

# Mercia

Roger Boyle

February 8, 2021



# Mercia

## A potted history

Roger Boyle

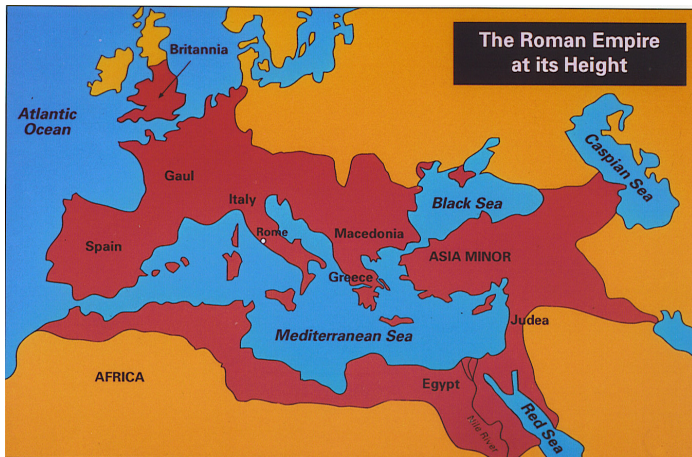
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# Caveat

I am not a medieval historian.

# Most of the known world



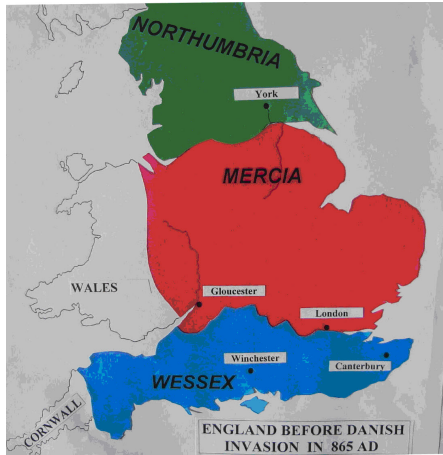
<https://theinquisitiveloon.blogspot.com/2011/07/united-states-and-lessons-of-rome-part.html>

# The Heptarchy – about 600CE



<https://socialstudiesforkids.com/subjects/anglo-saxonbritain.htm>

# Before the Danes arrived



[http://www.runcornhistsoc.org.uk/ethelfleda/england\\_before\\_alfred.html](http://www.runcornhistsoc.org.uk/ethelfleda/england_before_alfred.html)

# The Danelaw, 878CE



Wikipedia

# Sources

There are effectively no primary written sources on Mercian history.



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Documentary records are variously non-contemporary, or treat Mercia as of secondary interest, or have authors hostile to Mercia: cf. Bede the Venerable (673-733).

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Place names can be surprisingly informative.

Etymology: *Mercia* come from old English *Mierce*, meaning 'men of the marches', or 'Border people'.

Which border?

When the Romans left, Britain was inhabited by Britons, Romanised Britons, a few 'stay behind' Romans, some superannuated legionnaires, some mercenaries, and some Europeans – principally Anglo-Saxon: merchants and traders.

# The Romans Leaving Britain

Sir John Millais, 1853



<https://sites.psu.edu/romanoccupationofbritain/end-of-roman-britain>

# The 'Dark Ages'

An unnecessarily derogatory term

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They did. But they didn't go home again afterwards.

# Welcome, Hengist and Horsa

Poor diplomacy by Vortigern



<https://thewildpeak.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/are-the-english-basque>

# The 'Dark Ages'

An unnecessarily derogatory term

There followed a period of undocumented tribal behaviour.

Native British were pushed westward as more and more Jutes, Angles and Saxons arrived to plunder, then occupy, a fertile land (with complete road network).

Tribal groupings naturally coalesced into larger 'nations'.

After nearly 200 years, the Heptarchy had evolved and we start to learn names of 'national' and ecclesiastical leaders.

# The Mercian Kings

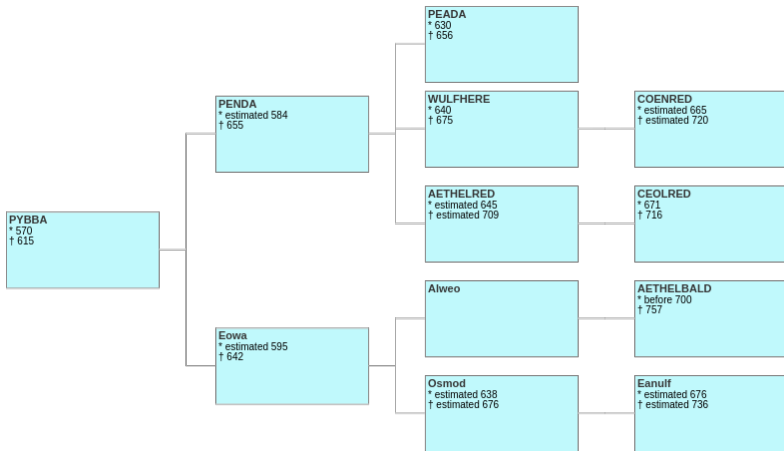
A nation is not defined by its Kings & Queens, but sometimes they are the only individuals of which anything is known. And in sub-Roman times they *could* define a significant amount of what happened.



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zxsbcdm/articles/zq2m6sg>

# The Mercian Kings (1)

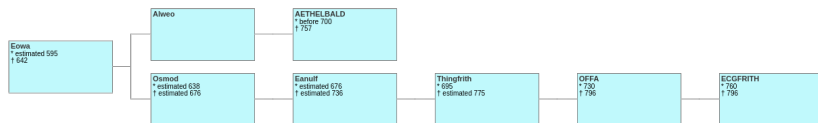
## Kings in CAPITALS



After Cyril Hart, 1977

# The Mercian Kings (2)

## Kings in CAPITALS



After Cyril Hart, 1977

## Penda: reigned 626-655

Over 30 years Penda changed Mercia from 'just another Kingdom' into a force to be reckoned with. He was an accomplished military leader and very aggressive in pushing back all his boundaries.

His reign was a succession of military campaigns and battles.

He was undersung in history as

- Following his death, much of this influence was lost.
- He was the last pagan King of Mercia, and chroniclers were Christian.

But he established a high-water mark for Mercia that his successors could regard as theirs.

# Penda: reigned 626-655

Stained glass, Worcester cathedral



Wikipedia



# Wulfhere: reigned 658-675

Wulfhere was the first Christian King of Mercia of note.

He was militarily accomplished but also politically astute, and extended the boundaries of his country, significantly gaining London. Under him, Mercia became larger than ever before, extending even to the Isle of Wight.

But he was also remembered for his piety, providing significant support to the Church. This won him great political favour outside Mercia, notably opening channels to the Frankish continent.

# Wulfhere: reigned 658-675

Lichfield cathedral (19th century)



<http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/20563>

# Aethelbald: reigned 716-757

Mercia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century from 716-796 is governed by just two Kings – a period of remarkably little regal change.

Following Wulfhere, an undistinguished collection of Kings maintained stability: Aethelbald was not in direct line of succession.

During his long reign, he extended Mercia's borders without significant conflict, and was an effective monarch.

In a 740 charter, Aethelbald styles himself as of the *gens Anglorum*, and the people began to refer to themselves for the first time as *Ænglisc*.

hence OFRS. *Angelona*, OS. (Du.) *Engelana*, (O)HG., Icel., etc. *England*. So **English**<sup>1</sup> i'nglɪʃ pert. to England or its inhabitants. OE. *englisc*, occas. *ænglisc* (prop.) pertaining to the Angles, but (in the earliest exx.) pert. to the group of Germanic peoples known coll. as *Angelcynn* (Bede's *gens Anglorum*), lit. 'race of Angles': also adi. and sb. of

Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology



<https://www.redbubble.com/i/dress/Aenglisc-vs-English-by-silentrebel/36599004.V4WQ8>



<https://www.redbubble.com/i/mask/Aenglisc-vs-English-by-silentrebel/36599004.9G0D8>

# Aethelbald: reigned 716-757

A first full-size likeness of an 'English king'

The Repton Stone, discovered in 1979.



<https://thethegns.blogspot.com/2011/10/repton-warrior-saxon-scale-armour.html>

## Offa: reigned 757-796

Offa is by far the best known of Mercian kings. Only Alfred of Wessex is better known among the pre-Norman monarchs.

Offa distinguished himself in 3 ways: political co-operation with the Church, establishment of Mercia as a *European* player, and construction of the eponymous Dyke.



# Political co-operation with the Church

In Christian countries, the Church was a non-military, but very influential, authority operating in parallel to the King.

Offa was very adept in running a government symbiotic with the Church, having and using influence over the appointment of bishops and archbishops, and the locations of monasteries and abbeys.

His negotiations frequently went as far as the Pope.

# Pope Hadrian I

Reigned 772-795



<http://www.culturalcatholic.com/PopeHadrianI.htm>

# Europe



<https://madmonarchist.blogspot.com/2012/01/feast-of-charlemagne.html>



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Charlemagne, Reigned 768-814

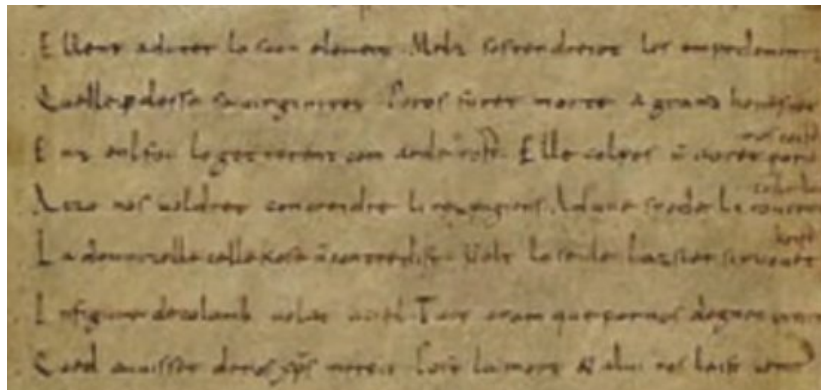
Charlemagne became Holy Roman Emperor and was the most powerful and influential European monarch for centuries.

Offa and Charlemagne dealt with each other as equals.

Correspondence presents Offa as a *European* statesman; for example, forging trade deals between Mercia and Europe. This permitted a Mercian 'presence' to develop into the Middle East.

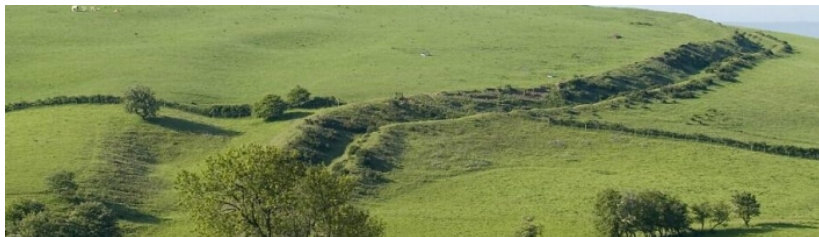
# Charlemagne to Offa, 796

*Charles, by the grace of God king of the Franks and Lombards,  
patrician of the Romans, to his esteemed and dearest brother Offa,  
king of the Mercians, sendeth health*



# Offa's Dyke

There's too much material on the Dyke to fit in – it would take an hour of its own!



<https://www.peny.co.uk/activities/places-to-stay-near-offas-dyke/>

# Offa: reigned 757-796

Cynethryth

Offa's wife of many years was Cynethryth. She is the first 'English Queen' to have significant personal influence: she co-signed charters and her head appeared on coins.



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<https://www.numismaticnews.net/world-coins/english-coins-in-spotlight>

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<https://www.numismaticnews.net/world-coins/english-coins-in-spotlight>

She is also the first 'English Queen' to be the subject of a play.

# Offa: reigned 757-796

At Tintern, Monmouthshire: 21st century oak

In 774, Offa styles himself *Rex totius anglorum patriae* – King of all England.



<https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/08/the-circle-of-legends-tintern-old-station/>

# And then ...

Offa is succeeded by a number of Kings, none of whom are able to replicate his authority and success, and several of whom are – putting it politely – undistinguished.

They are beset by problems

- Turbulence at the fringes (Kent, East Anglia)
- A growth in Wessex cohesion, influence and power

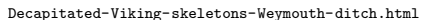
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- Turbulence at the fringes (Kent, East Anglia)
- A growth in Wessex cohesion, influence and power
- The Danish invasion

...thick and fast they came at last



# The Scandinavians arrive

To cut a long story short

The Scandinavian invasion is swift (unlike that of the Anglo-Saxons) and merciless.

Northumbria is an easy target, followed by Mercia.

Centred in Wessex, Alfred builds a coherent opposition,

Within 100 years, Mercian existence as an independent nation is at an end.

# What was it like to be a simple bloke?

When the Romans left, there were [maybe] 1M people in Britain. At Domesday 680 years later, there were maybe 2.25M.

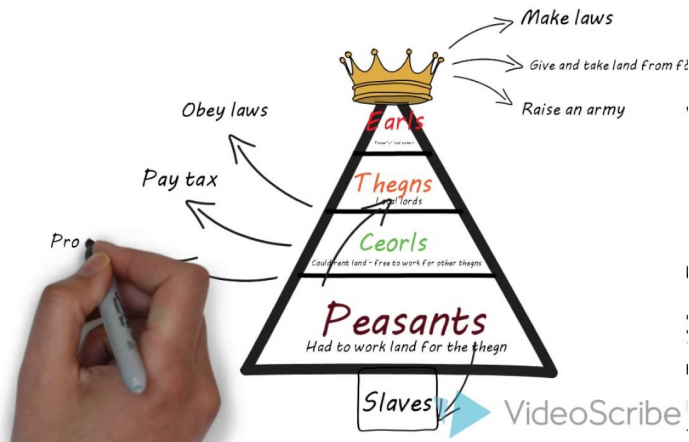
Sub-Roman days saw the towns depopulated and a sparse rural population grow. Small villages of maybe only 100 were self-sufficient. Saxon place names are a good indicator of how spread out the population was.

People were predominantly occupied in agriculture with export trade dominated by wool and some minerals.



# What was it like to be a simple bloke?

## Mercian social order



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7X6cZrFdQpQ>

# What was it like to be a simple bloke?

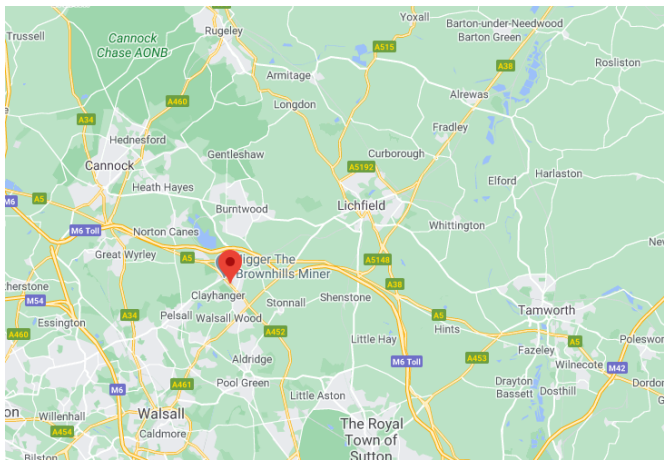
- Diet: vegetables, bread, beer, meat [sometimes]
- Life expectancy: It was good to reach 40. Disease, accidents, infant mortality, war . . .
- Buildings: rudimentary by Roman standards. Few Anglo-Saxon structures survive.
- Women: men ran the show, but women were not without rights. Primogeniture was not established until Norman times.
- Clothing: Wool, or maybe linen. Silk only if you were posh.
- Leisure: Dog/horse racing, dice, board games, music. Falconry if you were posh.

# Omissions

- 1 Offa's Dyke
- 2 Religion and politics in 'England', 409CE - 900CE
- 3 The Danish/Norwegian invasion
- 4 ...

# The Staffordshire Hoard

Discovered near Brownhills, July 2009



# The Staffordshire Hoard

'The hoard includes 3,490 metal fragments, totalling 5.094 kg (11.23 lb) of gold and 1.442 kg (3.18 lb) of silver, with 3,500 cloisonné garnets'

*Wikipedia.*

# The Staffordshire Hoard

*rise up, o Lord, and may thy enemies be scattered and those who hate thee be driven from thy face*



Wikipedia

*And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said,  
Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them  
that hate thee flee before thee.*

Numbers 10:35

# ...and it keeps coming

Northamptonshire



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CEMETERY AND SETTLEMENT  
FOUND IN OVERSTONE,

Significant Anglo-Saxon cemetery  
and settlement found in Overstone,  
Northamptonshire

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<https://www.mola.org.uk/blog/>

C6 – C8, discovered very recently.

# Diolch yn fawr