



CHRIS PEERS

# OFFA

AND THE  
MERCIAN WARS

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FIRST  
GREAT ENGLISH KINGDOM



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First Great English Kingdom

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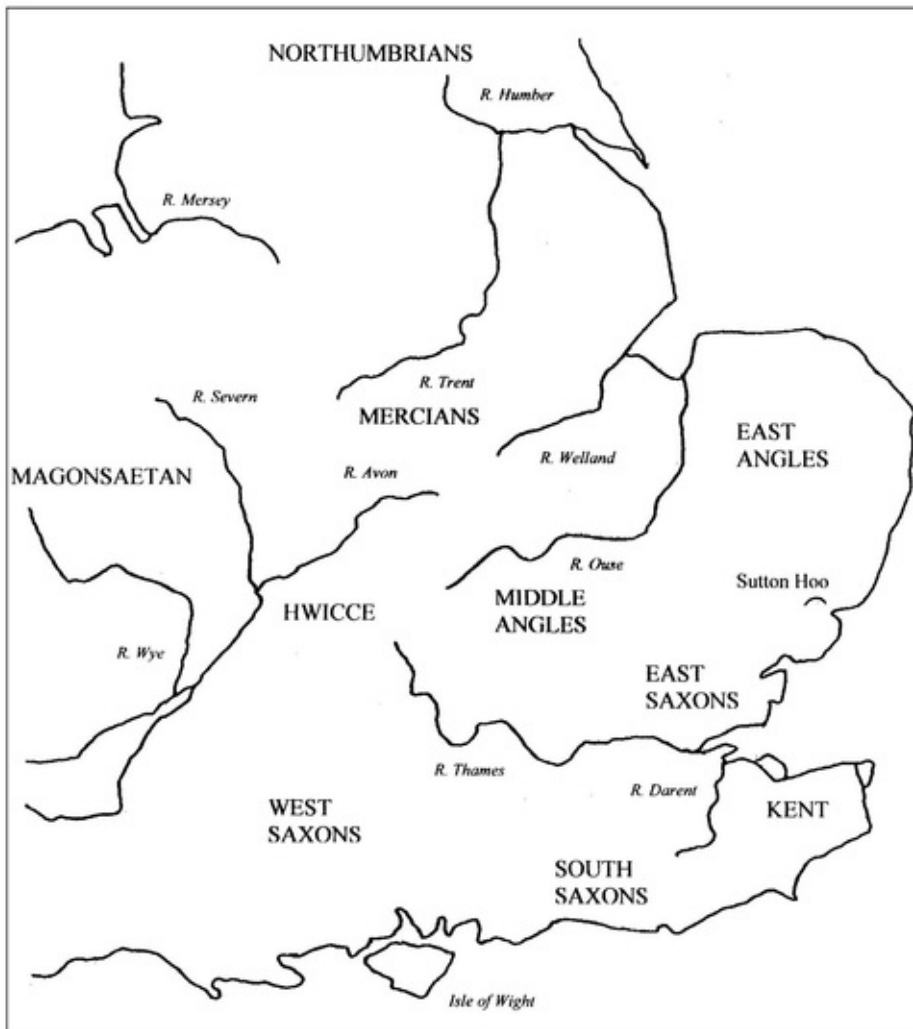
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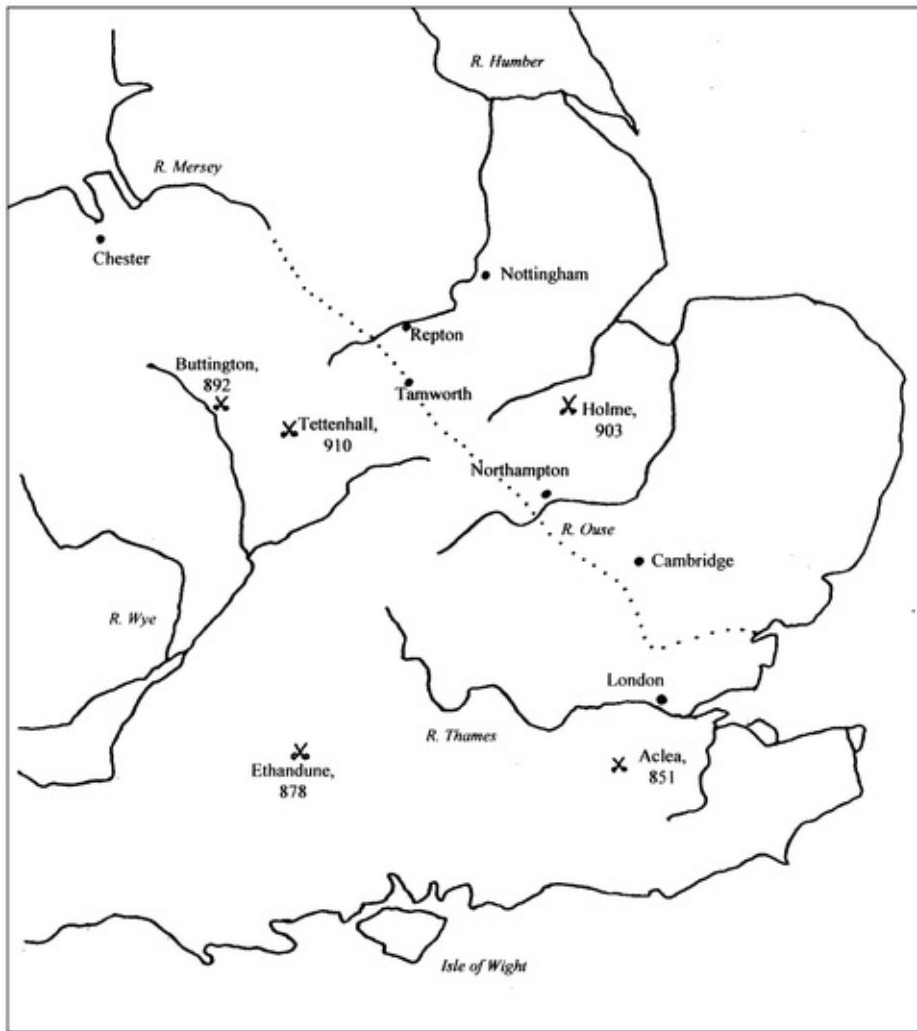
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*Map 1. The Mercians and their neighbours, c. AD 600.*



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# Prologue

Canterbury in the summer of 785 was a city not so much conquered by force of arms as stunned into submission. The ancient capital of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent, the seat of an archbishop, and place which had already been Christian for almost two centuries, this was the most sophisticated settlement in England – one of the few places where those who could afford them had access to luxuries imported from the European mainland. From here emissaries went south to Rome and even Constantinople, and traders arrived from overseas with the products of exotic lands. But it was no longer in Canterbury that real power resided: a fact which was now being brought home to the inhabitants in the most uncompromising terms. The hundreds of dust-stained warriors who urged the weary horses through the streets on this ominous morning may have seemed strange and rustic to the men of Kent, but they were received in awestruck silence. They might have been mocked in secret as half-pagan savages, but their grim demeanour – and the reputation of the man who rode at their head – ensured that not a hand was raised in resistance. These were the Mercians from the heart of England, wild frontier region famed as the school of warriors. Clad in coats of mail and iron helmets, bearing glittering spears and swords ornamented with the loot from countless victories, they were the mightiest army that England had yet seen. Their leader was the famous Offa, for nearly thirty years king of Mercia, and overlord of the neighbouring kingdoms as far as his raiding armies could reach. Now, at the height of his power, no one could be found to dispute his self-proclaimed title of ‘king of all England’.

Nine years previously the Mercians had met the men of Kent in battle at Otford on the River Darent and after a day of dreadful slaughter on both sides Offa had retired, not defeated, but unable to obtain a victory decisive enough to secure his supply lines as he advanced further into hostile territory. Since then Kent had enjoyed a precarious independence under a local ruler named Ecgberht, but the shadow of the Mercian armies, though they were temporarily distracted on other frontiers, had never been entirely dispelled. Now Ecgberht was dead and Offa was here in his place, having led his elite mounted warriors on a ride of 200 miles from the Mercian heartland to surprise the men of Kent before their new ruler could raise an army, or even open negotiations. We have no eyewitness report of his arrival in Canterbury, but Notker’s account of Offa’s contemporary Charlemagne at Pavia in 773 may give us an idea of the impact the unexpected appearance of such an army could have. Rank after rank of horsemen advanced on Pavia, coalescing into a ‘battle line of iron’, in the centre of which rode Charlemagne, armoured in mail and holding aloft his sword. The defenders, we are told, panicked or fainted at the sight, the terrified citizens crying out in despair, ‘iron, iron everywhere!’ Before the summer was out Offa would be holding court and issuing proclamations as if Kent was his by right, its ancient royal dynasty reduced to the status of vassals. So who was this man who, 1,000 years before Napoleon, could strike down kingdoms by his mere presence? Whence did he derive this power, and how did his successors lose it so completely that the name of Offa has been almost forgotten? This is the story of the Mercian kings, their victories and defeats, and the rise and fall of the first great English kingdom.

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# Introduction

As taught in English schools for most of the last two centuries, and to a lesser extent still in the popular imagination, ‘English history’ begins, paradoxically, with the Norman Conquest of 1066. Apart from the Victorians’ exaggerated admiration for empire builders such as the Normans, there are more understandable reasons for this disregard of the preceding centuries, an age which in reality saw the true creation of the English state. One reason is the scarcity of physical remains, for whereas places such as Greece, Italy and even southern France can show a more or less continuous sequence of buildings, aqueducts and other relics stretching from Roman times up to the present, in England there is very little to be seen from the period between the abandonment of the Roman villas at the end of the fourth century AD and the appearance of the first stone castles at the beginning of the twelfth. Documentary sources show a similar pattern, because English people of the fifth and sixth centuries were on the whole illiterate, and when their voice does start to be heard they are writing in a strange-looking language which at first glance bears little resemblance to the French-influenced English of the later Middle Ages. We do not even call them English: they are the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, a name which emphasises their supposed alien origin, and the period in which they lived is popularly referred to as the ‘Dark Ages’, a label which almost removes it from history altogether into a world of myth and mystery, where any wild speculation or crank theory can flourish, and often does.

However, the country which the Normans conquered already had a long history. Domesday Book, compiled only twenty years after the conquest, describes a settled land of mostly prosperous villages organised into shires and hundreds under a tight hierarchy of ownership, loyalty and obligation, their territories carefully arranged to provide each community with access to ploughland, pasture, woodland and other resources. The Normans did not create this arrangement. They owed it to the true owners of the land, whose efforts had brought it into the orbit of Roman Christianity after the chaos following the collapse of Roman secular power, and who had saved it from the Vikings, and turned it into probably the best governed and most productive kingdom in Europe. They had also produced some of the most celebrated artistic achievements of the early Middle Ages. Some of these, such as the illuminated Lindisfarne Gospels and the treasures of Sutton Hoo, have long been popular icons of Anglo-Saxon culture, but others are only now coming to light. In 2003 restoration work at Lichfield Cathedral in Staffordshire unearthed the ‘Lichfield Angel’, a magnificent eighth-century limestone sculpture now recognised to be of ‘European importance’ (‘The Lichfield Angel and the Saint Chad Gospels’, booklet, Chapter of Lichfield Cathedral, 2005). And six years later, only a few miles outside Lichfield, the buried war gear of the ‘Staffordshire Hoard’ emerged to challenge again our concept of the ‘Dark Ages’ with its exquisite decoration of gold and semiprecious stones. What is particularly interesting about these recent discoveries is their location in the English Midlands, in what was then the ‘forgotten kingdom’ of Mercia. (The counties into which England was traditionally divided, incidentally, provide a useful guide to locating the places mentioned in this book, but they were not yet in existence in the Midlands in the time of the Mercian kings. They were introduced during the tenth century when the rulers of Wessex brought the area under their control after the Viking invasions.) For of the four main kingdoms into which Anglo-Saxon England was once divided, Mercia

has always been regarded as the least interesting from a historical as well as a cultural point of view. Northumbria, whose heartland was along the north-east coast, had the great monasteries which produced the Lindisfarne Gospels and other symbols of the 'Northumbrian renaissance', as well as the influential historical work of Bede. East Anglia has the burial ground of its kings at Sutton Hoo, while Wessex, in the south, was the kingdom of Alfred the Great, the best-known pre-conquest English monarch, whose dynasty accomplished the defeat of the Vikings and the unification of the country in the tenth century.

However, as we are now coming to appreciate, Mercia was no backwater. In fact, in the seventh, eighth and early ninth centuries AD, before Wessex rose to its position of pre-eminence, it was the Mercian kings who dominated their neighbours and first earned the title of 'kings of England'. Men such as Penda, Wulfhere, Aethelbald and the greatest of them all, Offa, whose name has always been associated with the famous 'Offa's Dyke' along the Welsh border, and who received from a learned contemporary the description 'the glory of Britain'. Their rise was not a peaceful one, and battlefields across half of England, mostly now lost, were soaked in the blood of the Mercians and their enemies during their three centuries of glory. This book attempts to tell the story of how and why they achieved their victories and survived their defeats. Luckily the sources for this period are more extensive than they at first appear, and the last few decades have seen archaeologists and historians make dramatic progress towards putting it on a firmly historical footing. The most important narrative source for the early part of our period is Bede's *A History of the English Church and People*, which was written in Latin around the year 731. The 'Venerable' Bede, as he has become known, was a monk who spent almost all his life in the monasteries at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, in what was then the kingdom of Northumbria. He produced numerous erudite works, of which this history is by far the best known. As the title suggests, its primary concern is the conversion of the English to Christianity and the subsequent development of the church, but Bede also includes much information on political events and military campaigns, especially where these illuminate the careers of the early English saints. Despite the inclusion of miracle stories which the modern reader often finds difficult to take seriously, his book is a significant work of scholarship by the standards of the time, and he is often careful to identify his sources. Nevertheless his perspective is strongly pro-Northumbrian, and he is generally indifferent or even hostile to Mercia, which, for most of the century before he wrote, was Northumbria's traditional enemy. It is particularly unfortunate from our point of view that Bede died in 735 and did not live to record the career of Offa, although notes added to his manuscript after his death by an anonymous continuator do refer briefly to Offa's rise to power.

The other indispensable source is of course the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – or rather *Chronicles*, because this compilation survives in several versions, written at different locations, whose relationship to one another is the subject of constant scholarly debate. Apart from the main chronicle associated with Winchester, Worcester, Abingdon, Peterborough and Canterbury, passages from what were apparently once independent works such as the *Chronicle of Aethelweard*, and the so-called *Mercian Register* covering the years 902 to 924, have been copied into some of the surviving versions. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion I have usually referred to all these sources as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This is not unreasonable as they do follow each other very closely in most of the entries with which we are concerned, and they clearly derive from a common source. This source was probably first drawn up during the reign of King Alfred, was written in a West Saxon dialect of Old English, and mainly reflected the concerns of Alfred's own kingdom of Wessex. It was kept up to date more or less continuously from Alfred's time until the twelfth century. Like Bede, the *Chronicle* generally regards affairs in Mercia as of little consequence, and sometimes it displays a distinct political bias. But also like Bede, it is often the only source we have for the events it describes. The

Chronicle gives a fairly detailed narrative of events from the end of the ninth century onwards, and is especially valuable for the Viking Wars of that period, but before that it seldom contains more than brief notices of the main events of each year. Many of these are evidently derived from Bede, and others apparently from notes inserted into tables produced by monks for the calculation of Easter. The source has often been used as evidence for the earliest period of Anglo-Saxon England, the supposed 'invasions' of the late fifth century, but here it is particularly unreliable, and its focus is almost exclusively on the West Saxons who were traditionally believed to have founded the kingdom of Wessex.

The Life of King Alfred written by the subject's chaplain, Asser, complements the Chronicle for the reign of its subject, but again is inevitably West Saxon in its outlook and concerns. Two other well-known works of early English literature belong to myth as much as to history, but they do provide us with an unrivalled picture of the 'sharp end' of Anglo-Saxon warfare. The first is the epic poem Beowulf. This survives only in one late copy, but from internal evidence it has been deduced that it was first written down sometime in the century or so following the birth of Bede in 682 (Stenton). It is also thought that, although the present version is written in the West Saxon dialect, the original was composed in that part of the country which traditionally was settled not by Saxons but by Angles – probably, in other words, in Northumbria or Mercia. The poem may therefore be contemporary with the Mercian kings Aethelred, Aethelbald or Offa, or even have been composed at their courts. Its subject matter is not historical, but it powerfully evokes the world of the Anglo-Saxon warrior in the age of transition from paganism to Christianity. The other great English war poem recounts the exploits of Earl Byrhtnoth and his men at the Battle of Maldon in 991. Although dating from two centuries after the zenith of Mercian power, it describes weapons and tactics very similar to those which must have been used by Offa's armies, and presents a detailed account, if not of how a battle actually was fought, at least of how the noble classes believed it should have been. It is reproduced in full, in Old English and in translation, in Pollington (2001).

The notorious polemic entitled On the Ruin of Britain, written in the sixth century by a British monk named Gildas, is almost invariably the first point of reference for any study of early Anglo-Saxon England, but from our point of view it is of limited relevance and dubious reliability. The name of Nennius, a Welsh writer of the late eighth or ninth century, is traditionally attached to two more useful works which he may have edited rather than compiled personally: the *Historia Brittonum* or 'History of the Britons', and the 'Welsh Annals'. Nennius' stated intention was to reconstruct the history of the 'Britons', or non-English inhabitants of the island, which had been shamefully neglected by their own scholars. He remarks ruefully that their failure to keep proper records has forced him to rely heavily on English sources, so he can hardly be regarded as an independent source himself. However, he does provide some useful additional information, mainly from a Welsh perspective. Nennius is better known nowadays as the first historian to describe the career of the legendary King Arthur. A selection of early Welsh poems, notably the eulogies for Cadwallon and Cynddylan, two of Mercia's allies, shed a further faint light on affairs in central England in the lifetimes of their heroes.

I have also been unable to resist some of the contributions made by Henry of Huntingdon, whose *History of the English People* was written at Lincoln early in the twelfth century. Henry seems to have consciously intended to bring Bede up to date, and obviously relied on him for much of his early material. However, he does include additional details, especially in his battle accounts, which are written in his characteristically lively and entertaining style. Some of these accounts probably derive from his own imagination, but others contain hints that they might preserve material from other sources now lost, the 'chronicles preserved in ancient libraries' which the Bishop of Lincoln advised him to consult. Another reason for not disregarding Henry is his location in the East Midlands, which

put him in a better position than either Bede or the West Saxon annalists for recording oral traditions relevant to Mercian history. Several other writers of the post-Norman Conquest period dealt with the early Anglo-Saxons, and may, like Henry, have had independent sources to which we no longer have access. They include Simeon of Durham, Florence of Worcester, Roger of Wendover, William of Malmesbury, Matthew Paris, and the author of the fourteenth-century *Flowers of History*; the latter is traditionally ascribed to Matthew of Westminster and I have retained this attribution here, even though Matthew himself is now believed by many to be a fictional character.

Many writers on the subject of Anglo-Saxon warfare have relied heavily on analogy with Scandinavian sources, especially the Viking sagas. This is understandable because of the shortage of detailed accounts of English battles, and because the Scandinavian material does seem to come from a very similar warrior culture to that described in *Beowulf*, for example. Weapons were almost identical, and it is logical to assume that so were the methods of using them. However, while acknowledging that these sources can sometimes shed light on our subject, I have tried not to lean too heavily on them. They are, after all, at two removes from the world of the Mercian kings, having been written down in distant lands several centuries after the events they purport to describe.

Other sources which can illuminate the Mercian Wars in passing include the published laws of several Anglo-Saxon kings (none of them, unfortunately, Mercian), and the biographies of saints, not all of whom led entirely peaceful lives. Reference will also be made to the surviving 'charters' of the period from the eighth century onwards, which record grants of land made by kings and others in authority, often to ecclesiastical houses. These rather dry documents are of interest for two main reasons. Firstly, they record the names and often the titles of the parties, and so can show where a certain person was at a particular time and how he wished to style himself. The location of Offa's 'palace' at Tamworth, for example, is deduced not from a specific statement in the narrative sources but from the frequency with which he issued charters from that town. Similarly, documents in which Offa grants land in other kingdoms, such as Kent, provide us with a guide to the extent of his power as well as hinting at his presence on military campaigns. Many charters also define the extent of the territory they grant by describing a perambulation of its boundaries, and these have enabled scholars to reconstruct the appearance of the countryside and the frequency of woods, roads and other features.

In addition to written documents, we also have the huge and constantly growing supply of material provided by archaeologists, which has revolutionised our understanding of this and other periods, as well as providing ammunition for debate on all sorts of questions which we would once have thought lost in obscurity. At the same time textual criticism has cast doubt on the reliability of what we thought were solid facts, written down once and for all in 'black and white'. Nevertheless, despite recent attempts to bring the two disciplines closer together, writers on this period remain divided into two camps: those who use archaeology mainly to illuminate the documentary sources, and those for whom excavated material provides the only real 'hard' evidence, in contrast to the subjective and unreliable texts. I have tried to steer a middle course between these extremes, but two considerations have pushed me in the direction of the first camp. I am not trained as an archaeologist, and in any case the real interest of military history often lies in matters with which excavated artefacts alone cannot help us. What bring it to life are the names and motivations of the commanders, the strategy and tactics of the campaigns, and the deeds of the heroes. All too often, in a period as remote as this one, these have to be guessed. The words 'probably' and 'perhaps' appear far too often in these pages, for which I apologise. But that is probably better than giving a false impression of certainty, and surely better than discarding the written sources altogether, for all their weaknesses.

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# Rulers of Mercia, c. AD 600 – 874

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	Reign	Relationship to previous rulers
Cearl	c. 600	
Penda	626 – 654	Unknown
Peada	654 – 656	Son of Penda
Wulfhere	658 – 675	Son of Penda
Aethelred	675 – 704	Son of Penda
Coenred	704 – 709	Son of Wulfhere
Ceolred	709 – 716	Son of Aethelred
Aethelbald	716 – 757	Grandson of Penda's brother Eowa
Beornred	757	Unknown
Offa	757 – 796	Great-great-grandson of Eowa
Ecgfrith	796	Son of Offa
Coenwulf	796 – 821	Descendant of Penda's brother Cenwalh
Ceolwulf I	821 – 823	Brother of Coenwulf
Beornwulf	823 – 826	Unknown
Ludeca	826 – 827	Unknown
Wiglaf	827 – 840	Unknown
Beorhtwulf	840 – 852	Unknown
Burhred	852 – 874	Unknown
Ceolwulf II	874 – ?	Unknown



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# *Chapter 1*

## *Offa's Country*

The country which was to become the kingdom of Mercia occupies the approximate centre of England. It can be envisaged as a rough rectangle with its corners on the sea at the mouths of four rivers – clockwise from the south-west, the Severn, Mersey, Humber and Thames. In a great loop across the northern half of this region flows a fifth river, the Trent, along whose banks was situated the original core of the kingdom, ‘the land that was first called Mercia’. Running first southwards through what is now the county of Staffordshire, the Trent flows from west to east a few miles north of Lichfield and Tamworth – respectively the religious and civil centres of eighth-century Mercia – then north-east via Nottingham to join the Humber. On either side of the Middle Trent Valley is high ground – the Peak District of Derbyshire in the north, and the Birmingham Plateau to the south, now named after the region’s major city, which was an insignificant village in Anglo-Saxon times. The valley itself, however, contains some of the best agricultural land to be found in Europe. South and east of the Middle Trent is a wide swathe of rich lowland bounded by the swamps of the East Anglian Fens on the east, and on the south-east by the forested Chiltern Hills, almost a hundred miles from Tamworth. This was the territory of the Middle Angles, a closely related people who seem never to have had a kingdom of their own, most of whom had already come under Mercian control by the time our records begin. Beyond the Chilterns is London, at the mouth of the Thames, which, running across southern England from west to east, formed in historic times the boundary between the Mercians and the West Saxons. In the opposite direction, looking west from the edge of the Birmingham Plateau on a good day, you can see the Welsh hills sixty miles away. Between the two uplands the River Severn flows southwards towards the Irish Sea. East of its lower reaches lay the kingdom of the Hwicce, and between the Middle Severn and the hills of Wales a people called the Magonsaetan; both these groups were at least partly British rather than Anglo-Saxon in their culture and had once been independent kingdoms in their own right, but like the Middle Angles they had already become a part of the Mercian power bloc by the time our written sources begin.

This was the landscape that was to produce the first great English kingdom. It is not a big country by Continental standards, and despite its location in the centre of the island of Britain no part of it is more than seventy miles from the sea. Its rivers are also on a modest scale – you can throw a stone across the Trent at Newark, only fifty miles from its mouth – and none of its hills much exceed 1,000 feet above sea level. However, the maritime climate is relatively warm for its latitude, and the west winds provide reliable rainfall. People had been living in this land ever since the end of the Ice Age – essentially the same people, because modern DNA studies have proved that the old notion of successive waves of immigration was greatly exaggerated and that most of the modern inhabitants of Britain are the direct descendants of the original pioneers of the Stone Age. It is likely that all the primeval forest which once covered the land had been cleared for fields and pasture long before Mercia came into being, and most of the villages on the map today were already in existence in some form by the beginning of our period.



This was by no means the Dark Age wilderness of popular imagination. It would, however, seem very alien to a modern observer. Most shocking would be the way in which people lived for much of the time on the edge of subsistence, with famine and epidemic disease on a scale now seldom encountered outside Africa. Bede tells how in Sussex in the late seventh century a prolonged drought brought a famine so severe that people committed suicide by throwing themselves from cliffs rather than face a lingering death from starvation. Around the same time Saint Chad, one of the first Mercian bishops, died along with most of his colleagues from an outbreak of epidemic disease. And yet somehow the land produced large enough surpluses of food and population to sustain a wealthy warrior class and continually repair the damage inflicted by its incessant wars.

## **The Landscape**

In order to understand the nature of military campaigning in the Mercian Age it is necessary to build up a picture of the sort of country over which these campaigns took place. It is likely that people were very aware of the distinction between wild and cultivated landscapes – a distinction which drives the plot in *Beowulf*, for example, in which the halls of men are constantly threatened by monsters from the woods and marshes. However, even in the seventh and eighth centuries there can have been little any true wilderness in England, except perhaps in the Fens of East Anglia where Saint Guthlac sought refuge from the world amidst the demon-haunted marshes.

The bears, wild cattle and bison which Offa's contemporary, the Frankish emperor Charlemagne, hunted in the forests beyond the Rhine had long ago disappeared from the British Isles, probably by the end of the Bronze Age. Wolves were still widespread in Anglo-Saxon times, though perhaps even then not that common, and there are hints that their activities may sometimes have been a political issue, or even a cause of conflict. According to William of Malmesbury, in the tenth century the English king Edgar imposed a tribute on the princes of North Wales of 300 wolf skins annually; this was paid for three years, but ceased after that because the Welsh could find no more wolves in their territory. No doubt the pelts had some value in trade, but historians have always considered this a rather strange demand when Edgar could have insisted on cattle, silver or other more obviously useful goods. It has been suggested that the king was interested in the pelts as clothing for his troops, or even a kind of uniform for his bodyguard, but we have no other evidence for Anglo-Saxon warriors dressed in wolf skins. Another possible explanation is that the mountainous Welsh terrain provided a refuge for the predators which had already been driven out of most of lowland England. The Welsh herdsmen, who raised mainly cattle and horses, may not have considered the wolves to be enough of a threat to be worth hunting down, whereas to the English, dependent on their more vulnerable flocks of sheep, their presence would have been intolerable. Perhaps Edgar's subjects had complained of the damage done by 'Welsh' wolves raiding across the border in search of easy prey, obliging him to force his neighbours to address the problem. It is even possible that similar considerations had applied two centuries earlier in the reign of Offa, whose kingdom already relied heavily on the wool trade, and that a secondary purpose of his famous dyke (discussed in more detail on pages 136 to 140) was the control of four-legged raiders as well as human ones.

Most of the settlements identified by archaeologists from the period between AD 500 and 700 were situated on or near river banks, more than half of them being within 500 metres of a permanent source of water. However, the villages were less permanent than in later centuries, and many of them were apparently moved or abandoned – either temporarily or permanently – at some time during the seventh and eighth centuries. This may of course have been the result of political insecurity and chronic warfare, but there is also some evidence that the climate around this time was relatively

unstable, with alternating droughts and floods and several severe winters (Arnold). For example the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions a 'great mortality of birds' in 671, presumably the result of extreme cold, as well as the notorious 'big winter' of 763. Archaeological discoveries suggest that sheep were the commonest livestock, followed by cattle. The latter were used not just for milk and meat but to pull ploughs, as horses were very rare in agricultural communities. Most agricultural land was used for grain crops, mainly barley and oats, with wheaten bread probably remaining a scarce luxury food.

As discussed below (pages 28 to 29), modern research has disproved the theory that the Anglo-Saxons took over an abandoned and mostly forested landscape, and it has been estimated that the proportion of wooded country in the first millennium AD was already less than 20 per cent (Rackham). It was, however, much less evenly distributed than it is today. In the later Middle Ages there seems to have been a dramatic contrast between what Professor Rackham calls 'Ancient Countryside', which retained its pre-Roman and Roman patchwork of small fields, pasturelands, hedgerows and woods, and the 'Planned Countryside' characterised by huge, open arable fields, lacking natural obstacles and parcelled out among its cultivators in parallel and more or less regular strips. The true 'open field' system was probably a development of the tenth and eleventh centuries, but Rackham has detected signs that the difference between the two landscapes may go back much further. Place names referring to woods and clearings are much more common in Ancient Countryside, for example, and the features mentioned as boundary markers in charters from the eighth century onwards show a similar pattern. Especially in the Planned Countryside most woods were probably managed for timber, though less thoroughly than in Roman times, and so were by no means impassable to large bodies of men (Brooks). There is evidence that they were routinely surrounded by banks and ditches, probably intended to keep livestock from straying and wild pigs out of the fields, and no doubt some of these banks have subsequently been mistaken for military earthworks. On the other hand they could have been useful as instant defensive lines for outnumbered armies. Contemporary written sources do not appear to mention this tactic, however, and on the whole it seems that wooded areas were regarded as unsuitable for military operations.

Rackham suggests that the contrast between the two types of landscape may have been as dramatic as that between the Normandy 'bocage' and the open plains of Champagne in France today. If so, it must have had a significant influence on the conduct of warfare. The 'open country' formed a rough triangle with its points on the English coast at Great Yarmouth in Norfolk, Portland Bill in Dorset, and the mouth of the River Tees in North Yorkshire. Its boundaries were of course irregular, following local vagaries of terrain, and there were no doubt isolated patches of woodland within it. Conversely the 'wooded country' was typically a mixture of clearings, coppices and lightly wooded pasture. There may have been a more or less continuous belt of such close terrain running south-westwards across the country from the Humber to the Lower Severn, incorporating what were to become the Forests of Sherwood and Arden, and the escarpment of the Cotswolds further south (Hooke, 1985). This must have been a considerable barrier to armies moving between the kingdoms of Wessex and the Hwicce.

It is also noteworthy that the Mercian heartland around Tamworth lies very close to the boundary between Rackham's two landscapes. To the west and south-west lay the Forest of Arden and the hills, heaths and scattered hamlets of Cannock Chase and the Birmingham Plateau, while marching eastwards a Mercian army would soon have found itself in a rolling agricultural countryside with long lines of sight and little or no cover. Perhaps this partly explains the concentration of recorded battles in the corridor east of the southern Pennines and along the Berkshire and Wiltshire Downs, where the terrain lends itself to rapid manoeuvre and armies would have found it relatively easy to locate each other.

Rivers were the most important strategic features in the landscape, and are referred to repeatedly in the campaign accounts which survive. Guy Halsall (in Hawkes) has shown that the great majority of the identifiable battle sites of the Mercian Age are located either at ancient burial mounds or similar well-known sites of obvious cultural significance, or at river crossings. It is quite likely, as he suggests, that the former were chosen as pre-arranged rendezvous, but it is less certain that this also applied to the river crossings. Given that settlements, and therefore supplies of food, were concentrated near rivers, and that fording them must often have been a protracted operation, it seems probable that any army in the field would have spent more time near river banks than away from them. The places where an army could cross easily would have been well known to the local ruler, and it would have been a logical move to await an invader on your own side of the river as he struggled to reform his troops after the crossing.

The actual bank of a watercourse would not, however, normally have been a suitable spot for a battle. Before they were deepened and straightened for navigation and drainage purposes, the courses of rivers and streams were less well defined than they are today, with numerous small meanders and extensive marshy floodplains spreading into the countryside on either bank, and it must have been very difficult to find firm ground there on which to deploy. Other factors would also deter a defender from simply lining up his men along a river bank. Such a locality would be uncomfortable and unhealthy in wet weather, and might even be dangerous if sudden flooding was a possibility. And an invader whose passage was blocked in this way would probably not try to force his way across, but would instead leave a detachment behind to pin the defenders in place while he found an uncontested crossing up or downstream, which would automatically place him on the flank of the defenders and force them to withdraw.

At Maldon in 991 Ealdorman Byrhtnoth is said to have deliberately pulled back and allowed the Vikings to cross the River Blackwater, as the only way of bringing them to battle. Furthermore, an enemy who was allowed to cross and then obliged to fight with his back to the river would find it very difficult to retreat if he was defeated, as happened to Penda at the Winwaed in 654. For all these reasons, battles described as being fought on rivers are likely to have taken place not at the crossings themselves, but on the slightly higher ground beyond.

Waterways can of course be arteries of communication as well as obstacles, but there is little evidence for their use as such in this period. Even the Vikings travelled across the country mainly on stolen horses. In central England only the Rivers Severn, Trent and Thames were large and reliable enough to be viable military routes. In Offa's reign the monastery at Breedon-on-the-Hill near Burton on Trent was charged with providing hospitality for 'envoys from across the sea', which suggests that the main route into Mercia for foreign diplomats and traders was via the Humber estuary and the River Trent, which flows some five miles north of Breedon. On the other hand Nennius refers to two main rivers of Britain, the Thames and the Severn, 'on which ships once travelled', implying that they no longer did so in his day, and perhaps had never done on other rivers. Many smaller streams which might otherwise have been adequate for navigation were obstructed by fish weirs. These were apparently an Anglo-Saxon invention, which consisted of lines of wooden traps placed across the current to catch migrating fish. Rackham describes these devices as being placed between an island and one bank, leaving the other side of the island open, but there is evidence that in places they proliferated to the extent that they became a hindrance to shipping and even obstructed the flow of water. In the eleventh century Edward the Confessor had to order the destruction of many of these weirs, which were blocking rivers as big as the Thames, Severn, Trent and Yorkshire Ouse.

Another factor which tended to force military operations to follow certain routes was the existence

of a road network. As discussed below (page 29) the Roman transport system had by no means disappeared, and most of their major roads remained in use. There was also an extensive network of smaller local roads, and nearly one in eight of the features mentioned in the charters is a road or path (Rackham). Many of these are referred to as a 'herepath', or 'army path'. Rackham, however, considers that the identifiable 'army paths' do not constitute a deliberately planned strategic road system, and are unlikely to have been constructed specifically for military movements. It is noteworthy that although labour services were required by the Mercian kings from at least the eighth century for the purposes of building and repairing bridges and fortifications, road work was not included in these obligations, although local communities may have been expected to maintain the routes through their own neighbourhoods. Probably the term 'herepath' merely indicates a through route wide enough to be used by an army – or which had been used by one within living memory – in contrast to a lane used only by local people. It is worth remembering in this context that in the laws of King Ine, laid down in early eighth-century Wessex, a 'here' meant any armed force of thirty-five men or more.

Other place name evidence suggests that, after the Romans left, many of their bridges were initially neglected – the common name Stratford implies a ford on a Roman street, at a place where there would originally have been a bridge – but that Anglo-Saxon rulers were soon repairing them and ordering the construction of new ones. In Mercia King Aethelbald appears to have introduced an obligation on landowners in 749 to supply labour for work on bridges as well as fortresses. A sixth of the river crossings mentioned in charters between the seventh and tenth centuries were bridges, many of which crossed substantial water features. At Fambridge in Essex the River Crouch is a quarter of a mile wide, and although no bridge survives today, the name clearly implies its former existence (Rackham). A wooden causeway across the Thames marshes at Oxford has been dated to the reigns of Offa or his successor Coenwulf, and tree ring evidence has produced a date for the bridge at Cromwell, on the Trent near Newark, of between 740 and 750 (Brooks).

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## *Chapter 2*

### *The People of the Frontier*

The Mercians first appear as a distinct group in the accounts of Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle relating to the early seventh century. By then they were already a long-established people, with some of their oral traditions – such as the genealogies of their kings – going back several hundred years. Attempting to trace their origins, however, takes us into the most obscure and controversial period in the whole of English history. According to the conventional view the ‘English’ people were easily distinguished by their Germanic language and culture from the ‘Celtic’ or ‘British’ occupants of northern and western Britain, and this difference is said to have originated with the mass migrations of Anglo-Saxon tribes from the Continent after the fall of the Roman Empire. Until the 1970s it was generally accepted that the present inhabitants of most of England were descended from these migrants, who had displaced the aboriginal Britons with various degrees of force. Since then a growing revisionist movement has cast doubt on this view, with estimates of the size of the immigrant contribution declining to the point where many archaeologists now deny that there is any evidence for an Anglo-Saxon migration at all, preferring to think in terms of imported fashions and cultural influences rather than people (Pryor, 2004).

In the past the waters have been further muddied by politically motivated ideas of history. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English scholars often shared the prevailing contempt for the peoples of the ‘Celtic fringe’ and wished to emphasise the distinctness of the English and their supposedly superior political institutions, while more recently Celtic nationalists have also found it convenient to accentuate the same differences. Even today opinions tend to be so polarised that it is worth pointing out that the extreme migrationist view originates not from some Victorian ideologue, but from no less an authority than the Venerable Bede.

Bede’s account of the coming of the English begins with the troubles which afflicted the Britons after the departure of the Roman armies early in the fifth century AD. The inhabitants of the former Roman province, now mostly converted to Christianity, are described as timid and demoralised, hiding in terror behind their fortifications while the barbarian Picts and Irish plundered the country. In the 440s they wrote to the Roman consul Aetius in Gaul, begging for help: ‘The barbarians drive us into the sea, and the sea drives us back to the barbarians. Between these, two deadly alternatives confront us, drowning or slaughter.’ But Aetius was already fully occupied with the war against Attila and his Huns, and no help could be sent. Meanwhile the Britons had rallied and temporarily driven off the invaders, but famine, followed by a terrible plague, caused many deaths and weakened them still further. Fearing that their enemies would soon return, they followed the advice of one of their kings, Vortigern, and hired German-speaking Saxon mercenaries from the Continent to defend them.

This, says Bede, happened during the reign of the Roman emperor Martianus, who came to the throne in the year 449. Vortigern brought over three shiploads of Saxon warriors, and they were given land in the eastern part of the country in return for military service. They quickly proved their worth

by defeating a Pictish invasion from the north, then sent back to Saxony for more recruits, adding, in Bede's words, 'that the country was fertile and the Britons cowardly'. This sparked off a land rush which brought immigrants from the territories of three of the most warlike pagan tribes of Germany: the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes. Soon they were settling in such numbers that the Britons became afraid. Bede does not specifically say that the Germans brought their families with them, but it is clear that he regarded this as a large-scale settlement of peoples rather than just a collection of pillaging war bands. He goes on to state that the various English peoples of his day were all descended from these newcomers: the occupants of Kent, and the Isle of Wight and the mainland opposite, from the Jutes; those of Essex, Sussex and Wessex from the Saxons; and the East and Middle Angles, the Northumbrians, the Mercians and 'other English peoples' from the Angles.

It was the latter who precipitated the catastrophe which was to overwhelm the native Britons, when they made an alliance with the Picts and attempted to extort more land and provisions from their British employers. Whether or not they were successful in this we are not told, but eventually they broke out of the enclave where they had settled and began to ravage the country 'from the eastern to the western shores'. There was no organised opposition and the Anglian war bands inflicted terrible damage, destroying buildings, murdering bishops and priests as well as laymen and forcing the survivors to flee overseas or take refuge in the hills. Bede's language implies a deliberate genocide: 'A few wretched survivors captured in the hills were butchered wholesale, and others, desperate with hunger, came out and surrendered to the enemy for food, although they were doomed to lifelong slavery even if they escaped instant massacre.'

After this devastating raid the invaders returned to their settlements, and the surviving Britons gradually rallied. Under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus, said to have been the sole surviving man of 'Roman race' in the country, they inflicted a defeat on their enemies and a long struggle ensued, with neither side gaining a decisive advantage over the other. Eventually the Britons won a victory at the Battle of Mount Badon, which earned them peace for a generation. According to Bede this took place 'about forty four years' after the Anglo-Saxon invasions, which would place it around the year 500. This was not the end of the story, for both Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle record further campaigns as late as the early seventh century which are usually supposed to be part of a gradual westward expansion of the invaders at the expense of the Britons. In 552, for example, the West Saxon king Cynric routed a British army at 'Searo byrig' (Old Sarum, outside Salisbury). In 577 his successors Cuthwine and Ceawlin defeated and killed three British kings at Dyrham in Somerset, and subsequently captured the towns of Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath. Then in 605 Aethelfrith of Northumbria killed 'a countless number of Welsh' at Chester, including Christian priests who had come to pray for a British victory.

Bede's account is not the only source for the Anglo-Saxon invasion. We also have the testimony of the British monk Gildas, who was writing much closer in time to the events he described, and who may have been the source of some of Bede's information. Gildas' book, evocatively entitled *On the Ruin of Britain* and written in Latin around 550, describes Vortigern's invitation to the Saxons, their arrival in three ships, later reinforced by 'a larger company', and their demands for extra provisions, followed by a brutal attack. However, Gildas' perspective was much narrower than Bede's. His main purpose was to depict the sufferings of his people as God's punishment for their sins and those of the rulers, and he mentions contemporary kings by name only to condemn them for their immorality. Most of the identifiable places he refers to are in the far south-west of what is now England, and the only invaders he discusses are the Saxons. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes a series of campaigns against the 'Britons' or 'Welsh' which seem to be the same as the events related from the other side by Gildas, but again they give us only part of the picture, concentrating on the activities of

Saxon pirates in Kent, Sussex and the region around the Solent. What is more, the Chronicle in its present form was not written down until the ninth century, and so it cannot necessarily be regarded as an independent authority for the events of 400 years before.

On Bede's evidence it was the Angles, the ancestors of the Mercians, who eventually conquered and occupied most of England north of the Thames after the temporary setback at Mount Badon. But we have no account of any military operations by which this extensive conquest might have been achieved. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle the Angles appear as if from nowhere. The earliest mention here of them as invaders appears in a poem about the Battle of Brunanburgh inserted in the Chronicle under the year 937, which boasts that there had never been a greater slaughter, 'as books tell us . . . since Angles and Saxons came here from the east, sought out Britain over the broad ocean . . . overcame the Welsh, seized the country.' A passage of this date cannot be regarded as independent of Bede, though, especially in view of the specific appeal to the authority of 'books'.

The earliest mention of Angles in Britain, in fact, comes from a brief survey of the island in the *De Bello Gotthico* of Procopius of Caesarea (Stenton), who was writing only a decade or so after Gildas. According to Procopius, Britain was inhabited by three races: the native Britons, the 'Frissones' or Frisians, and the 'Angiloi'. But he says nothing of a recent invasion or migration. On the contrary, basing his account on the statements of some Angles who had accompanied a Frankish embassy to Constantinople, he states that the country and its people were so fertile that their surplus population regularly emigrated to the European mainland, where the Frankish king settled them in sparsely inhabited parts of his territory.

The presence of large numbers of Frisians in England is otherwise undocumented, but is not particularly surprising. They travelled widely as merchants and seaborne raiders, and the English language is remarkably similar to the Frisian dialects still spoken on the other side of the North Sea, in the coastal regions of what is now the Netherlands. It is possible that Procopius' Anglian informants used the term 'Frissones' to denote their Saxon neighbours, although such usage is not attested in England itself. But Sir Frank Stenton has pointed out that German traditions also describe population movement from England around the sixth century, and that according to one version, recorded at Fulda in the ninth century, the Saxons of Germany were descended from 'Angli' who had come from Britain.

With our earliest sources in such a state of confusion it is tempting to sidestep the issue of ethnic identity, and in common parlance the term 'Anglo-Saxon' (which was already in use in late Anglo-Saxon times) is widely used to include the descendants of Angles, Saxons and Jutes, as well as the smaller groups of Frisian and Frankish immigrants whom Bede also mentions. The Welsh writers were lumping them all together as 'Saxons' as early as the time of Nennius, around 800, while at the same time the word 'Welsh', derived from Old English 'wealh' or 'foreign', became attached to the Celtic-speakers of southern Britain.

There is plenty of evidence that the 'English' peoples all spoke mutually intelligible languages and considered themselves to belong to a common cultural tradition. For example, all the English royal houses except that of Essex claimed descent from the legendary hero (or god) Woden, who is identical to the Scandinavian Odin. However, the dialects of English written in the 'Anglian' regions from the seventh century onwards are readily distinguishable from those of the 'Saxons', and the differences were presumably more marked in earlier times. It therefore makes sense to see the Angles as somehow self-consciously different from the Saxons, Jutes and others, though as we shall see this was not necessarily due to their origin in a different location on the Continent.

So, according to the traditional view, the Mercians and their neighbours were descended from invaders from the Anglian homeland in Europe, which is usually located in what is now the Schleswig-Holstein region at the southern end of the Jutland Peninsula. These Angles took advantage of the weakness of the Britons after the Roman withdrawal to carry out a violent policy of 'ethnic cleansing', and then occupied the fertile lands vacated by their victims. They presumably penetrated inland via the rivers which flow into the Wash and the Humber estuary, and over a period of a century and a half, between about AD 450 and 600, pushed their settlement frontier west as far as the watershed between the east-flowing River Trent and the Severn, which runs south-westwards into the Bristol Channel. The name Mercian, which derives from the word 'mierce', meaning mark or frontier, suggests that this group formed the spearhead of the advance, gaining as a reward the rich farmlands of the Middle Trent Valley – the location of their heartland in historic times. This scenario could certainly explain the appearance in the centre of previously Celtic England of a warlike people speaking a Germanic language, worshipping Germanic gods, and bringing with them many of the trappings of German military and civilian culture. However, on examination it presents more problems than it solves.

The first is an obvious point which has nevertheless eluded many with an emotional attachment to the Anglo-Saxons, from Bede to the present day. The numerous small groups which the document known as the Tribal Hidage (see below, page 39) reveals in central England in the seventh century, some of them comprising only a few hundred fighting men, can hardly represent the successors of an army of conquest. Even in the time of Penda in the 630s and 640s, the Mercians, who were eventually forged into a kingdom under his leadership, were just one tribe among many, their name so obscure that to their contemporaries their ruler was just 'King Penda', or 'Penda the Southumbrian' (in other words, from south of the River Humber), as though he were a mere warlord without a proper kingdom. There is no surviving tradition of battles fought against the Britons along the Trent, no source mentions an earlier Anglian conqueror, no later Mercian king harks back to one – at least not in England – and we find no trace of a powerful kingdom which might have recently fragmented into those two dozen or more little tribes.

Bede's allegation that 'the Angles' made a treaty with the Picts does imply some sort of central command, but even if true it refers to a very early stage in the invasion, when their force may have consisted of only a few ships' crews. The strong impression is that large-scale political organisation was new to the region in the middle of the seventh century. But only an organised military force could have driven a well-established native population from an area of this size. In more recent times independent groups of settlers without military organisation have displaced other peoples – in North America, South Africa and Australia, for example – but only with huge advantages in numbers and technology, and even then the process has never been quick or easy. In fact it has often been observed that no settlement frontier ever managed a sustained advance against an intact Native American society which had not already been disrupted by disease or military operations. The theory that sixth-century Anglian farmers could have achieved such a result without greatly superior weapons or implausibly large numbers must depend solely on assertions of racial superiority over Bede's 'cowardly Britons'. In historic times the British kingdoms were themselves well organised, though, and furthermore were capable of launching fast mounted raids over long distances, as the famous epic poem *Y Gododdin* relates. Small groups of Anglo-Saxon settlers pushing ahead of the frontier would have been extremely vulnerable to such attacks. For a roughly comparable situation we can look to nineteenth-century Texas, where, even with the benefit of firearms, white settlers were unable to hold their ground against mounted Comanche raiders, let alone advance onto the plains without the support of the army.



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