve of London seemingly also held the office of sheriff of Middlesex: S 1103 (?), 1119 and 1121 (Writs, ed. Harmer, nos. 51, 75 and 77). By the twelfth century the shrievalties of London and Middlesex were closely bound together: the relationship between them was formalized by Henry I and Stephen (Brooke, Keir and Reynolds, ‘Charter’, p. 575).
other late Anglo-Saxon gilds. It met once per month, with a preference for a time when drink was plentiful: ‘when the butts [of wine] are being filled’ (*mid bytffylinge*). Moreover, twelve men would then retire for dinner together.⁵⁹ It is not clear whether these twelve were identical with the representatives of the tens and hundreds, or an inner circle among them. In any case, business and pleasure mixed closely in such settings. It was the norm in the early Middle Ages for weighty matters to be considered over food and drink.⁶⁰ In this instance, drinks followed by dinner provided a forum in which the leading citizens of London could extend their discussion of key issues.

This regular dinner party would have played a vital element in running the city, and a precursor to the Court of Husting. It was the norm for higher-status meals to be taken indoors,⁶¹ and indeed the first identifiable meeting of the Husting took place in a private house, belonging to Alfwin son of Leofstan.⁶² Regardless of whether the name goes back to the age of VI Æthelstan or was coined in the milieu of Scandinavian settlers, the small-scale, social setting may well have been the background that commended the word *husþing*. The monthly timetable the diners followed perhaps derived from, or reflected the same background as, a law of Edward the Elder that stipulated that reeves should hold meetings for whatever unit they oversaw once a month.⁶³ The Husting’s more frequent gatherings in later

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⁶² *English Lawsuits*, ed. van Caenegem, no. 270.

times reflect the demand generated by London’s enlarged size and business: a problem which only got more severe with time. By the twelfth century the Husting’s meetings had become weekly rather than monthly, and by the latter part of that century even this agenda was coming under pressure due to the volume of its activity.64

There is no explicit provision for a meeting of the members of all the tens and hundreds as a whole, though such a gathering would have been more or less identical with an assembly of the city’s population and associated districts at which the oaths, trials and ordeals presumed by VI Æthelstan might have taken place.65 Other gild statutes required general meetings, in one case three times per year.66 This is the same number of meetings as Edgar (and later Cnut) stipulated for a town court (buruhgemot),67 and as London’s Folkmoot had by around 1200. The generic name of the Folkmoot suggests that in some form it preceded Edgar’s legislation for town courts. But in the time of Æthelstan London’s general assembly may have been a less structured entity, or simply one that did not need to be explained within the framework of VI Æthelstan.

A third element of London’s later infrastructure, the wards or internal divisions headed by alderman, was well established by the early twelfth century, but has a less clear

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66 English Historical Documents, trans. Whitelock, no. 137 (Exeter).

early history. A survey of properties owned by St Paul’s, carried out between 1123 and 1132, refers to at least 20 *wardae*, and it is possible that the full complement of 24 into which London was divided before 1394 already existed.\(^6\) By this time certain wards were identified with sokes, or areas of jurisdiction thought to go back to the loose rights that attached to large-scale Anglo-Saxon landholders.\(^6\) At least some of London’s wards probably originated in this way. The clearest case is that of Portsoken, immediately outside the eastern walls of the city, which represents the tenth- and eleventh-century soke of the gild of English *cnihatas*. Their rights and properties were later vested in the priory of Holy Trinity Aldgate, the parish of which was coterminous with the ward.\(^7\) What is not known is whether Portsoken was an early or late addition to the complement, or representative of how all wards coalesced elsewhere in the city;\(^8\) at best it is suggestive of the way in which jurisdictional, social, ecclesiastical and military interests could coagulate and solidify over time to form a ward.

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\(^6\) H. W. C. Davis, ‘London Lands and Liberties of St. Paul’s, 1066–1135’, in A. G. Little and F. M. Powicke (eds.), *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Thomas Frederick Tout* (Manchester, 1925), pp. 45–59. 17 wards were named with reference to the alderman, 3 in another way; 3 other divisions were also named, one of which was probably not a ward (*vicus Judeorum*), but other two could have been.


\(^8\) Brooke and Keir, *London*, p. 170 argued that Portsoken’s formation provided a *terminus post quem* for the wards, while Haslam, ‘Parishes’, saw it as a later addition to an essentially late-ninth-century scheme.
The hundreds and tens of VI Æthelstan might have been one component in this process of creating the structures by which London was to be governed. Like the origins of the wards, those of the hundreds and tens are obscure. They could have applied to the population within the city only, or to those ‘who belong to London’ within a larger district. From the context in which they appear they sound more like actual groups of ten or a hundred individuals than fixed territorial units: for this reason they should probably not be equated with the often much larger hundreds of rural areas, such as those of Middlesex. VI Æthelstan’s hundreds should be seen as a local innovation from an era in the early tenth century when kings encouraged peacekeeping on the basis of local initiative, but did not stipulate what form the results should take. London’s efforts were part of a tendency for towns or fortresses to figure prominently in local government and justice under Edward the Elder and Æthelstan, in this case with the addition of a more granular level of organisation, one that may have had an influence on the structure and terminology of local government in


England more widely.\textsuperscript{76} The adoption of hundreds in rural areas, including the small shire surrounding London, could have been one reason the city differentiated itself organisationally from the encircling territory, especially as it grew in size and complexity and also took on greater national prominence in the late tenth and eleventh centuries.

Whether the change was one of substance or name is unclear. No direct relationship can be identified between VI Æthelstan’s hundreds and the later wards, but in terms of function, if not name, the two had much in common. Both were sub-units of London with responsibility for peacekeeping, and each had a prominent leader.\textsuperscript{77} The name ‘ward’ (Old English \textit{weard}) implies an original concern with peacekeeping and defence,\textsuperscript{78} and some of London’s wards could have come into being as districts assigned specifically for these purposes, especially the larger ones facing the gates and walls.\textsuperscript{79} Yet it is unlikely that either the wards or the hundreds of VI Æthelstan sprang into being \textit{ex nihilo} as a result of a single cause or event. Such units worked most effectively if they went with the grain of social organisation rather than cut across it. Like Portsoken, they most likely built on pre-existing

\textsuperscript{76} For VI Æthelstan as a possible model for later hundreds, see Molyneaux, \textit{Formation}, pp. 149–50; Lambert, \textit{Law & Order}, pp. 243–50.

\textsuperscript{77} D. Roffe, \textit{Decoding Domesday} (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 135–6. Stenton (\textit{Preparatory}, p. 29) also emphasises the military dimension of the wards.

\textsuperscript{78} Bosworth and Toller, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Dictionary}, s.v. \textit{weard}. It is not clear if the term originated in London, however: Domesday Book notes that Cambridge and Stamford had ten and six wards (described in Latin as \textit{custodiae}) respectively, while Huntingdon was divided into quarters (\textit{ferdingis}) and York into seven ‘shires’ (\textit{scyre}). Kew, The National Archives E 31/2/1–2 (‘Great’ Domesday Book), f. 189r, 203r, 298r and 336v: see A. Williams and G. H. Martin, \textit{Domesday Book: a Complete Translation} (London, 2002), pp. 519, 551, 785 and 883.

\textsuperscript{79} D. Roffe, \textit{Decoding Domesday} (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 136 suggests a link between roads or gates and wards in Huntingdon and Stamford, based on later material. At London, this may suggest an early date for the larger outer wards facing the walls and its gates.
bonds including lordship, landholding, ecclesiastical organisation, military obligation and kinship as well as location. Hundreds and wards might have served to combine, consolidate and reify those structures, potentially perpetuating them as administrative fossils. London probably went through many iterations of this process, with relics of past structures and developments layered on top of one another as they assumed new names and roles. In this way the hundreds of VI Æthelstan may well have contributed to the early formation of some of the structures that would eventually emerge as wards.

CONCLUSION

If the Husting, Folkmoot and at least some of the wards do go back to the age of VI Æthelstan, it was under different names and with less formalized functions. The move towards more defined, concrete infrastructure in the city accompanied the rapid expansion of London from the late tenth century onwards, its de facto detachment from Middlesex and its strengthening association with increasingly ambitious and intrusive royal government. While sui generis in so many ways, this aspect of its development can usefully be set alongside other long-established towns in England. Several of these urban communities also had very old traditions of local organisation that persisted into the eleventh century. Change was often a matter of name, scale and configuration, leaving in place core elements of


81 Naismith, Citadel, pp. 141–81.

82 A case made most vigorously in recent scholarship by Molyneaux, Formation; see also J. Campbell, The Anglo-Saxon State (London, 2000).
collective organisation and royal representation. Canterbury provides a particularly worthwhile comparison. The city possessed a set of representative bodies whose origins went back to the mid-ninth century; some of these bodies still existed in the tenth century, operating alongside a port-reeve, and they continued to characterise the organisation of the city into the eleventh. London underwent a more radical change than Canterbury in the late ninth century, meaning that the age of Alfred is the earliest likely horizon for its major institutions. In the generations that followed Alfred’s death, the city was still finding its feet and establishing a niche in the surrounding region.

Parallels can also be drawn between London and towns in other regions of medieval Europe in the two-hundred years between the mid-ninth and the mid-eleventh centuries, where quasi-formal organisations gradually assumed legitimacy, often taking on new names and trappings while performing essentially the same functions as they had done in earlier times. These circumstances offer a possible reason for the peace-gild’s apparent

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84 Compare S 1199 (Christ Church, Canterbury, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 87), datable to 858×865, which names five distinct bodies into which the population was divided. Three of these groups still survived in the mid-tenth century, when they were referred to as the þreo geferscipas (‘three fellowships’): S 1506 and 1215 (Christ Church, Canterbury, ed. Brooks and Kelly, nos. 121 and 128). Two of these, the innan and utan burgware (i.e. inner and outer town-dwellers), lent their names to the manig god mann ægðer ge binnan byrig ge buton (‘many good men, both within the town and outside [it]’) who attest S 1400 (Christ Church, Canterbury, ed. Brooks and Kelly, no. 172), of 1048×1050. For discussion see N. P. Brooks, The Early History of the Church of Canterbury: Christchurch from 597–1066 (Leicester, 1984), pp. 27–33; Blair, Building, pp. 258 and 269–74.

disappearance after VI Æthelstan. Although the peace-gild is customarily referred to as a singular, and evidently was expected to work as a unit, the words VI Æthelstan uses for the organisation as a whole are in the plural. They might be read, therefore, as descriptive, applying not to an organisation that was thought of as a single gild, but to what an ensemble of courts, hundreds, tens and other associations actually did, in the service of a ‘common benefit’ (gemæne þearf).\(^8\) Context may have been important here. The ordinances of VI Æthelstan are a report on local arrangements for the king’s approval and, by extension, his support.\(^7\) By focusing on function and the language of sworn associations, the Londoners framed their local institutions in general terms most consonant with the king’s current


\(^{87}\) In some respects the text particularly supports royal interests, for instance with reference to confiscated goods: Lambert, Law & Order, pp. 331–2.
The peace-gild (singular) never reappeared because it perhaps never existed in the first place, and was simply a functional way of describing the collaboration of a plurality of London-based associations to create what the king wanted; that is, a body whose focus was keeping of the peace. As the city and its role changed, the component elements of the ‘peace gild’ gave rise to institutions that were more discrete in both identity and function, yet still carried – and in some cases still carry – the hallmarks of their development within a looser, less formal communal association. The ordinances of the London peace-gilds represent the beginning of London as a distinct and coherent community which looked to the king for legitimacy and support, and the effective foundation of its system of government.

88 For Æthelstan’s wider concern with theft, see above, n. xxx.