

**Collapse, Reconfiguration or Renegotiation?
The Strange End of the Mercian Kingdom, 850-924**

by Charles Insley

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**The collapse of the early medieval European
kingdoms (8th-9th centuries)**

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1. Introduction

The “C” manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has the following entry for the year 1007:

In this year also Eadric was appointed ealdorman over all the Mercian kingdom
(*geond eall myrcena rice*)¹.

This is quite striking phrasing, given that the Mercian kingdom had not existed as an independent political entity since – by some accounts – the 880s, some one hundred and twenty years earlier. One might be tempted to dismiss this phrase as antiquarianism on behalf of the compiler of the “C” manuscript, probably writing in East Anglia in around 1016 or 1017, except for the fact that the Mercians and the Mercian kingdom appear elsewhere long after its supposed demise at the end of the ninth century². A decade or so before Ealdorman Eadric’s appointment in 1007, the will of a thegn from Essex, in eastern England, named Æthelric of Bocking, had caused some political problems³. Æthelric had died in around 995 or 996, having been accused of unspecified treasons. These matters had not been resolved by the time of Æthelric’s death and his will and bequests were thus contested by King Æthelred.

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¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. 5, *MS. C*, ed. Brien O’Keeffe [from now on *ASC C*].

² For the dating of the composition of the annals for Æthelred’s reign to the period after 1016 see Keynes, *Declining Reputation*.

³ Brooks, *Treason in Essex*.

An assembly took place at Cookham, in Berkshire, where Æthelric's will was discussed in front of, as the charter recording Æthelred's confirmation of the will states

all the thegns who from far and wide were gathered there, both West Saxon and Mercian, English and Danish (*ealle ða ðegnas ðe þær wīdan gegæderode wæron ægðer . ge of Westsexan . ge of Myrcean . ge of Denon . ge of Englon*)⁴.

As far as the draftsman of the charter was concerned, Mercians and West Saxons still formed distinct, identifiable political communities as late as the 990s, and possibly communities that cut across the more obviously ethnic markers of "English" and "Danish". For a kingdom that conventional paradigms suggest had last enjoyed an independent existence in the late 9th century, this reappearance requires some explanation.

2. *The Historiographical Problem: the "Making of England"*

One of the problems that bedevils comparative history of the sort engaged in by the essays in this monographic section is the emergence of distinct national histories and historiographical traditions, which have in turn led historians to see the exceptionalism of their own "national" histories in relation to other parts of Europe⁵. Only since the 1980s and 1990s has this exceptionalism begun to be replaced by a much more comparative perspective, which has sought to place these national histories in the wider framework of post-Roman Europe⁶. In an English context, therefore, the collapse of the Mercian kingdom has tended to be seen in relation to two phenomena: the Viking incursions into Britain and Ireland, beginning in the last decade of the eighth century; and related to this, the creation of a single English kingdom, largely centred on the kingdom of Wessex, in the late ninth and tenth centuries. In particular, the narrative of tenth-century state formation – the "making of England" has become deeply embedded in English historiography⁷.

The Mercian kingdom and its later history has served, therefore, largely as subordinate to these somewhat teleological narratives; it was a kingdom which during the seventh and eighth centuries was powerful in terms of the sort of "extensive" – broad but shallow – hegemonies discussed by George

⁴ Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* [from now on S], 1501; *Charters of Christ Church Canterbury*, nos. 136 (will) and 136 (confirmation), pp. 999-1008.

⁵ For a discussion of English exceptionalism, see Foot, *Historiography*; Foot, *Angelcynn*; Campbell, *The United Kingdom of England*; Campbell, *Maximum View*; Wormald, *Engla Land*; Wormald, *Germanic Power Structures*.

⁶ For locating England in a wider continental perspective, see: Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*; *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vols. 2 and 3; Leyser, *Ottomians and Wessex*; MacLean, *Britain, Ireland and Europe*; Reuter, *Making of England and Germany*.

⁷ Campbell, *Uniting the Kingdom*; Wormald, *Engla Land*; Foot, *Historiography*; for a more comparative perspective, see Molyneux, *English Kingdom*.

Molyneaux⁸, but where its own internal structural weaknesses meant it fell victim to the same Viking onslaught that also destroyed the kingdoms of Northumbria and East Anglia⁹. It therefore plays its part in the narrative of English state formation, but as a necessary but flawed precursor to the Wessex-focussed kingdom of the English¹⁰. It is seen as lacking the sort of institutional cohesion that could be seen in Wessex and, crucially, lacked the dynastic stability that allowed Wessex to withstand the Viking onslaught of the 870s¹¹. The chronic inability of the Mercian political elite to crystallise around one dynasty made the kingdom fatally vulnerable to the particular political threat Scandinavian warbands posed¹². The kingdom's collapse in the face of the «Great Heathen Army/*Micel Hæðen Here*», therefore, paved the way for the apotheosis of Wessex into England.

From the early 880s, and certainly by the time of the West Saxon seizure of London in around 886¹³, the Mercian kingdom was seen as very much subordinate to the West Saxons and is essentially waiting to be absorbed into the nascent kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons under Alfred the Great¹⁴. In the great dramas of the 870s and 880s, as recorded in the earliest Alfredian section of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Asser's biography of Alfred the Great (both sources composed in the 890s), the rump of the Mercian kingdom was very much a supporting actor in the deeds of the English, its rulers firmly under West Saxon lordship¹⁵: after 880, so Bishop Asser tells us, all the English who were not under Danish rule submitted to Alfred¹⁶.

As with all narratives, there is some truth in this analysis, but also much to take issue with. Perhaps the first step is to uncouple the processes of kingdom collapse from the teleology of English state formation; this might then allow what happened to the Mercian kingdom between the ninth and later tenth century to be seen not as some catastrophic but necessary collapse which enabled the creation of an English kingdom, but as a much more organic process of political reconfiguration and renegotiation. What follows,

⁸ Molyneaux, *Rulers of Britain*, p. 81; for Mercian history see the 2001 collection of essays edited by Michelle Brown and Carol Farr, *Mercia*, and Burghart, *Mercian Polity*.

⁹ Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 243-245.

¹⁰ This is very much the view of Stenton, *The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings*, for more nuanced views see Keynes, *Mercia and Wessex*; Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 179-180, 243-245.

¹¹ Gore, *Viking Attacks*.

¹² There is a significant literature on the Vikings attacks and conquests in Britain during the ninth century; for a good introduction see Hadley, *Viking Raids and Conquest*; see also Hadley, *Vikings*.

¹³ Keene, *Alfred and London*; see also Nelson, *West Francia and Wessex*, p. 103 on the alternative lordship and hence threat Viking groups offered to disenchanted and excluded aristocratic/royal factions.

¹⁴ Foot, *Angelcynn*; Keynes, *Edward*, p. 45.

¹⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. 3, *MS A*, ed. Bately [from now on *ASC A*], *Alfred the Great*, p. 96; Keynes, *King Alfred and the Mercians*, pp. 31-34; Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, pp. 314-322; Walker, *Mercia*, pp. 69-96; Keynes, *Edward*, pp. 52-55.

¹⁶ *Alfred the Great*, p. 96.

therefore, is an attempt to do this; to look at how the narrative of the collapse of the Mercian kingdom might be reshaped. In so doing, it is hoped this essay addresses some of the key questions identified in other contributions to this monographic section. Three questions, in particular, inform the following discussion: first, the role of external factors; second, the role of institutions and centralised political structures; third, the emergence of new forms of political articulation and new political identities. This essay will conclude by suggesting that the collapse of the Mercian kingdom might not be seen as a catastrophic process – at least, not in the way normally assumed by English historians – but as part of a process of political renegotiation. The Mercian kingdom did indeed vanish as a structured, independent political entity, but that process was a long one, and one in which the Mercian political and religious elite were actively involved. In essence, the disappearance of the Mercian polity was, to a significant extent, a negotiated process, as its political elite sought to position themselves within the structures of the evolving kingdom of the English. This process may say less about catastrophic collapse, but rather more about the highly fissile and fluid nature of early medieval polities.

3. *The Mercian Background*

To start with, some of the more teleological aspects of the narrative of English state formation need addressing. Wessex emerged as the kernel of England, it is assumed, because it was more developed than Mercia; it had stable dynastic structures, and therefore a more cohesive political elite¹⁷. It was also more institutionally developed, and those institutions – in particular the shire and its attendant fiscal, military and judicial functions – were then deployed as part of the processes of constructing a single English kingdom covering not just Wessex and the south-east of England, but the midlands and the north.

Mercia, on the other hand, is seen as a less “developed” polity, with sometimes violent dynastic strife and a lack of observable structures of centralised government, although the construction of Offa’s dyke, the earthwork that approximates to the modern border between England and Wales is used to adduce the existence of the sort of administrative structures needed to organise the labour and other resources required for such a mammoth project¹⁸. Nonetheless, the surviving documentary and archaeological record for Mercia, especially what is assumed to be the Mercian heartland – the upper Trent valley – is very thin for much of the early and mid- Anglo-Saxon period¹⁹.

¹⁷ Brooks, *England in the Ninth Century*.

¹⁸ See Burghart, *Mercian Polity* and Bassett, *Divide and Rule*, for a critique and reassessment of this perspective on the Mercian kingdom of the eighth and ninth centuries.

¹⁹ Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 243-245; Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, pp. 230-249.

Recent and very spectacular archaeological finds, such as the Staffordshire hoard (2008) have altered this picture a little, but the very specialised nature of the hoard, much of it consisting of sword and scabbard furniture, adds little to what is already known about Anglo-Saxon elite society in the seventh and eighth centuries²⁰.

Where Mercian charters survive from before the late ninth century, they tend to be from the periphery of the Mercian kingdom; the west midlands, Middle Anglia and the borders of East Anglia. Indeed, surviving Mercian charters from before the mid-tenth century are dominated by the contents of one archive, that of the bishopric of Worcester²¹. It is assumed – probably with some justification – that other Mercian houses preserved charters, but that the activities of Scandinavian raiders and settlers in the midlands in the ninth century led to the destruction or at least attrition of many of these archives. Indeed, there is some evidence of this in the surviving charters: the cartulary compiled in Worcester at the close of the eleventh century by the monk Hemming contains a charter issued in the name of Æthelred, «dux Merciorum» renewing a grant made by his predecessor Burgred (852-874), but where the original diploma was subsequently lost due to Viking activity²². As it stands, the charter is probably not entirely authentic, but the circumstantial details, according to Simon Keynes, would have been difficult to invent²³.

Nonetheless, even allowing for archival significant loss, the Mercian kingdom does look curiously de-centralised, fragile and fractious when compared to the West Saxon kingdom and one perhaps more vulnerable, therefore, to external attack²⁴. However, the contrast may be more apparent than real, at least to some extent.

First, it is likely that the Mercian kingdom of the eighth and ninth century was more organised and structured than the surviving evidence suggests. It certainly seems likely, as Bassett argues, that Mercian royal power in part rested on control of a network of fortified places across the kingdom, and that these fortified centres themselves became the focus for territories that later became shires²⁵. Archaeological evidence from Hereford, Tamworth and Winchcombe suggests that the defensive works undertaken in the early tenth century, presumably by the then Mercian rulers, Ealdorman Æthelred and his wife Æthelflæd, made use of and expanded existing defensive structures that seem to have been built in the eighth or earlier ninth century²⁶. Although

²⁰ Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 173-178.

²¹ In part this is due to the survival of two eleventh century cartularies (along with fragments of a third); for discussion of the eleventh century cartularies see Tinti, *Hemming's Cartulary*; Baxter, *Archbishop Wulfstan*.

²² S 222.

²³ Keynes, *A New Charter*, p. 312.

²⁴ Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon World*, pp. 191-193, 243-245; Keynes, *Alfred and the Mercians*, p. 5; Capper, *Titles and Troubles*, pp. 220-223.

²⁵ Bassett, *Divide and Rule*, pp. 57-59; Bassett, *The Administrative Landscape*, pp. 150-151.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 155-156; Bassett, *Divide and Rule*, pp. 59-77.

evidence for pre-tenth century fortifications is much more limited beyond these three towns, it seems likely that other Mercian centres had some sort of defensive fortifications well before the tenth century. Chester and Gloucester still had extensive Roman-period fortifications that appear to have been in use throughout the early medieval period, while the reference to the Vikings being unsuccessfully besieged by the English in Nottingham in 868 suggests that Nottingham, at least, had serviceable fortifications before the tenth century²⁷. Indeed, Asser's life of King Alfred states explicitly that the Vikings were «protected by the defences of the stronghold (*tuitione arcis muniti*)»²⁸.

Further evidence that the eighth and ninth century Mercian kingdom may have been rather more organised than is generally believed is provided by the charters. From the middle of the eighth century, the surviving Mercian charters begin to mention obligations placed on the beneficiaries of such land grants, sometimes referred to as the “common burdens”²⁹. These obligations consisted of the requirement for the landholder to provide men for army service and to maintain fortified places and bridges; in other words, for the provision of men for fortifications and the upkeep of the military infrastructure of the kingdom³⁰. By the end of the eighth century, these obligations seem to have been universal in Mercian charters³¹. In effect, although we tend to see systems of fortification and military obligation as an innovation of Alfred the Great, the Mercians appear to have had something similar a century earlier³².

It is also the case that much of the sophistication of West Saxon political and governmental structures is read backwards from the later tenth century along with the assumption that the structures of local government and justice that appear in the record from across midland England towards the end of the tenth century must have been transplanted from Wessex³³. This may well be a fair assumption but it also needs to take account of development in time and space, as well as the role of human agency; the structures of government – justice, tax, local lordship – in midland England may indeed owe something to a West Saxon heritage, but they should also be understood as results of negotiation with local elites and local senses of identity and political affiliation³⁴.

Secondly, it is possible to overstate the dynastic cohesion of the West Saxon kingdom, even at the end of the ninth century. The events that followed the death of Alfred the Great in 899 demonstrate that even within Alfred's wider

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 77-78; Ward, *Edward the Elder and the Re-establishment of Chester*, pp. 162-164; Thacker, *Chester and Gloucester*; ASC A, 868.

²⁸ *Alfred the Great*, p. 77.

²⁹ Brooks, *Military Obligations*, pp. 75-77; Edwards, *Charters*, p. 256.

³⁰ Bassett, *Divide and Rule*, pp. 81-83.

³¹ Brooks, *Military Obligations*, pp. 75-77.

³² Bassett, *Divide and Rule*, pp. 55-58, 83-85.

³³ An idea explicitly critiqued by Bassett, *The Administrative Landscape*, pp. 148-149.

³⁴ See, for instance, *ibidem*, pp. 172-173; Roffe, *Origins of Derbyshire*, pp. 110-116; Roffe, *Hundreds and Wapentakes*, pp. 32-42; Roffe, *The Danes and the Making of the Kingdom of the English*, pp. 40-43; Insley, *Wulfric Spott*, p. 121.

family, cohesion could not be taken for granted. Alfred's will, a copy of which is now preserved in the *Liber Vitae* of the New Minster of Winchester largely excluded the sons of his older brothers, Æthelbald, Æthelberht and Æthelred from either a share in the succession to the West Saxon kingdom or its patrimony, which passed instead to Alfred's son Edward (the Elder)³⁵. Ryan Lavelle terms this «dynastic authoritarianism» which, while dramatic, underlines how unusual and problematic Alfred's actions were in an Anglo-Saxon (if not Carolingian) context³⁶. Following Alfred's death, his nephew Æthelwold "rebelled", temporarily seizing the church at Wimborne, in Dorset, where his father was buried before heading north to gather forces from the Scandinavian-dominated Northumbrian kingdom (one Irish source even calls him "King of the north Saxons")³⁷. This was followed by an invasion of southern England by Æthelwold, along with a Mercian *atheling* (a term used in Old English to denote men who were deemed to be "throneworthy") called Beornoth³⁸. This invasion was defeated in 902 in a battle "on the Holme", on the borders of Cambridgeshire and East Anglia, and Æthelwold and Beornoth killed³⁹. This defeat allows the West-Saxon centred sources to gloss over the seriousness of Æthelwold's actions, to portray him as a failed rebel, and for English history to resume its proper course towards unification. Interestingly, although the annal in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which records the battle of the Holme mentions the West Saxons and the men of Kent, there is no mention of the Mercians⁴⁰. A contemporary set of annals of apparently Mercian origin, the so-called "Mercian Register" is also laconic about the battle, simply describing it as a battle between the men of Kent and the Danes⁴¹. This might mean nothing, but the possibility has to be considered, at least, that the Mercians were absent from this campaign, possibly deliberately. A less pro-West Saxon reading of Æthelwold's "rebellion", therefore, makes the events of 899-902 look much more like what happened elsewhere in England during the Viking age, where participants in dynastic strife, especially those who had been excluded from a share in power, were able to draw on Viking forces as an extra lever in their bid for power or control⁴². In this, Æthelwold looks rather like the Mercian king Ceolwulf II (c. 875-879) – an "unwise king's thegn" (*unwisum cinges þegne*) as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls him⁴³, or the short-

³⁵ S 1507; *Charters of the New Minster*, pp. 3-12; Keynes, *Liber Vitae*, pp. 98-99.

³⁶ Lavelle, *The Politics of Rebellion*, p. 53.

³⁷ ASC A, 900-902; Lavelle, *The Politics of Rebellion*, p. 74; *Annals of Ulster*, AD 913 (*recte* 903), pp. 360-361.

³⁸ Dumville, *The Ætheling*.

³⁹ ASC A, 903 (*recte* 902).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ The term "Mercian Register" was coined by Plummer (*Saxon Chronicles*, vol. 1, p. 92); for a fuller discussion see below.

⁴² Nelson, *West Francia and Wessex*, p. 103.

⁴³ ASC C, 875 [*recte* 874] «And the same year they [the Vikings] gave the kingdom of the Mercians to be held by Ceolwulf, a foolish king's thegn; and he swore oaths to them and gave hostages...».

lived Northumbrian king Ricsige of the late 860s, and Wessex begins to look less “special”, but perhaps rather luckier than its neighbours.

4. *The Rebuilding and Renegotiation of the Mercian Kingdom after 880*

It is important, therefore, to move beyond the Vikings when looking at the processes around kingdom collapse or reconfiguration. It is certainly possible to suggest that, far from waiting around to be absorbed into a kingdom of England, or being slavishly subservient to the West Saxon kingdom, the Mercian political elite of the period 880–920 were engaged in an organised and systematic attempt to reconstruct the Mercian polity and perhaps even to embed the Mercian kingdom at the heart of the new political entity – the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons – that was emerging towards the end of the reign of Alfred the Great⁴⁴. There are two things in particular that suggest this. First are the actions of the Mercian rulers in the period 880–920, especially after the death of Alfred in 899. Second, and related to this, is the extent to which we can see the nature and identity of this new kingdom, the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons as something negotiable and contested, in particular through the medium of texts.

In terms of the actions of the Mercian political elite, an assumption tends to be that they were subservient to their West Saxon rulers, either Alfred the Great or his son Edward the Elder⁴⁵. This might have been true in the 880s and possibly 890s, but is far from the case after then. It is also worth remembering two things at this point: first, both West Saxons and Mercians, of course, presumably felt some sort of shared identity as *Angelcynn*’ or English, especially in relation to the sort of external threat represented by the Vikings, although we should be wary of simply assuming that this shared “Englishness” overwrote other identities or rivalries⁴⁶. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the victory over the Danes and Northumbrians engineered by Edward the Elder, his sister Æthelflæd and his brother-in-law Æthelred at the Battle of Tettenhall in 910 is described as an English victory even in the “Mercian Register”, a text to which we shall return and which normally only references the activities of the “Mercians”⁴⁷. Second, is that by the close of the ninth century, there were close dynastic links across the generations between the West Saxon and Mercian elites; Alfred the Great had been married to a Mercian, Ealhswith, daughter of Ealdorman Æthelred *Mucel*, while his daughter Æthelflæd was married to a Mercian, *Dux* Æthelred. Again, we need to be

⁴⁴ Keynes, *Alfred and the Mercians*.

⁴⁵ See e.g. Keynes, *Edward*; for the unusual status of Mercian rulers after the 890s, see Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, pp. 318–322.

⁴⁶ Wormald, *Engla Land*; Foot, *Angelcynn*; for the possibility that the idea of the «kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons» may have originated in Mercia, see Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, p. 320.

⁴⁷ ASC A, 910; ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 910.

wary of assuming such dynastic alliances brought unity in their train; they might, but the ninth and tenth centuries are littered with high-level marriages that completely failed to generate any sort of political solidarity.

The actions of Æthelflæd and her husband Æthelred are interesting in this respect, especially after the death of Alfred in 899. Although West Saxon and Mercian sources pointedly do not refer to them as “king” or “queen”, it is clear that in many senses they were, or at least exercised the sort of authority associated with those holding royal titles, save – as far as we know – the minting of coin. They certainly issued diplomas which reserved a range of communal obligations and military services of the sort normally held by kings and whose royal styles emphasised the divinely conferred nature of Mercian rule, again a feature normally found in explicitly royal diplomas⁴⁸. They also engaged on the sort of major building and fortification projects normally associated with kings; indeed the so-called “Mercian Register” is really little more than a list of the places fortified – *getimbrede* in Old English – by Æthelflæd and Æthelred. They conducted military campaigns aimed at regaining control over the eastern midlands, occasionally in concert with Æthelflæd’s brother, but generally on their own⁴⁹. Interestingly, the neighbours of the Mercians to the west – the Welsh and Irish – did regard Æthelred and Æthelflæd as king and queen, the collection of Latin Welsh annals conventionally known as the *Annales Cambriae* calling Æthelflæd *regina* on her death in 918⁵⁰.

Their activities in Chester, Worcester, Stafford and Gloucester in terms of rebuilding urban spaces and relocating saints’ cults (for instance the translation of the seventh-century Northumbrian St Oswald’s relics from Bardney, in Lincolnshire, to Gloucester) suggest a systematic attempt to reconstruct the sacred landscape of the Mercian kingdom with a more westerly focus, given that the lower Trent Valley, the historic heartland of the kingdom, was by then under Danish lordship⁵¹. That this was effective is also clear, with the cults of Oswald in Worcester and Werbergh in Chester, in particular, becoming deeply embedded in the locality, in both a physical but also a mental sense⁵².

More importantly, in their actions, Æthelred and Æthelflæd look like Mercian kings of the ninth century and, indeed, some of Æthelflæd’s actions after the death of her husband in 911 must surely have cut right across her brother Edward’s interests and authority, especially in Wales. In 916, Æthelflæd launched a campaign against the southern Welsh kingdom of Brycheiniog, a kingdom which since the late ninth century had been under West Saxon overlordship and whose kings were clients of the West Saxon kings

⁴⁸ Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, pp. 317-318; see S 217-222, 225. See for instance the style of S 217: «Æðelred gratia domini largiflua concedente dux et patricius gentis Merciorum».

⁴⁹ ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 907, 909, 910, 912, 913, 914, 915, 917, 918.

⁵⁰ *Annales Cambriae*, 918.

⁵¹ ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 909.

⁵² Burghart, *Mercian Polity*, pp. 317-318, Thacker, *Chester and Gloucester*; Thacker, *Early Medieval Chester*, pp. 17-20.

since the 890s⁵³. This was a major campaign, which included the destruction of a site referred to in Old English as «Brecenanmere», almost certainly the lake crannog site at Llangorse⁵⁴. Along with the destruction of this major centre, Æthelflæd's forces also captured the king's wife and thirty-three other hostages. What lies behind this campaign is unclear, but it seems likely that the complex interaction between Mercian and northern Welsh politics may have been a significant factor. The *Annales Cambriae* records two significant events in relation to this episode, both concerning the northern Welsh king Anarawd ap Rhodri; in the years 893 and 916⁵⁵. Anarawd ap Rhodri was ruler of the northern Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd and it is possible to suggest that for parts of the late ninth and early tenth century, Gwynedd was under some sort of loose Mercian overlordship, whereas the southern Welsh kingdoms, in part in response to the aggression of Anarawd and the Mercians, had sought the protection of Alfred the Great⁵⁶. The attack, recorded in the *Annales*, in 893 on the south-west of Wales (the districts of Ceredigion and Ystrad Tywi) involved both Anarawd and the English – almost certainly, in this case, the Mercians⁵⁷. Anarawd ap Rhodri died in 916, the same year as the Mercian attack on Llangorse and it is possible to see a connection between the two events. To some extent, Anarawd's dominance in Wales in the early tenth century can be seen as something that rested on Mercian support or even active help. His death, therefore, would create something of a power vacuum and it is possible to see Æthelflæd's actions as a response to a crisis caused by Anarawd ap Rhodri's death. Far from being a capricious act of violence, the attack on Brycheiniog, as a demonstration of power and even lordship (if only by denying the lordship of someone else), can be seen as an attempt by Æthelflæd to reassert Mercian hegemony in Wales in the absence of Anarawd and in the face of her brother. In this, Æthelflæd does indeed resemble earlier late eighth- and ninth-century Mercian rulers, seeking to reassert a similar pattern of domination over the north Welsh, despite the changes in the political landscape since the 880s⁵⁸. Either way, it seems clear that Æthelflæd was pursuing her own agenda here, not one established by her brother; indeed,

⁵³ ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 916; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 493-496; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and Mercia*, pp. 97-104; *Alfred the Great*, ch. 80, pp. 96, 287. South-east Wales was certainly under West Saxon lordship in the early tenth century; in 914 Edward the Elder ransomed Cyfeiliog, bishop of Eryng, who had been captured by the Vikings (ASC A, 914); Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, p. 506; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and Mercia*, pp. 103-104.

⁵⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, p. 505; Lane and Redknap, *The Early Medieval Crannog at Llangorse*, p. 202, «Charred structural timbers and a possible destruction horizon recognised in the excavations may represent this event»; Campbell and Lane, *Llangorse*, pp. 678-679.

⁵⁵ *Annales Cambriae*, 893, 916.

⁵⁶ Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 491-496; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and Mercia*, pp. 102-103; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, ch. 80, p. 96; Davies, *Patterns of Power*, pp. 67-71.

⁵⁷ *Annales Cambriae*, 893: «Anarawd came with the English to ravage Ceredigion and Ystrad Tywi».

⁵⁸ Davies, *Patterns of Power*, pp. 67-71; Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 424-428.

it was one that, for whatever reason, seems to have directly contradicted her brother's interests.

5. *Chronicles, Memory and History*

The main source for the deeds of the Mercians and their rulers in the early tenth century is the above-mentioned enigmatic text known as the "Mercian Register". This is a set of annals relating to the Mercian kingdom covering the years 900 to 924 and copied as a block into the "B" and "C" manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*⁵⁹. They are extremely laconic, but largely concentrate on the deeds of Æthelflæd, rather than her husband Æthelred, who merits only two entries: the record of his death in 911 and the record of the deposition of his daughter Ælfwynn («Ætheredes dohtor») in late 918. It is not known when or where these annals were composed, although a fair assumption seems to be in Mercia and more or less contemporary with the events they describe, and probably no later than the 950s, roughly the date of compilation of the "B" text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The entry for 924 in both "B" and "C" is incomplete, the sentence «and he geaf his sweostor... (and he gave his sister...)» stops without being finished, which suggests there may have once been more of this text than survives⁶⁰.

The history of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a set of distinct but interrelated texts is extremely complex and far from being properly understood⁶¹; the relationship of connected sets of annals such as the "Mercian Register" to the main *Chronicle* tradition is even less well understood. As is well known, the earliest surviving manuscripts of the *Chronicle*, conventionally known as "A" and "B" are no earlier than the mid-tenth century and are at least one remove from the original Alfredian iteration of the text, which scholars now tend to refer to as the "Common Stock", since these early annals are common to all the surviving *Chronicle* traditions⁶². Should the "Mercian Register" therefore be seen as part of this wider *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* tradition, or something separate from it and only incorporated at a later date?

A recent article by Pauline Stafford has significantly advanced our understanding of the nature of the "Mercian Register", and its relationship to the early tenth century sections of what tends to be thought of as the "main" *Chronicle* tradition. Rather than seeing the "Mercian Register" as something

⁵⁹ The most recent discussion of the "Mercian Register" is in Stafford, *Annals of Æthelflæd*; see also Stafford, *Political Women*, p. 48.

⁶⁰ This last, unfinished, sentence is presumably a reference to the marriage of Æthelstan's sister to Sihtric, Scandinavian king of Northumbria in 926 (*ASC D*, 926).

⁶¹ For the best short introduction to the complex history of and relationship between the various versions of the *Chronicle* see Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, pp. 6-9, 17-18 and Jorgensen, *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, especially pp. 6-7; see also Brooks, *Why is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle about Kings*; Brooks, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*; Stafford, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*.

⁶² Stafford, *Unification and Conquest*, pp. 6-8.

separate from the *Chronicle*, Stafford suggests that it should be seen as a direct continuation of the “Common Stock” and one which sought to attach the record of the deeds of Æthelred and Æthelflæd to those of Alfred the Great, which form the meat of the “Common Stock”⁶³. In so doing, what Stafford calls «the annals of Æthelflæd» is in effect in competition with the main *Chronicle* entries for the reign of Edward the Elder (what we might think of as the “Annals of Edward”) in constructing a narrative for the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons in the early tenth century. Rather than seeking to maintain a separate Mercian history, the annals which comprise the “Mercian Register” should be seen as an attempt – probably centred on the court of Æthelflæd – to place Mercia and the actions of its rulers, in particular Æthelflæd, Alfred’s daughter, at the heart of the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons, rather than Wessex. What was at stake in the first two decades of the tenth century was not so much whether Mercia would be completely subsumed by Wessex, which is how matters tend to be seen by modern historians, but whether Mercia and the Mercian elite could dominate, or at least compete for domination within the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons, and whether the history of the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons would be a West Saxon or Mercian focussed one. What may have been at stake for Æthelflæd and the Mercians in the early tenth century was, as Stafford argues «Mercian-based or at least Mercian-orientated rule» of the English⁶⁴.

6. *Renegotiating the Mercian Kingdom after 924*

The “Mercian Register” stops in 924 with the death of Edward the Elder and his son Ælfweard, and the succession of Edward’s eldest son Æthelstan⁶⁵. This succession was not straightforward: Æthelstan’s father and brother died in the summer of 924, yet Æthelstan was not crowned until September 925⁶⁶. Such a lengthy delay between the death of one king and the inauguration of his successor surely indicates some sort of dynastic complication. It is worth briefly pausing here to note that when Edward died, it was in northern Mercia, at Farndon, near Chester⁶⁷. The twelfth century historian William of Malmesbury, in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, also states that Edward was in Mercia to put down a rebellion of the men of Chester and the Welsh⁶⁸. Although this story is not attested in the contemporary or near contemporary sources, it is not implausible. Æthelflæd had died in the summer of 918 and was initially

⁶³ Stafford, ‘Annals of Æthelflæd’, pp. 114-116.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁶⁵ ASC A, 924; ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 924.

⁶⁶ Keynes, *Liber Vitae*, pp. 19-22; Foot, Æthelstan, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁷ ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 924: « Here King Edward died in Mercia at Farndon (Her Eadweard cing gefor on Myrcm æt Fearndune)».

⁶⁸ Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, Bk. II, ch. 133, pp. 210-211.

succeeded as ruler of the Mercians by her daughter Ælfwynn. This seems to have involved Edward's tacit approval; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records Edward's presence in Tamworth, a major Mercian royal centre, at the same time in the summer of 918, along with the submission to him of the Mercians and the Welsh kings Hywel ap Cadell, Clydog ap Cadell and Idwal ap Anarawd⁶⁹. However, six months later, Edward had Ælfwynn removed from power; in the words of the "Mercian Register", she

was deprived of all authority in Mercia and taken into Wessex, three weeks before midwinter (*ælces anwealdes on Myrcum benumen and on Westsexe aloded þrim wucum ær middan wintra*).

Although it seems likely that Edward had some backing within Mercia for these actions, it is equally likely that they also aroused resentment and opposition within some sections of the Mercian elite. This does not necessarily explain the six year gap between 918 and the events of 924; other factors such as the complex politics of the Irish Sea region and Edward's expansionism in north Wales may also have played a part in the Chester rebellion. Nonetheless, Edward's coup of 918 may provide some context⁷⁰.

Although Æthelstan was, as far as we know, the eldest surviving son of Edward the Elder, it seems that by 924 he was not Edward's designated heir; rather a younger half-brother, Ælfweard was⁷¹. It is possible – the source is an unattested story in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum* – that Æthelstan spent his youth in Mercia, at the court of his aunt and uncle⁷². There are problems with this story; a distinct lack of corroborating evidence for one (Æthelstan does not appear to have attested any of his aunt and uncle's charters) and William of Malmesbury's well known tendency to embroider his histories have made some historians very suspicious of this story⁷³. Nonetheless, it is possible that William's assertion should be given some credence, and it is striking that the personnel Æthelstan's court, at least until the early 930s, had a strongly Mercian flavour, while there seems to have been a distinct distance between Æthelstan and the clerical communities in Winchester, the place of burial of Alfred the Great and Edward the Elder, but significantly not Æthelstan after his death in 939⁷⁴.

⁶⁹ ASC A, 918.

⁷⁰ Griffiths, *North-West Frontier*, pp. 179-184; in 921 Edward had built a *burh* (fortified settlement) at «Cledemuthan» (probably Rhuddlan) in north-east Wales (ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 921).

⁷¹ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 17-18.

⁷² William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, Bk. II, ch. 133, pp. 210-211.

⁷³ Lapidge, *Some Latin Poems*, pp. 62-71; Dumville, *Æthelstan*, pp. 142-145; Dumville (p. 142) refers to the «dangerous pages» of William's work.

⁷⁴ Bishop Cenwald of Worcester seems to have been closely associated with Æthelstan; it was Cenwald who seems to have led the embassy associated with the marriage between Æthelstan's half-sister Edith and the son of the East Frankish king Henry I, the future Otto I. See Walker, *A Context for Brunanburh*, pp. 27-31; Keynes, *King Æthelstan's Books*, pp. 156-159, 198-201. For Æthelstan's problems with Winchester, see Keynes, *Liber Vitae*, pp. 19-22.

Ælfweard, however, died a matter of weeks after his father; the “D” manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states sixteen days, while a regnal list copied into the great twelfth century compendium of English law known as the *Textus Roffensis* allocates Ælfweard a reign of four weeks⁷⁵. It seems to have taken over a year for the political establishments in Wessex and Mercia to accept Æthelstan as king⁷⁶. The “Mercian Register” describes Æthelstan being «chosen (*gecoren*)» as king by the Mercians after the death of his father and half-brother, which perhaps suggests that they saw him in some sense as “their man”, which might lend weight to William’s story about Æthelstan’s Mercian upbringing⁷⁷. Æthelstan’s court personnel, up to the 930s at least, had a strongly Mercian character, and the two clerics with whom Æthelstan seems to have been especially close – bishops Cenwald of Worcester and Ælle of Lichfield, were both Mercians⁷⁸.

The events of 918-924 might be read as the end of an identifiably Mercian polity; Æthelstan’s achievement was, after all, the making of a kingdom of all the English⁷⁹; however, it did not mean the end either of a Mercian political community or a distinctively Mercian perception of the new “kingdom of the English”. A group of ten mid-tenth century charters provide us with an interesting Mercian perspective on England and the processes of renegotiation and reconfiguration of the Mercian Kingdom. This group, covering the date range 940-956, are conventionally known as the “alliterative charters”, because of their strongly literary character, including the use of alliteration. They all concern property in Mercia and their production can be plausibly linked to Bishop Cenwald of Worcester⁸⁰. What is striking about these charters is that the royal style deployed in them is rather different from that which appears in charters produced in the rest of southern England of the same date. The first few years that followed Æthelstan’s death in 939 had been difficult ones for his half-brothers Edmund (ruled 939-946) and Eadred (ruled 946-955). For a period in the early 940s, northern Mercia had been sized by the Hiberno-Norse dynasty that ruled Northumbria, while southern English control over Northumbria was not in any secure sense restored until the death of the last Northumbrian king, Erik Haraldson in around 954⁸¹. Since c.929 or 930, Æthelstan had been styled consistently «King of the English/*rex*

⁷⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, vol. 6, MS D, ed. Cubbin [from now on ASC D], 924; Dumville, *Æthelstan*, p. 146.

⁷⁶ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁷ ASC C, *Mercian Register*, 924.

⁷⁸ Above, note 64.

⁷⁹ Most recently see Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 10-12; Molyneux, *The Formation of the English Kingdom*, pp. 48-115; Dumville, *Æthelstan*, pp. 169-171.

⁸⁰ Keynes, *King Æthelstan's Books*, pp. 158-159.

⁸¹ ASC C, 924; Stafford, *East Midlands*, pp. 109-122; Hadley, *The Vikings in England*, pp. 54-61; for the debate over Erik Haraldson, the dating of his rule in Northumbria and whether he was the Erik “Bloodaxe” of the sagas see Townend, *Viking Age*, pp. 74-84; Sawyer, *The Last Scandinavian King of York*; Downham, *Chronology*; Downham, *Erik Bloodaxe - axed?*; Woolf, *Erik Bloodaxe revisited*.

Anglorum» in his charters, a development from the earlier «king of the Anglo-Saxons» that seems to have followed Æthelstan's establishment of some sort of authority over the Northumbrians in 927⁸². This style «king of the English» was continued in the charters of Æthelstan's successors, except for this group of Mercian charters, some of which reverted to the older style «king of the Anglo-Saxons», generally adding a phrase along the lines of «ruler of the Northumbrians and Pagans (*gubernator Nordanhymbranque paganorum*)», and all of which distinguished between rule over the English and the Northumbrians⁸³. This perhaps suggests that the Mercians, if Bishop Cenwald can be taken for a moment as an avatar for all Mercians, saw the kingdom rather differently from their West Saxon counterparts; that for the Mercians, the loss of direct English royal control, such as it was, over the Northumbrians was very apparent and real and that in some senses, the “kingdom of the English” as it had been under Æthelstan had ceased to exist.

7. Conclusion

The previous discussion has endeavoured to suggest that the collapse of the Mercian kingdom in the ninth century was much more of a process of reconfiguration and renegotiation than a single, catastrophic event, even if the sources to some extent, construct it as such. It would of course be foolish to suggest that the Vikings were not a major political factor in the ninth and tenth centuries, but equally, they were not the only factor in terms of political dynamics, and a Mercian polity remained in existence well into the tenth century. How far this sense of a Mercian kingdom endured is less clear, although it was possibly to briefly resurrect the idea of a kingdom of the Mercians in 957, when Eadwig split the kingdom of the English with his brother Edgar⁸⁴. This final Mercian kingdom was shortlived, lasting only until Edgar succeeded his brother in 959, but that it existed at all suggests that the idea and indeed the reality of a Mercian kingdom remained available to the political elite of mid-tenth century England. This polity remained robust enough to be identifiable to outsiders, and the memory of the kingdom was embedded enough that references to the kingdom of the Mercians still had some sort of meaning in the eleventh century, hence Ealdorman Eadric, whose appointment as ealdorman of the Mercians in 1007 is recorded in the quotation that begins this essay, could be seen by contemporaries as, in some senses, succeeding to the rule of the Mercian Kingdom.

⁸² ASC D, 927; William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum*, Bk. II, ch. 134, pp. 212-214; Foot, Æthelstan, pp. 17-20.

⁸³ E.g. see S 549 «Ealdredus rex Ængulsæxna ond Norðhymbra imperator . paganorum gubernator . Brittonumque propugnator».

⁸⁴ ASC C, 957: «Here the atheling Edgar succeeded to the Mercian kingdom (*Her Eadgar æpeling feng to Myrcna rice*)»; Lewis, *Edgar*, pp. 116-123.

The early tenth century therefore becomes a key moment in this process of renegotiation and reconfiguration, as Mercian rulers sought to place themselves at the heart of the politics of the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons created by Alfred the Great. Edward's seizure and incarceration of his niece in late 918 could be seen as an act of political violence, as a sort of *coup d'état*, but it is less clear that this disempowered the Mercian political community, some of whom may have preferred an adult male ruler to a young female one. It is, though, important to remember that Ælfwynn's rule lasted perhaps as much as six months before her incarceration⁸⁵. This same political community, one assumes, was the one which chose Æthelstan to be king in 924, and descendants of whom backed Edgar as king of the Mercians between 957 and 959.

How far this political community was reinforced by a relationship with place, in particular, religious communities is less clear. If we can suggest for a moment, though, that the alliterative charters can possibly be associated with the Worcester community, then Worcester, while being an important English religious and indeed political centre, also remained a place with a distinctively Mercian focus in the tenth century. Another question to raise, if not answer here, is the extent to which the descendants of Danish settlers in the eastern part of the Mercian kingdom could also access Mercian identity; that, at least, is the implication of the couplet in the confirmation of Æthelric of Bocking's will⁸⁶. The echoes of the Mercian kingdom can be heard two centuries on from the events of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. In the autobiographical information that he provides the prologue to book five of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Orderic Vitalis, writing in the 1120s, described himself as being born at Atcham, near Shrewsbury, and of Mercian origin⁸⁷. It would, of course, be naïve to suggest that being Mercian in the 1070s or 1080s, when Orderic was born, was the same as being Mercian in the 880s, or even the 980s and that Orderic's sense of his Mercian-ness was probably as much an artefact as real. Nonetheless, a notion of a Mercian identity, and a Mercian location was available to him. Mercia may have indeed collapsed in the ninth century, but it was a very long process!

⁸⁵ Stafford, *Political Women*, pp. 47-48.

⁸⁶ Roffe, *The Danes and the Making of the Kingdom of the English*, pp. 40-41.

⁸⁷ *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Chibnall, vol. 3, p. 9: «Tandem ego de extremis Merciorum finibus decennis Angligena huc aduectus, barbarusque et ignotus aduena callentibus indigenis admixtus inspirante Deo Normannorum gesta et euentus Normannis promere scripto sum conatus. (So in the end I, who came here from the remote parts of Mercia as a ten-year-old English boy, an ignorant stranger of another race thrown amongst folks who know, have endeavoured by God's grace to commit to writing an account of the deeds of the Normans for Normans to read...)».

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