

OFFA'S DYKE

A SYMBOL OF KINGSHIP?

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Offa's Dyke, which bears the name of King Offa of Mercia (757– 796 AD), is an earthwork which winds a sinuous course through the Welsh Marches. The monument consists of a bank on the eastern, 'English,' side and a ditch on the western, 'Welsh,' side, but what was it for?



© Cott Nero D VIII Offa, King of Mercia, from the Benefactors Book of St. Alban's Abbey, c.1380 (vellum). English School, [14th century]/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images

Offa, King of Mercia, remembered as a benefactor of the monastery at St Albans.



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Offa's Dyke, one of the most well-known ancient monuments in Britain, bisects the Powys countryside from top to bottom in this aerial photograph.

Over the course of twelve centuries, time, weather and erosion have taken their toll, and today Offa's Dyke in many places is scarcely visible, but when newly-constructed it was a substantial and impressive monument, presenting on its western side a barrier with an average height of twelve feet from ditch bottom to bank top.

Historians and archaeologists have traditionally emphasised the importance of the earthwork's practical utility but, in fact, the dyke's primary purpose may have been its symbolic and ideological value, as a representation of Offa's imperial kingship.

Location, Origins and Extent

In a superficial sense Offa's Dyke is one of the most well-known field monuments in Britain. When considered more closely, however, it appears rather more enigmatic. On a very basic level, there is no record of its construction in any surviving source; indeed there are no references to it at all in any contemporary or near-contemporary source. In his *Life of King Alfred*, written a century after Offa's death, Bishop Asser of Sherbourne mentions that the Mercian king '...ordered a great wall, running from sea to sea, to be built between the Britons and the

Mercians'. Were it not for this casual reference we would have no convincing reason to associate the earthwork with Offa.

The gaps in our knowledge do not stop with the construction of the dyke. There is also disagreement over its extent. Traditionally it was seen running, if intermittently, from Sedbury Cliffs on the Severn estuary, to Prestatyn on the north Welsh coast. This 'maximalist' vision was outlined by Sir Cyril Fox, who made extensive field surveys of Offa's Dyke in the 1920s and 1930s, and published his findings in their final form in *Offa's Dyke*, his magnum opus of 1955. Fox envisaged the dyke as defining a frontier with a total length of 149 miles, though he considered that only eighty-one miles of earthwork were constructed.

Since the turn of the millennium, however, David and Margaret Hill, based on a mammoth programme of excavation starting in the 1970s, have persuasively argued that Offa's Dyke was rather shorter than this. They claimed that the only section of the earthwork which can safely be associated with Offa is the fairly continuous section of about sixty-four miles from Rushock Hill, Herefordshire, to Treuddyn, near Mold.

There is also no agreement regarding the time, labour and resources required for the dyke's construction. Certainly all scholars agree that it was a mammoth undertaking, but there consensus ends. Estimates range from that of the late Patrick Wormald, who argued that the project could have required 5,000 men occupied for the whole of Offa's thirty-nine year reign, to that of the present writer, who has suggested that the same number of labourers could have constructed the earthwork in as little as twenty weeks.

From Sea to Sea: a Barrier against the Welsh Kingdoms?

One might think that uncertainty over such major issues is problematic enough, but most fundamentally of all, we do not really know why the dyke was built, what its intended functions were, or how it fulfilled those functions. Fox, as we have seen, accepted Asser's characterisation of the dyke as running along the whole western frontier of Mercia, 'from sea to sea', and thus separating the Mercians from all the Welsh kingdoms. He further argued that the earthwork delineated a negotiated frontier and was conceived and built during a period of peaceful relations between Mercian and Welsh peoples.

One could question why it was necessary to construct a boundary marker on such a massive scale along the intersection between two groups currently at peace. Moreover, Fox does not really address the issue of why it was necessary to construct a frontier work such as Offa's Dyke at all. The great Sir Frank Stenton, in his magisterial *Anglo-Saxon England*, first published in 1943, accepted Fox's vision of the dyke and argued that it should be seen in the context of the Welsh raids on Mercia referred to in Felix's early-eighth-century *Life of St Guthlac*. He argued that: 'Under these conditions, the creation of an artificial line of defence for the protection of the Mercian lowlands becomes a natural response to an intolerable situation.' Stenton saw Wat's Dyke, in the northern Welsh borderlands, generally associated with Offa's predecessor King Æthelbald (716–757), as the initial Mercian reaction to these raids, followed later by the construction of Offa's Dyke.

Building two large-scale earthworks with a minimum total length of about 100 miles seems an excessive, rather than a 'natural', response to raids from neighbouring kingdoms especially since, contrary to popular opinion, the surviving evidence suggests that Welsh attacks were few. In any case, the Mercians were from time to time on similarly bad terms with most of their other neighbours, yet they seem to have felt no need to construct comparable barriers elsewhere.

The Threat of the Kingdom of Powys: An Anglo-Saxon Berlin Wall?

More recently David and Margaret Hill have advanced a rather different interpretation of Offa's Dyke. As noted above, their archaeological examination of the dyke suggests that it did not in fact run 'from sea to sea,' but rather merely from Treuddyn in the north to Rushock Hill in the south. As for the purpose of Offa's Dyke, they suggest that it did not



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Offa's Dyke path at Foel Fenlli Hillfort, Denbighshire.

define the Mercian frontier with the Welsh kingdoms in general, but with Powys alone. The archaeological evidence appears to support their hypothesis, though their interpretation, while based on a 'minimalist' view of the dyke, requires us to accept a 'maximalist' vision of the extent of the kingdom of Powys.

They then go on to posit a political context for the building of the dyke. Their model hinges on the inscription once legible on the Pillar of Eliseg, a truncated stone cross which stands in, and gives name to, the Valle Crucis, near Llangollen. The inscription, though no longer legible, was copied in 1696 by the antiquarian Edward Lhuyd. It states that the cross was set up by Concenn, the great-grandson of Eliseg, and that: 'It is Eliseg who annexed the inheritance of Powys... throughout nine [years?] from the power of the English, which he made into a sword-land by fire ...' 'Concenn' is generally equated with King Cynan of Powys, whose death at Rome in 854 is recorded in the *Welsh Annals*. Depending on the length of each generation, the time of Eliseg is likely to have been between fifty and a hundred years earlier, almost certainly making him a contemporary of Offa.

The Hills argue that the inscription shows a period when the kingdom of Powys was aggressive and expanding, with Eliseg devastating and temporarily recapturing erstwhile areas of Powys which had long been in Mercian control. Offa's Dyke, they suggest, was constructed as a response to this threat. Thus it was not necessary to build the dyke 'from sea to sea', as it was intended purely as a defence against the men of Powys. Margaret Hill, noting the apparent absence of original gateways or openings in Offa's Dyke, has made an analogy with the Berlin Wall, suggesting that the dyke acted as an almost total barrier for a short time, after which it was completely redundant.

The Hills advance a more specific, and perhaps more credible, context for Offa's Dyke than the rather vague 'Welsh threat' posited by Stenton. Nevertheless, their model presents difficulties. The expansion of Powys at the expense of Mercia indicated by the Pillar of Eliseg inscription is unrecorded elsewhere. Even if we accept the historicity of this phenomenon, Powys was not the only Welsh kingdom to come into conflict with Offa's Mercians. Under the year 778 the *Welsh Annals* record 'The wasting of Southern Wales by Offa', and one might speculate as to why an earthwork was deemed necessary along the frontier with Powys and not further south.

More fundamentally, how serious a threat to the Mercian kingdom did an aggressive Powys present? Was the building – at great expense of time and labour – of a large-scale, sixty-four-mile-long earthwork an appropriate response to a threat of this nature? Even if we accept that a precedent had been set by Æthelbald with the construction of Wat's Dyke, this was not the typical response of an Anglo-Saxon king to an external threat, and this was a period when inter-kingdom warfare was endemic.

The Limitations of the Dyke

In seeking to answer the question of why the earthwork was built, it is instructive to consider more precisely what it was intended to do and how, and how effectively it would have fulfilled that purpose. In view of the scale of its construction, and its seeming lack of gateways or other openings, it does seem likely that Offa's Dyke was meant to act as some sort of barrier, intended to seriously impede and rigorously control traffic across the frontier.

There is no evidence, however, that the dyke formed part of a sophisticated system of frontier defence in the manner of



A massive surviving section of the dyke rampart marches towards Furrow Hill, near Discoed, Powys.

Hadrian's Wall. No traces have been found in the archaeological record of possible sites – enclosures or forts – where a garrison could be accommodated. While these cannot categorically be ruled out, in view of the military resources available to early Anglo-Saxon kings, the existence of a permanent garrison is unlikely in the extreme.

It seems probable then that it was intended that the earthwork should be capable of fulfilling its function by itself, unsupported by armed men. When newly built, Offa's Dyke would have been a substantial barrier, with a western frontage of twelve feet from ditch bottom to bank top. Patrick Wormald suggested that even unmanned it would have presented a formidable barrier to raiders. Individuals on foot could have scaled it with little difficulty, but he argued that horsemen would have struggled to cross it, and that it would have been even more difficult to drive cattle – the most common form of plunder seized in raids – over it. If raiders were unable to profit from their activities this may well have acted as a deterrent, though livestock was not the only form of plunder, nor was cattle-raiding the only motivation for warfare.

Moreover, the archaeological evidence makes it clear that after its initial building Offa's Dyke was not maintained. There is no evidence of scouring of the ditch, building up of the bank, or any other medium-term or long-term maintenance.

Observations made at the Overton Down experimental earthwork in Wiltshire suggest that changes in the profile of an earthwork due to erosion and weathering occur most rapidly in the early stages after its construction.

Within two decades of completion the profile of Offa's Dyke may have been similar to that currently presented in areas with surviving sections of bank. Though sometimes still visually impressive, the dyke today rarely offers a serious impediment to movement. If constructed early in the reign of Offa, it may have ceased to be effective as a defensive barrier before his death.

Though Offa's Dyke clearly had some practical, defensive utility, its usefulness hardly seems to justify the effort involved in building it, and it seems an excessive response to its hypothesised military context. Indeed, it is difficult to see how in eighth-century Britain *any* military threat could be sufficiently severe as to require the construction of so monumental a line of defence. These issues may perhaps best be answered by approaching them from an alternative direction.

An Imperial Symbol?

Considerations of the purposes of Offa's Dyke to date have tended to concentrate on the practical utility of the earthwork. What kind of frontier does it represent? How did it function? How successful was it? These are the kinds of questions scholars have most frequently asked. While they represent important lines of enquiry, studies of other early-medieval societies suggest a strong connection between monumental architecture, ideology and power.

In this context, it seems likely that one of the primary functions of the dyke was its ideological value. Whatever else it was, Offa's Dyke was and remains a highly visible, spectacular and unambiguous symbol of the power of the man who caused it to be built. It required massive mobilisation of labour, demonstrating the ability of the Mercian kingship to exploit the surplus labour of the population. Once complete, the dyke remained as a permanent testament to Offa's power; even when its profile had softened sufficiently to render it militarily redundant, its visual impact, and therefore its symbolism, would not be seriously reduced.

Texts such as Gildas's sixth-century *De Excidio Britonum*, Bede's eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People*, and the ninth-century *Historia Britonum* all indicate that in early-medieval Britain the building of linear barriers which defined frontiers was associated with the Romans, and in particular with Roman emperors. Building substantial earthworks was therefore seen as a Roman, imperial activity.



Eliseg's Pillar, the remains of a ninth-century cross near Llangollen, erected in honour of the King of Powys.

Offa appears to have been a king with imperial ambitions and, though greater in physical scope, the dyke would parallel other manifestations of his concern to augment his position and image by any and all possible means. These included the use of grandiose royal titles in charters, the minting of pennies bearing his name and image (an innovation in eighth-century England), the promotion of Lichfield, the Mercian bishopric, to the status of an archdiocese, his presidency of pan-English Church councils, the anointing of his son Ecgfrith as king during his own lifetime, and his diplomatic relations with Charlemagne, king of the Franks.

If we are right to attribute Wat's Dyke to Æthelbald, another king who indulged in quasi-imperial ideology, then Offa could present himself as outdoing his great predecessor, as Offa's Dyke, even in a 'minimalist' interpretation, is almost twice as long as Wat's Dyke.

A Reflection of English Identity?

Such an ideological interpretation can perhaps help explain the construction of the dyke. Its location, however, requires further consideration. It is argued above that, in so far as we can tell, the threat posed to the Mercian kingdom by its neighbours in Powys (or indeed among the Welsh kingdoms generally) was no greater than that emanating from other groups on the peripheries of Mercia. Why then should such an earthwork be constructed here

but not elsewhere? There is at least some reason to consider that, at their most expansive, Offa's aims included the domination of all England south of the Humber.

By the eighth century at the latest there was among the Anglo-Saxon élites a definite consciousness of an English identity which transcended identification with individual kingdoms. By constructing a barrier between the English and the Welsh, Offa may to some extent have been portraying himself as the protector of the English. This explanation is of course hypothetical, and beyond proof, but it does offer a more subtle explanation of this remarkable monument, unequalled anywhere in medieval Europe, than that of mere military utility. ●

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Further Reading

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David Hill & Margaret Worthington, *Offa's Dyke: History and Guide* (Tempus Publishing, 2003).

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Damian J. Tyler, 'Offa's Dyke: a historiographical appraisal,' *Journal of Medieval History*, 37, 2011, pp 145-161.

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