



The Origins of the English KINGDOM

George Molyneux explores how the realm of the English was formed and asks why it eclipsed an earlier kingship of Britain.

DUKE WILLIAM of Normandy defeated King Harold at Hastings in 1066 and conquered the English kingdom. This was the second time in 50 years that the realm had succumbed to external attack, the first being the Danish king Cnut's conquest of 1016. Two points about these conquests are as important as they are easily overlooked. The first is that contemporaries regarded Cnut and William as conquerors not merely of an expanse of land, but of what Latin texts call a *regnum* and

King Harold is killed. Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, late 11th century.

Old English ones a *rice* – both words can be translated as 'kingdom'. The second is that both in 1016 and in 1066 the kingdom continued as a political unit, despite the change in ruling dynasty. It did not fragment, lose its identity, or become subsumed into the other territories of its conquerors. These observations prompt questions. What did this 11th-century English kingdom comprise? How had it come into being? And how had it become sufficiently robust and coherent that it could endure repeated conquest? ▶

ENGLISH KINGDOM

Writers of the 11th century referred to the English kingdom in Latin as the *regnum* of 'Anglia', or, in the vernacular, as the *rice* of 'England'. It is clear that these words denoted a territory of broadly similar size and shape to what we think of as 'England', distinct from Wales and stretching from the Channel to somewhere north of York. Anglia and England could, however, refer to areas larger or smaller than modern England. Thus, for example, the Domesday survey of 1086 was said to describe the whole of Anglia or England, but it covered only the land from the Channel to the Tees (excluding Wales), an area that I call 'Domesday Anglia'. Similarly, a royal document issued a few years later mentioned land 'north of the Tyne, and south of the Tyne, and in Anglia'. This would suggest that Anglia ended somewhere short of the Tyne, quite possibly at the Tees. On the other hand, however, an English chronicle recounts that in 1091 Malcolm III, King of Scots, 'went out of Scotland into Lothian in England', thereby indicating that England could encompass the area around what is now Edinburgh. We even find a forerunner of the still-prevalent practice of conflating England with the island of Britain: Æthelweard, a late tenth-century chronicler, narrated the ancient Britons' defeat, then declared that 'Britannia is now called Anglia, taking the name of the victors'.

AMID THESE apparent contradictions, the claim that Britain had become Anglia is perhaps the easiest to explain. Since fairly early in the Anglo-Saxon period, certain English kings had probably been able to throw their weight around across much of the island. King Æthelstan, whose heartlands lay in Wessex and the West Midlands, rampaged to the island's northernmost extremity in 934 and, for centuries thereafter, his successors often had at least a loose hegemony over all other kings in Britain. Such island-wide English domination explains how Æthelweard and a handful of other chroniclers could assert that Britain had become Anglia.

This does not, however, explain the 1091 annal, where England includes Lothian, but seemingly not the land north of the Firth of Forth. The king of the English had a measure of power in Lothian, in the sense that he could lead an army there, but much the same was probably true further north. The idea of the Forth as England's northern limit can, however, be explained by looking back to the early Anglo-Saxon period, when the Northumbrian kingdom had stretched from the Humber to the Forth. The Northumbrians saw themselves – and were seen by others – as part of an English people, along with the other Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who were believed to have migrated from the Continent in the fifth century. English habitation therefore reached to the Forth. Indeed Bede, writing in 731, explained that the church of Abercorn, in modern West Lothian, was 'in the land of the English [*regione Anglorum*] but near the sea [i.e. the Firth of Forth] that divides the lands of the English and of the Picts'. Sometime before about 900 an anonymous writer translated this into



Above: Æthelstan presenting a book to St Cuthbert, 934, in a manuscript held at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Below: the Firth of Forth, the frontier between the English and the Picts.





of the English kingdom. This distinction explains the apparent contradictions in how words like Anglia and Engaland were used. When the author of the 1091 annal said that Lothian was in Engaland, he was – like Bede before and Adam afterwards – expressing the common-place view that the Forth constituted the limit of English habitation. When, however, the land north of the Tees was presented as outside Anglia or Engaland, despite the Englishness of its inhabitants, these words were most likely being used to designate the English kingdom. This was a political unit, whose bounds would not necessarily correspond with those of English settlement.

The inference that the 11th-century English kingdom was perceived to end at the Tees is strengthened by accounts of the construction of Durham Cathedral in 1093. Malcolm III, along with the bishop and prior, laid its foundation stones. That the Scottish king should do this, especially in his English counterpart's absence, would be surprising, if Durham were unambiguously within the English kingdom. It does not, however, follow that Durham was part of the Scottish kingdom. Both English and Scottish kings were active between the Tees and Forth and it is likely that this expanse was widely seen as distinct from either of their kingdoms.

WHILE THE 11TH-CENTURY English kingdom probably did not extend across all of modern England, it was different from anything that had gone before. In the late ninth century there had been no political unit of remotely similar size and shape. Much of the north and east of the future English kingdom was under the domination of various Scandinavian potentates, who had destroyed the former East Anglian and Northumbrian kingdoms and seized the eastern part of the Midland kingdom of Mercia. The kingdom of Wessex, ruled by the Cerdicing dynasty, managed (just) to resist the Viking onslaught, but until the late ninth century its power was largely confined to south of the Thames. The West Saxon king Alfred, now often called 'the Great', gained

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Old English, using the term Engaland, its earliest known appearance. Given the significance of the so-called 'West Lothian Question' in current Anglo-Scottish relations, the context is ironic.

By the tenth century, the Scottish kings had considerable power in Lothian, but there remained a perception that the Forth separated the English from the Scots; for centuries afterwards, the word 'Scotia' was used to refer specifically to the land north of the Forth. Furthermore, while the Tweed came to be recognised as the border between the English and Scottish kingdoms during the 12th century, at least some of those dwelling to its north continued to see themselves as English. Thus Adam of Dryburgh, a late 12th-century monk, wrote that he lived 'in the land of the English [*terra Anglorum*] and in the kingdom of the Scots [*regno Scotorum*]'.

Adam's comment demonstrates that the land inhabited by the English was not necessarily the same as the territory

some degree of domination over the western remnant of Mercia in the 880s, but even then his kingdom was vastly smaller than the one that would exist by the 11th century.

During the first half of the tenth century, Alfred's successors gradually extended their power northwards, encompassing all of what would become the English kingdom and, indeed, the rest of Britain. Much is uncertain about the events of this period, but the precise sequence of kings, campaigns and battles need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that Alfred's successors killed, expelled or subjugated the principal Scandinavian potentates based in East Anglia, the East Midlands and Northumbria. They also made the leading figures of Wales and northern Britain acknowledge their superiority. Æthelstan had such rulers meet him at Eamont (Cumbria) in 927 and, for a time, the Cerdicings' assemblies were attended by men from across the island.

The geographical extension of the Cerdicings' power was neither smooth nor inexorable. Thus, for example, York ►

ENGLISH KINGDOM

changed hands several times between the 920s and 950s and Scandinavian domination in the East Midlands was temporarily re-established in the 940s. Even when the final Scandinavian king to base himself at York, Erik Haraldson, was killed in 954, contemporaries could not have been sure that he would be the last. As it turned out, though, the Cerdicings were not (so far as we know) involved in major armed conflict for over 30 years thereafter. There were renewed Scandinavian attacks from the 980s, which culminated in Cnut's conquest of 1016, but the intervening three decades of relative calm were highly significant. This period was crucial to the development of the English kingdom as a coherent territorial unit.

WE HAVE ALREADY seen that some people in the 11th century saw the Tees as the English kingdom's northern limit, even though English habitation stretched far beyond.

The question therefore arises: what distinguished the land between the English Channel and the Tees (and east – roughly – the dyke ascribed to Offa) from the rest of Britain, such that 'Domesday Anglia' constituted an identifiable kingdom?

Three features of this part of the island stand out. The first is that, at the time of Domesday, it was divided into administrative districts called shires. Many of these shires, such as Hampshire, Shropshire and Yorkshire, remain recognisable today, despite a major reorganisation in 1974. Kings appear to have used these districts to organise tax collection, military levies and judicial assemblies and the Domesday survey itself was arranged by shire. In contrast to 'Domesday Anglia', however, shire organisation was not imposed between the Tees and the Tweed until the very end of the 11th century and was only extended west of the Pennines in the 12th. (Whether the land between the Mersey, the Pennines and the Lake District was considered part of the kingdom in the 11th century is doubtful. This area is described in Domesday, but only sketchily.)

The second key characteristic of 'Domesday Anglia' was that its shires all had subdivisions known as hundreds or wapentakes, which were not found further north or in Wales. The terminological distinction between hundreds and wapentakes was linked to the distribution of Scandinavian settlement, but there do not seem to have been significant functional differences between them. Kings of the 11th century appear to have used hundreds and wapentakes to arrange (among other things) fiscal assessments, law enforcement groups and the witnessing of transactions. These administrative units performed similar functions to shires, but on a more local level.

The third thing making 'Domesday Anglia' distinctive was that, for almost all of the 11th century, this was the only part of Britain in which coins were struck. Two points make this especially significant. The first is that a uniform design, incorporating the king's name, was used in all

Below: a coin minted in the name of Olaf Guthfrithson, a Scandinavian who ruled at York, c.940.
Bottom: Domesday Book, 1086.



parts of 'Domesday Anglia' at any one time. A coin would carry a legend stating its location of issue and the moneyer responsible, but would otherwise look the same, whether it came from London, Exeter, York or Chester (to name but a few major minting places). The second crucial point is that the design in use was changed frequently and coin hoards imply that old types were systematically withdrawn from circulation. It is quite likely that kings sought to ban the use of obsolete coins and that they achieved considerable



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success. There was thus uniformity in production and something approaching uniformity in the circulating currency between the Channel and the Tees. Coins were by no means unknown elsewhere in Britain, but they were rarer and were imported from various places. Consequently, there was nothing like the standardised currency that circulated in 'Domesday Anglia'.

The system of shires, hundreds and wapentakes meant that, within 'Domesday Anglia', there were standardised administrative structures through which kings could implement their commands. The 11th-century kings used this apparatus to impinge routinely upon the lives of even quite ordinary people, notably through taxation, judicial organisation and the regulation of the circulating currency. Moreover, the features outlined above marked 'Domesday Anglia' as a unit that was distinct from the rest of Britain and ruled in a relatively uniform way. There is therefore a clear explanation for why people in the 11th century could regard this area as the full extent of the English kingdom. Such structures did not, however, merely serve to define the kingdom. They also gave it the institutional coherence that enabled it to outlast repeated conquest.

Many historians have written about 11th-century shires, hundreds and wapentakes, although few have discussed their importance in the kingdom's definition. Another

neglected issue is the question of when this administrative apparatus became important to the Cerdicings' power. It is often assumed that in Wessex itself they had ruled through shires and hundreds since some indeterminate point in the distant past and swiftly replicated this system as they pushed northwards. There may be an element of truth in this: Berkshire, Wiltshire and other shires south of the Thames are mentioned in ninth-century sources and some of the Domesday hundreds of this area may well perpetuate districts that had been recognisable for centuries. There is, however, little to suggest that ninth-century shires, or (if they existed) hundreds, already served the functions that they did in the 11th century, or that kings routinely used them to impose their will.

The first evidence that hundreds and wapentakes were important to royal rule comes in the mid-10th century. By the end of King Edgar's reign (959–75), they existed right across 'Domesday Anglia' and from then on they are ubiquitous in royal legislation. By contrast, there is just one reference to hundreds in the legislation of King Edmund (939–46) and none in the fairly voluminous ordinances of his predecessors. This suggests that, whatever earlier existence hundreds may have had, they were not especially significant to the Cerdicings.

A similar point can be made about shires. Edgar is

Durham Cathedral, construction of which began in 1093.



Edgar was the first king who had both the desire and the ability to impose numismatic uniformity between the Channel and the Tees

the first king known to have ordered the regular holding of shire assemblies and soon afterwards we get our earliest definite accounts of their being held. This is unlikely to be coincidental and implies (at the very least) that shire meetings became much more widespread and routine around this time. It was probably not until the 11th century that Norfolk, Suffolk and Yorkshire operated as shires, but such units had been established across much of the Midlands (as

King Edgar (bottom, centre) offering a charter to Christ, 966.

well as in the south) by the 980s at the latest.

The proposition that shires, hundreds and wapentakes first became important around the third quarter of the 10th century is based on the silence of earlier texts. Historians are rightly cautious about such arguments; that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' is well known. There are, however, two reasons for accepting the argument from silence here. The first is that we are to

a large extent dealing not with absent sources, but with silent sources. There is plenty of surviving legislation from before Edmund's reign and the lack of references to hundreds would be very odd if these were already central to the Cerdicings' power. The second key consideration is coins. Surviving coins are plentiful from throughout the 10th and 11th centuries, which allows us to see that uniformity in production and circulation began in Edgar's reign. Previously, coins of contrasting designs were struck in different regions and the circulating currency was correspondingly varied. Edgar was evidently the first king who had both the desire and the ability to impose numismatic uniformity between the Channel and the Tees. That this major reform was implemented in his reign should give us confidence that key elements of local administration were likewise standardised around the same time. This hypothesis would also fit with the political context of the period; the prolonged respite from external attack after 954 would have been a propitious time to effect substantial administrative change. There are, therefore, good grounds to conclude that the features that defined the English kingdom of the 11th century date only from around the third quarter of the previous one.

MANY historians, notably Patrick Wormald, have explained the English kingdom's formation by arguing that Alfred and his successors were aiming to achieve English unification. If this was their goal, they did not succeed; we have already seen that the English kingdom of the 11th century (and later) did not include all those seen at the time as English. It is, however, doubtful whether the Cerdicings were engaged on a unification project. No contemporary source expressly states, or hints, that they were seeking to execute such a plan.

The main reasons why the Cerdicings extended their power northwards were probably more prosaic. In part, they were almost certainly inspired by the things that made most medieval kings want to expand their territories, especially the prospect of land and treasure. In addition, however, they probably wanted to obtain security from the Scandinavians who had gravely threatened Wessex in the ninth century. This would explain why they killed or expelled the principal Scandinavian potentates based in Britain, but generally left in place the other leading figures on the island, providing the latter acknowledged Cerdicing superiority.

North of the Tees, there had been little Scandinavian settlement and the Cerdicings were content to establish relatively loose client relationships with the bishops of Chester-le-Street (who moved their seat to Durham in 995) and an English dynasty based at Bamburgh. Providing such figures could be induced (by intimidation or otherwise) to give the Cerdicings' enemies no assistance, there was little reason to depose them. This did, however, mean that Cerdicing power was less direct than further south. In turn, this probably explains why the administrative reforms that gave 'Domesday Anglia' its coherence stopped at the Tees.

Insofar as any grand idea inspired the Cerdicings to



Coin of King Edgar's reformed type, minted in the 970s.

expand, a vision of domination over the whole of Britain was probably more important than some notion of English unity. There were venerable precedents for the idea that one man might enjoy hegemony throughout the island. Indeed, Bede had described the power of certain seventh-century Northumbrian kings in such terms and titles like *rex Britanniae* ('king of Britain') had occasionally been used in eighth-century Mercia. Æthelstan swiftly adopted similar styles after the Eamont meeting of 927 and Edgar, too, was widely celebrated as king of the whole island. For the Cerdicings, this idea seemingly held considerable allure.

Claims to supremacy over the whole island should not be dismissed as bombast, even though the Cerdicings' hegemony over the other kings in Britain was loose and intermittent. Before the administrative reforms of the mid-10th century it is likely that the Cerdicings had few means with which to impinge routinely on the lives of the general populace in any part of Britain. Throughout the island their power was based on a mix of personal relationships with powerful people. The intensity of Cerdicing domination will have decreased with distance from Wessex, but it never quite disappeared and there was probably no sharp dividing line to separate the future 'Domesday Anglia' from the rest of the island. As such, contemporaries may well have had little difficulty in conceiving of Britain as a unitary realm.

In and after the 11th century, however, claims to rulership over the whole of Britain became less common in royal titlature. They did not disappear and Æthelweard's conflation of Britain and England had a long future, but by William the Conqueror's reign the normal kingly style was *rex Anglorum* ('king of the English'). This shift to more modest royal titles was not precipitated by some prolonged collapse of Æthelstan and Edgar's island-wide hegemony, which had always been episodic. Rather, the administrative changes of the late tenth century had so intensified and standardised the Cerdicings' power within one part of Britain – the future 'Domesday Anglia' – that it became increasingly difficult to think of the island as a single realm. It is most unlikely that the Cerdicings intended (or anticipated) that administrative reform should eclipse their kingship of Britain, but this was one of its effects. The mid- to late-10th century Cerdicing kings established the framework for what would be an enduring English kingdom. But in doing so, they forfeited the possibility of a unitary realm of Britain.

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FURTHER READING

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