H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Cooper. *Bridges, Law and Power in Medieval England, 700-1400.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006. xi + 185 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-275-1.

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Published on H-Law (July, 2007)

Praise the Bridges

In an age when we fund the building of bridges to nowhere, having apparently built bridges to everywhere else, it is worth contemplating the days when bridges were rare. In this stimulating work, Alan Cooper does exactly that.

As the title indicates, Cooper's book is about how bridges figured in the law and political organization of medieval England. It is not about the design or engineering of bridges, subjects which were admirably covered a few years ago by David Harrison in *The Bridges of Medieval England: Transport and Society, 400-1800* (2004). Instead, Cooper looks at two principal paradoxes in the medieval law of bridges: first, in the early period, bridges were much more prominent in law than they seem to have been in life, for they were part of the public duties which were almost unavoidable, the famous *trinoda necessitas* of Anglo-Saxon law, even though there seem to have been very few actual bridges on the roads Anglo-Saxon people traveled. The second is that, in the later Middle Ages when the utility of bridges was recognized and they were more and more common in practice, funding their construction (and, even more, their upkeep and repair) relied on a messy tangle of inconsistent and uneven methods, as a result of which it was often difficult to know who was supposed to care for bridges and very easy for individuals and institutions to deny their responsibilities. In discussing the contrast and transition between these two regimes, Cooper contributes a minor but telling example of the replacement of generalized Anglo-Saxon public duties by private, specific, and inconsistent private responsibilities after the Norman Conquest.

Cooper sums up his first chapter, significantly entitled "Bridge-Work but No Bridges," with the statement, "It seems strange that kings insisted upon bridge-work, when bridges seem not to have been important at all" (p. 8). It does, indeed. By canvassing the evidence for the existence of bridges in early Anglo-Saxon England (charters, place-names, narratives and archeology), Cooper demonstrates that it is remarkably hard to prove the existence of any bridges in early Anglo-Saxon England. Even the major Roman bridges may not have been in use, and there may have been no Anglo-Saxon bridge building before about 900. Rivers were crossed sometimes by ferries, but mostly by fords. Instead, "the great period of building of bridges … was between 900 and 1200" (p. 15). The incentive to build them was provided by changes in the technology of the landscape and of transport which made fords harder to use than they had been. "Forest clearance, drainage of fields, and the building of mills all combined to cause a faster run-off of water and more defined, faster rivers" (p. 21). Moreover, as the movement of goods changed "from pack animals to ox-drawn wains and from wains to horse-drawn carts," bridges became increasingly desirable (p. 22). Nevertheless, the role of the kings in the building of bridges was minimal: "except for a brief time in the tenth century, their construction was not something initiated by the king: the bridging of the major river crossings was accomplished by local action" (p. 150).

If this was so, then why do Anglo-Saxon law's well-known "common burdens," the *trinoda necessitas*, impose on all subjects not only army service and borough work but bridge work? An extensive discussion of the Gumley charter of 749, "the first appearance of bridge-work in an authentic charter" (p. 25), leads Cooper to conclude that the appearance of bridge work is essentially an accident. The charter, issued by King Ethelbald of Mercia (and given in Latin and English in appendix 1), was part of St. Boniface's attempt to secure privileges for the Anglo-Saxon church comparable to those which he had secured for the Frankish and German churches; and on the Continent churches were normally exempt from all secular obligations except for certain public duties, which included work on bridges. The definition of where the church's exemption ended simply carried over without much scrutiny, so English kings wound up ex-

empting English churches from all public duties except army service, work on fortresses, and work on largely non-existent bridges. Nonetheless, despite the august origins of the exemption, it appears only sporadically in sources for a century or more after the Synod of Gumley.

The usual explanation of the requirement that even churches perform the three obligations of the *trinoda necessitas* is that they were militarily necessary. In chapter 2, Cooper considers the evidence for bridges as part of the defense of England against the Vikings, especially the six great bridges at Rochester, Chester, London, Huntingdon, Nottingham, and Cambridge, which are "quite the earliest major bridges of England" since evidence of their existence "can be traced back to around the year 900" (p. 47). For "Rochester, Chester, London and perhaps Huntingdon, the bridge may have survived in some form from Roman times" (p. 57). Moreover, for all of them "there is evidence of bridge-work obligations spread over a wide area … which is evidence of wide responsibility quite unlike that for other bridges" (p. 47). Though the evidence is problematic, Cooper concludes that, both on the Continent and in England, building bridges was not normally part of the strategy rulers used in attempting to prevent the Vikings from raiding up rivers. Nonetheless, boroughs were important to defense, often boroughs on both sides of a river crossing, and where bridges existed they were included in the obligation to maintain fortifications. Alfred's reign probably marks the "the turning point from the casual and sporadic insistence on the common burdens, which is characteristic of the ninth century, to the vigorous and universal insistence on them in the tenth" (p. 59).

All that changed with the Norman Conquest. What had been a public obligation under the late Saxon kings, "so that the king could not even grant exemptions from bridge-work to his own lands," became merely "a feudal incident, alienable like any other" (p. 66). Although "the twelfth century may have been the great age of bridge building," monastic charters, Henry I's coronation charter, and the various legal treatises produced in the twelfth century show that what had been a public obligation was replaced by "a plethora of personal and institutional obligations, exempted through favour, demanded through malice" (p. 79). As a result, in the later Middle Ages, "we are presented with a new picture: many bridges, but no clear and consistent law about their repair" (p. 79).

Cooper devotes his last chapter, "Three Solutions," to considering the ways in which contemporaries attempted to deal with this problem. One might sum up the results by saying that "solution" is a bold overstatement of the muddle that was the later medieval law of bridge maintenance. Cooper is more polite. He distinguishes three methods that were developed: "customary and [therefore] haphazard" obligations, "appeal to charity," and "the granting of pontage tolls" (p. 80). None of these was a very reliable way of funding the upkeep of bridges since obligations were resented and avoided, charity was unreliable, and pontage tolls were complicated and temporary. As a result, the state of the bridges of medieval England was parlous. Even the greatest bridges were often in ruinous state. In the fourteenth century Rochester bridge was subject to "continual failure" (p. 101) and sometimes had to be replaced by a ferry. It finally collapsed for good in 1381. The bridge at Chester appears to have collapsed for good somewhat earlier since the new bridge was being built by 1346. Cooper, however, does not dwell on the fragility of England's bridges, of which Harrison gives graphic descriptions. Instead, he looks at the consequences for legal obligations. Especially where the great bridges collapsed and were replaced by new ones, the existing public obligations of repair were usually replaced by charities, bridge trusts, which were responsible for the permanent upkeep of the new bridges. Here, the new London Bridge begun in the late twelfth century was the pioneer. Cooper concludes that King John "drew from the knowledge he had gained in his French possession … and introduc[ed] a French method of financing the bridge" (p. 119). London's Bridge Trust, like some of the others, was well endowed.

Not all bridges were so fortunate, however. For them, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century kings often tried to find some set of people who were obligated to repair the bridge. These efforts met with considerable resistance. Alternatively, the king might grant pontage, which is so closely related to grants of pavage for repairing roads that Cooper discusses the two together. Appendix 2 catalogs all known grants of pontage from 1228 through 1399. Such grants were "favours to the recipients. This was not another form of taxation thrust onto an unwilling population" (p. 134) because the tolls were paid on charged on merchandise intended for sale and therefore "probably appeared as surcharges on top of other market dues" (p. 130). Moreover, grants of pontage and pavage correlate with "times of royal weakness" in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (p. 137). They did not work well in any case: "The overall picture is one of the impotence of kings to do anything broadly constructive about a national problem that seems to have been recognized by all" (p. 147).

It is a pleasure to read a really good book, and this is one. The issues raised are important in the context of the subject, and their larger significance is evident. The evidence is well marshaled and problems with it are fully discussed both in the text and in the extensive notes. The arguments are cogent and persuasive. The writing is clear, uncluttered, and occasionally funny. All in all, this was a joy to read.

In production, the book is also relatively clean. The largest flaw is that the bibliography is incomplete. It ends with a book by R. N. Swanson (p. 181), but the notes refer to works by many authors later in the alphabet, for example Thomas Szabo (p. 4, n. 6), Bruce Watson (p. 6, n. 15), Leslie E. Webster (p. 13, n. 35), etc. Other problems are minor. There is no list of maps and graphs, so one must flip through the book to find them. On page 119 (at n. 250), the sentence reads, "rents bequeathed in the town [of Newcastle] amounted to twenty marks of which one was paid to the chaplain and his clerk and the other ten to the master mason." How does ten plus one add up to twenty? The assertion that "the Black Death made an enormous impact on the history" of pontage and pavage is supported by reference to graph 1. The graph is so small (covering 172 years along the long side of one page) that it is hard to tell which year is which, but it seems to show that the alleged "marked dip in the number of grants in the 1340s, 1350s and 1360s" began before 1348 (p. 142). The reference in the introduction to appendix 2 refers to "Columns 5, 6, and 7" (p. 155), but the columns of the table which constitutes this appendix are actually denominated A through G.

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Citation: Emily Zack Tabuteau. Review of Cooper, Alan, *Bridges, Law and Power in Medieval England, 700-1400*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13358

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