

HOLDING THE BORDER: POWER, IDENTITY AND THE CONVERSION OF MERCIA

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship, particularly that of Nicholas Higham, proposes that the seventh-century conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to Christianity occurred because Christianity offered methods for accessing and using power that Anglo-Saxon kings had previously lacked. A nuanced evaluation that looks at more than just political necessity is needed to account for those kingdoms that resisted conversion. Examining the conversion of the kingdom of Mercia from the perspective of its origin and development shows that what concerned Mercia's rulers – especially Penda, Mercia's last pagan king – was not the “overlordship” or sacral kingship identified by Higham and others as the Anglo-Saxon kings' primary concerns. Instead, Penda's resistance to Christianity arose from Mercia's identity as a “border” kingdom and its status among the other kingdoms of England. Penda may have resisted conversion in order to maintain and defend that Mercian identity.