

THE ANGLLO-SAXON ORIGINS OF THE WEST MIDLANDS SHIRES

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Provincial organisation in late Anglo-Saxon England consisted of discrete territories organised to promote both defence and the maintenance of essential public works. In Mercia the territories comprised its shire structure: the regime through which defence, public works, governance, taxation, and administration of justice were undertaken.



Shires and hundreds; Speed's seventeenth-century map of Staffordshire reveals the units of tenth-century local government.

The territories which ultimately became Staffordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Herefordshire have Anglo-Saxon origins. A close look at the last three shires suggests the possibility of a territorial organisation dated to the British period, with bounds discernible in the Anglo-Saxon shire structure.

The Shire and the Hundred

The system of local government which existed over the greater part of England at the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 had two tiers: the shire and the hundred. There is much debate about when these two structures were first in evidence in the west midlands and the more prevalent view is that they probably originated in Wessex and were later imposed early in the tenth century after the West Saxons annexed western Mercia.

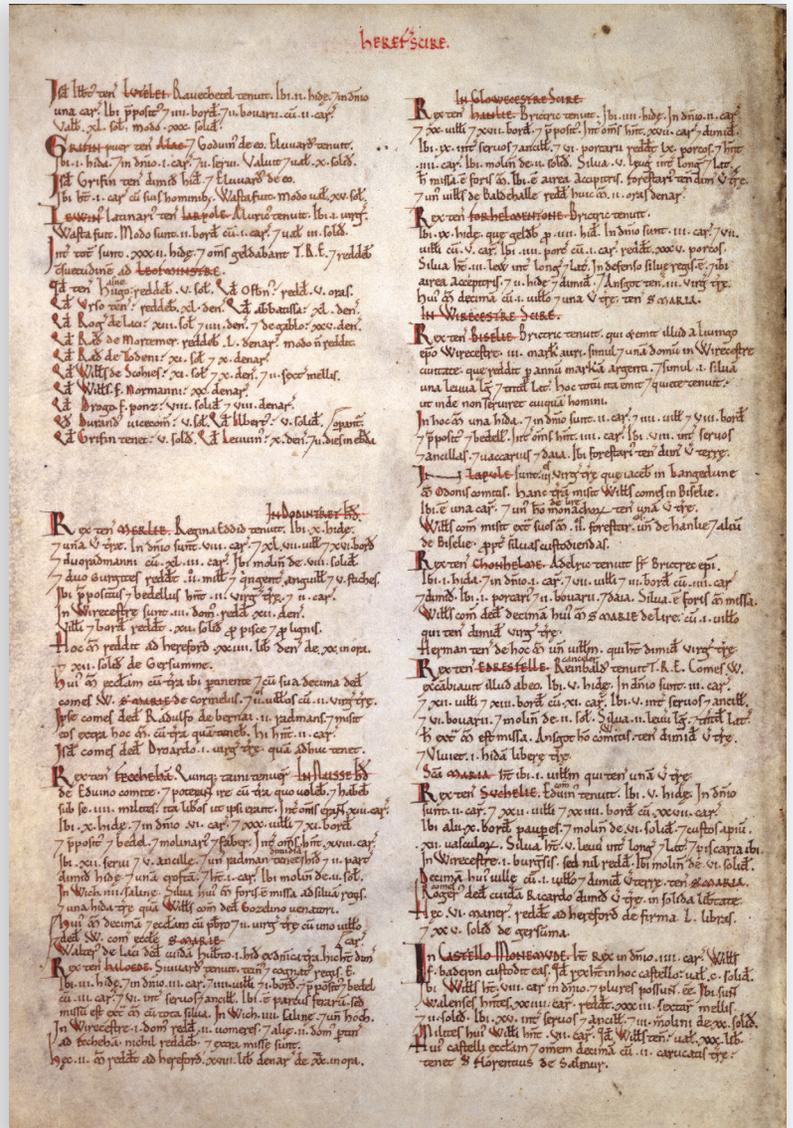
Both the terms ‘shire’ and ‘hundred’ are imprecise ones, and their uses, even as late as the Conquest, may be inconsistent. A ‘shire’ was the Old English word for any area of jurisdiction or control carved out of a larger one, and did not refer necessarily to a territory which later became a modern-day county. The term ‘hundred’ had an obvious numerical connotation for taxation purposes and, throughout the west midlands, implied a theoretical content of one hundred hides, which represented the basic unit of assessment for liability to pay public burdens.

West Midlands Shires in *Domesday Book*

The first time it is possible to identify the shape of the west midland shires, and their constituent hundreds, is from the 1086 returns found in *Domesday Book*. These records provide a snapshot of what historians believe represented the organisation of late-tenth-century Anglo-Saxon Britain. Over the years medieval scholars have endeavoured to link the manorial holdings listed in *Domesday* returns to their modern-day places, with some considerable success.

The Alecto Edition of *Domesday Book*, published from the late 1980s onwards, mapped the boundaries of each shire and its constituent hundreds. It was a comprehensive project, and the landscape findings are available in summary digital format (see website under Further Reading).

In 1086 the west midland shires represented only part of the area which had comprised greater Mercia – that into which its western territories had been divided. Derbyshire has been omitted from this discussion, since at the date when it is argued that the shire system was organised in the tenth century, it was under Danish control, beyond the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon Mercia. Gloucestershire has been included since its eleventh-century extent comprised territory which had been, in



Record of the boroughs and manors of Herefordshire. Extract from *Domesday Book* of 1086.

the tenth century, partly within Herefordshire, partly within Worcestershire, and partly within an abolished shire of Winchcombe.

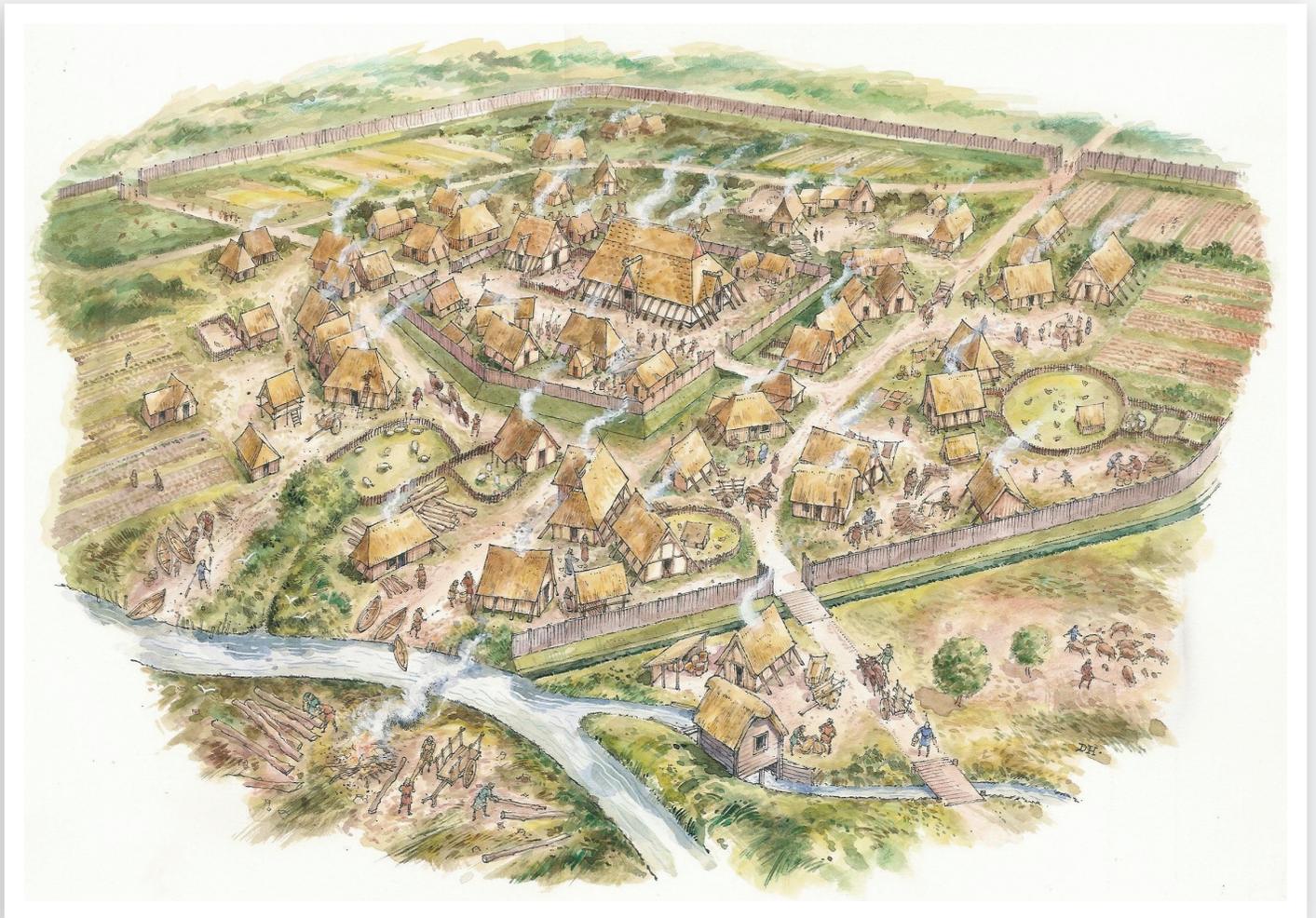
Early Territorial Organisation in Mercia

To understand how these territories were formed we need to look at them individually, and in the context of the political background of the ninth and tenth centuries. The first thing to appreciate is the political climate. During Offa’s reign (757-796 AD) Mercian energies had been focused on the essential statecraft of unifying the different peoples whose heartlands comprised Mercia’s provinces.

These heartlands are identifiable from a seventh- or eighth-century tribute list/taxation document known as the *Tribal Hidage*, which allocated bundles of hides to various groups or polities. It included an area known as ‘Original Mercia’ and the satellite territories of peoples known as the Wreocensæte, the Hwicce and the Magonsæte, among others.

The importance of the *Burh*

By c.700 the Mercian kingdom was large, and diverse in its extent. Archaeologists and historians have argued for the existence of a political



Allegiance and obligation focused on the *burh*. Artist's impression of the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Tamworth.

By kind permission of Tamworth Castle. © Tamworth Castle and Museum

strategy in place from the middle of the eighth century to maintain an infrastructure of public defences at a number of strategic settlements, including three within Mercia's western territory: Tamworth in Staffordshire, Winchcombe in Gloucestershire and Hereford in Herefordshire. Each of these seems likely to have had its first military fortifications by Offa's reign, since evidence found in royal charters which were granted from 740 onwards, records the imposition of three public service duties on landowners receiving royal grants: the duty to maintain military fortifications, or *burhs*, the duty to maintain bridges, and the duty to serve in the army.

These obligations required landowners from the surrounding countryside to second their able-bodied workers at regular intervals to undertake them. The extent of the area which bore primary responsibility was the catchment or hinterland of the *burh*, and each landholding within it was assessed at a specific number of hides, defining its level of contribution.

The effect of requiring this kind of public service from those who worked in the territory would have been to change a group's primary focus from one of tribe and family to one of community. Allegiance and obligation were focused on the *burh*, the consequence of which would have been to unify and organise the surrounding area, its defence and its political economy. Moreover, the unification of an area assigned to a particular *burh* required

those planning the scheme to demarcate its catchment more precisely than perhaps had been the case previously.

Around all these fortifications a hinterland or dependent territory was identified. There was nothing particularly new in this tactic of aligning discrete territory to a fortified place – the device had been used since Iron Age times. What was novel was the systematic imposition of essential public service to secure its maintenance and defence.

The Break-up of Mercia and the Creation of Shire Towns

The political upheaval of the ninth century which saw the internal collapse of Mercian government after the death of Offa's ultimate successor, Coenwulf, the Danish onslaught from the east and skirmishes with the Welsh in the west, concentrated energies on further defensive initiatives. During this period Mercia saw itself subjected to and subsequently allied with its long-time rival, Wessex, and its eastern portion ultimately taken by the Danes.

As a consequence of the east/west partition of Mercia in 877 certain western settlements came within a revitalised defence plan which closely mirrored the one already in place in Wessex, and one which had been key to its defence. The three early *burhs* of Tamworth, Winchcombe and Hereford were re-fortified early in the ninth, and again in the tenth century.

Archaeological and charter evidence shows that Worcester had come within this network by the end of the ninth century. For Stafford and Warwick the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries for 913 and 914 reveal that each was fortified then. Historians argue that, on account of their strategic royal and ecclesiastical significance, Shrewsbury and Gloucester were probably fortified by the end of the ninth century, as well.

What effect did this strategy have on western Mercia? Clearly, by re-aligning territories around fortified or re-fortified centres which were organised for military purposes there was likely to have been a reorganisation of local administration, and in fact shire towns ultimately served other functions, including those of an ecclesiastical, fiscal and governance nature. As their names suggest, each of the shires of western Mercia took its name from the *burh* upon which its protection depended. To see the consequence of this type of reorganisation we have to consider each of them in a little more detail.

Staffordshire

Eleventh-century Staffordshire had been within the territory known as 'Original Mercia' of the *Tribal Hidage*, in the diocese of the Mercians. Stafford was then not its capital, rather it was Tamworth, Mercia's headquarters and a fortified place in the eighth century, near to the diocesan seat at Lichfield. At the time of the partition of Mercia in 877 it is not clear whether Tamworth was then on the boundary of western Mercia as a frontier fortification, or under Danish control.

Some historians argue that its significance as a fortified site declined because of its frontier location, others because it lay in enemy territory by the date of partition, and others because of a conscious decision to downgrade it. In fact Staffordshire's boundary with Warwickshire was drawn so as to bisect it. Stafford itself may have been a middle-ranking centre of some local importance in the ninth century and may have had some fortification, but evidence is lacking. By 913 it lay at the centre of a reorganised dependent territory.

Shropshire

There is no record of any strategy to fortify Shrewsbury. However, it is one of a number of places which, on account of royal and ecclesiastical significance, is argued to have been defended by the end of the ninth century.

The territory's western boundary had been at Offa's Dyke since the late eighth century, and a *burh* at Shrewsbury, with its strategic



A modern image of Winchcombe, the county town of the Mercian shire of Winchcombeshire until merged into Gloucestershire c. 1016.

point on the Severn, would have protected its riverine approaches. The eastern and southern limits of the shire incorporated areas of the Wreocensaete and the Magonsaete, both of the *Tribal Hidage*; returns found within *Domesday Book* show that it continued to evolve well into the Norman period.

Warwickshire

In 1086 Warwickshire lay in an area which formerly had been within two discrete sections: its south-western part was within

the diocese of Worcester and the Hwiccan kingdom, and its north-eastern part lay within the diocese of Lichfield and the territory of the South Angles. Some speculate that the settlement of Warwick itself emerged as a trading point on the border between these two groups, and that a *burh* may have been founded in the eighth or ninth century to control the political frontier between them.

An extensive fortification under Anglo-Saxon control came in 914. By the end of the tenth century Warwick was flourishing as a trade and military settlement, lying at the centre of these two areas which had been organised around it, ignoring older diocesan boundaries.

Worcestershire

Worcester, like the Mercian royal centre at Tamworth, had long been the administrative seat of a territory – that of the Hwicce, an Anglo-British group with considerable power and autonomy, and their own diocese in the seventh century. In 1086 what had been this kingdom comprised Gloucestershire east of the Severn, the south-western portion of Warwickshire, and most of Worcestershire.

The existence of its *burh* is first recorded at the end of the ninth century, by which date a hinterland would have been assigned to it. This seems probable because Worcester is listed as a *burh* in an appendix to the *Burghal Hidage*, a document believed to have been drawn up between 914 and 918 which lists the fortified sites within neighbouring Wessex, and provides information about how *burhs* were to be maintained and manned. The creation of a dependent territory for Worcester and Warwick left the south-western portion of the former Hwiccan kingdom to be reorganised – the part now in Gloucestershire.

Gloucestershire

Gloucester had been the Roman fortified settlement of *Glevum*, and an important British ecclesiastical and administrative centre in the post-Roman period. It was captured by the West Saxons in 577, along with Cirencester and Bath, and later annexed to Mercia



Hereford, developed as a *burh* to secure approaches along the River Wye. Cooke's *Universal British Traveller*, 1779.

by Penda in 628. Its significance as the revitalised capital of western Mercia from early in the tenth century makes it highly likely that it was re-fortified in the ninth.

However, the shiring of the territory is complex and, arguably, later than that of its neighbours, because the eighth-century *burh* of Winchcombe – which lay in Gloucestershire by 1086 – had itself been a shire in its own right until abolished and merged into it around 1016. In Gloucestershire's case, as with Shropshire's, reorganisation continued well into the eleventh century.

Herefordshire

Herefordshire is the final shire to consider. Historians argue that its origins, like those of the neighbouring shires of Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and southern Warwickshire, also lay with an Anglo-British kingdom – in this case the kingdom of the Magonsaete. It, like its neighbour-province of Hwicce, was a diocese by 680 with an extensive jurisdiction – one that extended into what later became southern Shropshire and western Gloucestershire up to the boundary with the Severn. The diocesan limits of Hereford remained at the Severn until the early-modern period.

Archaeological investigations indicate that the *burh* of Hereford was likely to have been constructed by the middle of the eighth century; its location, like Shrewsbury's, would have secured the riverine approaches along the Wye, which was becoming essential given increasingly frequent incursions by the Welsh. This event may have predated a similar development at Shrewsbury. The demarcation of a hinterland for Hereford, some way to the south of the Severn's banks, would have made Shrewsbury's case all the more critical since the shire's northern boundary ignored the older diocesan border and ran well south of the Severn.

In 1086 Hereford was at its southern limits on the Wye, and at the frontier of the Welsh district of Archenfield which was by then under Anglo-Norman overlordship. Its modern-day central location in the shire was not achieved until the twelfth century when its hundreds were reorganised after Archenfield's incorporation.

British Tribal Districts and Shire Boundaries

Historians have uncovered the vestiges of what are argued to have been British tribal districts whose bounds are fossilised within the shires and hundreds of western Mercia. There is a territory argued to have been administered from Worcester which may date from the Roman period, and the abolished shire of Winchcombe which may represent

the patrimony of the kings of the Hwicce. There are two other discrete areas of eleventh-century Gloucestershire which may represent two British kingdoms seized by the West Saxons at the Battle of Gloucester in 577.

My own research into Herefordshire suggests at least three similar territories – one centred on Hereford, one on an area north and west of Leominster and one along the Frome valley. Historians argue that these early polities were growing into larger unified territories from the eighth century – all assessed in the bundles of hides recorded in the *Tribal Hidage*.

Shiring: an Anglo-Saxon Achievement

The process of shiring has been described as the defining of territories expressed in hides so as to provide for defence and upkeep of the *burhs*. The area of western Mercia which was organised into tenth-century shires was from c.700 the territory of discrete peoples: those of Original Mercia, the Hwicce, Wreocensaete and Magonsaete, whose obligations to the state were expressed in their respective hidage allocations.

The development of a scheme of political organisation, taxation and governance over the succeeding three-hundred-year period – from one allocating tribute owed by peoples, to one aligning communities to the hinterlands of defended settlements – represents the development of a far-sighted and sophisticated statecraft which was, without doubt, one of the greatest achievements of the Anglo-Saxons. ●

Dr Sheila Waddington recently completed a PhD at the University of Birmingham on the origins of Anglo-Saxon Herefordshire.

Further Reading

The 1086 shire maps of the Alecto edition of *Domesday Book* can be found on the website of University College London at www.ucl.ac.uk. Enter 'Electronic Anderson' into their searchbox.

Steven Bassett, 'Anglo-Saxon fortifications in western Mercia', *Midland History*, 2011: 36, pp. 1-23.

Nicholas Brooks, 'The development of military obligations in eighth- and ninth-century England' in Brooks, *Communities and Warfare 700-1400* (Hambledon Press, 2000), pp. 32-47.

Nicholas Higham & Martin Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Yale University Press, 2013).

Simon Keynes, 'Mercia and Wessex in the Ninth Century', in Brown and Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe* (Continuum, 2001), pp. 310-28.