HOLDING THE BORDER: POWER, IDENTITY,

AND THE CONVERSION OF MERCIA

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by

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HOLDING THE BORDER: POWER, IDENTITY,
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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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1. INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING CONVERSION

> Political empires and economic systems have come and gone, but the
> world religions have survived…. Their genius lies in their curious ability
> to renounce this world and announce another, more compelling and true.
> They relocate the divisive solidarities of language, custom, and region
> within a broader community and higher Truth.[1]

The seventh century is one of the most crucial in English history, for it was then that Christianity was firmly established among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Part of this conversion's effect on England was certainly to change its perceived boundaries and its relationship with the rest of the Christian world. Within a hundred years, England went from an island dominated by the individual kingdoms of pre-literate Anglo-Saxons to one able to produce a work of illuminated text – the Lindisfarne Gospel –that rivaled any produced on the Continent. By early in the eighth century, the English-educated monk Winfrith, who would come to be known as St. Boniface (675-754), was bringing Christianity to the continental kin of the Anglo-Saxons. England began in the fifth century as Roman Britain conquered, but England converted was not Britain reborn. Its system of government, its economy, and even its vernacular language had changed during the fifth and sixth centuries. But even so changed, after a century and a half of darkness during which its history lay mostly unrecorded, with the coming of Christianity England was once again part of Europe.

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[1] Robert W. Hefner, "Introduction: World Building and the Rationality of Conversion," *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 34.

That broad change, though, was not the goal of the mission that went from Rome to England in 596. Their goal was clear to Bede (672-735), the great historian of the English conversion, who in his 731 *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) presents the tale of the Anglo-Saxons "snatched from the wrath of Christ and called to his mercy."[2] Bede tells how the Anglo-Saxon invaders who had established themselves in what was now England became Christian by means of the conversion of their kings. Over the course of the seventh century, even those kingdoms that resisted Christianity, such as the kingdom of Mercia long held by its pagan king and warlord Penda (r. 626-654)[3], came to Christ. The pious Cenred (r. 704-9), who abdicated the Mercian throne in order to go on pilgrimage to Rome and enter holy orders there, ruled Mercia only 76 years after Penda had dismembered the Christian Northumbrian king Oswald (r. 634-642) at the battle of Hatfield. Bede's history is that of men acting to further the providence of God.

Recent scholarship on the Anglo-Saxon conversion makes a much different claim: that this religious change was not provident, but expedient. It presents Christianity as a tool that supplied Anglo-Saxon kings with a ready-made structure of power they could use to exert and support their own power and authority. This interpretation puts the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons into the social context with which we can best evaluate it. For that evaluation to be complete, however, we need to look at more than just political necessity, and we need to account for those kingdoms that resisted religious change. Examining the conversion of the kingdom of Mercia from the perspective of that

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[2] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 135.

[3] The probable date of Penda's reign is examined in detail in Chapter 3.

kingdom's origins and development and its rulers' interests and concerns will enable us to understand both resistance and conversion to Christianity in seventh-century England.

This examination was prompted by Nicholas Higham's 1997 book *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England*, which does interpret the conversion of England as a response to political necessity. According to Higham's interpretation of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Æthelberht of Kent converted to Roman Christianity as "a diplomatic move occasioned by his need in 595-6 to seek an accommodation with what looked like the winning side in Frankia."[4] Even what may be seen as more purely religious considerations were, Higham says, based on political reasoning in response to earthly events. Oswald of Northumbria turned to Celtic rather than Roman Christianity neither because he had been raised in the Celtic Church, nor because he accepted the Celtic dating of Easter, nor even because there were no Roman Christians left in Northumbria,[5] but instead because Edwin's death at the hands of the Celtic Christian Cadwallon demonstrated "God's preference for the Celtic customs and methods for determining the date of Easter."[6] And in Penda's Mercia, where Higham claims the king's power was based on the Anglo-Saxon concept of pagan sacral kingship, it was critical for Penda to exclude Christianity as a "Bernician cult, with

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[4] N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 117.

[5] James the Deacon remained at the church in York after Paulinus fled to Canterbury following Edwin's defeat; Bede, 207.

[6] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 213.

its capacity to reinforce subordination to [Edwin's successor] Oswald."[7] For Higham, the

sources for the conversion of England show how Anglo-Saxon kings, seeking

> instruments capable of consolidating, reinforcing and extending their own power … found crucial allies in Christian bishops, who were generally prepared to place their skills, ideologies and organising capabilities at the disposal of convert kings in return for royal backing for missionary activities. That fact, beyond any other, made many of the greatest kings welcoming and committed patrons of Christian missionaries. Those of the same generation who abstained (like Penda of the Mercians, for example) probably did so more out of hostility to rivals who were convert kings than out of any particular animosity towards Christianity itself.[8]

Conversion, as Higham interprets it, suborned religion to politics and to questions

of authority and power.

For Bede, the events of the conversion of England show the hand of God; for

Higham, they are a series of politically expedient acts. History, though, is much more

than an account of events in series. It is a narrative of influences and their effects, a

description of social structures and their evolution, and an apprehension of changes in

human life and thought over time. Central to human history is man's conception of

himself and his world, a conception shared with the others of his culture. This is his

mentalité, his "system of beliefs expressed in the acts and language of the culture."[9]

Man's physical environment sets absolute limits on man's actions, but his mental

environment also determines for him which actions are possible, desirable, and

significant.

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[7] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 219.

[8] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 27.

[9] Yelena Mazour-Matusevich with Sean Bledsoe, "On Concepts, History and Autobiography: An Interview with Aron Gurevich," *The Medieval History Journal* 7:2 (2004), 180.

To better know why and how England, and Mercia within England, became Christian, we must look deeper into the evidence and form our own interpretation in light of what we know about Anglo-Saxon societies, how they were structured, and how their leaders held and used power. We have to consider both how the practices and ideologies of Roman and Celtic Christianity may have differed and what social, political, and spiritual concerns Anglo-Saxon kings may have considered when deciding if, or from which church, to receive baptism. We must try to determine what aspects of religion were important to the Anglo-Saxons, how they evaluated different beliefs, and what benefits they saw in Christianity.

Finally, in the case of Mercia, we have to use this understanding gained to determine why conversion was resisted. For, though Mercia was "converted" by the death of its adamantly pagan king, religious affiliation alone did not decide Penda's loyalties. He fought his battles against Christian Northumbria as an ally of Christian Gwynedd, and he met the pagan West Saxons not as an ally but as an enemy. Was Christianity incidental to Penda and to the struggle for dominance among the polities of seventh-century England, or merely a tool used by the leaders of these polities in their quest for power? Did the Anglo-Saxons see conversion to Christianity as anything more than a change in alliances or in definition? When kings and their men changed their religion, what did they expect to receive in return?

Higham must be lauded for presenting the conversion of England within its socio-political context and for discussing aspects of Christianity's appeal to Anglo-Saxon kings (and would-be kings) that some previous scholarship failed to emphasize. However, his presentation fails to consider any significance of religion to these kings and their

followers. It threatens to obscure evidence for the social and religious aspects of the Anglo-Saxon *mentalité* through an interpretation that sees all aspects of Anglo-Saxon religious identity through a lens of *realpolitik*. It is true, as Higham states, that "belief" as a theological ideal was a thing foreign to the pagan English and that to seek to explain the conversion of England in terms of belief alone can impose modern and Christian assumptions about what was significant to English converts.[10] However, those that converted in order to gain "improved access to power or social status,"[11] as both Anglo-Saxon kings and their follower may have done, were not doing so because they were concerned only with material and power. Instead, their desire for these things and their expectation that they would find them within Christianity reveals their world view, which was that power, social status, and religious belief were closely linked. Conversion to Christianity may not have taught the English the concept of belief, but it did change, in time, what they believed.

A coherent description of the specific beliefs and practices of Anglo-Saxon paganism lies beyond our recovery. Careful analysis, though, can reveal how religion functioned in the Anglo-Saxon worldview. In Book II (covering 605-633) of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Bede describes the conversion of King Edwin of Deira. Edwin had married Æthelburh, the Christian sister of King Eadbald of Kent, and had accepted into his household with her the Roman Christian bishop Paulinus. Convinced by the instruction of Paulinus (and by events that included meetings with mysterious strangers, an attempted assassination, and letters from Pope Boniface along with the influence of his Christian

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[10] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 17.

[11] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 19.

wife and her kin), Edwin decided to become Christian. He did not make the decision to

accept Christianity for himself alone, though. Instead,

> when [King Edwin] had heard his words, he answered that he was both
> willing and bound to accept the faith which Paulinus taught. He said,
> however, that he would confer about this with his loyal chief men and
> counselors so that, if they agreed with him, they might all be consecrated
> together in the waters of life. Paulinus agreed and the king did as he had
> said.[12]

The first piece of the Anglo-Saxon worldview that we can take from this is that,

although he was king, Edwin could not or would not impose his new religion on those

who supported him without first taking counsel with them. It may be that to do otherwise

risked dangerous opposition, or it may be that the structure of power within his kingdom

gave Edwin authority only with the assent from representatives of those he ruled.

However, Bede does not say that Edwin required any agreement from his men in order to

be "both willing and bound" to become a Christian. The meeting that followed was

initially not so much a theological discussion as it was a discussion of matters of

collective action. Edwin was asking *his* men to move forward with him and be baptized

into this new religion. If he had not been assured of their support, he would likely not

have converted.

Next, Bede does not say that Paulinus or any other Christian priest first addressed

the subsequent council and explained to them what this change would mean. It is likely

that all of those present were familiar, at least to some extent, with Christianity not only

from the teaching of Paulinus but also from some knowledge of the Celtic church, for

Northumbria shared a border, in conflict and in peace, with the British kingdoms to the

north. Edwin instead began by asking each "in turn" what he thought of this new religion

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[12] Bede, 183.

(and, it is assumed, of Edwin's commitment to accept and impose it). Bede recounts in detail the responses attributed to two of these men. While these statements are certainly Bede's own invention based on reports of this meeting, they reflect not only his own beliefs but also his understanding of what his pagan ancestors thought and did. Bede says that the first one to speak was Coifi, the chief of Edwin's (pagan) priests, who said,

> "Notice carefully, King, this doctrine which is now being expounded to us… None of your followers has devoted himself more earnestly than I have to the worship of our gods, but nevertheless there are many who receive greater benefits and greater honour from you than I do and are more successful in their undertakings…."[13]

Coifi's reaction was to first note that his own service to the gods has not led Edwin to reward him and then to complain that these gods have not helped him "more readily." Coifi's rejection of his pagan religion reveals within it his belief that material success and well-being may result from devotion to the gods, but those gods bestow their blessings through the person of the king. This is not a *credo* espousing the "divine right of kings;" it is instead a statement of how Coifi, a priest of the pagan Anglo-Saxon religion, believed divine power manifested in the material world. Coifi may not have spoken primarily about his gods, about religious truths, or even about the Anglian Northumbrians' religious traditions, but his statement was, nonetheless, a statement of his belief about how divine power worked in the world.

Bede's account reveals more about these beliefs through the next statement by one of the king's "chief men," who said,

> "This is how the present life of man on earth, King, appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside

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[13] Bede, 183.

the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall…. For the few moments it is inside the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight…. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all."[14]

This man, in a striking and famous image that is frequently taken to characterize the Anglo-Saxon worldview, described the king's hall as a bright refuge from the dark without, a place that, in his life, provides a respite from the unknown. That description does more than say that the pagan religion from which Edwin and his men were to convert had no conception of the afterlife. Indeed, even though almost nothing is known about that religion from seventh century sources, it is hard to imagine that this was a subject about which it was completely silent. Hinted at here as well is another affirmation of the king's material protection as a shelter against elements natural, supernatural, and (likely) political. This man's statement also reveals how threatening and uncertain life outside of this protective fellowship was seen to be. He would seek not to control the elements of the storm but instead to gain an understanding of the world he cannot see. Edwin's chief man gave in this another statement of a belief: the belief that religion can give knowledge of the world and provide comfort to men. If the pagan Anglo-Saxons had not believed that religion could provide such knowledge, they would not have expected to find that knowledge within Christianity. And, since Paulinus did not address the assembly until after these men's statements, it is most likely that what they said was intended to be taken, in Bede's presentation, as a depiction of the Anglo-Saxon pagan reaction to Christianity.

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[14] Bede, 183-4.

So, what Christianity may be seen to have offered Edwin's men was a more sure path to divine favor, expressed through the favor of the king, and a more secure knowledge of the world and men's fates within it. Both of these concepts must have been familiar to these men from their own, non-Christian religion even if, as Higham states, their conversion to Christianity was more likely the result of their seeking material benefit rather than their striving for psychological or intellectual change.[15] Bede himself was a second-generation English Roman Christian and one, it is assumed, who had experienced such changes. He was almost certainly, though, not so far removed from those of the generation before his as to misunderstand what motivated them. Ideas as fundamental to religious belief as "how does the Divine grant favor" and "what comes before and after life" change slowly; as Peter Brown points out when discussing the Christianization of the Roman Empire, fundamental conceptions of the world such as these usually shift "with the slowness of a glacier."[16] So, also, do ideas of identity, and Bede was careful to know the origins and location, as he knew them, of all of the peoples who made up the "English Nation" about which he writes. Bede, despite his obvious biases, gives every impression that he was committed to accuracy, and for him to misrepresent so baldly what his ancestors thought and felt would not only be dishonest but ineffective if he truly intended for his work to provide moral examples.

Other fundamental beliefs about authority, social structure, and identity were likely just as slow to change in Anglo-Saxon societies. Therefore, to discover those things at work in the conversion of Mercia, we need to look at all of Anglo-Saxon England in the

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[15] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 19.

[16] Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

seventh century and try to apprehend the world view shared by all within its cultures. So, we will begin by examining how the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain and established there the social groups that coalesced into the kingdoms described by Bede, for doing so will enable us to place Mercia and its rulers within that context of coalescing kingdoms. We will also look at what both documentary and material evidence says about the spread of Christianity and the formation of and change in distinct Anglo-Saxon identities, and we will explore how Mercia's relationship with its Anglo-Saxon and British neighbors may have influenced its early seventh-century resistance to Christianity.

What we will find is that, as Higham says, pragmatic concerns of power are much easier to demonstrate than matters of belief. Nevertheless, even those pragmatic concerns are tied to more subtle ones. In the case of Penda of Mercia, what was most immediately significant to him was neither "overlordship" nor sacral kingship, two concepts that Higham identifies as key elements in the Anglo-Saxon kings conversion to Christianity. Penda instead was concerned with the *gens Merciorum* – the Mercian people within Mercian lands. His adherence to paganism may have come from a desire to hold fast to Mercian traditions and Mercian identity. That Mercian identity also affected how other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms related to Mercia, which in turn affected how Christianity was made available to Penda and the Mercians.

Penda's concerns were different from those of the Kentish and Northumbrian "overkings" Higham examines, and Mercia was a different kingdom. By looking at how Mercia was founded and what actions its most famous pagan ruler took, we can see how that part of the Mercian *mentalité* that defined them as a *gens*, as a people, affected

Penda's actions and, as a consequence, Mercia's religion during the first half-century of the Anglo-Saxon conversion.

CHAPTER ONE: *ADVENTUS* AND AFTERMATH

If we are to talk about the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity, we must first look at who these peoples were, how they came to England, and what sort of society they formed there. If we do not have a good idea of who was converted and from what, we can know little about how or why this conversion took place. Exploring the origins of the Anglo-Saxons means coming to grips with previous historical approaches to these problems – approaches that were developed in response to the historiographic climate of their times, the lack of easily interpreted sources, and the general uncertainty that even now still, and likely always will, surround the early history of England. This chapter, therefore, examines both the documentary sources and the material remains for the Anglo-Saxon *adventus* with a view toward creating an image of Mercia as part of early Anglo-Saxon culture that leaves room for questions and interpretation. The faint tracings of the structure of power can be discerned only if the ground on which they are drawn is described in detail first.

The Historiography of Anglo-Saxon Origins

> From the country of the Angles, that is, the land between the kingdoms of the Jutes and the Saxons, which is called *Angulus*, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all of the Northumbrian race.[12]

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[1] Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 51.

For much of the twentieth century, the historiography of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain and of the conversion of the kingdoms founded there rested on assumptions about ethnicity and social organization that often obscured more than they illuminated. Exposing those assumptions is the first step toward shaping a coherent and plausible description of the origins of Mercia and the other kingdoms of sixth and seventh-century England.

Bede's description of the Anglo-Saxon peoples is the starting point for this survey and a good lens for focusing on the changes in the historiography of Anglo-Saxon and English origins. From the mid-nineteenth century through at least the fifth decade of the twentieth century, the orthodox interpretation of Anglo-Saxon origins was that the Anglo-Saxons were Germanic tribesmen with distinct "Germanic" social and political institutions. This interpretation had at its core a reading of Tacitus that emphasized the primitively "democratic" nature of Germanic culture, along with the dependent assumption that Anglo-Saxon culture and institutions must be primitively democratic as well, with "*reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt*."[3] H. Munro Chadwick, in his 1907 *Origin of the English Nation*, expended much effort tracing the tribes named by Bede to their continental homelands. He concluded that the Mercians descended from the continental Angli, part of a Suebic Baltic religious confederation centered on the cult of Nerthus.[4] Such a conclusion says little, though, about what Mercians may have believed,

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[3] Cornelius Tacitus, *Germania*, in Tacitus, *Opera Minora*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), accessed at < http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Tac.+Ger.+7.1>.

[4] H. Munro Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge University Press, 1907), 267-8.

and there is no evidence of a Nerthus cult in Anglo-Saxon England.[5] Chadwick's skills

are not in doubt, but his work early in the last century can often obscure more than it can

illuminate concerning the question of origins.

This faulty interpretation is a consequence of Chadwick's and others' assumptions

about what it means for the Anglo-Saxons to have been Germanic. The sources he

brought to bear on the question of Mercian, and Anglo-Saxon, origins ranged from

Ptolemy to Saxo Grammaticus – 1100 years spanned by the assumption of an underlying

"Germanic" commonality. The "Germanist" tradition of Anglo-Saxon scholarship was, at

a fundamental level, ahistoric, for it too easily assumed a static pre-historic Germanic

culture in which all these tribes participated. This tradition of interpretation also, as a

rule, dismissed any idea of Roman influence on Anglo-Saxon cultures, something that we

shall see may have obscured vital evidence. Early twentieth-century archaeological as

well as historical interpretation followed this Germanist tradition. For example, E.

Thurlow Leeds's typography of Anglo-Saxon artifacts traced them to the continental

homelands of the Anglo-Saxon invaders, and the assumption that underlay his

interpretation of burial remains (for he considered no other evidence[6]) was that

> faint traces of Roman art can be detected in the *first* products of Anglo-
> Saxon culture. But the Romans came and went, and with them vanished
> practically everything that they had toiled so hard to impress upon the
> country–institutions, language, and culture; all their labor in vain.[7]

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[5] Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (New York: Dorset Press, 1980), 41.

[6] E. Thurlow Leeds, *The Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 16.

[7] Leeds, 13-14.

Archaeological evidence uncovered since 1913 has disproved his assumptions, but it was only when the underlying interpretation itself was questioned that the disproof became possible.

At the heart of this older interpretation was the assumption of cultural discontinuity between Romano-Celtic Britain and Anglo-Saxon England.[8] According to this historical interpretation of Anglo-Saxon origins, continental Germanic tribesmen entered Britain beginning at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, possibly first as *federates* of the Roman administration of Britain but more certainly at the behest of British leaders after the withdrawal of Rome's military from Britain. These Anglo-Saxon peoples' culture then completely replaced the culture of the British populace in the areas under Anglo-Saxon domination. The Anglo-Saxons' subsequent conversion to Christianity did not fundamentally change this culture, which remained Germanic until the Norman invasion and, possibly, beyond. Bede's account of the "invasion" was understood as "part of the information from Canterbury that gave him the Kentish story" and to be "generally supported by archaeology."[9] The assumptions again are that the "Germanic" Anglo-Saxons remained fundamentally uninfluenced by others and undifferentiated among themselves from before the fifth through the end of the eleventh centuries.

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[8] Donald A. White, "Changing Views of the *Adventus Saxonum* in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century English Scholarship," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32, no. 4 (October – December 1971), 590.

[9] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 22.

The problem with this interpretation is not only its basis in ahistorical and ascientific assumptions about race and racial character.[10] It also leads its adherents to resort, in the face of scarce sources and difficult to interpret evidence of what Anglo-Saxon culture was actually like, to use sources far removed in time and space, such as Tacitus's *Germania*, the Icelandic *Eddas*, Scandinavian sagas, and other materials that both greatly predate and postdate the foundation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Certainly there must be similarities borne from common Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Scandinavian origins, and those sources, carefully interpreted with an understanding of their anthropological, literary, and folkloric backgrounds, can guide and provide evidence for a nuanced and sophisticated interpretation of early English history. Those similarities do not, however, make it possible to indiscriminately use Norse mythology recorded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to "fill in the gaps" of pagan Anglo-Saxon belief[11] or to stretch too far typological similarities among insular and continental material remains, as Leeds did, to argue for a strictly "Germanic" basis for Anglo-Saxon culture.

Furthermore, the Germanist interpretation presupposes a total replacement of Romano-British culture, the sources for which were both Roman and Celtic British and the practitioners of which remained active in the north and west of England for centuries, by a Germanic Anglo-Saxon culture. Assuming this ignores both archaeological evidence and the historical fact of continued interaction and mutual influence between Germanic "invaders" and British polities. This is not to say that ethnic identity was not important to

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[10] Admirably explored in Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982).

[11] Along with Chadwick, further examples include Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1957) and, with much better critical facility, William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1970).

the English and the British both, only that ideas of "race" and fixed interpretations based on static assumptions about "Germanic" character invariably muddy the examination of Anglo-Saxon identity and ethnicity.

In the end, there is no reason to doubt that groups from various continental Germanic tribes entered Britain in the fifth century and that their descendants, in time, dominated the island. The unquestioned Germanic origin of the Anglo-Saxons, however, provides only part of the background for explaining the cultural and political systems of England in the seventh century. To say that some undifferentiated and static Germanic tribal or racial character shaped the Anglo-Saxons is far too simplistic. The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic in origin, but they must be understood in the light of their own history and evidence, not merely in terms of their origins.

Documents of Origins and Conversion

The main documents that give details of the origin and history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their conversion to Christianity are as follows:

· Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britaniae*, British-Welsh, c. 515-520 C.E..[12]
· Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, Northumbrian, 731.
· "Nennius," *Historia Brittonum* – the dating and provenance of this text remains controversial (as discussed below), but the earliest full text is Welsh, c.828-829 C.E..
· Peripheral and derived sources, including chronicles from Gaul, Welsh eulogies committed to writing in the tenth and eleventh centuries but possibly derived from seventh-century oral sources, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

Each of these has its application at different points along the narrative of these centuries, and each will be examined in turn.

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[12] I am accepting the dating and attribution of origin given in Thomas D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: Its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978).

Gildas is the main source for the story that the Anglo-Saxon *adventus* was begun by Germanic mercenaries who turned on their British employers. Gildas says that a British king – unnamed, but called *superbus tyrannus* – invited Saxon warriors to Britain as mercenaries charged with repelling Scottish and Pictish invaders. These Saxons "landed on the east side of the island" and soon, complaining that they were not being provisioned, proceeded to "break the treaty and plunder the whole island."[13] This account is repeated by Bede, who gives the name *Uurtigerno*, "Vortigern" to this British king (possibly as a Latinization of "chief lord" or possibly from information supplied by Albinus from Kent),[14] and it is reproduced from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.[15] While the few details Gildas provides are hard to trace and harder to credit – his is a jeremiad rather than a history – there is no reason not to take his account as a starting point.

Written two centuries after Gildas, Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* stands above every other source. Many complete copies of the *Historia* exist, and Bede's writing is fluent and extensively detailed. No other history of this period provides as much information about the sources from which it was drawn, and none presents a narrative of such sophistication. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* must, however, be read and used with the fullest possible understanding of Bede's purpose for writing it. It is as much a didactic work as is *De Excidio*, seeking through its history of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the subsequent growth of the Roman church in England to instruct,

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[13] Gildas, *De Excidio* (*"The Works of Gildas"*), in J. A. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 310-1.

[14] Bede 48 f. 2. Giles's addition of "Gurthrigern [Vortigern]" as the name of the *superbus tryannus* is not supported in the text.

[15] *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12-13.

through moral example, Ceolwulf of Northumbria "and those over whom divine authority has appointed [him] to rule."[16] It is also heavily biased against the Celtic church for its failure to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons even though it is sympathetic toward individuals within that church (generally, toward those of Irish rather than British origin). Whether that bias comes from Bede's selection of sources or from the lack of sources available to him, it has to be considered. If Christians from, say, Gwynned were active Mercia during Penda's reign, Bede may not have known of them – or, he may have considered their actions of no value since they "would not preach the way of life to the English nation" and would not accept Augustine's authority despite his prophetic threat that it would lead to their deaths.[17]

In all, Bede tells little about Mercia that does not directly relate to its conflicts with Northumbria. While he does say that "King Penda did not forbid the preaching of the Word, even in his own Mercian kingdom, if any wished to hear it," he does not describe any Roman Christian missions to Mercia. The Roman priest who became the first bishop of the Middle Angles and Mercians was one of those first sent to Penda's son Peada upon his conversion.[18] If there was missionary activity by Celtic Christians in Mercia – and it is hard to believe there was not some, given Mercia's long-standing alliance with the British Christian kingdom of Gwynedd, its location hard on the border with the British kingdoms, and, as we shall see, the presence in parts of Mercia's territory of British who were likely Christian – it was not recorded by Bede.

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[16] Bede, 3.

[17] Bede, 139-41.

[18] Bede, 281.

The *Historia Ecclesiastica*'s great benefit, of course, is that it is a carefully documented and seemingly comprehensive view of Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh and early eighth centuries and the process of its conversion to Roman Christianity. That comprehensiveness however, is called into question when Bede's work is compared to that of his contemporaries. Patrick Wormald points out that, unlike Gregory of Tours for the Franks or Paul the Deacon for the Lombards, Bede tells almost nothing about the secular lives of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy or about the religion from which they converted. He says that "conversion for Bede is where the story of the Anglo-Saxons begins and thereafter it is a story of saints, not sinners."[19] Often it seems in Bede that the Celtic-Roman controversy over the date of Easter is more important to Bede than the conversion of pagan Anglo-Saxons, and almost none of the unconverted or apostate kings are given much space or voice in his work, with the notable exception of Penda of Mercia. Given that Bede is writing a history of the English and their relationship with the Church, though, it is not surprising that he displays a "patristically justified refusal to take an interest in the pre-Christian past of his people."[20] We may wish for more, but that refusal is at least consistent with Bede's aims.

Those aims do not render the *Historia Ecclesiastica* any less important to the history of seventh century England and its conversion to Roman Christianity. Any account as detailed as Bede's can provide hints to things peripheral to its main subject, including population, political and social structure, and even everyday life. For instance,

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[19] Patrick Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, BAR 46, ed. Robert T. Farrell (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1978), 59.

[20] Wormald, 68.

Bede was told by Herebald, abbot of the monastery at Tynemouth, that when he was a youth St. Wilfrid, then the bishop of Hexham, healed him after he was injured racing his horse on "a level and dry road" they had come upon while journeying. This single incident provides a wealth of details: monks and laymen traveling together; a bishop giving a young man an expensive gift of a riding horse; priests removed from office for being "slow-witted" and "unable to perform the office of catechism and baptism"; doctors available who can set and bind a fractured skull; even, as implied by the presence of a *viam planam et amplam*, the survival of and continued reliance on Roman roads.[21] Despite Bede's *lacunae* and his silence about many things we may wish he had addressed, we still have to be grateful for, and make use of, his careful and detailed work.

Like the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Historia Brittonum*, long ascribed to Nennius, gives an account that runs from the entry of the Anglo-Saxons into Britain through, and past, their seventh-century conversion to Christianity. It is the first source to name Horst and Hengest as the Saxon mercenary leaders who were given the island of Thanet as their base, and it describes how Hengest brought over sixteen "keels" of warriors to supplement the initial three keels, a creditable expansion of detail from Gildas's account.[22] The *Historia Brittonum* is also a collection of material from other sources, though one certainly less discriminating, less detailed, and shaped with less sophistication than Bede's.

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[21] Bede 465-9; Joel T. Rosenthal, "Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the Material Conditions of Anglo-Saxon Life," *The Journal of British Studies* 19:1 (Autumn, 1979), 14.

[22] Nennius, *British History and the Welsh Annals*, ed. and trans. John Morris (London: Phillimore, 1980), 26.

The account of Anglo-Saxon history given in the *Historia Brittonum* is compelling but problematic. Manuscripts of this work survive only in various states of disorganization, and the work itself includes much material that can most charitably be described as "legendary"[23] (such as its history of the Arthurian Merlin). Its internal dating is frequently garbled, likely because the original author calculated from a source dated from the year of the Passion that he mistakenly thought was using A.D. dating.[24] There may, however, be data in the *Historia Brittonum* that are available nowhere else. John Morris says that the material it collects is likely from Welsh and northern sources and represent, in its account of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of what would become Kent, a tradition from no later than the early seventh century.[25] Hengest, who the *Historia* says was "driven into exile from Germany,"[26] is quite probably a historical as well as a legendary figure, possibly the Hengest named as Hnaef's lieutenant in the "Fight at Finnsburg" fragment and in *Beowulf*.[27] A number of historians dismiss the *Historia Brittonum*, saying that its source and significance are "undemonstrated" and its accounts "unusable" for determining any facts about Anglo-Saxon kingdoms,[28] and it does give

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[23] O'Sullivan, 166.

[24] David N. Dumville, "Some Aspects of the Chronology of the *Historia Brittonum*," *The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 25:4 (May 1974), 442.

[25] John Morris, "Introduction," in Nennius, 4.

[26] Nennius, 26.

[27] As suggested by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, ed. Alan Bliss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983).

[28] David Dumville, "The Origins of Northumbria," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 214-5. Dumville worked for decades on the *Historia Brittonum*, even preparing a critical edition of one version of the text. That he would reach this conclusion after so much work sounds a note of caution – one, however, muted by the use of the *Historia Brittonum* by Nicholas Brooks when writing directly about the origins of Mercia in the same volume.

every appearance of mixing close factual detail with broad invention. It makes more sense, though, to examine "the origin and external witness of each item [in the *Historia Brittonum*] on its own merits."[29] Because it may be the only major insular source to use materials independent of Bede's to give an account of the seventh century, it deserves close consideration.

Alongside these main sources stand others of less detail but still considerable usefulness. Welsh bardic poetry, for example, provides corroborating details about Edwin of Northumbria's campaigns and a background for explaining the conflict between Mercia and the northern kingdom. Edwin besieged Cadwallon, the king of Gwynedd, at Priestholm and drove him from Wales to Ireland c. 630, an event alluded to in the eulogy *Marwnad Cadwallawn*.[30] Penda's battles against Edwin and Oswald in alliance with Cadwallon are also alluded to in elegies to that Welsh king as well.[31] Chronicles and histories from outside the island also provide some dates but little detail, though two fifth-century Gallic chronicles provide likely corroboration for the entry of Hengest and Horst, or at least of a notable Saxon host, into Britain.[32] Finally, there are the genealogies and regnal lists recorded in the centuries after the conversion; those will receive a separate, detailed examination for what they can tell us about Mercia in the next chapter.

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[29] Morris, 2.

[30] D. P. Kirby, "Welsh Bards and the Border," in *Mercian Studies*, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 33.

[31] Kirby, "Welsh Bards," 33-35.

[32] Michael E. Jones and John Casey, "The Gallic Chronicle Restored: A Chronology for the Anglo-Saxon Invasions and the End of Roman Britain," *Britannia* 19 (1998): 379, 393.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle calls for separate consideration, especially as it has fallen into and out of favor as an authoritative source among historians over the past century.[33] It repeats the Hengest and Horst story from the *Historia Brittonum*, but it also adds a detailed account of the entry of the Saxons and others into what would become the East and West Saxon kingdoms.[34] Again, detail brings with it the need for caution, for much of this account mirrors the Hengest/Kent story and contains other elements that might be more folklore than history. Many of the Saxon leaders mentioned in the *Chronicle* – Port, Cerdic, Whitgar – are said to have fought major battles at places named for them.[35] This could well represent a trope related to place name origins, something less literary but of no less doubtful veracity than Bede's record of Pope Gregory's response to seeing the English "angels."[36] The account of the Saxon's arrival in England and their conflict with the British is also substantively repeated in the *Chronicle* with dates nineteen years apart, or "the length of … the separate cycles within the Easter tables of Dionysis."[37] Such dates and details from the *Chronicle* as can be reconciled and compared with other chronicles and sources can be used with confidence; others are

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[33] Joel T. Rosenthal, "A Historiographical Survey: Anglo-Saxon Kings and Kingship since World War II," *The Journal of British Studies* 24, no. 1 (January, 1985), 75-76.

[34] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 12-14.

[35] Barbara Yorke, "The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the Origins of Wessex," in *The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 85-86.

[36] Bede, 133-5. Bede attributes this as a *traditione maiorum*, though Wallace-Hadrill does say that it may nevertheless be creditable; Wallace-Hadrill, 51.

[37] Yorke, "Jutes," 85-86.

better taken as the most general of guides or as "foundation legends" that say more about ninth-century views of origins than about the fifth- and sixth-century realities.[38]

From these sources, it is possible to piece together the following rough but serviceable chronology for the spread of Anglo-Saxon control in England. Though Germanic tribesmen had long been present in Britain, possibly as *federates* of the Roman military,[39] a large number of continental Germanic groups entered the island first in what was to become the kingdom of Kent, hired as mercenaries by whatever British authority remained there, around 452. These mercenaries then attacked their British employers and fought their way eastward and northward. They were stopped by the British around 490-500[40] and forced back from the extremes of their advance, but warfare between the two groups and the Anglo-Saxon push westward and northward resumed about the middle of the sixth century. By the end of that century (see figure 1, page 26), the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the "Heptarchy" were well on their way to formation. There were, however, forming, not fixed, and it is likely that the Angli settled the area that was to become the kingdom of Mercia only during this second phase of the Anglo-Saxon advance. Material evidence can throw some light on this settlement and the development of the kingdoms that Bede says the Augustinian mission found in England.

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[38] Yorke, "Jutes," 84.

[39] Primarily discussed by J.N.L. Myres, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). Peter Salway, however, doubts that material evidence from the late third century that displays a "Germanic" typology can be used by itself to demonstrate the presence of Germanic *foederati*; Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 388 n.2.

[40] O'Sullivan, 177.
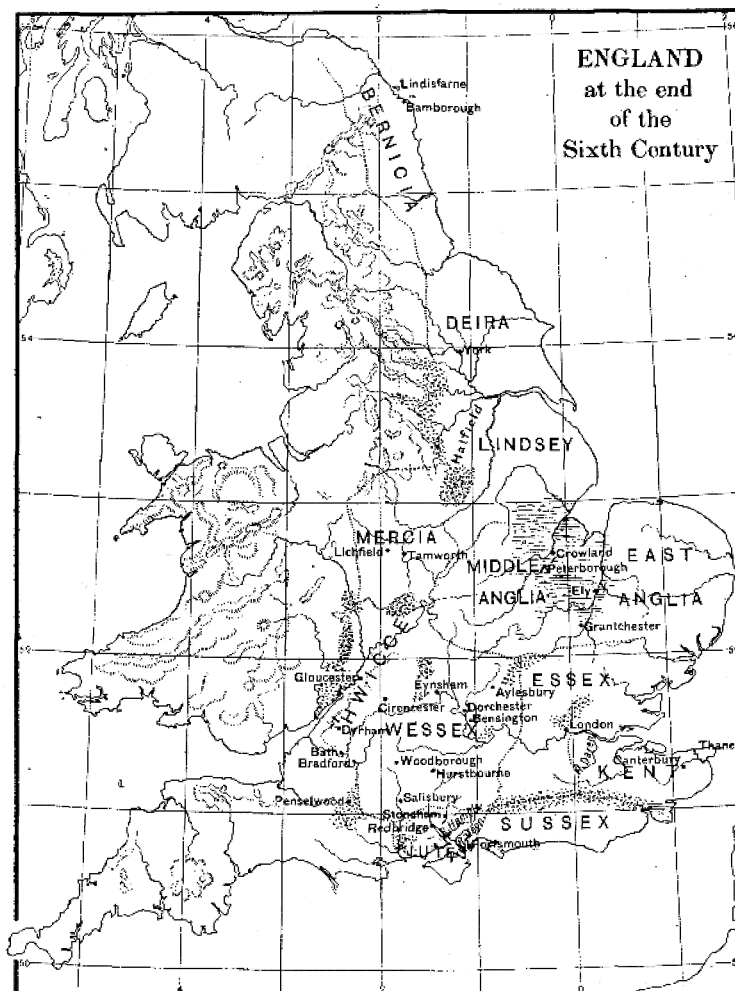
Figure 1: The Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms c. 600. It is important to understand this map as indicating areas rather than territorial boundaries. Adapted from H. M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1907), facing page 11.

Material Evidence for the Sub-Roman and Anglo-Saxon Periods

Just as historiography has its fashions of interpretation, so to does archaeology. The

height of the Germanist archaeological interpretation of Anglo-Saxon origins and culture

coincided with Leeds's assumptions, noted above, that nothing Roman remained in

England after the entry of the Saxons and Angles. It was not until the 1960s, and the rise of a "New Archaeology" that stressed describing social systems over identifying and dating artifacts, that the focus in Anglo-Saxon archaeology shifted away from that of describing material evidence and matching it with documentary sources to that of describing social structure and societal change.[41] As that focus has shifted, many more types of evidence are now available, including those of patterns of settlement, of distribution and flow of goods and materials, and of material remains in assemblage rather than in isolation. This evidence permits a more nuanced picture of what these Germanic peoples would have found upon their entry to Britain and how they interacted with the cultures they found there. In fact, material evidence carefully employed makes possible a more accurate interpretation of the documentary sources through the time of Gildas and even to that of Bede.

Archaeological data can tell us much more about the *adventus* than can documents alone; it may even be able to correct ideas about how suddenly this change from Britain to England occurred. It is not surprising that material evidence records changes in Britain during the fifth century, by the middle of which "mass-produced vessels ceased to be made in the British isles [… and] there were not enough coins to sustain the circulation of an official recognized currency."[42] However, the economic decline for which those things give evidence can be seen in the archaeological record by the end of the fourth century, when Britain was still Roman. Britain was already less urban by the time the Anglo-

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[41] C. J. Arnold, *An Archaeology of the Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, new ed. (London: Routledge 1997), 14.

[42] David A. Hinton, "The Fifth and Sixth Centuries: Reorganization Among the Ruins," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 53.

Saxons came. Richard Reece says that by the fourth century Roman landowners had moved from the cities to "worthy, solid little establishments, which occupy the best areas for farming" and left the economic and social life of towns to decline.[43] Construction of new public buildings had almost ceased by the end of the third century, and after that typically only city walls and other defensive structures were repaired.[44] Some argue that there was a rapid collapse of both town and rural life at the end of the fourth century,[45] and Richard Reece goes so far as to claim that stratigraphic evidence shows that towns could not have substantially survived until the end of that century.[46] However, sites such as Mucking in Essex and within the Saxon Shore fort in Hampshire remained continuously occupied until the seventh century,[47] villas "appear to have met no violent end but [instead] to have undergone gradual decay," and many larger and smaller towns "[reveal] the survival of active life well into the fifth century."[48] The Anglo-Saxons were not the prime cause of the abandonment of Roman cities in Britain, but neither did they enter to find urban life completely gone.

Because Christianity – at least, the kind of Christianity that can influence kings through its wealth and power – was an urban phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge that the evidence shows that some urban life survived the entry of the

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[43] Richard Reece, "Town and Country: The End of Roman Britain," *World Archaeology: Classical Archaeology* 12, no. 1 (June, 1980): 87.

[44] Nicholas Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* (London: Seaby, 1992), 55-56.

[45] Richard Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 16.

[46] Reece, "Town and Country," 81.

[47] Hodges, 26.

[48] Sheppard Frere, *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 366-8.

Anglo-Saxons and would have been part of their early experience of Britain. That survival, however, was not a survival of the same kind of life as had been known there before. Excavations at Wroxeter show that although the town's Roman basilica remained in use as late as the mid-sixth century, its porticoes were closed off by the end of the fifth, its stone flooring was removed, and its baths were left to decay as early as the fourth. There is even an undisturbed mid-fourth century coin horde in one apparently unused and unrenovated corner of the building.[49] The Roman structure was found after careful excavation to have sheltered a group of timber-framed buildings – possibly, Anglo-Saxon ones – on a base of debris recycled from earlier Roman building, and similar timber-framed structures have been found southwest of the Roman baths at Canterbury.[50] Throughout the island are examples of sub-Roman and early Anglo-Saxon re-use of Roman urban sites for different purposes, possibly (as David Hinton proposes) "as centers for the collection of agricultural products" rather than as inhabited towns. He says that "a function of this sort … could have lasted only so long as there was an authority which could enforce the collection of produce, and so it is symptomatic of the changing nature of authority that there is no sign of storage and processing after the end of the fifth century."[51] This would mean not only that some British authority remained in the island after the Anglo-Saxons entered but also that the Anglo-Saxons either did not bring with them, or did not maintain for long, structures of authority that made such collection and

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[49] Roger White and Philip Barker, *Wroxeter: Life and Death of a Roman City* (Stroud, UK: Tempus, 1998), 18-21.

[50] Higham, *Rome*, 104.

[51] Hinton, 60.
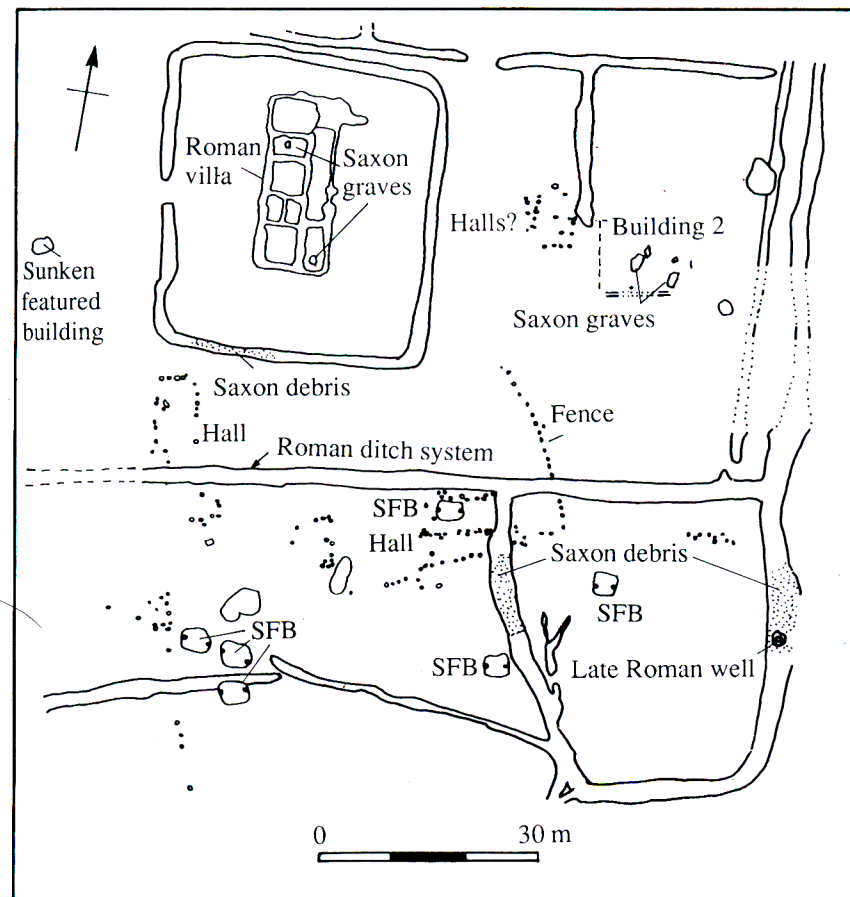
Figure 2: Barton Court Farm – the re-use of Roman sites. From Higham, *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, p. 117. (Originally adapted from D. Miles, *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon: an investigation of late Neolithic, Iron Age, Romano-British and Saxon settlements.* London, 1986.)

distribution of grain on the scale once done possible. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of 600 C.E. were not brought to the island in 450 C.E. but developed *in situ*.

This reuse and gradual abandonment of sites in both towns and villae illustrates a gradual change in settlement that began in the fourth century and continued through the fifth. It must be stressed, though, that Anglo-Saxon settlements are not really rehabilitations of Romano-British ones, at least not in the sense of rebuilding or re-using recently abandoned sites along the same lines as before. Most of these new settlements were established "on sites which had not been previously occupied, … [though] this is

not to say that the land on which they arose was not, originally at least, closely associated with Roman towns or estates."[52] Previously used sites would likely have been preferred if they provided access to resources, but that previous use could have ended years before. Dendrochronological evidence indicates that, though some land cultivated during the early Roman period remained under cultivation in the Sub-Roman period, much was already falling out of cultivation by the end of the fourth century. Pollen samples from Derbyshire, which was part of northern Mercia according to the Tribal Hidage,[53] indicate reforestation at the end of the Roman period to "the extent of pre-Iron Age levels."[54] Such land would still have been preferred, for it would be easier to clear land that had recently fallen out of cultivation than land never before cleared.

Neither did new settlements, even those that used the remains of previous ones, have to reproduce what had come before. The villa at Barton Court Farm (figure 1.2, previous page) was demolished after c. 370, but activity continued in and around the remains of its buildings into the sixth century. That activity, though, is that of a different culture using the same land area,[55] one practicing self-sufficient mixed farming and the production of crafts. In the development of the new sites such as at West Stow, which grew from overlapping small landholdings (some likely reusing Roman boundary markers and settlement features like at Barton Court Farm), can be seen the first stage of the development of "a community of networked families" rather than the "consumer or

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[52] Philip Rahtz, "Buildings and rural settlement," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. David M. Wilson (London: Methuen, 1976), 58.

[53] Cyril Hart, "The Kingdom of Mercia," in *Mercian Studies*, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 53.

[54] Petra Dark, "Pollen Evidence for the Environment of Roman Britain" *Britannia* 30 (1999): 259.

[55] Hinton, 65-66.

producer establishments of the late Roman period."[56] It was from these communities that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, in time, developed.

"Reuse of old places for new purposes" is a common theme in recent archaeological work in sub-Roman Britain and early Anglo-Saxon England, and one that sets the context for the seventh-century conversion of Mercia. That context is one of the continuing development, beginning in the fifth century, in the areas of mainly rural Romano-British settlement of an Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition that was both distinct and malleable, one both self-identified and open to influence. That development had not stopped by the beginning of the seventh century, especially not in an area like Mercia that the Anglo-Saxons had entered later than those areas of England to the east and south, but remained in process. The context for Mercia is one for late and still-active settlement; it is the context of the borderland.

At the core of this idea of Mercia as a borderland lie two basic assumptions. First, to stress the point made before, the Anglo-Saxons to whom Gregory sent the Augustinian mission of conversion were not merely settled Germanic tribesmen with static Germanic institutions who had erased all trace of previous cultures by their coming and settling in England. They were instead a distinct people in some way shaped by a Romano-British as well as a continental Germanic cultural history. The British were certainly their enemies, but the landscape in which the Anglo-Saxons settled had its own identifiable British and Roman identity. Though British settlement sites were abandoned throughout the fifth century, "population collapse and replacement by immigration is an inadequate explanation" for that abandonment; to instead say that "villas, forts, and towns were

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[56] Martin O. H. Carver, "Exploring, Explaining, Imagining: Anglo-Saxon Archaeology 1998," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, 32-33.

inappropriate to the direction of social and economic change in the early post-Roman era" provides a much more profitable context for understanding the developments of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.[57] Again, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, especially those on the border like Mercia, were inheritors of long-term change in settlement and long-term development of culture.

The second assumption is that England was always open to influence from cultures both from within and from without. This assumption is critical for understanding the seventh-century period of conversion, for the forces that shaped that conversion were not just pagan and Christian but also (Celtic) British, Irish, Roman, Frankish, and Anglo-Saxon. The context for conversion in England, like the context for changes in settlement patterns, burial practices, and the typology of material remains, is that of development than one of replacement. There is evidence for this kind of development of a distinct cultural tradition from various sources in the timber-framed structures built in the fifth and sixth centuries. These open halls lack freestanding roof supports and often incorporate end and other interior partitions, both of which are features of Romano-British vernacular timber architecture. They also, however, have the centrally positioned doors and wattle-cored wall panels of continental Germanic buildings of the same size.[58] These structures represent a new tradition of building practice that developed from two distinct cultural elements. This admixture of different cultural practices is also found in burials of the early Anglo-Saxon period. These show variety both by region and within cemetery sites, with cremation burials (already starting to become less common on the

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[57] Higham, *Rome*, 113-5.

[58] Simon James, Anne Marshall and Martin Millett, "An Early Medieval Building Tradition," in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, 97-101.

Continent during this period) prevalent only in eastern England, inhumation burials that could be either Anglo-Saxon or Late Roman elsewhere, and grave goods that could as easily be part of native British traditions as of new Anglo-Saxon ones.[59] This variation and admixture again can be understood not as "a result of a change in the population so much as a change in material culture and customs,"[60] and those changes are best understood as the development of a distinct Anglo-Saxon culture from different influences.

As Anglo-Saxon culture became more distinct, it also began to show regional differences. Specific styles of grave goods from the fifth and sixth centuries are often not good markers of the identity of the peoples who deposited them because some items and deposition practices were common among different groups. Examples of this include penannular brooches that were likely made by British craftsmen but were deposited in graves in a manner characteristic of the Germanic immigrants.[61] However, as the sixth century advanced, there is increasing evidence of grave-good assemblages being used to represent distinct "Anglian" and "Saxon" identities. Stronger regional differences in female jewelry assemblages have been found that some interpret to represent a growing "notion of *Tracht* or deliberately constructed national costume."[62] Examples of artifacts that seem to indicate distinct cultural identifies have been found in sixth-century cemeteries in Middle and East Anglia, where specific types and combinations of types of

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[59] Arnold, 31.

[60] Arnold, 31.

[61] Hinton, 72.

[62] Helen Geake, *The Use of Grave-Goods in Conversion-Period England, c.600-c.850* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1997), 107.

dress fasteners distinguished graves of three distinct regions.[63] Grave goods signify

cultural status and identity, and both changes in assemblage and introduction of new

grave goods can therefore show the development of cultural distinctions.

While material evidence most often cannot provide exact dating or exact identities

of peoples, it can give an idea of chronology and period that can then be used to

supplement, support, and in some cases correct documentary evidence. For example,

Jutish remains in Wessex[64] throw doubt on *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s claim that

Saxons founded this area and support instead the conjecture that the Saxons later

conquered this area.[65] Wheel-made Late Roman red-slip "A" ware seems to have been

imported into Wales, including into the border region that was later to be under Mercian

control, from the late fifth to the mid-sixth centuries, or "the [British] period of peace and

prosperity noted by Gildas,"[66] and these ceramics seem never to have spread into areas

not under British control.[67] This early sixth-century time of peace may even be seen in the

deposition of weapons in graves. Arnold says that "the greatest incidence of weapon

burials occurs in the middle of the sixth century when recorded battles were at their

lowest" and notes that the weapon combinations deposited were at times ones that would

not be found used in battle gear. This may represent an increased need to display a man's

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[63] Genevieve Fisher, "Style and Sociopolitical Organization: A Preliminary Study from Early Anglo-Saxon England," in *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland*, ed. Stephen T. Driscoll and Margaret R. Nieke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1988), 143.

[64] J. N. L. Myres, *The English Settlements*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 148.

[65] Yorke, "Jutes," 84.

[66] Myfanwy Lloyd Jones, *Society and Settlement in Wales and the Marches 500 B.C. to A.D. 1100*, BAR British Series 121 part ii (Oxford: British Archaeological Records, 1984), 252.

[67] Hinton, 71.

status as warrior during periods of peace.[68] Grave goods can indicate both events in a

society, such as times of war and peace, and influences on that society from without and

within.

Influence upon Anglo-Saxon culture from the outside can be seen in far more than

the presence of Celtic-style penannular brooches in graves. It can be traced and verified

through changes in the technology, materials, and design of locally produced artifacts as

well. Kentish craftsmen in the last quarter of the sixth century adopted brooch designs

that employed filigree and *cloisonné* work on a solid gold base. Though the technique of

cloisonné was known (though rare) in Kent for the fifty years before that, it and filigree

were, significantly, "the preferred [styles] of the Frankish elite."[69] Given that Æthelberht

of Kent married Bertha, the daughter of King Charibert of Paris, c. 575-581,[70] the

adoption of Frankish brooches during the same time indicates both an evident desire

among the elite to adopt Frankish styles and access to the gold needed to produce these

styles. Gold was imported from the Continent and exchanged in England, as is shown by

sixth and seventh-century graves containing balance weights that correlate with the

weight-standard of Byzantine and Merovingian tremisses.[71] Other imported materials

included amber and amethyst beads, glassware, and cowrie shells. In all cases but one,

though, there was "inequal access to [imported] groups, the quantities falling off rapidly

beyond the point of greatest consumption." The exception to this – Kent – by the end of

the sixth century "maintained a near monopoly over [imported] goods" and an overseas

[68] Arnold, 215.

[69] Arnold, 68.

[70] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 66.

[71] Arnold, 112.

network "so strong that Kent might have been viewed as part of the Continent at this time."[72] It is not surprising that Kent was also the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom to receive Roman Christian missionaries; for Kent, the importation of goods, and of ideas, from the Continent may have been a long tradition.

There is one last important thing to note before leaving this examination of material evidence. Anglo-Saxon grave goods changed during the seventh century, the century of conversion, in a surprising way. As a rule, Christians, and certainly those Christians buried in cemeteries associated with churches, did not deposit grave goods. Therefore, Christian graves are commonly assumed to be those that lack the assemblage of goods, and those graves prevailed in England from the early eighth century onward. During the seventh century, however, when both Roman Christianity and Christianity brought by Celtic missionaries of Irish origin was spreading throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the types of goods found in non-Christian graves changed. The always-present scatter of "heirloom" Roman goods were joined by new items, such as spiral-headed pins, melon beads, bronze or silver spoons, and others items that display Roman influence but were likely of English manufacture. Moreover, these were frequently not items of the then-contemporary, "Byzantine" Roman style, but instead ones fashioned after Roman artifacts from fourth century Britain.[73] Helen Geake, who made an extensive survey of seventh-century grave goods, says that this striking change occurred across England, likely in areas that were not yet converted as well as those that were. Moreover, she says, this change marks a "classical revival" sparked by the presence of Roman Christian

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[72] Arnold, 147.

[73] Geake, 120-1.

missionaries and the process of conversion, but it was directly connected with changes in secular power rather than religious affiliation. These changes came about either through Anglo-Saxon rulers styling themselves as "legitimate successors to the Roman state machinery [by which] they could centralise, tax and control with greater ease," or through (or simultaneously with) the encouragement of "the property-owning population as a whole to see itself as inheriting the mantle of Rome, and therefore needing rulers as part of the whole 'civilizing package.'" The result of that "civilizing" package, from the eighth century onward, was a unification of cultural identity into one no longer Anglian or Saxon but instead English.[74] Just what this "Romanization" of even non-Christian Anglo-Saxons might show about the concerns of elite Anglo-Saxons (the ones who had these goods deposited) and the relationship of those concerns to conversion will be explored in the last chapter.

That early eighth-century end of the continuum of grave-goods in England returns us to our main points. England was certainly open to influence from outside and within and its cultures were open as well to a continued shaping of their identity. They remained, however, distinctly Anglo-Saxon cultures, ones that drew upon both what their ancestors brought to the island and what they found there to forge their cultural identities. They must have, despite the loss of Roman urban centers and end of production farming, produced enough of a surplus to trade overseas – neither amber from the Baltic nor amethyst from Europe would have been traded for English air. Trade and distribution, however, require some form of organized power and authority. Just as the Anglo-Saxons shaped a distinct cultural identity that adapted under the influence of the Roman Christian

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[74] Geake, 133.

conversion, they also shaped the political structures that were the targets and, in Higham's assessment, the greatest beneficiaries of that conversion.

Kings and kingdoms were not brought to England; they grew up there. With this background and introduction to the documents, materials, and concerns that provide the basis for investigation, we turn next to those kings and kingdoms and how they, and especially Mercia, developed.

CHAPTER 2: KINGS AND PRIESTS

> Edwin had reigned most gloriously over the English and the British race
> for seventeen years, for six of which, as we have said, he was also a
> soldier of Christ, when Cædwalla, king of the Britons, rebelled against
> him. He was supported by Penda, a most energetic member of the royal
> house of Mercia, who from that date ruled over that nation for twenty-two
> years with varying success.[1]

Bede devotes more space to Penda of Mercia (dates likely 626-35 and 642-654, as discussed below) and his activities than he does to any other pagan Anglo-Saxon king, but he still does not say much about him. Even with what little Bede says, though, it is clear that the stubbornly pagan Penda's power, at least on the battlefield, throughout the second quarter of the seventh century was unchallenged. Penda was the scourge of the pagan West Saxons as well as of the Christian kings of Northumbria and East Anglia and a military ally of Cadwallon (d. 635), the Celtic Christian king of Gwynedd. He had dynastic connections to other kingdoms as well; Edwin of Northumbria's (616-632) first wife Cwenburh was the daughter of Ceorl, the king of Mercia who ruled before Penda's father Pybba. Bede even ascribes to the *vir strenuissimus* Penda a kind of rough integrity about religious matters, saying that the Mercian king called those who, "after they had accepted the Christian faith, were clearly lacking in good works… despicable and wretched creatures who scorned to obey the God in whom they believed."[2] Though this anecdote may reveal Bede the moralist better than it does Bede the historian, it nevertheless does appear that Penda did not interfere in the conversion and baptism of his

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[1] Bede, 203.

[2] Bede, 281.

son Peada, who he had set up as king of the Middle Angles and who would succeed him as the king of Mercia. Penda, by Bede's account, did not actively resist the conversion of Mercia; it looks more like there was no organized attempt to bring Christ to Mercia while Penda lived.

However, Bede likely fails either to tell or to see the whole story. The conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia deserves close consideration not only because one pagan king may have resisted Christianity, but also because that resistance to, or that lack of opportunity for, conversion raises questions about why other kings sought and welcomed Christianity. Mercia in the seventh century was bordered by Christian kingdoms to its north and west, and to its east by kingdoms already converted or in the process of converting. If, as Nicholas Higham claims, it was "a fundamental sylloge between royal and episcopal interests" that formed "the driving force behind the English adoption of, and adaptation to, Christianity,"[3] then it would appear that the interests of the Mercian kingdom in the first half of the seventh century were different than those of its neighbors. Was Mercia at that time a different kind of kingdom that was Kent, Northumbria, or Gwynedd, and one whose ruler had different needs that were not compatible with Christianity?

Mercia may have been different – or, the assertion that Christianity offered kings a power that they easily recognized and sought may itself be incomplete. To determine the truth of those assumptions, though, we must be much more exact in our assessment of Mercia's socio-political structure. As noted before, the Anglo-Saxons do not appear to

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[3] Nicholas J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 10.

have entered Britain as peoples ruled by kings. Instead, kings and kingdoms developed through the consolidation of power and identity and through interaction among a number of polities, both Anglo-Saxon and British, that formed over the course of the century and half before Bede begins his detailed account of the conversion of the English people through the conversion of their kings. To understand Mercia during the time of conversion, I will consider in this chapter its specific origin, its rulers, and its connections with the kingdoms around it. I will also look at the processes through which kingship and kingdoms developed and describe the forms they took in Anglo-Saxon society. Then I will describe the "Christianities" present in England along with what can be determined of Anglo-Saxon pagan practices and beliefs. This social, political, and religious framework will allow me in the subsequent chapter to evaluate the claim that it was the "epsicopal interests" of Roman and Celtic Christian missionaries that kings like Edwin and Oswiu found appealing and that Penda of Mercia rejected, as well as to propose what other influences shaped the conversion of Mercia.

Locating Mercia

At least as early a Chadwick's major study on the origin of Anglo-Saxon England,[4] it has been accepted that the name "Mercia" (from the Anglo-Saxon *Mierce*, Latin *Mercii*) means "borderers" or "dwellers on the march."[5] This most likely reflects the kingdom's location between the Anglian English to its east and the Celtic British to its

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[4] H. Munro Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 7.

[5] Nicholas Brooks, "The Formation of the Mercian Kingdom," in *The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 160.

west, but to determine a more exact location we must examine both the written and material evidence.

The only sources that hint at where seventh-century Mercia lay are Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the list now known as the Tribal Hidage, the Anglo-Saxon version of which was copied into the Harleian MS 3271 in 1032.[6] Both Bede and the compiler of the Tribal Hidage measure area according to "hides," or parcels of land sufficient to supply the needs of a household,[7] and both provide figures and other details that give some idea of the size and location of Mercia. Bede writes that Oswiu, after defeating Penda in 654, gave Penda's son Peada (654-657) control of the 5,000 hides of "kingdom of Southern Mercia," which was separated from the 7,000-hide "Northern Mercia" by the river Trent.[8] The Tribal Hidage, however, gives the size of the *Myrcna landes* – the "original land" of the Mercian – as 30,000 hides.

Right away it is clear that either "hide" had a meaning that varied by as much as 250% or these two writers had different ideas of what comprised the kingdom of Mercia. The first of these options seems too far-fetched. Even if "hide" denoted a quantity of measurement that is "consistently fiscal not spatial"[9] and therefore changed according to time and place, this is too great a difference to be accepted if "hide" were to have any meaning either for us or for those who used the term. Surely, Bede and those who

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[6] J. Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage [1912]," *The English Historical Review* 27, no. 18 (October, 1912), 625.

[7] Bede, 72 n. 2.

[8] Bede, 295.

[9] Wendy Davies and Hay Vierck, "The Contexts of Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns," *Frühmittelalterlihe Studien 8* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 229.

compiled the Tribal Hidage were all taught to read and write by the Church, likely from the same books and by the same methods. To claim, as Wendy Davies does, that Bede's and the Tribal Hidage's differences reflect what is "simply a different system of values"[10] therefore makes little sense; that claim would almost assume that literate Anglo-Saxons had no concept of consistent measurement.

Instead, this discrepancy is much more likely to reflect differences in both time and the sources these documents used. Bede used, according to Nicholas Brooks, no Mercian sources or correspondents that we can now identify,[11] so the Tribal Hidage may, if it is a Mercian document, reflect information Bede lacked. Also, Bede is describing Mercia following its defeat by Oswiu, a point at which the kingdom was apparently divided. If Bede was using Northumbrian rather than Mercian sources to arrive at the 12,000-hide figure, then those sources might well have been exact only for this brief period rather than for the time before and after, when Mercia was not under Northumbrian control. As we shall encounter again, the sources for Mercia's early history are very often those of its enemies rather than its own; in this case, it is reasonable to assume that the Tribal Hidage offers better information than does the Northumbrian Bede.

Most scholars think that the Tribal Hidage was created as a tool for determining the assessment of levy – as "a tribute-taker's survey"[12] – and was compiled as early as the middle of the seventh century. J. Brownbill proposed early in the twentieth century that

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[10] Davies and Vierck, 229

[11] Brooks, 159.

[12] H.R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), 45, quoted in Davies and Vierck, 225.

the document was created at least as early as the reign of Wulfhere (658-673)[13] if not as early as the reign of Penda.[14] Not everyone agrees with this; Cyril Hart would date it much later, during the reign of Offa (757-796).[15] As Wendy Davies points out, though, internal evidence indicates a much earlier date; for example, the kingdom of Elmet, which the Hidage assesses at 600 hides, could not have been consider a Mercian dependency after 690 when it came under the control of Northumbria.[16] Her conclusion is that the Tribal Hidage was complied between 670 and 690.

This conclusion does depend on the assumption that this document was complied in Mercia for the use of a Mercian ruler. Nicholas Brooks flatly denies that this could be so, saying that "an early medieval king did not impose tribute on his own kingdom." He says that the Tribal Hidage may instead be a Northumbrian assessment, for the purpose of levy, of the land-wealth of Mercia and the other kingdoms over which Northumbria briefly held dominance in the middle of the seventh century.[17] This, however, would mean that the 30,000-hide assessment of the "original Mercia" was made during the three-year period of Oswiu's dominance of Mercia through his son-in-law Peada – a period for which the ever-careful Bede, writing less than three-quarters of a century later, found a much smaller assessment of 12,000 hides. Also, to say that Anglo-Saxon kings "did not impose tribute" on those they ruled ignores the fact that these kings relied upon

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[13] J. Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage [1925]," *The English Historical Review* 40, no. 160 (October, 1925), 498-499.

[14] Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage [1925]," 497.

[15] Hart, 44.

[16] Davies and Vierck, 226-7.

[17] Brooks, 159.

both food renders and in cattle tribute.[18] Even though the Tribal Hidage represents a much

more formal record – one made possible by the literacy brought by Christianity – the

concept of assessing tribute was certainly not news. So, based on Brownbill's analysis,

which stresses the absence in this document of any assessment for Northumbria (which

was not under Mercian control in the mid-seventh century), the coherently geographical

arrangement for the assessment of territories that follow the initial assessment of Mercia

proper, and the common-sense assertion that "an enumeration of English districts which

begins with Mercia can only be of Mercian authorship,"[19] his conclusion that the Tribal

Hidage is a Mercian document stands, and Wulfhere is the one most likely to have

commissioned it.

Certainly, a document like the Tribal Hidage could have been used for many

purposes, hence, likely, its survival. Does it, however, represent an assessment of

geographic territories, or an assessment of peoples? May it, by listing those who lived

around Mercia and whose locations can be conjectured through place-name studies and

comparison with other documents, permit the mapping of the location of Mercia to an

area as exact as, in Brook's claim, "much of the modern counties of Staffordshire,

Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire together with south Derbyshire and northern

Warwickshire"?[20] Almost surely not, for fixed territorial and political boundaries were

not concepts Anglo-Saxon kings or their subjects likely would have recognized. As we

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[18] Thomas Charles Edwards, "Early Medieval Kingship in the British Isles," in *The Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (London: Leicester University Press, 1989), 30-31.

[19] Brownbill, "The Tribal Hidage [1912]," 629-30; Hart, 44.

[20] Brooks, 161.

saw earlier, these kingdoms formed over at least a century and a half after the end of

direct Roman authority in Britain, and that process of formation did not end when

Augustine landed in Kent. The Tribal Hidage, which lists not only the kingdoms

mentioned by Bede but also a number of smaller groups, is not a surveyor's report of the

boundaries between these kingdoms. It is instead a document that highlights the process

of the formation and coalescence of kingdoms, one in which it was "groups and

associations of people [formed] the raw material of early political development, not the

carving up of territory."[21] Understanding this process, though the example of how

Hwicce, the sub-kingdom annexed to Mercia by Penda, developed, is important for

understanding how Mercia developed and what groups formed its identity.

Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Settlement and Consolidation

It is likely that the Anglo-Saxons who, in the early to mid-sixth century, settled in

the Midlands area that became Mercia did so in small groups. Though no settlement

studies available focus on the heartland of Mercia itself, examples of the ways in which

settlement may have occurred can be found in areas directly to the southwest and west,

areas of likely Anglian settlement that came under Mercian dominance during the seventh

century.

One area with clear examples is the kingdom of Hwicce, which Frank Stenton says

that Penda created by bringing "the Angles and Saxons of the middle and lower Severn

under a single lordship" after defeating by defeating Cyngelis of Wessex in 628 at

[21] Davies and Vierck, 224.

Cirencester.[22] Surveying the sixth-century settlement of the Severn Basin, which formed Hwicce, Katherine Pretty finds evidence for small and scattered Anglo-Saxon settlement in the Cotswolds to the west and south of the area, near the Roman town of Cirencester. These settlements put Anglo-Saxon and Celtic peoples in close proximity; Pretty says the surviving Celtic authority in the area may have agreed to them because the town's exposure to the English advance up the Thames Valley and through Oxfordshire made accommodation safer than resistance.[23]

Both Anglo-Saxon and Celtic-style sixth-century burials are found in this part of the Severn Basin, indicating interaction between and possibly even "admixture" of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic cultures in this area. Pretty cautions, though, that the presence of Anglo-Saxon goods in Celtic-style inhumation graves does not necessarily mean a mixture of cultures, for "it is probable that the late-Roman population was forced to acquire and use Anglo-Saxon objects because they were the only ones on the market."[24] This is an example again of how grave goods may not signify actual peoples or ideology even though the do show influences. Still, this possible cultural admixture and the early seventh-century conflict over this territory between the two English groups involved in its settlement (the West Saxons and the Anglian Mercians) without interference from any identified Celtic groups strongly suggests that whatever British authority remained had

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[22] Frank M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 45.

[23] Kate [Katherine Bridget] Pretty, "The Welsh Border and the Severn and Avon Valleys in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D.: An Archaeological Survey," (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1975), 73.

[24] Pretty, 101-2.

been subsumed or pushed it westward by the Anglo-Saxons within a century of their settlement.

During the sixth century, then, the Angles moved into the areas of the Midlands where British authority could not effectively resist their advance. Pretty finds a much higher concentration of Anglo-Saxon settlement in the Avon River valley in the west and north of Severn Basin, where she says the "the lack of urban and villa development … prevented any organized resistance to the Anglo-Saxon colonists"[25] such as may have been offered by the towns of Gloucester and Bath (around which there are no sixth-century Anglo-Saxon graves).[26] She says that the Anglo-Saxon archaeological material from the sixth century indicates that these settlers on the upper Avon, likely of "the second or third island-born generation" and thus able to identify the best agricultural land, remained in contact with their Anglian homelands on the Trent and in Cambridgeshire as is demonstrated by the continuity of style between the artifacts found in these areas.[27] The picture given, then, is of the Angles moving in groups south and westward from the their holdings in the east Midlands and settling in those areas not strong enough to resist them.

Pretty also finds a few rich sixth-century Anglo-Saxon graves in the Avon Valley that indicate the presence of social hierarchy and reinforce the likelihood that these settlements had leaders of higher rank. She says, however, that these settlers "probably did not belong to an established kingdom but to scattered groups of people who owed

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[25] Pretty, 99.

[26] Pretty, 72-73.

[27] Pretty, 100.

authority to a local chief."[28] The area that in the seventh century came under Mercian control was not colonized in the sixth century by a Mercian kingdom, for "there is no evidence that the colonisation [of the Avon Valley] was an ordered migration under a single authority."[29]

This conclusion matches what can be seen when assessing evidence for the settlement of other parts of England, which progressed through the establishment of small "homelands" by discrete groups that later, through growth and through identification with a locale, developed into kingdoms. Steven Bassett says that the *provinciae* and *regiones* given in early sources are these smaller groups in the process of coalescence. Some survived long enough to be recorded in the Tribal Hidage; others, like the probable *regio* of the Stoppingas, can be seen in the boundaries of the minister parish associated with the monastic church for which a senior member of the Hwiccian royal family gave the Stoppingas land.[30] These families often gave their names to the area over which they held authority, and those who rose the highest and brought the most area under their control likely became the royal dynasty. They are the ones whose names were attached to locations like Rodings area of Essex,[31] places like Ickleton in Worcestershire and Warwickshire that bears the names of the recorded founder of Mercian Iclinga dynasty,

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[28] Pretty, 94.

[29] Pretty, 94.

[30] Steven Bassett, "In Search of the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms," *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 18.

[31] Bassett, 21-22.

and places like Pendiford, which is named for the first famous member of the dynasty, Penda.[32]

Names showing a place's identification with a people or a ruler were attached to settlements and features throughout England. As a rule, Anglo-Saxon settlement areas are equivalent to tribal areas because "kingdoms and tribes clearly settled within strong natural confines,"[33] though those confines may have been as loosely defined as "in the fens" or "in the woodlands."[34] It is likely, therefore, that settlements that succeeded were not only those on good agricultural land but also those within an easily identified territory. Some of the markers for that identification were man-made; the graves in which much of the sixth and seventh-century archaeological record is found may have been sited in part to serve as boundary markers delimiting a tribe's territory. Desmond Bonney says that, in Wessex and elsewhere where "pagan Saxons … chose to settle in areas which can be shown to have had a substantial rural population in the Romano-British period," a significant number of those settlers' burials lie on what later became parish and estate boundaries. In these areas, like in the Severn Basin of Hwicce, "the countryside had long been farmed and managed and was essentially man-made, not just a scatter of cultivated islands in a sea of waste. In these conditions clearly defined and well understood boundaries were not only possible but highly desirable."[35] This is the picture that the Tribal Hidage gives: kingdoms, sub-kingdoms, and tribal territories, all within

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[32] Brooks, 164.

[33] Davies and Vierck, 281.

[34] Davies and Vierck, 284.

[35] Desmond Bonney, "Early Boundaries and Estates in Southern England," *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change*, ed. P. H. Sawyer (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), 44-46.

named and located, though not precisely bordered, areas, described by and arranged

according to their location and relative size around the central kingdom of Mercia.
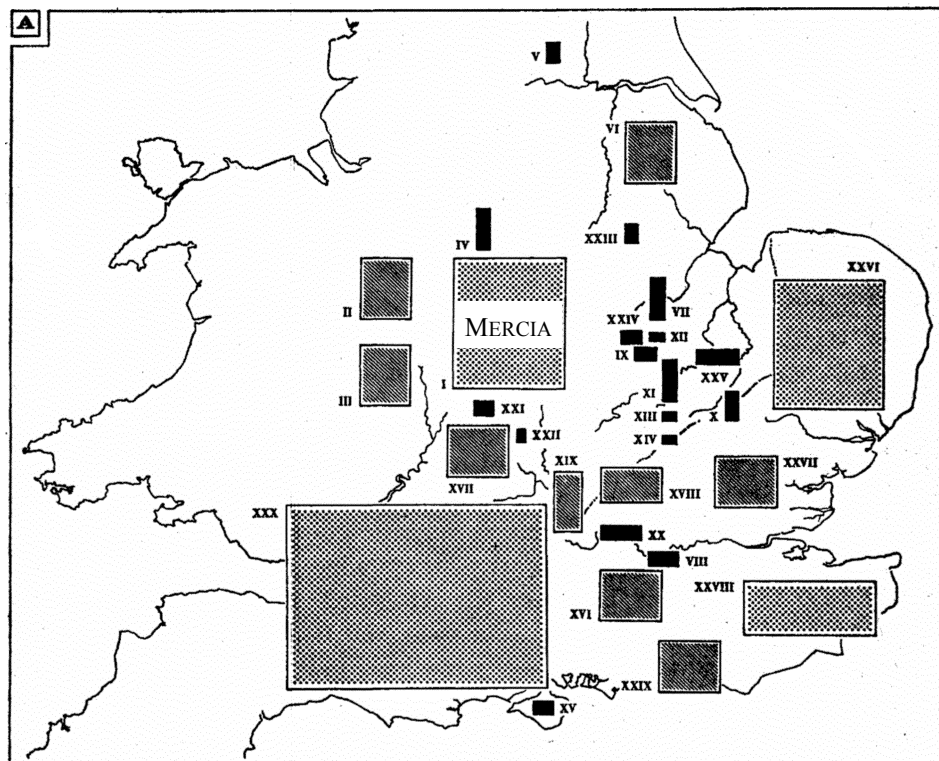
Figure 3.The likely location and relative size of Mercia and the other areas
listed in the Tribal Hidage. Adapted from Wendy Davies and Hay Vierck,
"The Contexts of Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns,"
Frühmittelalterlihe Studien 8 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 235.

It is easy to see how distinct areas such as the Hwicce could become subordinate to

a larger one like Mercia through conquest, in response to political influence, and through

the intermarriage of what became royal families. (How intermarriage affected the

acceptance of Christianity and how Mercia may have differed from other kingdoms in

this respect will be explored in the next chapter.) It is also easy to see how, over time,

these defined areas became kingdoms as the rulers of the largest and most influential

tribal areas drew power and influence to themselves and their families.

Kingship was almost certainly known to the Anglo-Saxons who entered Britain, both as part of their own culture (as attested by Tacitus) or by the example of British *tyranni* such as Vortigern. It is important to remember, though, that "the difference between the mediaeval king and the head of a smaller community, like that between the *rex* and the *princeps* of Tacitus, was one of degree rather than of kind."[36] Royal houses would have then developed through "increasingly hierarchical leadership" within families such as the Iclingas and the Stoppingas as settlements grew and "resources became the object of determined competition.[37] Authority would have developed over time and according to the power and influence of the individual community and the family who ruled it, something that is witnessed in the documentary sources by the number of terms employed for noblemen.

The Anglo-Saxons appeared to have recognized a number of different degrees of royal authority. Bede calls Peada the *princeps* of the Middle Angles when he is given that rule by his father,[38] and he later does not name him *Peada regis* but simply says that Peada was given *regnum*, "royal authority," over the briefly existing Southern Mercia by the victorious Oswiu. Among the *duces regii xxx* who set out on with Penda against Oswiu in 654 was Æthelhere, the brother of Anna king of the East Angles whom Penda had just defeated, suggesting that Penda had within his army "rules of provinces which were under [his] overlordship and so were not reckoned as kings but *ealdormen* [*regis*

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[36] Fritz Kern, *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages*, 1914 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), 13.

[37] Bassett, 24.

[38] A. T. Thacker, "Some Terms for Noblemen in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 650-900," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History 2*, ed. David Brown, James Campbell, and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), 204.

duce]."[39] As H. R. Lyon says, during this period "there were kings and kings, a wide variety both in name and fact, with the intensity of royal control … dependent on a delicate balance of military and religious prestige and the ability to exact permanent tribute and food rents."[40] The kings who the Augustinian missionaries approached, and some of whom themselves sought out both Roman and Celtic Christian priests from which to accept conversion, were in many ways just the latest to rise to the top in a structure of power that grew up from below as the expansion of individual groups of Anglo-Saxons led to the consolidation of territories and kingdoms. They had become royalty by benefit of the power they wielded, the allies and subordinates they held, and the cultural tradition of royalty that had grown up around the leading families.

An individual king's power could be ephemeral, though. The genealogies of the Anglo-Saxon kings almost all trace their lineage back to Woden, but that inheritance belonged to the family, not to the individual.[41] Especially as smaller kingdoms consolidated into larger ones and as kings sought to extend their power over their neighbors, the question of who should rule remained open as long as degrees of royalty remained. Members of both the Deirian and Bernician royal houses at ruled Northumbria, sometimes dividing power and then contesting that rule as did Oswiu and Oswine, and three *duces gentis Merciorum* could raise a younger son of Penda, Wulfhere, in the place

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[39] Bede, 290 n. 2.

[40] H. R. Loyn, "Kings, *Gesiths* and *Thegns*," *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-western Europe*, ed. M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1992), 78.

[41] Kern, 14.

of Peada and have even Bede name him *rex*.[42] Royal genealogies that depict a neat procession of rulers occur after the fact of power, as we shall see next when we look at the lineage of the kings of Mercia during the early seventh century.

Mercia's Kings

The kings of Mercia during the period of conversion are listed in brief in the *Historia Brittonum* chapter 60 and the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*,[43] and the Mercian royal genealogy and regnal list appears in four other sources: Cotton Vespasian B. vi, written in Mercia around 805-814; Cotton Tiberius B. v, vol. 1, from about the second quarter of the eleventh century; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 183, from the second quarter of the tenth century; and Rochester, Cathedral Library, A. 3. 5., from the first half of the twelfth century.[44] All of these lists appear to derive from a single source written in Mercia around 796[45] but drawn, on the basis of "a very few distinctively Northumbrian dialect forms," from a Northumbrian collection made in the third quarter of the eighth century.[46] The *Historia Brittonum* may, however, reflect a different documentary tradition, possibly that of "notes on the history of the Britons of the North … covering the period from the latter part of the sixth century to the middle of the eighth" that Kenneth Jackson says

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[42] Bede, 294.

[43] Restored by Michael Swanton based on David Dumville's work (cited below); *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 24 n. 3.

[44] David N. Dumville, "The Anglian Collection of Royal Genealogies and Regnal Lists," *Anglo-Saxon England 5* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 24-28.

[45] Dumville, "Anglian Collection," 46.

[46] Dumville, "Anglian Collection," 50.

"consist, in part or wholly, of more or less *contemporary* entries" (emphasis his) of the

events recounted.[47] These documents give the following succession of Mercian kings

through the time after Penda:[48]

Genealogy (*ASC)*	Regnal lists		*Historia Brittonum* (notes in second column)	
Æðelred	Æðelred	28 years	Aethelred	
	Wulfhere	15 years		
	Peada	1 year		
Penda	Penda	21 years	Penda	Eobba "brother of Penda"
Pybba			Pybba	"begot twelve sons, two of whom are better known to me than the others, namely Penda and Eobba."
Creoda			Creoda	
Cynewald			Cynewald	
Cnebba			Cnebba	
Icel			Icel	

   Despite the consistency among the genealogies, the regnal list presents the first of

the problems we need to consider when writing the history of the kings of seventh-

century Mercia: the length and beginning date of the reign of Penda. Nicholas Brooks

summarizes the conflicts among the three main sources as follows:

> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, year 626: "And Penda held his kingdom for
> 30 years and he was 50 years old when he succeeded to the kingdom."
>
> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*: Penda fights with Cadwallon to defeat
> Edwin in 633 and henceforth "ruled the Mercians for twenty-two years
> with varying fortune [*varia sorte*]."
>
> The *Historia Brittonum*: "Penda, son of Pypba, reigned ten years.... he

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[47] Kenneth Jackson, "On the Northern British Section in Nennius," *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. Nora Chadwick (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 49.

[48] Spellings follow those in the CCCC and Tiberius B manuscripts; regnal lists given as they appear in those manuscripts as well. Compiled from Dumville, "Anglian Collection," 30-37. The *Historia Brittonum* genealogy is taken from Nennius, trans. and ed. John Morris, 36-37.

fought the battle of *Cocboy* [642], in which fell his brother Eowa[49], king of the Mercians and son of Pypba."[50]

As Brooks, and Chadwick before him, note,[51] the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* would have Penda leading 30 *duces regii* against Oswiu at 80 years of age. Also, among other anomalies, Penda's son Wulfhere would "have still been *adulescens* when he was brought out of hiding in 658, while a third son, Æthelred. … was apparently younger still."[52] In addition, the *Historia Brittonum* says that Eowa, not Penda, was king of the Mercians in 642 at the battle of *Cocboy/Maserfelth*. [It is also worth noting that the Peterborough manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not record that Penda was 50 years old when he "succeeded to the kingdom," only that he "ruled for 30 years."[53]]

Brooks resolves this conflict in an ingenious manner. He proposes that the source used for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry of 626 likely read something much like "*Penda moruus est xxx^{mo} anno regni sui, aetate L.*" ("Penda died in the 30th year of his reign, at the age of 50") and therefore should have been rendered by the chronicler as "Penda [succeeded to the kingdom] reigned 30 years and was 50 years old *when he died*."[54] He further says that Bede's recording a 22 year reign for Penda beginning at the battle of Hatfield in 633 can be resolved by assuming that his brother Eowa, not he, ruled Mercia

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[49] Given as "Eobba" in the *Historia Brittonum*.

[50] Brooks, 165.

[51] Brooks, 165; Chadwick, 16.

[52] Brooks, 165-6.

[53] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 25.

[54] Brooks, 166.

as a client of the Northumbrian king Oswald from around 635 until his death in 642.

Brooks interprets the statement that Penda "[separated] the kingdom of the Mercians

from the kingdom of the Northerners"[55] to mean that "the Mercians and their king Eowa

had indeed been subject to control by the Northumbrian king Oswald" before Penda's

victory at *Cocboy/Maserfelth*.[56] This approximately seven-year interregnum would bring

the 30 years recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the 22 years recorded by Bede, and

the 21 years recorded in the regnal lists more in line with each other, if it is assumed that

the *Chronicle*'s complier either failed to account for or chose to ignore the interruption in

Penda's rule and simply counted back from the date of his death to the date of his

recorded victory in 626.

This solution does not immediately answer all reservations, though. It implies that

two of the four sources for Penda's reign made major errors or imposed different criteria

for determining the length of his reign, with the *Chronicle* ignoring Eowa's rule under

Oswald and the *Historia Brittonum* first ignoring Penda's rule from 626 to around 635

and then miscalculating how long he ruled after Eowa's death. Considering the likely

sources of these different accounts can help answer those reservations. If, as Henry Sweet

proposed and as David Dumville supports, the genealogies and regnal lists that have

survived originated in Northumbria and therefore "[stand] apart from the other Old

English genealogical texts which are West Saxon productions [and] chiefly associated

with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,"[57] then it makes sense that both Bede and those who

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[55] Nennius, 39.

[56] Brooks, 166.
[57] Dumville, "Anglian Collection," 24.

compiled the source document would, with their focus on Anglian kingdoms and especially Northumbria, use Northumbrian annals as well as genealogies and regnal lists.[58]

The *Historia Brittonum* passage that gives the genealogy of the Mercians describes a much more complex succession of power than the regnal lists. It ends with Ecgfrith (d. 796), a descendant of Eowa, Penda's brother, and describes Penda's direct line only through Æthelred (reigned 674-704), leaving out Cenred (r. 704-709) and Ceolred (r. 709-716) of Penda's line. In doing so, though, it may give a more accurate picture of the actual succession of Mercian kingship than do the straightforward genealogies and regnal lists. Those documents likely developed through oral transmission in the seventh and eighth centuries for the purpose of "explaining current social grouping and institutions," and it may therefore "bear little relation to an historical sequence of events."[59] However, David Dumville also notes that anthropologists studying genealogies in pre-literate societies have identified a varying but consistent window of "historical time" in which more accurate and complex genealogies are remembered and transmitted. He says that, as may be the case for the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies preserved in the manuscripts noted above,

> one may expect to find for the historical period a fairly complex
> genealogy with collateral pedigrees; that part, however, which has been
> transmitted for a long time by oral tradition down to the point of record
> will have resolved itself into a long series of simple father-to-son

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[58] Bertram Colgrave, "Historical Introduction," *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, xxxii-xxxiii.

[59] David N. Dumville, "Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists," in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds: Sawyer and Wood, 1977), 85.

successions.[60]

Such a method of transmission may well explain why descent along collateral lines is described in the *Historia Brittonum* but ignored by the regnal lists and genealogies. The British document may have held among its mish-mash of sources some of this "historical" oral tradition based on contemporary memory of how Penda became king. That Mercia's rulers would be better remembered in British lands than in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria is an indication of where Mercia's strongest connections may be found.

The origins of genealogies and their use as propaganda[61] to establish royal pedigree may also help explain why Eowa does not appear in the "official" genealogies derived from Mercian sources. While those late eighth-century compilers of oral and written sources may have felt compelled to list the reign of the Christian Peada, even if that reign were under Nothumbrian dominance, they may not have wanted to acknowledge the approximately seven years of rule by the pagan Eowa under Northumbria's hand. If the source document for the surviving genealogies does date from the 790s, then it would have been compiled during the reign of Offa, whose interest lay in securing the succession of his son Ecgfrith.[62] Since collateral lines existed by descent both from Penda (if any remained from that line) and from Penda and Eowa's brother Cenwealh,[63] it would

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[60] Dumville, "Kingship," 87.

[61] Dumville, "Kingship," 83.

[62] Hart, 54.

[63] Hart, 54-56.

have been best for the eighth-century compilers, who likely worked under Offa's auspices, to ignore them.

So, during the time that Christianity was being firmly established in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms around Mercia, the pagan Penda may well have found his power reduced and this rule interrupted by that of his brother, who was set in his place under the auspices of the newly Christian, and Roman Christian, Edwin of Northumbria. Whether this is part of what led to Mercia remaining pagan until Penda's death is something we will consider in the next chapter. Where we turn next is to that paganism itself, what part Anglo-Saxon kings played in its practice, and how it supported their kingship. We will then look at the churches that converted these Anglo-Saxon kings and the church that did not in order to identify the differences among them and determine how those differences may have affected Mercia's conversion.

Christianities and Paganism in England

> The king came to the island and, sitting in the open air, commanded Augustine and his comrades to come thither and talk with him. He took care that they should not meet in any building, for he held the traditional superstition that, if they practiced any magical art, they might deceived him and the get the better of him as soon as he entered. But they came endowed with divine not devilish power and bearing as their standard a silver cross and the image of our Lord and Savior painted on a panel.[64]

First, it must be said that the following discussion is not much concerned with theology and questions of belief, only with highlighting the social world-view and influence of the main religious players: Celtic Christian bishops and abbots; Roman Christian bishops and missionaries and their direct followers; and the representatives of

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[64] Bede, 75.

Anglo-Saxon paganism, the pagan kings, priests, and the few others pagans whose

actions we can describe and whose motives and beliefs we can reasonably assess. The

theological and doctrinal differences among various seventh-century Christian churches

is a study in its own right, and our aim is of a much narrower functionalist scope: to

explore these religions as distinct cultural mentalities, as frameworks that supported

Anglo-Saxon kingship and guided the actions of its kings, and to see how differences

among them may have influenced those kings' choice of religious affiliation.

If, as Nicholas Higham states, "Christianity was adopted in England because

systems of authority and organisation which were inherent within it offered attractive

solutions to political problems confronting powerful kings,"[65] then it should be possible

to determine two things regarding the conversion of Mercia. First, we should be able to

describe what kings needed and what solutions Christianity offered. Then, we should be

able to determine what it was about Mercia that made it less fertile ground for

conversion, requiring both the death of its king and the domination of the kingdom under

Northumbrian power for conversion to take place. To prepare for this analysis, let us start

by looking at the religion the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to Britain and what

religious systems they found when they arrived there.

Anglo-Saxon Paganism in England

Gale Owen relates well the frustration felt by those who attempt to describe the

"minds and beliefs" of the pagan Anglo-Saxons in England when she says that "no altars

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[65] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 27.

or idols, not inscribed names of gods or paintings of heathen rites guide us" in that task.[66] What we do have are brief descriptions of pagan practices given by contemporary witnesses like Bede, material evidence that can yield information after careful analysis, and examples of likely related Germanic beliefs recorded centuries before and after the seventh (which must be used with great caution). This evidence has formed the basis for understandings of the pagan beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons, including the conjecture that Anglo-Saxon kings were "sacral kings" who acted as semi-divine priests of their kingdom's religious rites and who were believed to be "filled with a charismatic power on which his tribe [depended] for its well-being."[67] That conjecture, if true, would explain much about how and why Anglo-Saxon acted as they did and what they would expect from their religion. To evaluate it, let us first look at what Bede and others said about pagan kings and their religion.

Anglo-Saxon pagan practices involved both worship in temples at altars bearing idols representing of their gods and animal sacrifice. Pope Gregory wrote to Abbot Mellitus, as Mellitus was traveling to join the Augustinian mission in 601, that these idols were to be destroyed, the altars cleansed and the buildings reconsecrated as churches, and the sacrifices reinterpreted to the newly Christian as being "for their own food to the praise of God."[68] Some of these practices stand in contrast to what Tacitus wrote 500

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[66] Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (New York: Dorset Press, 1980), 7.

[67] William A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1970), 15.

[68] Bede, 108-9.

years before about the religious practices of the Germanic ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons, who, he says,

> judge it not to be in keeping with the majesty of heavenly beings to confine them within walls or to portray them in any human likeness. They consecrate woods and groves and they apply the names of gods to that mysterious presence which they see only with the eye of devotion.[69]

Clearly, some change in religious practice had taken place between the time of Tacitus and that of Gregory, maybe through contact with pagan Roman temples or even with Christian churches on the Continent or in Britain itself, that led the Anglo-Saxons to perform their rites in buildings that contained images of their gods. These images were likely representational to at least some degree, and divination, also mentioned by Tacitus, may have been a part of their worship as well. Pope Boniface exhorted Edwin in a letter written in 620, before Edwin's conversion,[70] to "hate all idols and idol worship, to spurn their foolish shrines and the deceitful flatteries of their soothsaying," stressing to the king that idols were "made from corruptible material by the hands of your own servants and subjects" and were given "by means of such human art … inanimate semblance of human form."[71] This letter was likely written by Boniface in response to Paulinus's report of his failure to convert Edwin,[72] so it is reasonable to assume that Boniface had a good idea of Edwin's pagan practices even if Gregory, writing only four years after the beginning of the English mission, way have known less about those that Æthelberht had left behind.

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[69] Tacitus, 42.

[70] D. P. Kirby, "Bede and Northumbrian Chronology," *The English Historical Review* 78 no. 308 (July 1963), 522.

[71] Bede, 169-71.
[72] Kirby, "Bede and Northumbrian Chronology," 522.

Idol worship within a temple and the religion of the pagan kings are connected throughout Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*. When Rædwald of East Anglia is "seduced by his wife and by certain evil teachers and perverted from the sincerity" of the Christianity he had been converted to in Kent, he set up "in the same temple … one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to the devil."[73] The revival of idolatry and sacrifice in a *fanum* is, for Bede, the marker of the apostasy of a king. When Osric and Enfrith took power in the divided Northumbria after the death of Edwin, they "reverted to the filth of their former idolatry,"[74] and when Sigehere of Essex and "the majority of both commons and nobles" reverted to pagan worship in response to the plague of 664, they "began to restore the derelict temples and worship images."[75] It does appear that Gregory's recommendation that pagan temples be reused was not always followed; if it was, then those temples would not have had to be restored during Sighere's apostasy and then the separate churches reopened after his and the kingdom's return to Christian practice.[76] It is also notable that there is no mention of pagan priests leading rites during this time of apostasy – it is instead the king and his people who perform the worship. This, however, may simply be an omission of Bede's rather than proof that Anglo-Saxon kings led pagan religious worship. We shall return to this point when we consider the possible "sacral" function of these kings.

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[73] Bede, 191.

[74] Bede, 213.

[75] Bede, 323.

[76] Bede, 323.

Owen says that etymological and place-name data indicate that temples likely developed from shelters erected to protect idols placed outdoors in groves, on hills, or by springs[77] The use of these data to identify sites of pagan temples is of limited value, though, when the temples themselves, with one exception, have not been found and when there is no certain correlation of elements thought to contain god and place names with structures rather than with topographical features that may or may not have been temple sites.[78] Only a single building, designated D2 in the excavated early seventh-century complex at Yeavering, is now thought to be a pagan Anglo-Saxon religious building. This identification has been made because of the presence in the building of successive deposits of ox skulls, presumably from sacrifices, and because of its later likely re-use as a Christian church after the filling in of non-structural post holes that could have served as altar support or, maybe, supports for standing pillars or images.[79] A further reason for identifying Yeavering D2 as a pagan temple may be the discovery that built around it were a number of huts characterized as "flimsy, temporary structures probably erected for some specific purpose and demolished when the occasion had passed."[80] These huts sound very much like they were built to conform to Gregory's instructions to Mellitus that those attending Christian festivals should "make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines."[81] If Gregory

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[77] Owen, 42.

[78] Arnold, 149-50.

[79] Arnold, 150.

[80] Owen, 45.

[81] Bede, 109.

actually knew much about pagan Anglo-Saxon practices, or if he had simply read Tacitus and had received reports from England that the Anglo-Saxons worshiped in groves, he may have suggested this practice of cutting trees as a further way of "desacralizing" the groves in which pagan temples were sited. Whatever his intention, though, these "huts" are further evidence that Yeavering D2 was in truth a pagan temple built on the site associated with Æthelfrith of Northumbria and built in such a manner that, as has been pointed out, a sparrow could fly into and out of its main doors as Edwin's man describes.[82]

It is not certain why other Anglo-Saxon buildings similar to Yeavering D2 have not been found to contain evidence of pagan rites. It may be because there is nothing truly distinctive about the style of this building,[83] or it may be that other temples were abandoned to decay, like those in Essex, once Christian churches were sited elsewhere. The survival of these identifiable remains of a converted *fanum* at Yeavering may be due to the destruction of the complex by fire during the second quarter of the seventh century – destruction that may, in fact, have been at the hands of Penda and his ally Cædwalla of Gwynedd following their defeat of Edwin in 633.[84] Apart from this building, though, along with the occasional finds of sacrificial remains (both animal and human) associated with pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon graves, and the very inconclusive evidence derived from

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[82] Bede, 182 n.1.

[83] Simon James, Anne Marshall and Marin Millett, "An Early Medieval Building Tradition," *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England: Basic Readings*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (New York: Garland, 1999), 83 figure 4.4.

[84] Bede, 203-5.

grave goods and mortuary practice that often give rise to conflicting interpretations,[85] there is no other material evidence for Anglo-Saxon paganism. This is likely because Anglo-Saxon paganism, if it maintained the simplicity of practice described by Tacitus, left almost no easily identifiable evidence. There is little, aside from unusual occurrences such as the skull burials at Yeavering, to distinguish animal sacrifice from animal husbandry. As Arnold says, when we consider what constitutes material evidence for Anglo-Saxon paganism, "because there is always a wide range of factors determining the form of religious activity and belief, especially when it may not be appropriate to divorce [it] so forcefully from domestic life, … doubt can always be cast on our conclusions" about those beliefs.[86] We are left, then, to consider what Bede tells us and, possibly, what we know about similar Germanic pagan practices to determine the religious function of pagan Anglo-Saxon kings before their conversion to Christianity.

Anglo-Saxon Paganism and "Sacral Kingship"

The examination and interpretation of the surviving literary, linguistic, and historical record of Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic peoples has led some to conclude that Germanic religion and Germanic kingship were inexorably linked. The power of Germanic kings was derived from their descent from the gods and that this power was expressed as personal charisma, success in warfare, and good fortune for those they ruled. For these scholars, pagan Germanic kingship incorporated both religion and secular elements into a "sacral" kingship. William Chaney says that

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[85] Summarized well by Arnold, 151-70.

[86] Arnold, 179.

> the most fundamental concept in Germanic kingship is the indissolubility of its religious and political function The king is above all the intermediary between his people and the gods, the charismatic embodiment of the 'luck' of the folk … to assure the favourable actions of the gods toward the tribe the king 'does' his office as mediator between them, sacrificing for victory, for crops, for peace.[87]

Chaney, working from Tacitus, says that the king "[exercised] power which is honorific and priestly" and that "the Tacitean distinction between *reges* and *principes* seems to rest ... on multiple rulership."[88] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, following Ammianus's statement in the *Res Geste* that the Burgundians were ruled by kings responsible for both military victory and the prosperity of harvest, concludes that the Burgundians had combined the two elements described by Tacitus into a single king (*Hendinos*) who had religious, temporal, and military functions. He states that "it would be hard indeed to say that such a man was a straightforward comitatus-leader with no sacral background. The two cannot in practice be separated."[89] This combination of sacral and military functions in one ruling king, if it occurred, may have done so in response to contact with Rome and the increased need for a more permanent and higher-status role for military *duces* beginning in the later part of the second century C. E..[90]

However, it is not likely that these kings were sacral in the way that Chaney and others describe. It is clear that as the Middle Ages progressed kings were seen as sacred,

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[87] Chaney, 11-12.

[88] Chaney, 8.

[89] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 15.

[90] Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 61-62.

as witnessed by consecration and according to formulas "derived partly from Byzantium and its law books, and partly from the unbroken Roman traditions of the west."[91] The Roman Church also stressed that God would bless a Christian king, for as Gregory wrote to Æthelberht of Kent, "Almighty God raises up certain good men to be rulers over nations in order that he may by their means bestow the gifts of his righteousness upon all those over whom they are set."[92] However, neither Gregory nor any of the Celtic or Roman Christian missionaries ever seem to have implied that Anglo-Saxon kings should expect to have a *sacral* function in their new religion. Those pagan or apostate kings who set up or restored pagan altars and idols may have themselves performed sacrifices there, but Bede never condemns them for sacrificing, only for having the altars raised. Even Osric and Enfrith, whose reign is not counted among the kings of Northumbria on account of their apostasy,[93] are not said to have acted as priests of the paganism they re-established.

If sacral kingship did exist as proposed by Chaney and others, though, they and other pagan Anglo-Saxon kings would necessary have performed sacrifice rather than just sponsored rites or religious buildings. There is no indication that they did so, or even that kings did so consistently among other Germanic peoples. The Burgundians had a chief priest in addition to a king who may have had a sacral function. Adam of Bremen, writing in the eleventh century, says that priests officiated at the temple in Uppsala.[94]

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[91] Kern, 64.

[92] Bede, 111.

[93] Bede, 215.

[94] Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. and ed. Francis J.

Chaney acknowledges the existence of priests separate from the ruler, as witnessed by

Bede's story of the conversion of the heathen priest Coifi and his reference to the

idolatris pontificibus to who London's citizens turned to rather than the Christian bishop

Mellitus.[95] Chaney argues, though, that these priests were subordinate to the king and that

"the Germanic and Scandinavian history of the early Middle Ages knows no strong

priesthood set apart from the secular rulers."[96] Against this claim, when evaluating

evidence for sacral kingship among the Merovingians, Alexander Callander Murray finds

none of that evidence convincing and flatly concludes that "sacral kingship among the

Franks is a hypothetical construct of modern historiography founded on the exegesis of

nineteenth-century *Germanistik* as adapted to recent theories about the nature of early

Germanic society."[97] Walter Baetke, examining the evidence for sacral kingship in

Scandinavia, says that it consists "almost exclusively" of

> myths, sagas, and legends, poems or tales of gods, heroes, or kings of
> ancient times, mostly unclear and historically dubious documents. The
> wealth of secondary sources concerning this matter shows, in addition,
> that it often requires difficult interpretations and risky hypotheses to
> wring favorable data from even these sources.[98]

Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 207.

[95] Chaney, 61-3.

[96] Chaney, 14.

[97] Alexander Callander Murray, "*Post vocantur Merohingii*: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'," *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 151.

[98] Walter Baetke, *Kleine Schriften: Geschichte, Recht und Religion in germanischem Schrifttum*, ed. Kurt Rudolph and Ernst Walter (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1973), 147. Unpublished trans. Marion Ingham, 2003.

How the idea of "sacral kingship" is used to support a religious interpretation a king's "luck" and success and could therefore have affected a king's acceptance or rejection of Christianity will be explored in the next chapter. For now, though, it is enough to say that if kings did have a role within Anglo-Saxon paganism, that role was not a priestly one.

Surely, both pagan and Christian Anglo-Saxon kings would have turned to their respective priests for counsel (or augury) and blessing, and it is safe to assume that kings like Æthelberht and Edwin understood Gregory and Boniface's assurances that God would bless them and their rule. It can even be assumed that Penda of Mercia may have felt that his god or gods provided better blessings that the god of the Christians, for certainly he was no stranger to Christianity. To go beyond that and say that Penda resisted conversion because of his sacral role within his religion, or even to say that the dismemberment of Oswald at *Maserfelth* "may have been the completion of a dedicatory vow made before the battle by the Woden-worshiping Mercian king"[99] does not fit the evidence. We cannot, based on what is known, say with confidence that pagan Anglo-Saxon kingship had a religious function that would have pushed those kings either toward or away from Christianity. Instead, to find what may have led Penda to resist conversion to Christianity and other kings to embrace it, we must next look at Christianity in England itself.

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[99] Chaney, 119. Chaney does acknowledge *op.cit.* that there are no recorded instances of sacrifices to Woden/Oðinn of victims already dead.

"Christianities" in England

When examining Celtic and Roman Christianity in England at the time of conversion, our focus is on church structure and on ecclesiastical authority's relationship with kings and secular authority. Again, this examination will not exhaust all that may be said even about this limited topic, but it will enable us to address what Anglo-Saxon kings may have found in and expected from Christianity. For, if these kings did find in Christianity an instrument "capable of consolidating, reinforcing and extending their own power,"[100] then it is clear that they did not find it to be such an instrument before the Augustinian mission. That kings needed power we have shown; indeed, during the sixth and early seventh century, when powerful leaders were just starting to be identified with territories and peoples and different regional and "national" identities were starting to be expressed among Anglo-Saxon elites,[101] they likely needed power more than ever. Was the Christianity they had found among the Romano-Celtic peoples of Britain before the coming of the mission from Rome inadequate to meet those needs? Or, were there other factors that revealed Roman Christianity as a better choice?

Let us look at the first of these questions first. Celtic Christianity – the Christianity practiced in the British areas in the north and west of England as well as in Ireland – developed from the Romano-British Christianity of the fourth century. Romano-British Christianity is often characterized as a religion of "the towns and prosperous villas" of

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[100] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 27.

[101] See page 34.

Britain,[102] but that characterization is likely oversimplified. Britain had Christians in both

town and country; of the thirteen late Roman British cemeteries surveyed by Dorothy

Watts, seven were on rural sites as were nine of the seventeen probable Late Roman

churches.[103] There are place names in England dating from the time of the Anglo-Saxon

settlement that incorporate *eccles*, or "church." Parallels from the Continent lead Richard

Fletcher to suggest that Kent at the time of the Anglo-Saxon entry may have had "some

urban Christianity, some rural Christianity at the gentry level, and a lot of rustic

paganism."[104]

Little of Christianity survived outside the Celtic areas after the fifth century,

though, and there can be seen no conversion of the Anglo-Saxons by any Christians who

remained in fifth and sixth-century England. This may be because of the withdrawal of

Celtic Christians, including Christian priests and bishops, to the west and north of the

island, or even across the Channel to the Continent.[105] It may also be that Celtic and

Anglo-Saxon antagonism precluded attempts at conversion. Henry Mayr-Harting's

assertion that the Anglo-Saxon conquerors would not have sought to emulate the religion

of those they conquered likely contains much truth about their attitudes toward the

British,[106] just as the British churchman Gildas's characterization of the Anglo-Saxons as

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[102] Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 32.

[103] Dorothy Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 220.

[104] Richard Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe from Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 AD* (London: Fontana, 1998), 108-9.

[105] Peter Salway, *Roman Britain*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 788.
[106] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 33.

"bastard-born" barbarians with "doggish mouths."[107] This antagonism may have been part of what led the British bishops to reject Augustine's authority and his demand that they "preach the word of the Lord to the English people in fellowship with" him and the other Roman missionaries.[108]

Celtic Christians whose background was in the Irish rather than the British church, however, were more willing to preach to and convert the Anglo-Saxons,[109] at least in Northumbria after Oswald took power. Bede openly admired these Irish-British clergy whose practices were based from Columba's (521-597) monastery at Iona, Columba who had converted both the Picts of northern England and Oswald of Northumbria during his exile there, for their "great abstinence, their love of God, and their observance of the [monastic] Rule."[110] Bede does note, though, some structural differences between the Christianity of Iona and that of its Roman counterparts, saying that Iona "always has an abbot for its ruler who is a priest, to whose authority the whole kingdom, including even bishops, have to be subject. This unusual arrangement follows the example of their first teacher, who was not a bishop but a priest and monk."[111] Some scholars of Christianity in the British Isles say that this arrangement was not unique to Iona but instead reflects a distinct tradition of monasticism and ecclesiastical authority, one which Columba learned

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[107] Gildas, *De Excidio* (*"The Works of Gildas"*), in J. A. Giles, *Six Old English Chronicles* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900), 311.

[108] Bede, 139.

[109] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 53.

[110] Bede, 225.

[111] Bede, 225.

in Ireland and brought to Iona and which other Irish missionaries brought to Wales. This idea, that the episcopal structure that characterized Roman Christianity, with its descending hierarchy of archbishops, bishops, abbots, and priests, was weak or absent in Christianity as it developed in Ireland, deserves further consideration. If it is a valid description of differences, then it may explain why Roman Christianity appealed to some Anglo-Saxon kings more than Celtic Christianity – if power and authority were those kings' major considerations when assessing Christianity.

This model of Celtic Christianity assumes that in the Celtic church abbots held the most ecclesiastical power, amassing to themselves dependent monasteries and bishoprics.[112] Power in the Celtic church was centered in the separate community of the monastery rather than in churches placed in the secular community; as Margaret Deanesly writes, "Irish Christianity was unable to develop on the lines of the territorial episcopate, because Ireland had no civitates."[113] If this is true, then it may mean that Roman Christianity, with its episcopal structure derived in part from the framework of secular Roman government, would have given Anglo-Saxon kings access to a single hierarchy of power with defined spheres of territorial influence (and with the cachet of *Romanitas*). The Celtic church would have instead presented to them a plurality of powers and a structure in which "great monasteries and ambitious bishops … carved out for themselves extensive ecclesiastical 'empires'."[114] If this is true, then Anglo-Saxon

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[112] Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003). 330.

[113] Margaret Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 39.

[114] Brown, 330.

kings may have found in the competing power blocks within the Celtic church an

invitation to competition and disorder, while the Roman church offered order and

continuity. For kings like Penda and all others, whose power was just then being defined

within the context of their consolidating peoples, a fractious religion would have no

benefit at all. Kings were concerned with authority as a check on unrest; when faced with

the Paschal controversy, Oswiu's pointed questions concerned who had more authority

and who would decide upon admission to heaven – Peter or Columba.[115]

It is true that the Roman church may have presented a continuity of power that

some Anglo-Saxon kings would recognize and covet, though likely of a power more

secular than sacred as we will discuss later. It is also true, though, that this

characterization of Irish monasticism and the Irish Church is likely far too simple. In both

England and Ireland, there was "no single model of monastic organization"[116] that

stressed either unitary or multiple bases of ecclesiastical power. In England, both the

Council of Herford and the penitential attributed to Theodore sought to "preserve

monasteries from episcopal influence,"[117] while the writings of Cassian, Basil and

Jerome, all strong supporters of episcopal authority, were known and used in Ireland.[118]

Moreover, recent interpretations stress that the episcopal hierarchy established in Ireland

in the fifth century continued to serve the pastoral needs of Irish Christians and that

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[115] Bede, 307

[116] Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2002), 40.

[117] Herren and Brown, 41.

[118] Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 144-5.

bishops and diocese are recognized by Irish legal texts as well as by religious ones from the fifth through the eighth centuries.[119]

Celtic Christianity as developed in Ireland did make unique contributions to medieval Christianity, and it was Celtic-trained and influenced priests who firmly established Christianity in Northumbria and first preached in Wessex. It also had developed practices that conflicted with those of the Roman church. Those conflicts were very likely known to the Anglo-Saxons who both groups evangelized,[120] but it is much less likely that Anglo-Saxon kings, if they did assess competing claims for Christian authority, would have found much difference between the two churches. They did find, though, kingdom by kingdom as the seventh century progressed, that Christianity from whichever source served them better than did their native paganism. It is likely, as Higham asserts, both that their conviction of the rightness of Christianity had more to do with their perception that the Christian god would offer them earthly power and that their conversion was more a change of alliance than a change of mind based on some deep understanding of Christian theology and doctrine. In almost all cases, Anglo-Saxon kings accepted Christianity while already in power as the result of the influence from other kings. Priests carried the message, but converted kings provided the means by which that message took hold. Christianity came to England to stand closely alongside of secular party.

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[119] Dunn, 147.

[120] Rob Meens, "A Background to Augustine's Mission to the Anglo-Saxons," *Anglo-Saxon England* 23, ed. Michael Lapidge et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16-17.

However, the one major and one of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kings of the second quarter of the seventh century was not influenced toward Christianity either by alliance or by conflict, and not because he did not need power. Penda of Mercia remained pagan until his death and did not turn to the Celtic Christianity of his neighbors and enemies. Nor did he seek out the Roman Christians of Canterbury. Mercia, on the border between English and British Christians as well as English and British kingdoms, seems to have held itself aloof from questions of religion and the power Christianity could provide. So, let's next look at what Higham, the advocate of conversion as a quest to gain power through accepting belief, has to say about those kings who did convert so that we may show why Penda did not.

CHAPTER 3: POWER AND IDENTITY

The last chapter explored the origins of Mercia and its rulers and discussed as well some of the issues that must be kept in mind when analyzing the evidence for its conversion to Christianity. Mercia was shown there to be a kingdom still coalescing and expanding through the late-sixth through mid-seventh centuries, one whose rule may well have been internally and externally contested. It was not, at first, powerful among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The territory to its southwest, in the area of the Hwicce, remained in contention among the Mercians, the West Saxons, and, for a time at least, the British until Penda's victory at Cirencester in 628. There is no record of Mercia participating in the battle that brought Edwin to the throne of Northumbria in 616 despite that battle's having taken place on Mercia's border[1] and despite, as we shall see, Edwin having already taken one of the actions that would later provoke Penda against him. No royal complexes like those at Yeavering (which both pre- and post-dates the conversion of that kingdom) and Canterbury or major burials like that at Sutton Hoo have been found in Mercia for this period. The earliest likely palace complex, at Tamworth, contains at least some material from before the seventh century, but that may represent the reuse of older material in a building erected in the late eighth century.[2] Indeed, the seventh-century building projects most easily associated with Mercia may be the earthworks built

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[1] Bede, 181.

[2] Philip Rahtz, "The Archaeology of West Mercian Towns," *Mercian Studies*, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 111, 114.

not by them, but by the Northumbrians, West Saxons, and East Angles in defense against them.[3]

Bede, however, knew the Mercians as a distinct people of Anglian origin[4] and recognized their leaders, both before and after Mercia's conversion, as kings. He names Ceorl, father of Edwin of Northumbria's first wife Cwenburh, as "king of the Mercians,"[5] and though Ceorl/Ceal/Ceolric does not appear in any of the genealogies or regnal lists cited above,[6] he does appear in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in the later annals as the king ruling before Penda's father Pybba.[7] That is Bede's first mention of one of Mercia's rulers; the next Mercian to come upon the scene, and to dominate it, is the stubbornly pagan Penda.

We know Bede's thoughts, but what did the other English kings and the Roman and Irish missionaries who converted them think of Penda? Anglo-Saxon kings from the time of Æthelberht almost always accepted Christianity under the influence of their fellows. Warfare, diplomacy, marriage, and, sometimes, strong-arm tactics formed that web of influence. Undoubtedly a king, even in the eyes of the Christian historian Bede, and likely considered one by his fellows, Penda nevertheless seems to have been immune to

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[3] Cyril Hart, "The Kingdom of Mercia," *Mercian Studies*, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 53.

[4] Bede, 51.

[5] Bede, 187.

[6] See page 58.

[7] Wendy Davies, "Annals and the Origin of Mercia," *Mercian Studies*, 23-25. The spelling varies according to source. "Ceolric" is probably a scribal error; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* , 21 n. 14.

this web of influence among Anglo-Saxon kings even while participating in it and to have prevented Christianity from gaining any foothold in Mercia until after his death.

Nicholas Higham describes these kings who converted in terms that stress conversion as a considered political choice. Both their understanding of political power and influence and their religious understanding of and reliance upon divine favor and "luck" were, in his assessment, things they considered when deciding if, and from whom, to accept Christianity. His analysis, however, depends heavily on two concepts: the sacral nature of Anglo-Saxon kingship, and the Anglo-Saxons ideal of the "overking" or *bretwalda*. These two concepts have long been part of the historical interpretation of Anglo-Saxon England, but they are ones that do not fit well with the evidence we have examined so far. Given the actual development of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their institutions and the lack of contemporary evidence that would permit a clear understanding of what "sacral kingship" might have meant to the Anglo-Saxons, it is not possible to accept Higham's analysis without qualification and modification.

This final chapter takes up that task of revision. It presents a nuanced view of "the convert kings" that is based on the actual origin and development of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms as well as an examination of the ways that these kingdoms transmitted ideas amongst and influenced each other. Higham's work serves as a starting point, both because it opens up an understanding of conversion as a social phenomenon and because examining his ideas about how some kingdoms became Christian will point us toward why, in the face of the rapid if not always easy conversion of the other kingdoms, Mercia remained pagan for so long.

The Kings' Political and Religious Power

Higham stresses throughout *The Convert Kings* that Anglo-Saxon kings chose which religion to follow based on their understanding that divine power was a component of political power. He says that the successes or failures of these kings were seen, by themselves and by other Anglo-Saxons, as reflections of the power of the religion to which they held allegiance. The power of the Anglo-Saxon king, pagan or Christian, reflected the power of the god he served, for he was "a protector figure, [a] war-leader and diplomat, and … an intermediary between man and god."[8] While he does not use the phrase "sacral kingship," Higham is explicit in his agreement with those such as Chaney who say that "the crucial figure … in any conversion was the sacral king, and the fact that in Anglo-Saxon England the paths of the new religion were made smooth was in every kingdom due to the role played by its ruler."[9]

The Anglo-Saxons, in Higham's estimation, thought that kingly power stood in direct correlation with divine power because the king himself, whether Woden-descended or reborn through Christian baptism, had a special relationship with the divine. Thus, Edwin's death at the hands of the British Christian king Cadwallon meant that "because Edwin's God and St. Peter had failed to protect him *in extremis*" Roman Christianity failed in Northumbria.[10] Then, following the discrediting of traditional Paganism by the

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[8] Higham, *Convert King*, 39-40.

[9] Chaney, 156.

[10] Higham, *Convert King*, 190-1.

rapid failure of Edwin's apostate successors,[11] Oswald turned to the Irish Christians of

Iona to establish in Northumbria a Christian cult whose success had already been proven

by the success of Cadwallon, whose Christianity was closer to that of Iona than to that of

Rome.[12] Higham implies that Oswald, a royal-divine leader by nature of his position and

independent of whichever religion he followed, simply chose the God he thought would

bring him the most success. Anglo-Saxon kings were therefore, in Higham's analysis,

sacral by the cultural nature of their kingship rather than upon the basis of the gods they

served; sacral kingship was part of the Anglo-Saxon *mentalité*. Conversion – the choice

of a god and a religious practice – was both a political and religious act and one that was

a matter of forging the most beneficial alliance possible.

Furthermore, Higham says, the alliances with Christianity made by the four kings he

studies directly – Æthelberht of Kent, and Edwin, Oswald, and Oswiu of Northumbria –

were made to further their quest for and maintain their positions as *bretwalda* or

"overkings" of the Anglo-Saxons. His work is explicitly focused on the conversion of

those kings who were "at some stage *imperium*-wielding kings or 'overkings'" and whose

conversion was therefore "more influential in encouraging a wider dissemination of

Christianity than that of any other English figure before 670."[13] The concept of

overkingship also shapes his understanding of how other kings accepted conversion and

how all Anglo-Saxon kings interacted as clients, allies, and rivals. Overkings who

became Christian often effected the conversion of other kings over whom they held

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[11] Higham, *Convert King*, 202-6.

[12] Higham, *Convert King*, 207.

[13] Higham, *Convert King*, 43.

power, and that effect was a function of their power. The first example of this is Æthelberht's sponsorship of the baptism of Rædwald of East Anglia, about which Higham says Rædwald was "accepting Æthelberht in a pseudo-paternal role … [and] additionally surrendering to Æthelberht and his priests a portion of his own sacral kingship and his powers of mediation between his own people and the divine."[14] Overkingship plays a part in much less symbolic interactions as well. Writing about the attempted assassination of Edwin of Northumbria, Higham says that the West Saxon king Cuichelm sent his man Eomer to kill Edwin in 626 because of Cuichelm's ambition to attain the status of "overking" or *bretwalda*, a status to which he had claims of "a certain credibility" because the West Saxon Cæwlin "had held such a position in the recent past."[15] Overkingship, then, was not merely the description of the scope of a king's power. It was also a thing to be won or lost through war, though diplomacy, or through murder.

Higham does avoid using *bretwalda,* a word appearing only in the Parker manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,*[16] and does not explicitly say that "overking" was a title sought by kings. He still, though, refers to Edwin's and others' "donning the mantle" of the role of "overkingship," a role in which the king became "a universal 'father'" for lesser kings.[17] Higham's conclusion is clearly that Anglo-Saxon kings knew of and vied for some unnamed but still recognized role of overking. That role, if it existed

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[14] Higham, *Convert King*, 103.

[15] Higham, *Convert King*, 143.

[16] And there, most likely, as a result of scribal error; see page 90.

[17] Higham, *Convert King*, 143.

and was recognized, must also predate Christianity, for Bede named the pagan Ælle and

Cælin (Ceawlin) as kings holding "like sovereignty" to the Christian overking

Æthelberht.[18] Christianity, Higham says, strengthened this role because it concentrated

divine power in the hands of the king through a "uniformity of cult" that emphasized

royal participation in ritual and through providing an institutional channel for royal

beneficence that led to the creation of physical manifestations, such as the building of

churches and monasteries, of the king's divine power.[19] That, for Higham, is something

that the Anglo-Saxon kings who converted to Christianity understood. Their acceptance

of Christianity as a way to power is the reason for the rapid conversion of the English. He

says again of Edwin that, after the victory he won over the pagan West Saxons following

his conversion to Christianity,

> the success of his regime and of his novel [Christian] cult had thereafter
> been inextricably linked and each had served to reinforce the other. In 633
> [when Edwin was killed in battle with Cadwallon of Gwynedd and Penda
> of Mercia] … neither Edwin's God nor his patron saint saved him or his
> adult sons from their enemies. His failure necessarily also encompassed
> the divine agencies which had hitherto protected him. As in other
> conversion situations, the adhesion of the Deirians to Christianity was
> conditional on it serving their wider political interests.[20]

If Anglo-Saxon kings were truly sacral and their people saw their power and luck in

battles as reflecting a divine source, then this analysis does help explain both kings'

conversion to and their reversion from Christianity as politically expedient actions.

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[18] Bede, 149.

[19] Higham, *Convert King*, 41.

[20] Higham, *Convert King*, 201.

Higham's analysis seems to fit for those who are his main focus, but it is too narrow to account for Mercia's late conversion. He explicitly states that this relationship between overkingship and sacral kingship is, through its focus on the four "overkings," not "entirely representative of English conversion."[21] This relationship should, however, apply to *all* of the English kings unless "overkingship" was different in quality rather than just in degree from "regular" kingship. All of those kings who were introduced to Christianity should have recognized its potential to bring them power if that potential were inherent within the interaction between Christianity and kingship.

Among those kings so introduced would certainly have stood Penda, whose ally was the Christian Cadwallon and whose influence extended over Hwicce and Magonsætan (whose first ruler, Merewalh, was said to be a son of Penda),[22] where burials indicate there had been Christians since the early seventh century.[23] It is hard to credit that Penda and the other "regular" Anglo-Saxon kings would have thought and acted differently from their more powerful fellows given the chance. If Christianity fit so well with the institution of Anglo-Saxon kingship, then those who were kings or sought to be would have seen that fit and sought conversion. If Roman Christ failed for Edwin in the face of the British Christ of Cadwallon and the pagan Woden of Penda, and then pagan Woden failed both Osric and Eanfrith, slain by Cadwallon in the aftermath of Edwin's fall, why did Penda not then turn to the God who had given Cadwallon victory? His position in

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[21] Higham, *Convert King*, 43.

[22] Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England 600-800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 47-48.

[23] Pretty, 90.; Sims-Williams, 76-77.

Mercia could not have been secure if, as Brooks suggests,[24] he lost the rule of Mercia soon after this to his brother Eowa. The luck and power granted to Cadwallon by his God was strong enough to ensure him victory when fighting outside his own kingdom and ravaging Northumbria, yet Penda's God could not even guarantee him the power he sought in his own homeland (as he must have, else he would not have fought against Oswald's hold over Mercia in 642). If the utility of Christianity was so clear to other Anglo-Saxon, and British, kings, why did Penda not recognize it?

The fault likely lies not with Penda but instead with Higham's too-narrow analysis. The concept of overkingship he uses simply does not match the observed reality of the Anglo-Saxon institution of kingship during the seventh century. Certainly some kings were more powerful than others and were therefore able to influence their conversion and to call on them as allies. But *bretwalda*, "Britain-ruler," has proven to be an elusive term – one that appears only once in the Parker manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* while other manuscripts of the *Chronicle*, as well as other texts, give variants that are more clearly forms of *brytenwalda*, "wide-ruler."[25] As Stephen Fanning has convincingly shown, *bretwalda* or *brytenwalda* likely never meant "Britain-ruler" or "overking" in the sense of designating a role by which a ruler was recognized as having power over the majority of the island. Instead, those kings holding *imperium*, or "overkingship" were those who, like the Roman emperor, ruled "over a multiplicity of kingdoms" and also

[24] Brooks, 166.

[25] Barbara A.E. Yorke, "The Vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon Overlordship," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History Volume 2*, ed. David Brown, James Campbell, and Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), 172-3.

were "associated directly or indirectly with the conquest of other kingdoms."[26] Moreover, despite the presence of the pagan Ælle and Cælin (Ceawlin) in Bede's list of seven "overkings" and his use of *imperium* for other kings,[27] Bede conspicuously fails to award some kings *imperium* who it seems should have it. One of those is the "*rex fortissimus et gloriae cupidissimus*" Æthelfrith of Northumbria, the pagan king who first united Benicia and Deira and of whom Bede says that after his defeat of Aedan of Dalriada "no Irish king in Britain has dared to make war on the English race to this day."[28] The other king whose *imperium* Bede neglects, if rule over more than one kingdom or nation achieved through military conquest is the marker of *imperium*, is Penda, whose conquests included Hwicce and the smaller kingdoms that he united, briefly, into Middle Anglia. Fanning concludes that Bede's seven "overkings" represents not "a continuing political tradition in England but part of a legend, one that was obscure even to Bede."[29]

So, it is likely that Penda did not recognize an idea of "overking," despite his evident ability to recognize and target other kings on the battlefield, and likely would not on that account have recognized any native Anglo-Saxon form of kingship as having a special resonance with Christianity, if Christianity was especially good for overkings. Another reason why he might not have seen a clear and compelling reason to convert if the chance was offered to him was that the connection between the king's luck and the king's religious role in Anglo-Saxon England was neither as neat nor as direct as those,

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[26] Stephen Fanning, "Bede, *Imperium*, and the Bretwaldas," *Speculum* 66:1 (January 1991), 17.

[27] Fanning, "Bede," 17.

[28] Bede, 116-7.

[29] Fanning, "Bede," 25.

like Higham, who posit "Germanic" sacral kingship as part of the Anglo-Saxon world view would claim. Anglo-Saxons may not have considered the king's power or "luck" as a reflection of the strength of the king's deity but instead have understood it in more personal, less categorical ways. For advocates of the idea of sacral kingship, luck, related to terms like *gæfa*, *gipta* or *gipt*, and *hamingja*, is seen as a pagan Germanic concept. Peter Hallberg argues that the terms used in the Scandinavian sagas to describe the luck given by the gods "are ancient and Scandinavian in origin," and says that the Anglo-Saxon terms *eadig* and *saelig* as well as may have a similar origin as well.[30] Walter Baetke counters that these terms are applied in the sagas not only to kings but also to jarls and Icelandic farmers and says that they "were in no way exclusively associated with regal status. Among kings – as among all human beings – some have luck, some not."[31] Moreover, Baetke argues that the sagas describe a Christian concept of blessing by God rather than a pagan concept of luck because they

> were written partly in the twelfth, for the most part in the thirteenth century, and their authors lived in a Christian conceptual world. Yes, one cannot dismiss the suspicion that *gipt* and *gipta*, perhaps *gæfa*, too, are themselves only Christian formulations. One suggestion of this is the meaning of the words, another the fact that in skaldic poetry the words *gæfa*, *gipta*, and *gipt* occur only in later poems composed by Christian skalds and also usually have a Christian meaning.[32]

However, Rory McTurk says that Hallberg's statistical studies of the occurence of these

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[30] Peter Hallberg, "The concept of *giþa, gæfa, hamingja* in Old Norse Literature," *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, 1971/1973, in Rory W. McTurk, "Sacral Kingship in Ancient Scandinavia; A Review of Some Recent Writings," *Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 19 (1976), 167.

[31] Baetke, 152-3.

[32] Baetke, 153.

terms for luck in Old Norse-Icelandic narrative prose finds "no clear evidence in the

sagas of an unmistakeable connection between the words *gæfa*, *gipta*, *hamingja* and

Christian concepts, or even for their acquisition of Christian shade of meaning over

time."[33] Since these terms express

> native Scandinavian concepts [that are] neutral in relation to definite
> religious systems – they mean success in life, but that can be provided by
> Oðinn, by God, or by some other, more undefined power … what would
> then be more natural than that popular Christian kings and heroes should
> be endowed with plenty of that fortune?[34]

So, the power and "luck" of Anglo-Saxon kings may have been more personal and less

institutional than Higham's analysis assumes. If so, then Penda's power was not

dependent on an institutional "kingly" religious role, and he may have had no reason to

look for a religion that might offer him more kingly power. If he instead understood the

Anglo-Saxon pagan religion to be the *Mercian* religion, then he may have had compelling

reasons to continue in it; we shall examine that possibility more closely at this chapter's

end.

In addition to these points, it is very possible that the association of the king's power

with both divine favor and power over other kings may have been made much more

explicit by the Augustinian missionaries than it ever was within Anglo-Saxon, and it may

even have been made more explicitly Roman as well. In his letter to the newly converted

King Æthelberht of Kent, Pope Gregory recounts the career of Constantine as "*piissimus*

imperator" and urges the Kentish king to, like Constantine, "hasten to instill the

knowledge of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into the kings and nations

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[33] McTurk, 167.

[34] Hallberg, 161-2, in McTurk, 168.

subject to you, that you may surpass the ancient kings of your race in praise and merit."[35]

Higham, who, despite his emphasis on "overkingship," is a convincing analyst of the

actual power of Anglo-Saxon kings, says that Gregory's vision of Æthelberht's kingship

as "a universal one which was justified within providential history as the divinely

appointed means of effecting conversion" failed to account for the political reality in

which other English kings "were separate from, and autonomous from, Æthelberht."[36] If

so, then "overkingship" was something that made much more sense to the pope than it

did to the king.

The patrician Roman Gregory's model for Æthelberht's Christian kingship and the

one almost certainly presented by the Roman mission would surely have been that of

Roman law.[37] In the Justinian Code, the emperor's authority was that of "the *kosmokrator*

– the world's Ruler – and thus the earthly representative of God, the *Pantokrator*."[38] As

noted before, there must have been some royal sponsorship of Anglo-Saxon pagan

religious rites and temples, for kings like Æthelberht and Rædwald had the power to raise

or cast down altars and idols. Gregory's letter to Æthelberht put that power in the context

of Roman *imperium* and associated it with Christianity. However, as we have shown, a

king's endowing temples and being present at their rites, pagan or Christian, does not

mean that the king had a sacral role in those rites. Coifi, Edwin's pagan priest, does not

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[35] Bede, 113.

[36] Higham, 98.

[37] Walter Ullmann, *Law and Politics in the Middle Ages: An Introduction to the Sources of Medieval Political Ideas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 54.

[38] Ullmann, 61.

say that the king ever performed a sacral function like his own, only that the king bestowed "greater benefits and greater honors" on others.[39] Gregory almost seems to be offering an expanded, more directly sacred (if not sacral) role to Anglo-Saxon kings who became Christian, one more like the idealized role of the Roman emperors.

Overkingship and sacral kingship may not have been ideologies of power native to Anglo-Saxon England at all, at least in any developed, institutional form. Instead, they most likely are ideologies that developed in response to the Christian mission to England and in response to impulses that were Roman *and* Christian.

Identity and Influence among Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

To say that the Christianity that came first to Kent was among the Anglo-Saxons seen as Roman is not to say that Anglo-Saxon kings wanted to be either emperors or Romans. But, surely, those kings who converted to Christianity, especially those who converted under the aegis of the Augustinian mission, understood the significance of Rome. That significance may very well also have reached those kings who had not yet converted, and those kings may have reacted to it in different ways depending on their own sense of identity.

We have already seen that concomitant with the seventh-century English conversions came a change in grave-goods, with some of the new goods showing styles and forms similar to those of Roman remains of the late forth and early fifth century. These graves may be those of both pagans and Christians (though graves unaccompanied

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[39] Bede, 183.

by goods are, in general, considered to be those of Christians).[40] Since they seem to

appear in "all English kingdoms at once" rather than just in kingdoms known to be

Christian at their first appearance, Helen Geake says that these Roman-style goods may

have been connected with "changes in secular power" being given impetus by the new

religious and political ideology presented by the Augustinian mission.[41] While it may go

too far to say, as she does, that "the grave-goods of Conversion-period England were …

used to construct and express a pan-English neo-classical national identity" based on

earlier and contemporary Roman models,[42] it does seem both safe and useful to say that

among Anglo-Saxon elites there was, during the seventh century, a fashion for markers of

status associated with Rome and with the Roman past of England.

One of those elites, as we know from Bede, was Edwin of Northumbria, who had

Roman-style standards carried before him not only in battle but also during his royal

circuit.[43] Edwin may have seen examples of these standards in Rædwald's court in East

Anglia[44] or in Cadvan's in Gwynedd,[45] and Margaret Deanesly proposes that Edwin's

standards for war and peace were copied from Roman coins. She says further that coins

show a continued fashion for England's Roman past. From the beginnings of minting in

Anglo-Saxon England, the English followed the Merovingian standards for value and

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[40] Geake, 127; Pretty, 90.

[41] Geake, 133.

[42] Geake, 136.

[43] Bede, 193.

[44] Bede, 192-3 n.2.

[45] Margaret Deanesly, "Roman Traditionalist Influence Among the Anglo-Saxons," *The English Historical Review* 58:230 (April 1943), 137.

weight but not in design. Instead, the English "made an independent selection of suitable emblems, taking them mainly from the reverses of imperial coins of the Constantinian period and the fourth century, from such 'treasure' coins as must have been produced from hoards rather than acquired by trade."[46] Graves with Roman coins in Geake's sample occur near Roman settlements in the areas corresponding with Kent, East Anglia and Hwicce, and most of these coins were pierced or otherwise show indications of mounting that suggest they were used as amulets.[47] Again, the strong suggestion is that seventh-century Anglo-Saxons elites, including those who, if converted, were not yet well-versed enough in Christian ways as to bury in cemeteries associated with churches and to cease to deposit grave goods, were attracted to the Roman heritage of the island at the same time that missionaries came to the island from Rome to convert them to Christianity.[48] They associated Rome not just with religion but also with power, and they saw that power as something independent of religious belief.

Remnants of Rome much larger than coins were certainly known to the Anglo-Saxons from their first entry into the island. Æthelberht restored a church for the use of Augustine's mission that "had been built in ancient times by the hands of Roman believers,"[49] surely one of many such remains of Roman buildings throughout England. Not only the living but also the dead made use of these physical markers of the power of the insular past. Howard Williams, assessing the associations between Anglo-Saxon grave sites and pre-Roman burial mounds, says that in the seventh century single large

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[46] Deanesly, "Roman Traditionalist," 142.

[47] Geake, 32, 205.

[49] Bede, 115.

burial mounds were built to house the graves of Anglo-Saxon elites (the most famous

example being Sutton Hoo) rather than smaller graves being incorporated into existing

barrow sites. He suggests that these Anglo-Saxon elites "were not inventing these [burial]

traditions *de novo*" but were instead using appropriating and altering "existing attitudes

toward ancient monuments" to associate themselves "with powerful forces and with a

distant past that may have served to legitimize political strategies in the present."[50] So, by

the placement of graves, by the deposition of grave goods, and by the adoption of

symbols of power from the Roman past, some of the Anglo-Saxons sought to associate

themselves with that power. Not all did so. Notably, Roman coins are not prominent at all

in seventh-century Mercian graves – but spear points and swords are.[51]

Why, however, if the Anglo-Saxon elites wanted to identify themselves with the

Roman past, did they have to dig up that past? The inheritors of Roman Britain were

already with them, in the British kingdoms. Edwin took refuge in the courts of one of

them, and Penda allied with that one's son to defeat Edwin. Christianity also remained

among the British in England, and northern England even shows signs of maintaining the

diocesan ecclesiastical organization inherited from Rome.[52] Once the Augustinian

mission entered England, English kings and kingdoms accepted conversion from Irish-

established missions from the North, but before that, and for long afterward as Bede

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[50] Howard Williams, "Monuments and the Past in Early Anglo-Saxon England," *World Archaeology* 30:1 (June 1998), 103.

[51] Geake, 239-40.

[52] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 35.

makes clear, the British Church in the Roman-identified kingdoms to the West actively avoided bringing Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons.

Part of why a living tradition of *Romanitas* was not available to the Anglo-Saxons is that the British were likely no longer particularly Roman themselves. The rapid disappearance of urban life and urban products such as wheel-produced pottery and coinage occurred in western Britain in the fifth century, before the Mercians and others approached the British borders.[53] That the Anglo-Saxons and the British maintained an active enmity for centuries certainly proved a bar to any exchange of ideas as well. More importantly, however, it was unlikely that the Anglo-Saxons found those ideas they did encounter, British Christianity included, attractive. Bryan Ward-Perkins says that some of the Franks who entered Gaul had already been introduced to Roman ideas through imperial service. Furthermore, the Franks found in Gaul Roman cathedrals in an active urban culture. The Anglo-Saxons who entered Britain, however, who likely had much less contact with Rome while still in the Continent, found a Brittonic-speaking people who had already to a large part abandoned cities and Roman villas. As he says,

> the experience in post-Roman Britain confirms the observation that the amount of borrowing between one culture and another is determined, not only by the amount of contact between the two, but also by the perceived status that each culture has in the eyes of the other. When invaders find a native culture that they feel to be superior to their own, they borrow heavily and readily from it … but when, as in Britain, they find a culture that they, rightly or wrongly, perceive to be inferior, they story is very different.[54]

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[53] Bryan Ward-Perkins, "Why Did the Anglo-Saxons Not Become More British?," *The English Historical Review* 115, no. 462 (June 2000), 528.

[54] Ward-Perkins, 530.

The perception of inferiority was likely mutual, if Gildas's opinion of the Anglo-Saxon invaders and their "doggish mouths" is any indication.[55] In the case of Mercia, though, this polarization between British and Anglo-Saxon was much less clear, as Penda's willingness to ally with Cadwallon and the lack of conflict between Mercia and her western neighbors shows. Again, Mercia was Anglian in culture, but at its fringes it included lands where Britains had lived alongside Anglians since the sixth century. Penda at least treated the British as allies, and they returned that esteem until the end. Sims-Williams notes that a Welsh elegy for Cynddylan, a seventh-century prince of Powys, says of Penda that "'when the son of Pyd wished, how ready was he'… apparently referring to an alliance between Cynddylan and Penda son of Pybba, whose nickname in Welsh sources is *Panna ap Pyd* ("Penda son of Danger")."[56] Sims-Williams does not press the conjecture that "some British alliance or intermarriage may be implied by the elements *walh* [in Merewalh, said to be the son of Penda who first ruled the Magonsætan] and *pen* in these names (cf. Welsh *pen* 'head, chief'),"[57] but even lacking evidence of that close a connection it is clear that Penda often stood in better stead with, and could rely more upon, his British neighbors than his Anglian ones.

Such an alliance could not have been ignored by the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, not only for its military but also for it cultural implications. It may be that Penda was more resistant to influence from other kingdoms within his own Anglo-Saxon culture, and may also have been less of a candidate for conversion attempts, because his status

[55] Gildas, 311.

[56] Sims-Williams, 28.

[57] Sims-Williams, 26.

and Mercia's was lessened by their position on the "marches" and their association with the British. The Mercians were Angles by all evidence, but not all Angles may have been equal in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons. One thing that may demonstrate this is that until Peada's marriage to Alhflæd, the daughter of Oswiu, none of the marriages among Anglo-Saxon kingdoms recorded by Bede involved marriage into the ruling house of Mercia. Marriage seemed to have moved *outward* from Mercia; Edwin's first queen, Cwenburh, was the daughter of the Mercian king Ceorl. It is clear that conversion to Christianity often followed the more intimate lines of communication opened up between pagan and Christian kingdoms by a royal marriage. Conversely, Rædwald's pagan queen was able both to "seduce" him away from his new Christianity[58] and to convince him not to "sacrifice his own honor … more precious than any ornament" by accepting Æthelfrith's bribes to kill Edwin, whom he was protecting.[59] In addition, it was only after Edwin was no longer married to Cwenburh that he accepted Christianity, in part as a result of his marriage to Æthelburh. While sources may not show their specific influence, the effect of queens upon the religious affiliation of their husbands is clear enough in outline to be accepted as part of what influenced conversions.

It may also be that the marriage conveyed more status to the king accepting the queen than to the one giving his daughter in marriage. Edwin sought Æthelburh at a time when he was seeking to gain power in Northumbria, and it is likely that such a marriage conferred more status upon him than his marriage to the daughter of a Mercian king. Likewise, it is only when he was set up within his own kingdom that Peada sought the

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[58] Bede, 191.

[59] Bede, 181.

hand of Oswiu's daughter. It could be that such a match would not have been possible before, not only because of the continuing conflict between Mercia and Northumbria, but because Mercia's status as a new, less defined kingdom whose king turned to the British more than to the English was such that the kingdoms were not equal enough to permit such a rise in Mercia's status through marriage. Christianity was part of the influence and status that came with the new queen, explicitly in Peada's case, less adamantly in Edwin's, and that Mercia was less open to influence and to conversion reflects its status as a kingdom in the early seventh century.

The Power of Identity: Penda and Leovigild

And so, this is the picture we have. The seventh-century Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, large and small, all vying with each other for power, influence, and territory and all standing in opposition to the British from whom they had taken England, were offered by Augustine's mission and by those Irish Christians who followed that example a Christian religion that provided their kings with the benefits of divine power and the Roman tradition of imperial authority without making them less English. Those kingdoms that most easily accepted Christianity were the ones that had already defined themselves through territorial expansion and that had already begun to establish a clear-cut royal lineage, either over time or through the actions of a powerful ruler. Other kingdoms either were absorbed into these larger ones or accepted Christianity through the pressure applied by powerful kings, and once that acceptance was matched with the establishment of an episcopal structure, those kingdoms remained Christian.

In the middle of this, both geographically and in the continuum of power, lay Mercia. It was established later and with less initial coherent than kingdoms like Kent, which was supported by a strong dynasty and Frankish connections, and Northumbria, which threatened at several points to split into its two component kingdoms of Benicia and Deira but still had traditionally been unified by Æthelfrith. Mercia was, however, larger and more influential than East Anglia or Lindsey and had developed a royal house whose traditions went back to the Continent.[60] Furthermore, within Mercia were both British and Anglo-Saxon polities, the former powerful enough to remain identifiable and to have their territories like Hwicce and Magonsætan still recognized as coherent entities. Mercia was powerful enough that the daughters of its rulers could be married to other Anglo-Saxon kings but apparently not important enough, or too wary, for members of other ruling family to marry into theirs. Most importantly, for the second quarter of the seventh century, when both Roman and Irish missionaries were spreading Christianity and Christian institutions of the most powerful Anglo-Saxon kings, it was led by Penda, a very capable warlord whose most evident concerns lay with Mercia's power and identity as a coherent Anglo-Saxon polity.

No one can say if Penda saw himself as upholding traditional Anglo-Saxon paganism in the face of Christianity. Even if Bede had had Mercian sources, those would likely have little or nothing to say about Penda's pagan religion – to the literate English and British Christians both, that he was pagan was enough. The traditional picture of Penda recorded by Bede, as a man indifferent to religious affiliation but concerned with

[60] Brooks, 163.

integrity and forthright behavior, may have some element of truth. He had, after all, seen his brother rule Mercia under the domination of Oswald and his aunt (at some remove) set aside by Edwin in favor of a Christian bride. He himself murdered one of Cwenburh's sons, a Christian, whom he held as hostage after Edwin's defeat. His own son Peada must have turned to Oswiu not long before Penda's final battle, one in which many of his allies, less sturdy than Cadwallon, deserted him. Penda may have been right to suspect others' motives and behavior whatever their religious beliefs.

The biography of Penda will always elude us; we can do no more than draw likely conclusions about his concerns and motives based on his actions as recorded by hostile witnesses. It may be that he remained adamantly pagan not only because some of his enemies were Christian but also because, as Henry Mayr-Harting conjectures, he felt pressured "*not* to abandon the old cults and leave the old gods completely unpropitiated, … [for] if Penda also deserted him, who knew what the war-god Woden might think and do about that?"[61] If he did feel pressured to remain true to Woden because of religious concerns or concerns for a loss of "luck" or power, however, we cannot find clear and direct evidence of it. When evaluating why Penda did not convert despite almost all other Anglo-Saxon kings doing so, it is often easier to see his conflicts with others as based in earthly concerns than to see them as based in his own piety.

There is, however, another "Germanic" king of this period whose career has some parallels with that of Penda and who may have attempted to use his people's traditional religion as a unifying and defining political force. Leovigild, the Visigothic king who

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[61] Henry Mayr-Harting, *Two Conversions to Christianity: The Bulgarians and the Anglo-Saxons* (Reading, UK: University of Reading, 1994), 15.

ruled in the Iberian peninsula from 569-586, ascended to the throne at a time when the

Visigoths were only beginning to reclaim their stability lost through internal strife (his

was the first peaceful ascension to the Visigothic throne in over 40 years) and through

conflicts with the Byzantines and the Roman Catholic Suevi. Like Penda, Leovigild

fought battles throughout his reign and succeeded in expanding and consolidating the

Visigothic kingdom. He was also not a Roman Christian, like most of those he opposed,

but an Arian one. Later Roman Christian writers treated him slightly better than Bede

treated Penda; Isodore of Seville, who excoriates Leovigild's Arian "impiety,"

nevertheless says that "with the zeal of his armies and the concomitant success of his

victories, he brilliantly succeeded in achieving a great deal."[62] The difference here is not

only that Roman Christians may have found Arians more palatable than they found

pagans. Isodore was also a Visigoth while Bede was Northumbrian, not Mercian.

Leovigild was less lucky in his sons than was Penda. Whereas Peada, Christian or

no, must have allowed his father's army in 654 to cross Middle Anglia, capture East

Anglia, and return to fight his own father-in-law Oswiu, Leovigild's son Hermenegild

converted from Arian to Roman Christianity and raised a military rebellion against his

father. Moreover, it is clear that religious conflict played some part in this confrontation

between Leovigild and his son, while there is no record that Penda and Peada fought after

Peada's conversion, and that Leovigild used Arian Christianity to support his political

position. He sponsored an Arian Christian synod that declared that Roman Catholics

could enter the Arian church without being rebaptised in 580, the year after

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[62] Isidore of Seville, *History of the Kings of the Goths* 49, in *Chronicle, Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Baxter Wolf (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 102.

Hermenegild's rebellion. This was an effective move to weaken Hermenegild's professed religion and strengthen Leovigild's own; John of Biclaro says that because of this synod "many of our own inclined toward the Arian doctrine."[63]

Leovigild may have been no more or less pious than Penda. However, they appear to have shared one overriding concern: the security of their kingdoms both within and without. E. A. Thompson points out that Leovigild's support for the Arian religion may well have been based in identity rather than in religious doctrine. As he says,

> the victory of Catholicism was in some sense a defeat for the Visigothic element in the population of Spain; or at any rate it may have been regarded as such by a considerable number, though not by all, of the Visigoths. Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Leovigild attacked John [of Biclaro] and Masona of Merida not because they were Catholics but because they were Visigoths who had gone over to Catholicism. There was no proof that they were in any way connected with Hermenegild's rebellion … but they were in Leovigild's eyes traitors to the Gothic cause at a critical time.[64]

This emphasis on religion as a component of a kingdom's identity may give insight into one of the more heinous actions of Penda's that Bede records – the murder of Edwin's son, and Penda's cousin by Cwenburh, Eadfrith.[65] Brooks suggests that Penda did this to gain favor with Oswald,[66] but if Penda suspected Oswald's apparent designs on Mercia then an attempt to curry favor with him by killing a rival claimant to the Northumbrian throne seems out of character. At no point does Penda seem to have lacked spine. That he

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[63] John of Biclaro, *Chronicle*, in *Chronicle, Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Baxter Wolf (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 72.

[64] E. A. Thompson, *The Goths in Spain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), 106. Both men were Visigothic Roman Catholic bishops exiled from their sees during Hermenegild's rebellion.

[65] Bede, 203.

[66] Brooks, 167.

found Eadfrith to be useless as a hostage or, even, as a potential and controllable replacement for Oswald once Oswald proved he could hold Northumbria, is a more reasonable guess, but one that fails to provide motive for murder. Eadfrith was still Penda's kinsman, and if he were powerless he could likely do Penda no harm. However, if Eadfrith's conversion to Christianity, especially if it was sincere (and Bede might very well have known if Eadfrith had apostated and joined Penda), was seen by Penda as a betrayal not of paganism but of Eadfrith's Mercian heritage, then that may explain why Penda killed him. It was not because Eadfrith was a poor tool, or because he had rejected paganism for Christianity, but because he was a traitor to the Mercia Penda was fighting, and would continue to fight, to secure. For Penda and Leovigild both, their actions are most easily understood as being concerned with political identity, with their kingdom, its independence, and its security, rather than religious belief.

Leovigild maintained the Visigothic kingdom and himself as its king by quashing rebellion, recovering Visigothic territory in Spain, and adapting the symbols of royal power to serve the Visigothic identity. Leovigild used all of the tools at his disposal to ensure his unchallenged rule over a unified Visigothic kingdom, and when faced with the rebellion of his son he used Arian Christianity as a tool as well. Could Penda have done the same with his paganism? If he did try to use Anglo-Saxon paganism as a tool to support Mercian identity and stability in the same way that Leovigild used Arianism, that is not recorded. There is no evidence for a pagan temple complex in Mercia like there is with Æthelfrith's complex at Yeavering, no record that Penda reinforced pagan rites, nor

even a statement that he barred Christian missionaries from Mercia.[67] The Christians present in the lands he controlled appear to have continued much as they had before, and his own Christian son retained his Middle Anglian kingdom despite his being dependant upon his father.

The reason why those Christians were able to remain in pagan Mercia and the reason why Penda himself remained pagan is because their loyalties, and his own, remained with Mercia and with him as Mercia's king. If religion is part of the *mentalité* of a people, then adherence to that religion is also in part loyalty to that people. Peada became Christian after he obtained his own kingdom and became the ruler of the Middle Angles rather than just the son of the Mercian king. Those who were Christian within Mercia's lands appear to have raised no rebellion against its pagan king because of their religion, so their religion was tolerated. Eadfrith's conversion may have carried the taint of disloyalty that Penda could not endure, but Penda was less secure in 634 than he was two decades later, when he was strong enough to have defeated two Northumbrian kings and was set, if not for the defection of his allies, to defeat a third.

Higham's assessment – that Penda's failure was a failure to "centralise political and sacral power, leaving him over-dependent on military might to achieve his ends"[68] – speaks to results rather than to reasons. Because Penda's ends were most clearly to expand and stabilize Mercia in the face of the designs of other, higher-status kingdoms, and because the relationship of power and sacral authority was likely much weaker within Anglo-Saxon paganism than Higham contends, the religion of Mercia was most

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[67] Indeed, Bede specifically says he allowed them; Bede, 281.

[68] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 241.

clearly important to Penda only as it related to Mercian identity. King Penda failed to convert not as much because he was pagan as because he was Mercia's king and because it was there that his strongest interests lay. Bede may have had it right. For Penda, what was crucial was not *fide Christi* but *opera fidei* – not religious faith, but faithful works. Three years after his death, Penda's son Peada, who ruled a divided Mercia under Oswiu's auspices, was murdered by three of Penda's lords. They drove out Oswiu's *ealdormen*, reunited Mercia, and made Penda's son Wulfhere its king. Then, Bede says, "being free and having their own king, they rejoiced to serve their true king, Christ, for the sake of an everlasting kingdom in heaven."[69] Both Peada and Wulfhere were Christian, but Peada had been content to rule over a Mercia weakened, divided, and subordinate to Northumbria. Wulfhere's actions, which were to take back its territory and even to expand it further, showed him to be a king who considered Mercia first. Penda would have approved.

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[69] Bede, 295.

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