THE RISE AND FALL OF THE KINGDOM OF MERCIA

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Around 731 AD, the Northumbrian monk, Bede, writing one of the most important texts in Anglo-Saxon history, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People*, noted the reach of Mercian power. After listing the bishops of England's southern provinces, he observed: 'all these provinces, together with others south of the river Humber and their kings, are subject to Æthelbald, king of the Mercians'.

The kingdom of Mercia at its high water mark, represented in a seventeenth-century map by Jan Jansson. *Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy Map of the Kingdoms of England, c.* 1646.

These words effectively convey the pre-eminence that Æthelbald had secured within England during his forty-one year reign (716-757), one of the longest recorded in Anglo-Saxon history. This observation leads the historian to ask how Mercia achieved such eminence, what enabled it to survive and why it declined?

If there is one document that 'captures' this sense of supremacy it is Æthelbald's 'Ismere Diploma' of 736, by which the king granted to his 'venerable companion' Cyneberht, ten hides of land by the River Stour in the neighbourhood of Morfe and Kinver (Staffordshire) for the construction of a monastery. In this charter Æthelbald was described not only as '*rex Merciorum*' and '*rex sutanglorum*' (king of Mercia and king of the South English), but he also took the title of '*rex Britanniae*', king of Britain, while in death he was perhaps commemorated as the triumphant warrior-king of the Repton cross-shaft.

Caution should be exercised when evaluating the claims of kings, but without doubt Æthelbald was a powerful figure with wide-ranging authority, who laid the foundations upon which his successor, the famous King Offa, subsequently built his reign of a little less than forty years (757-796). However, this Mercian pre-eminence of the eighth century, with its origins in the seventh, was to be lost during the ninth century and Mercia transformed.

Mercia and the first Mercians

The very name 'Mercia' is derived from the Old English word '*Mierce*', 'boundary folk', suggesting that these people were in some way at the fringes of the main Anglo-Saxon settlements. Archaeology points to the territory between the Warwickshire Avon and the Trent Valley as the Mercian heartland, where the principal sites included Tamworth, a major royal estate; Lichfield, the bishopric associated with the cult of St Chad; and Repton, a monastery which was endowed by the Mercian royal family, had associations with St Guthlac, and was the mausoleum for several members of the Mercian royal kin.

A process of infiltration and admixture between the incoming Anglo-Saxons and the existing Romano-British communities

Æthelbald, king of the Mercians for forty-one years, perhaps shown as triumphant warrior–king on the Repton cross-shaft.

Courtesy J. Hunt

characterises the western midlands, suggesting that the population of Mercia might be better described as 'Anglo-British'.

The incoming Anglo-Saxons encountered an established British population and while the nature of our evidence leaves scope for debate, early post-Roman Britain seems best characterised by political fragmentation and regionalisation, based on late Roman towns and their *territoria* and on pre-Roman territories that had never lost their identity; the best known and most readily identifiable of such territories in the western midlands is that of the *Hwicce*. This 'patchwork' was not only British in texture. The new arrivals were similarly fragmented into groups of varying size, an observation that is implicit in the accounts of early encounters in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in later sources.

Although the Mercian royal family were known as the '*Iclingas*', the kin of Icel, it was his descendant, Creodda, to whom the establishment of the Mercian kingdom is credited in the late-sixth century (*c*.585), a date consistent with the foundation of the other English kingdoms. However, while Creodda had successfully established his authority over a number of communities, this need not imply a Mercian kingdom on the scale that was to be achieved by the seventh century.

It is from the mid-seventh century that we can detect the presence of the Mercian kingdom, the establishment of bishoprics at Lichfield in *c*.669 and in Worcester *c*.680-690 reflecting the growing confidence of emergent Mercian authority. Although poetry has to be used with caution as a historical source, the tenor of the seventh century seems to be caught in a ninth-century Welsh poem that tells of Cynddylan, prince of the Wroxeter region, raiding towards Lichfield in the mid-seventh century, apparently allied with Morfael, the last British lord of Lichfield, perhaps attempting to forestall the westward expansion of English political authority. The foundation of the bishoprics, tied as they were to the protection afforded by royal power, was itself a mechanism that reinforced royal authority. While such authority was evident in the ability to claim tribute from subject communities, the foundation of the bishoprics would surely encourage the development of a more durable royal infrastructure.

Silver penny of Offa, 757-796.

King Offa famously gave Mercia not only the earthwork that bears his name, but also a strong coinage.

King Penda and his Succesors

The first of the Mercian kings of whom we have any real knowledge was Penda, who appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 628 at Cirencester, apparently reversing West Saxon incursions into the Mercian region, and in the course of this also establishing Mercian authority over the territory of the *Hwicce*. Penda may be traced making war on Northumbria, killing both Edwin in 633 and Oswald in 642, and extending his territories to the east and the west until he was eventually overcome by Oswy of Northumbria in 655. The telling detail in Bede's account is that Penda died leading an army that incorporated 'thirty royal leaders' and their 'legions' – a clear indication not only of his overlordship and power, but also of the personal and tribute-based foundations of his kingship.

Abrupt as Penda's end was, it was not the end of Mercian power. After a short period of Northumbrian domination Penda's son, Wulfhere, returned from exile and established himself as king. Under Wulfhere (659-675) and his brother Æthelred (675-704) Mercia again recovered the initiative and claimed authority over the southern English, one important consequence of which was to secure London as a Mercian town, an association that lasted into the ninth century. This had far-reaching implications for Mercian kingship as royal authority was closely related to wealth, an important source of which in the early English kingdoms was trade. England was firmly embedded in trade networks that reached out across Europe and Scandinavia, London now serving Mercia as an '*entrepôt*' in the same way as *Hamwih* (Southampton) served Wessex, *Eoforwic* (York) served Northumbria and *Gipeswic* (Ipswich) served East Anglia.

Great poems like *Beowulf* reveal the importance of 'good lordship' and generosity in determining the reputation of a lord. The ability to attract and reward the best warriors was all-important and Mercia, with further opportunities in an open frontier to the west, had considerable advantages.

Kings like Penda prospered because they were able to maintain large numbers of noble and well-equipped warriors; they could do so through a combination of opportunities for plunder and gifts of land and possessions. As historian Patrick Wormald remarked: 'Royal power is like a snowball; while it moves it grows, but when it stops it melts.' Thus were the foundations of the kingdom laid, and this is the context in which the immense moveable wealth associated with such as the Sutton Hoo ship burial or the Staffordshire Hoard can be best understood.

Mercian Communities

The development of the kingdom of Mercia is informed by a tantalising document of uncertain date and origin known as the *Tribal Hidage*, but arguably associated with the time of Wulfhere or Æthelred in the seventh century. Without parallel at this time in England, the *Tribal Hidage* is a list of thirty-five tribes south of the River Humber, many of them known only from this source, together with the number of hides assigned to each territory. It reads like a tribute list that may be associated with the Mercian Supremacy, listing the kingdoms and 'peoples' south of the Humber subject to claims of Mercian authority at the time of its creation.

The 'hide' was the unit of assessment against which burdens, requirements and payments might be levied; it was a basis for levying hospitality, military and labour services, and other forms of tribute. Reflecting the 'political geography' of the day, kingdoms and folk groups are present, but it is a list that is expressed more in terms of people than of land – communities rather than territories. Kingdoms did not yet embrace all communities in England, other than through the exaction of tribute. It reveals the mixed nature of the communities that inhabited the west midland region, the probable heirs to what had been found at the time of the migrations.

Moveable wealth - one of the foundations of Anglo-Saxon power. The Sutton Hoo helmet and a Staffordshire Hoard cheek piece.

Kings Æthelbald and Offa

When Æthelred abdicated to the monastery of Bardney in 704, while the north was secure, Mercian authority in the south was far from it. This situation was entirely reversed by the two greatest of Mercia's kings, Æthelbald and Offa, during whose reigns the relatively sophisticated infrastructure of royal power can be discerned. Æthelbald, who came to the throne in 716, died at the hands of his bodyguard at Seckington, near Tamworth, in 757. His murder may reflect tensions in his reign and contention between two rival Mercian dynasties. He was followed to the throne by Beornred, to be deposed within the year by Offa, restoring the previous dynasty. This dynastic rivalry resurfaced a little more than fifty years after the death of Offa, when in 849 Wystan, the grandson of King Wiglaf (827- 840), was murdered by Berhtfert, the son of King Beorhtwulf (840 - 852), who like his ancestor was brought to Repton for burial.

By the time that Offa's reign had matured, Mercia was the dominant English kingdom whose king sought to treat with Charlemagne as an equal. Offa was effectively at the head of a confederation of peoples south of the Humber and was close to unifying these territories under his own assertive kingship. He reduced once independent kings to the ranks of subordinate ealdormen and sought to dominate Canterbury. He styled himself as '*Rex Anglorum*' (king of the English) but north of the Humber he relied on punitive expeditions and marriage alliances to influence his son-in-law, Æthelred of Northumbria.

Offa was arguably a more significant figure than his celebrated West Saxon successor, Alfred. He provided the kingdom with a strong coinage – the new silver penny – first issued after 765 and comparable with the new silver pennies of Pippin III in Frankia, and was the first Anglo-Saxon king to issue coins in his own name on a large scale, fully aware of the prestige that this lent to his kingship; and he understood the significance of trade. Among the greatest visible monuments to his power, albeit only partly his work, is the earthwork dyke running between England and Wales, an experiment in linear boundaries on a scale not previously seen in Anglo-Saxon England but clearly with Roman antecedents.

Roots of Royal Power

The personal and institutional standing of kingship was further enhanced when in 787 Offa had his son, Ecgfrith, acknowledged and anointed as heir; the rite of royal unction, adopted from the Franks, added to the sacerdotal nature and prestige of kingship. The preamble to King Alfred's law code reveals Offa the legislator, having issued a code of laws, now lost, that alongside his other actions asserted the prerogatives of the king.

Surviving charters reveal the steps Mercian kings took to maintain their supremacy. Permanent subordinate relationships were established, while in demanding the 'three necessities' (bridge and *burh* work and *fyrd* duty) as of right they demonstrated the way forward for their successors; at sites like Hereford and Tamworth we see the inspiration for a fortifications policy that was later adopted by the West Saxons.

Mercian domination, however, was primarily a 'south Humbrian' affair. Mercian supremacy had only been gained at a cost, was resented particularly in Kent, and held in check by military campaigns. Together with the embarrassment of uncooperative archbishops in Canterbury (and York), these difficulties led to the short-lived elevation of St Chad's seat in Lichfield to the status of an archbishopric. In East Anglia King Æthelberht was executed on the orders of Offa, while the West Saxons looked to the return of their exiled King Egbert. By 800 Mercia stood at the high water mark of its fortunes and on the eve of her decline in what was a rapidly changing world.

The End of Mercian Supremacy

In 802 Egbert returned to Wessex and West Saxon fortunes began to change. The rise of Wessex and the arrival of the Vikings, themselves interconnected, spurred the decline of the Mercian kingdom, compounded now by kings who lacked the skills and qualities of their predecessors. Ceonwulf's authority was more circumscribed than had been Offa's, and his attempt to replace the archbishopric in Lichfield with another in London led to the loss of both although this was offset by his supremacy in Kent.

East Anglia was in rebellion, but it was the West Saxon victory over Beornwulf at the battle of Ellendun in 825 that ended Mercian supremacy across southern England. The West Saxon king, Egbert, briefly took the Mercian throne in 829, but Wiglaf had recovered it by 830 and was sufficiently re-established by 836 to call an assembly at Croft in Leicestershire attended by the archbishop of Canterbury and eleven bishops of the southern province, describing the whole as a gathering of 'my bishops, *duces* and magistrates'. But Mercian supremacy was over; the relationship between Mercia and Wessex had shifted, now reliant upon alliances and marriages.

When Burgred, the last independent king of Mercia, retired to Rome in 874, in the wake of the Viking invasions, the throne passed to 'a foolish king's thegn', Ceolwulf II. Viking raiding escalated with the arrival of the Great Army, the '*micel here*', in 865. By the early 870s they were at the heart of Mercia and over-wintering at the iconic Mercian site of Repton, which they turned into a fortress. By this act the Mercian royal dynasty had effectively been defiled.

Perhaps taking advantage of local rivalries and factions, the Vikings put Ceolwulf on a 'puppet throne' and then in 877 partitioned Mercia with him. It was the Danes who had brought the kingdom of Mercia to its knees but the '*coup de grâce*' was delivered by Wessex, as when royal authority was re-asserted in the area, it was not that of the Mercian royal house but of the West Saxon kings. In essence, just as the Mercians had turned the province of the *Hwicce* into a Mercian shire, then the kings of Wessex turned Mercia into a West Saxon province.

From Kingdom to Earldom

After the Vikings English Mercia became a 'frontline province', dependent upon Wessex but autonomous under the governance of a Mercian ealdorman named Æthelred whose wife, Æthelflæd, was Alfred's eldest daughter. When Æthelred died in 911 his widow, as 'Lady of the Mercians', in concert with her brother, the West Saxon king Edward the Elder, continued their policy of fortifying Mercia and subjugating the Danes.

English history remembers these events as the 'Saxon Reconquest', as a restoration of the *status quo*, but it was far from this. Rather, it was a West Saxon campaign of aggrandisement. When Æthelflæd died in 918 Edward the Elder formally incorporated Mercia into Wessex, apparently with little trouble, and it was probably at this time that the shire boundaries in Mercia were determined, although they likely reused earlier territorial arrangements. The shires were fundamental to the exercise of royal authority in the locality and a clear indication that the territory was being incorporated into an enlarged kingdom rather than simply dominated.

The Mercian 'earldom' survived as an entity until the early 1070s and retained a sense of its own identity. The kings of Mercia had gone but they had been replaced by ealdormen, and then earls, whose association with the Mercian heartland was just as strong, and whose lands were those that had been at the core of the former kingdom. Despite the disruptions of Cnut's reign, these were the lords to whom Mercians gave their allegiance. A complex web of land tenure, patronage and kinship bound this society together and focused it on the Mercian earls. For the 'political classes' Mercian identity remained strong; when it eventually crumbled it did so under the impact of the Norman Conquest, from the 1070s. ●

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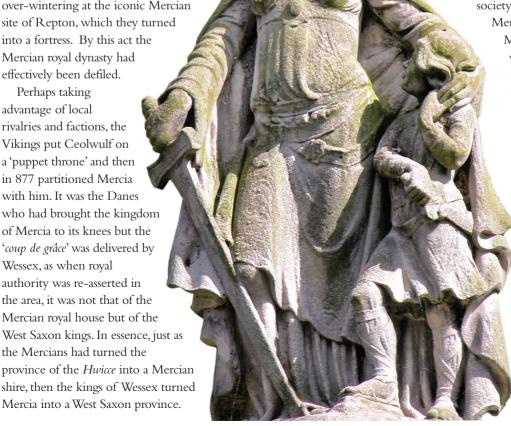
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The Sutton Hoo treasures at the British Museum. See www.britishmuseum.org

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Æthelfleda, 'The Lady of the Mercians', Tamworth Castle.