

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE KINGDOM OF MERCIA

THE LANDS OF ST CHAD

Andrew Sargent



When the rulers of the Anglo-Saxons began to turn themselves into Christian kings from the late sixth century, they were joining a club already peopled by the most successful of the European kingdoms that had emerged from the wreckage of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Mercia became one of these new Christian monarchies.

© Window w6 depicting St Chad (stained glass), English School, (15th century)/York, Minster, Yorkshire, UK/Bridgeman Images

St Chad, Staffordshire's Saint and Bishop of Mercia.

Religious authority was moulded over political power, and amongst the Anglo-Saxons one bishop was initially appointed to minister to each kingdom. Thus, when the Christian King Oswiu of Northumbria defeated and killed the pagan King Penda of Mercia in 655 AD, he created a single bishopric to serve this newly-conquered realm. This article explores its history during the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, when it formed the primary diocese of the kingdom of Mercia.

Christian missions

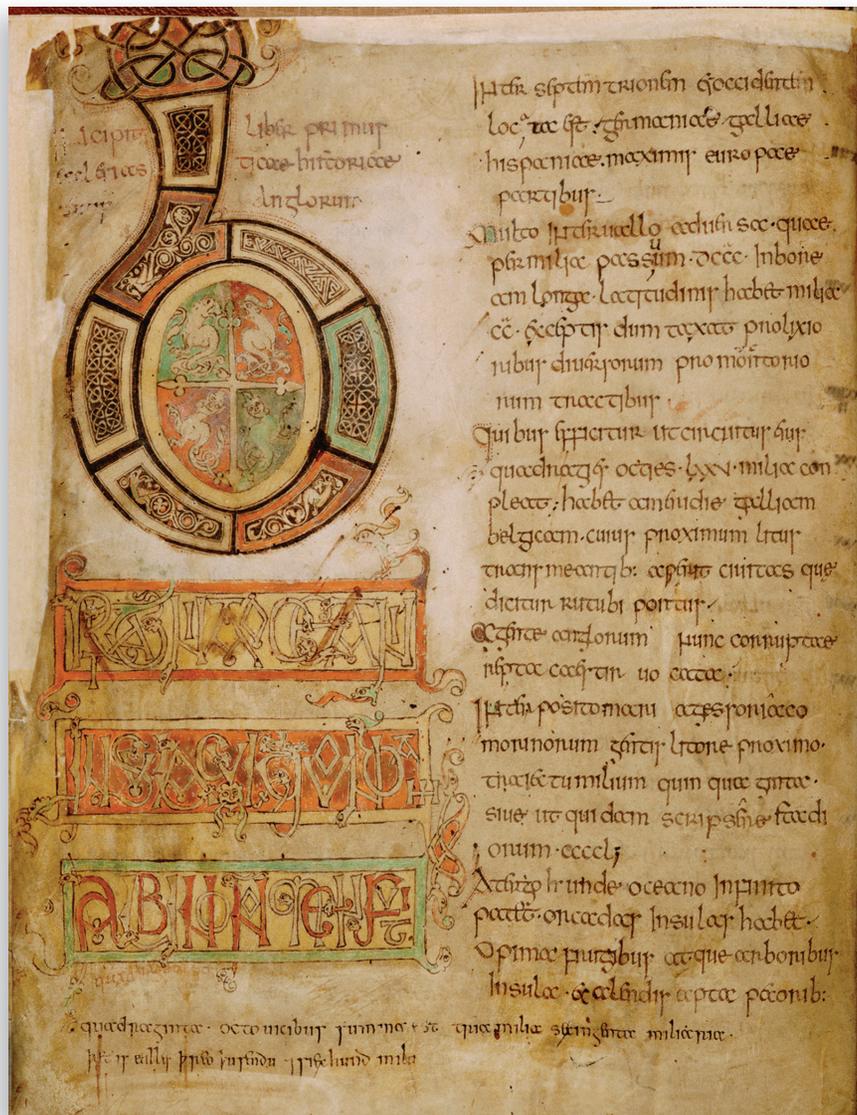
Bede, the Northumbrian monk who wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People* in about 730, described two primary conduits of the Christian religion into Anglo-Saxon society. These were a Roman mission sent by Pope Gregory the Great which had arrived in Kent in 597, and an Irish mission established at Lindisfarne in 634 by King Oswald of Northumbria, who desired in part to override the Roman bishopric established at York by his predecessor and rival, Edwin.

The new Mercian bishopric, a product of Northumbrian imperialism, was overwhelmingly staffed from Lindisfarne. Although Penda's son Wulfhere regained the Mercian throne from Oswiu in 658, the Northumbrian connection remained influential. Several of the diocese's early bishops were Northumbrian or Irish in origin, including its fifth bishop, Chad.

St Chad

Chad had been raised at Lindisfarne, one of four brothers given to the Church at a young age. Chad's brother Cedd became an influential abbot, participating in the Synod of Whitby in 664, at which King Oswiu decided to follow Roman rather than Irish customs of Christianity. Chad himself had travelled to Ireland to seek further education at the monasteries there. Returning to Britain on Cedd's death, he was appointed bishop of a revitalised diocese of York, as part of what appears to have been a competition for power between King Oswiu and one of his sons.

However, in 669 Chad was ousted by Wilfrid, one of the former losers in this competition, who exploited the high Roman standards of a new archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore, to



Bede's eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People* tells us much about Chad's mission.

cast aspersions on the quality of Chad's consecration. Nevertheless, both men were apparently so impressed with Chad's humility under fire, that Theodore re-consecrated him, and assigned him the vacant Mercian bishopric, whilst Wilfrid gave Chad a Mercian estate he had earlier received from Wulfhere: Lichfield.

The Diocese of Mercia

The Mercian diocese was initially very large, as by 655 Penda had extended his rule out of the royal heartland centred on southeast Staffordshire, taking in the Middle Angles of the East Midlands and the people of Lindsey in Lincolnshire. Chad established the diocesan cathedral at Lichfield; we do not know if previous bishops had a central church, although given the size of the diocese they might have moved around quite frequently.

After Chad's episcopate the diocese was gradually confined to the northwest midlands as parts of it gained their own bishoprics: Lindsey in 678 and the Middle Angles in 737. Meanwhile, by the end of the seventh century, the Mercian kings had solidified their control of what is now Cheshire and northern Shropshire, colonising a power vacuum caused by the extinction of various Briton dynasties, and incorporating the area into Lichfield's diocese.

Chad's experience as bishop might have been politically volatile, but it also demonstrates that there was more than politics to the Anglo-Saxon Church.



© Lichfield Camera Club

Lichfield, the heart of Chad's diocese.

Christianity affected the entire cosmology of the Anglo-Saxon peoples; it claimed they had souls in need of saving, and bishops such as Chad appear to have taken this seriously, and to have considered the cure of souls in their dioceses part of their responsibility.

In southern Europe the old Roman cities had survived imperial disintegration and acted as bases for the bishops and their churches. In northern Europe, urban life had largely disappeared, and new centres were needed to support religious life. In England, these took the form of 'minsters', a label used by scholars to describe quasi-monastic institutions containing both monks (and/or nuns) and clerics, and supported by landed estates.

Lichfield was one of these, and as such was a centre for religious life. Chad erected a small oratory there, believed to have been located on the site of the present church at Stowe, specifically set aside for him and a select group of his companions to study and pray.

A network of minsters

In order to preach and deliver the sacraments (such as baptism and the mass) to the people of his diocese, a bishop worked to establish a network of minsters, used as bases by clerics who toured the surrounding settlements and estates.

We can glimpse the network assembled by successive bishops of Lichfield in the distribution of episcopal estates recorded in the *Domesday Book* of 1086. Many of these had no doubt been in the bishops' possession for centuries, and many supported minsters. Most were also located on Roman or important medieval roads, enabling the bishop to progress around them on a yearly basis, as was required by Church edict. Some of the bishops' minsters were located on the sites of older churches established by the Britons:

Chester was a Roman city, and Eccleshall's place-name implies the presence of an older church there.

Although many people, high and low, were content to visit the bishop's churches or await the tours of his priests, others, notably important aristocrats and especially kings, founded their own minsters, often themselves becoming the abbot or abbess of the place or assigning a family member to the position.

The differences between episcopal and aristocratic minsters were not great; after all, bishops were aristocrats too, and all aristocrats lived in a world of patronage centred on the king. Nevertheless, where aristocrats provided for their own religious life, bishops sometimes became anxious about their relative lack of oversight; in theory bishops had the right to visit any religious institution in their diocese, but this was sometimes hard to enforce, especially where the minster's head was a member of the royal family.

Royal and aristocratic minsters can be identified in the diocese of Lichfield by the location of Anglo-Saxon saints' cults, which often sprung up around the remains of a prestigious founder or holy inmate, whose life or death was considered to epitomise the religious ideal.

It is notable that such minsters are concentrated in the south-eastern parts of the diocese, near the Mercian royal heartland, where they had ready access to royal patronage. Only the bishop's minsters (which tended to be dedicated to St Chad) are more evenly distributed, testifying to an episcopal concern for the cure of souls across the diocese.

Achievements

The eighth and earlier ninth centuries were a productive period for the Anglo-Saxon Church. Churchmen appear to have sustained contacts with others in Ireland and on the continent,

encouraging a mixing and fusion of religious cultures displayed in manuscripts such as the *Book of Cerne* (which might have been produced for a bishop of Lichfield) and in sculpture such as the 'Lichfield Angel', discovered at Lichfield and thought to be a panel from St Chad's shrine. Sculpture and architecture elsewhere testify to a desire to glorify the bones of saints across the diocese at this time.

Meanwhile King Offa cultivated important relationships with the Pope and the Frankish king Charlemagne. Under his auspices a papal legation was received in England in 786, aimed at reforming both religious and worldly life, considered the proper role of a Christian king.

Nevertheless, the possibilities for tension between royal and religious prerogatives found dramatic expression when Offa began to use the yearly synods of the Southumbrian Church (which included all the Anglo-Saxon dioceses south of the Humber) as a forum for governing his expanding empire. At particular issue was his control of Kent, because his desire to consecrate his son as his heir required the assent of the head of the Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In the end, unable to get what he wanted, Offa used his influence with the Pope to get his own archbishopric, raising Bishop Hygeberht of Lichfield to the honour in 787 and cutting Canterbury's Southumbrian province in half. This split was only undone after Offa's death, which eloquently testifies to his ability to interfere in religious matters whilst alive.

Survival

As the ninth century wore on, destructive infighting wracked the Mercian royal dynasty, and the ravages of the Viking Great Army from 865 set the seal on the disintegration of the Mercian empire and the extinction of its kings. Many minsters suffered at the hands of pagan warriors, and the bishops of Lichfield may for a short time have been exiled from their own see. Nevertheless, the diocese of the Mercians outlived the kingdom it was founded to serve, eventually enjoying a new life within the kingdom of England. ●

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Further Reading

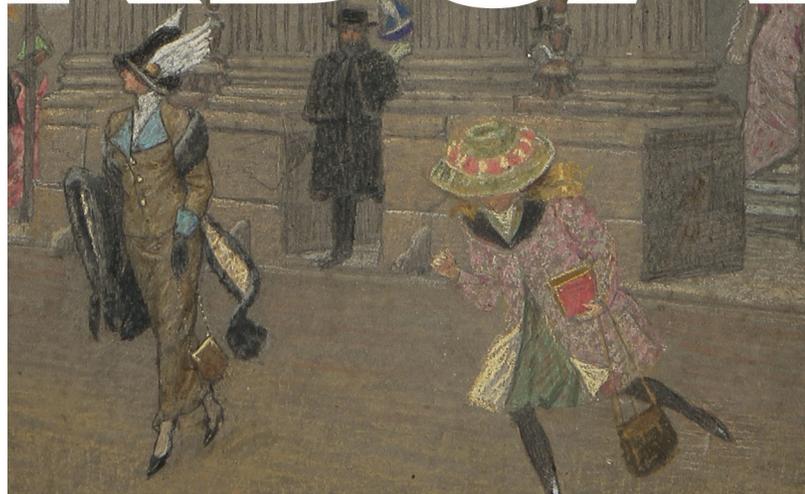
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Michelle P Brown, *The Book of Cerne. Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England* (University of Toronto, 1996).

Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c.650 – c.850* (Leicester University Press, 1995).

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