# An Early Mercian Hegemony: Penda and Overkingship in the Seventh Century

*The overthrow of Penda meant the end of militant heathenism and the development of civilization in England*

(Sir Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943), xvi)

The words cited above refer to the death in 655 of Penda, the last king of the Mercians to die a non-Christian. Today Stenton's judgement of Penda seems both anachronistic and loaded with questionable value judgements. Few if any contemporary scholars would consciously endorse the agenda implicit in his words, yet arguably a modified form of Stenton's vision of Penda still underpins much of the literature on Mercian hegemony, and indeed on overkingship in general. Overkingship is an aspect of early Anglo-Saxon society which has traditionally attracted much scholarly attention. The mechanisms of these systems - how they were built up, the methods used to maintain them, the reasons for their collapse - have frequently been discussed.[1] One reason for this interest is that English historians historically have been preoccupied with the creation in the tenth century of a single English kingdom, and have looked for its antecedents in the overkingships of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. Despite this extensive consideration, Penda has received comparatively little attention. Even scholars writing about Mercian dominance have had little to say about him. Typically, his career is given cursory attention, and writers quickly move on to later, Christian Mercian rulers. While his power is generally acknowledged, he is not treated as an overking of the same order as the Northumbrians Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu.[2] Overall, the impression one gets is that Penda's career was somehow less significant

than those of later kings, and that the important aspects of Mercian history begin with his sons Wulfhere and Æthelred. Perhaps more significantly, insofar as Penda *is* considered, it tends to be in terms of his impact on others: to date little attempt has been made to look in any detail at his rule from the inside.[3] This article endeavors to do so. After an exploration of the sources available for Penda's kingship the central section of the piece consists of a consideration of the extent of Penda's hegemony, followed by a detailed analysis of the mechanisms sustaining it. In the conclusion it will be argued that Penda's style of overkingship represented a flexible but essentially conservative reaction to the new strategies of power which Christian ideology and Christian churchmen were providing for other seventh-century kings.

It could be argued that Penda is neglected by modern historians because we have few sources for his career. However, the Northumbrian king Oswald is scarcely, if at all, better documented, yet there is a whole volume dedicated to his kingship.[4] Arguably the negative view of Penda expressed above derives ultimately from the picture of him that emerges from the *Historia ecclesiastica* of the Northumbrian monk Bede, completed in 731.[5] Of all the literary sources for Penda, this text is the closest in time to, and the most detailed in its coverage of, his career. Despite this it presents the modern scholar with a number of challenges. Bede's work is a politically-charged providential narrative history, and his agenda did not include providing posterity with a detailed, rounded portrait of Penda.[6] His treatment is both limited in scope and extremely negative in character. Bede's Penda is '*rex perfidus*',[7] the evil slayer of Christian kings,[8] a heathen impediment to the God-ordained growth of the English Church, a consistently violent scourge of the godly. In the *Historia ecclesiastica* we meet Penda the pagan warrior and see no other side to him - his role as the dominant

king in southern Britain throughout most of the 640s and the first half of the 650s is glossed over, and we see virtually nothing of the internal development of Mercia. Crucially, Bede omits Penda from his list of kings wielding *imperium* over the southern English.[9]

For Bede Penda was a negative figure, but he nevertheless perceived him as English, and therefore one of his own people. He is careful to distinguish between Penda's wickedness and the much worse evil of his British ally Cadwallon, the king of Gwynedd, '[...] a barbarian who was even more cruel than the heathen.'[10] Bede notes the alliance between the two kings, but ignores its significance for Penda's attitude to ethnicity.[11] This should not surprise us, given Bede's rhetorical imperatives, particularly his hostility towards the Britons and his vision of *Gens Anglorum* as the people of God.[12] It will be suggested below, however, that Penda had a much more relaxed view of ethnic difference than did Bede and that it had little if any effect on his policies.

Bede's treatment of Penda is, then, far from full, and even further from balanced, yet his work is the literary source on which we rely the most, which gives some intimation of the difficulties presented by the others. Old Welsh poetry has been used in attempts to illuminate the history of the west midlands in the seventh century,[13] but in view of the serious uncertainties regarding the dating and context of this material it can tell us little directly, though it is illustrative of the attitudes of later generations. [14] Though often cited the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*[15] is seriously compromised as a source for the early seventh century and should be used with caution.[16] The *Tribal Hidage* can potentially allow us to imagine something of the political geography of seventh-

century midland England, but this document is an extremely problematic source, especially when one attempts to place its composition in a particular political context.[17] Thus it is difficult to determine how relevant the information it provides is to any particular period. The 'North British Section' of the *Historia brittonum*, which gives some details of Penda's genealogy and death,[18] is perhaps more reliable than other portions of that work,[19] and adds a little to what can be gleaned from Bede, but it must be stressed that it is a little. None of these texts add much to Bede's account, and all are much later than Penda's time and/or of uncertain provenance. No other literary sources with credible claims to historicity are extant.[20] The Anglian element within Penda's Mercia was a non-Christian, non-literate society and so produced no documentation. Even were this not the case, his *floruit* was probably before the introduction to England of the land book, or charter,[21] which is one of the mainstays of the study of eighth-century Mercian kingship.

If the literary sources are inadequate, it can scarcely be said that archaeological evidence goes very far towards filling the lacunae in our knowledge. Pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in the mid-Trent valley can perhaps tell us something about the focus of the early Mercian polity, and their virtual absence west of the River Severn may say something about extent to which the west midlands were by the mid-seventh century inhabited by a self-consciously Anglo-Saxon community.[22] It would be naive, however, to imagine that funerary practice, material culture, language, religion, ethnic consciousness and political affiliation generally, or even often, coincided geographically.

There is some place-name evidence relevant to Penda's kingship. The names of Penda and several of his close kin appear to be preserved in a number of place-names, concentrated in the west midlands, particularly in the territory of the Hwicce, and this may tell us something about the date of the Anglicization of this area.[23] Place-names can perhaps also shed some light on the cultural and ethnic orientation of the early Mercian kingdom. There are several place-names in the west midlands with 'eccles' prefixes. These are Eccleston, south of Chester, Eccleshall, south-west of Stone, Staffordshire, and two Exhalls in Warwickshire, one near Alcaster and the other north of Coventry. 'Eccles' place-names are generally thought to indicate 'British' church sites, places which were recognizable as churches when their English names were formed.[24] It is difficult to account for the presence of an ecclesiastical structure here if we do not also accept the existence of Christians among the local elite. In order to function medieval churches needed lands, servants and educated clerics. In this same region there are also several 'pagan' Anglo-Saxon place-names. These are Weeford, Wednesbury and Wednesfield, all in Staffordshire.[25] The juxtaposition of these two types of place-names may suggest that the elites of early Mercia were more ethnically mixed that is generally assumed.[26]

Given the nature of the sources one might be tempted to conclude that Penda's kingship is too obscure to usefully discuss. In the view of the current writer, however, taking such a line would be a mistake. It was under the leadership of Penda that the Mercians became a powerful, successful people. Penda's career made possible those of Wulfhere, Æthelred, Æthelbald and Offa, and any consideration of the development of the Mercian kingdom must acknowledge this. Furthermore, scanty though the sources are there is still much that can be said. In the following section of

this article it will be established that Penda was an overking who exercised *imperium* over numerous tributary kings. After this has been done the nature and functioning of his hegemony will be considered.

It could be suggested that Penda's *imperium* embraced all the kings of the southern English. Penda established his position by victory in battle against a powerful opponent, as did Rædwald, Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu.[27] If such victories could catapult these rulers to near universally dominance there seems little reason to suppose that a similar success would not do the same for Penda. When one seeks for positive signs of the influence of these other kings over individual polities it is by no means abundant, yet their wide-ranging power is generally accepted. That a similar model of Penda's dominance is not the conventional one can probably be attributed to the fact that unlike these rulers Penda, as was noted above, does not feature on Bede's list of kings wielding *imperium* over the southern English. In view of Bede's hostility towards the Mercians in general and Penda in particular, this objection does not seem particularly compelling. A maximalist vision might then be sustainable, but it is possible to create a rather more precise model.

In *c.* 653 Penda made his son Peada ruler of the peoples of the south-eastern midlands, who have been known since Bede's day if not before as the Middle Angles.[28] This umbrella term probably should be seen as including many, if not all, of the unlocatable peoples featuring in the *Tribal Hidage*. Despite a certain cultural cohesion,[29] there doesn't seem to have been a kingdom of the Middle Angles until one was created by Penda, and so we should probably accept David Dumville's vision of Peada as a 'mense' king, interposed between the minor rulers of this region and the

Mercian overking.[30] That Penda was in a position to install Peada in this way suggests that his interest in and influence among the Middle Angles considerably antedated 653. It is possible that some of the conflicts between Penda and various East Anglian rulers were caused by rivalry over the tributes of the Middle Anglian groups,[31] and the creation of a kingdom here may have been intended to help strengthen Penda's control over these peoples.

For a most of Penda's reign the East Angles themselves clearly were not tributary to him, as much of his warfare was directed against them.[32] Nevertheless, by 655 their king, Æthelhere, appears to have accepted Penda's *imperium*, as he fought at his side at *Winwæd*.[33] If the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is correct in stating that the previous East Anglian king, Anna, was killed by Penda in 654,[34] then this group were among the most recent additions to his Mercian hegemony, and Æthelhere himself may well have come to power with the approval and/or aid of Penda.

Penda's *imperium* certainly embraced Gwynedd, as its ruler Cadafael took part in the *Winwæd* campaign, though not, famously, in the final battle.[35] This represents a reversal of positions as Penda initially came to power as a protégé of another king of Gwynedd.[36] Cadafael was not the only British ruler to accompany Penda on his final northern expedition. The *Historia Brittonum* states that '[…] the kings of the British, who had gone forth with king Penda in his campaign to the city called Iudea, were killed.'[37] It is impossible to determine which polities these kings ruled. It may be, however, that most or even all of the Welsh rulers were tributary to Penda. We should bear the existence of these British kings in mind when we contemplate the Mercian *imperium* of the 640s and 650s.

Despite Bede's quasi-hagiographical treatment of King Oswine of the Deiri[38] there is reason to suppose that he was a Mercian tributary.[39] Penda raided Bernicia several times while Oswine was ruling the Deiri,[40] and his line of march would have taken him through the territory of that people, yet we hear of no strife between the two kings, nor of Penda wasting and plundering here in the way he did further north. Thus it is possible that Oswine was subject to Penda's *imperium*; at the very least he was benevolently neutral and prepared to allow Penda and his forces to repeatedly traverse his lands. Furthermore, Oswine's successor Œthelwald appears to have initially at least taken Penda's part in 655, though he stood aloof from the battle.[41]

It seems likely that Penda also had tributaries among the peoples living between Mercians and the Welsh. For the sake of clarity I follow in this article the common practice of referring to the people inhabiting the region which from the late seventh century formed the Diocese of Hereford as the Magonsæte, though it seems probable that the name was not in use this early.[42] Though it is generally accepted that there was a seventh-century kingdom here, solid evidence for it is slight, resting primarily on late texts such as the eleventh-century *Life of St Mildburg* (and the putatively eighth-century *Testament of St Mildburg* embedded within it),[43] and the group of texts known under the general name of 'The Kentish Royal Legend'.[44] According to these the Magonsæte were ruled in the middle decades of the seventh-century by King Merewalh, a son of Penda. Merewalh's historicity is generally accepted, but his status as a Mercian prince has been disputed.[45] If he was not Penda's son it is probable that he was husband to one of Penda's daughters,[46] as Merewalh's daughter Mildburg at

one point refers to Penda's son Æthelred as uncle.[47] In either scenario it is probable that Merewalh and the Magonsæte were tributary to Penda.

To the south of the Magonsæte was the kingdom of the Hwicce. [48] There has long been a widespread belief among Anglo-Saxonists that this kingdom was established by Penda *c*.628, and that from its inception it was closely dependent on Mercia.[49] If this is the case then the Hwicce certainly formed part of Penda's hegemony. Although the view that this polity was a Mercian creation has come close to a consensus there have been dissenting voices and it cannot be taken as certain.[50] If the Hwicce were already a kingdom before Penda's reign, the question of whether or not its kings were tributary to Penda is one which cannot be definitely answered,[51] though even if they did not come under Penda's sway in 628, they may have done so at the time of his attack on Cenwalh of the West Saxons.[52]

The rulers of Lindsey may also have been numbered among Penda's tributaries. Evidence for a kingship in Lindsey is thin, but there is arguably just enough. An eighth-century genealogy of its kings survives,[53] Bede refers to the area as a '*provincia*', a term that he generally reserves for kingdoms,[54] and from 678 the region had its own bishop.[55] Taken together, these factors strongly suggest that Lindsey had its own kings, however invisible they are to us. It is likely that the kings of Lindsey were tributaries of Penda during the years of his dominance. Edwin had controlled the region,[56] as also did Oswald,[57] Wulfhere and Egfrith.[58] Thus the kings of Lindsey seem always to have been tributary to one or other of their more powerful neighbours. With the death of Oswald, and the dismemberment of Northumbria, it seems unlikely

that Oswine of the Deiri would have been powerful enough to control the Lindissi, and the probability is that they were subject to Penda.

There is some reason to suppose that the West Saxons were for a time tributary to Penda. Early Wessex appears to have been a loose-knit polity, made up of a number of subkingdoms. In the seventh and eighth centuries virtually all West Saxon kings were succeeded by men to whom they were at best very distantly related. The West Saxon elites seem to have been determined that no one kin group should monopolize the kingship. Cenwalh was the only king's son in these two centuries who contrived to follow his father in the kingship.[59] His father King Cynegils had close ties to the Northumbrian king Oswald.[60] Cenwalh himself was for a time married to Penda's sister.[61] In these circumstances it seems possible that he was able to secure the kingship in spite of tradition by effectively distancing himself from his father's policies, represented by the northern alliance. If the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is correct in dating Cynegils's death to 643,[62] the year after *Maserfelth*, it is possible that Cenwalh's Mercian connection helped him to gain the kingship. The West Saxons may then have been tributary to Penda from the start of Cenwalh's reign. Even if this hypothesis is incorrect, it seems likely that whoever was ruling the West Saxons during Cenwalh's three year exile did so with the approval of Penda.[63] By the end of his reign though, Penda may have lost his influence in this kingdom, as Cenwalh had probably returned to his homeland before the death of his erstwhile brother-in-law.[64]

In conclusion, the kingdoms tributary to Penda seem to have fluctuated, but covered a large swathe of central Britain, stretching from the east coast to the west, and at times possibly from the southern coast of Wessex to the Bernician frontier. This is a very

large area, but we should not be tempted into thinking of this overkingship as one political unit, or to overestimate the degree of control exercised within it by Penda. This was *imperium*, not *regnum*.[65] In the next section of this article the nature of this system of relationships will be considered.

Our first credible encounter with Penda sees him waging war against Edwin,[66] our last sight of him is his defeat and death at the hands of Oswiu,[67] and virtually every appearance he makes in between these two events (in all the principal sources) sees him attacking some or other luckless group. To a large extent this picture of a militant Penda may reflect the biases of our sources: as we have seen, it suited Bede's rhetorical agenda to represent him thus.[68] Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Penda was an aggressive ruler, and war, particularly victory in war, does seem to have been a critical component in his career.[69] The warfare of which we are aware was targeted at several different groups,[70] and it is likely that there were other conflicts of which we are ignorant. The West Saxons suffered from Penda's aggression. The battle at Cirencester recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, *sub anno* 628, may or may not have legitimate claims to historicity,[71] but we are on safer ground with Bede's account of Penda's driving the West Saxon king Cenwalh into a three-year exile.[72] The East Angles also had to endure a number of attacks, losing two kings and one ex-king in battle against Penda.[73] If we are not misled by Bede's partisanship, however, Oswiu and the Bernicians bore the brunt of Penda's warlike activities, their lands being repeatedly ravaged by the Mercian king and his followers.[74]

Warfare served several purposes in early Anglo-Saxon society. Most obvious is that it provided plunder and tribute which enriched the successful king, enabling him to be

the more lavish in gift giving, which in turn allowed him to further augment his *comitatus* with ambitious young warriors. To some extent this was a self-perpetuating process. James Campbell sums it up aptly when he observes that: 'To keep giving he has to keep taking [...]'.[75] The king who was successful in war, however, might gain much more than immediate plunder. A great victory could sometimes result in a king achieving a dominance far wider than merely over the defeated people. Rædwald, Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu all gained widespread *imperia* as a result of individual battles,[76] and as argued above it is possible that Penda's victory over Oswald at *Maserfelth* had a like result.[77] Subsequent attacks on recalcitrant kingdoms would not only have brought tribute, but would also have helped to retain the loyalties of the kings subject to his *imperium*.

One of the obligations owed by lesser kings to their overlord seems to have been a requirement to provide what one might term 'military service'. Tributary kings and their warriors appear to have joined the overking on his campaigns.[78] This of course brought practical advantages to an overking; by adding other warbands to his own he would be able to collect forces far larger than he (or a rival) could personally maintain. In addition the ability to demand such service advertised his power. The king bringing his warband to the service of an overking was making a public statement of inferiority and dependence. Thus, the more one waged war, the more opportunity there was to broadcast one's status. When Penda set off in 655 on his final northern campaign with thirty *duces regii* and their warbands in his train[79] this may have seemed to him the apex of his kingship.

Warfare thus enhanced the power and status of an overking such as Penda, but it also paradoxically helped to secure the positions of less powerful kings. It has been observed that military power is potentially useful to a ruler only in so far as it can be controlled, otherwise it can be divisive.[80] The Spartans in the fifth century BC had to accept a great degree of autonomy on the part of their weaker allies in the Peloponnesian League because they were dependent on the military support of those *poleis*.[81] Similarly Penda also would perforce have accepted the autonomy of his dependent kings. Lesser kings were a necessary link between the military potential of their kingdoms and the overking. The personal relationship between the two men was all-important. Thus, although warfare and military power are the aspects of Penda's overkingship which are most visible to us, they cannot alone have supported his position, and we need to consider other, more subtle mechanisms.

An important component in cementing Penda's hegemony was kinship by marriage, as it was in Anglo-Saxon politics generally. The wives of kings were usually sought from without the kingdom, and were in the main members of other royal lineages.[82] As such they could have considerable influence. Æthelberht of Kent seems to have owed his ascendancy over the East Saxons to the marriage of his sister Ricula to Sledd, the father of King Sæberht,[83] Rædwald's queen apparently played a decisive role in the formation of her husband's policies on at least two occasions,[84] and Bishop Wilfrid owed part of his success to the patronage of Northumbrian queens.[85]

We know of a number of marriage links between Penda's kin and other royal lineages. Cenwalh, the West Saxon king, was married to Penda's sister,[86] and as we have seen this may have been a crucial factor in his gaining the kingship.[87] This

marriage was clearly important to Penda; when Cenwalh repudiated his wife, Penda retaliated by driving him from his kingdom.[88] Retribution for the slight to his sister's (and his own) honour was probably part of the reason for this, but Cenwalh's action may have had a political dimension, being symptomatic of a change of political alignment; certainly it is interesting that in his exile he took refuge at the court of Anna, the East Anglian king,[89] who appears to have been hostile to Penda.[90]

Penda's kin were also linked by marriage to the kin of Oswiu, the Bernician king. Penda's daughter Cyneburh was the bride of the latter's son Alhfrith.[91] Alhfrith appears to have been Oswiu's eldest son and probably seemed the likely heir. Penda may thus have hoped to draw the future Bernician king into his orbit. We cannot say exactly when the marriage took place, but it was followed in 653 by the marriage of Peada, Penda's (probably eldest) son and king/*princeps* of the Middle Angles, to Oswiu's daughter, Alhflæd.[92] It seems likely that this latter union took place on the initiative of Oswiu and Peada, rather than of Penda. We are told that Peada '[...] went to Oswiu, and asked for the hand of his daughter Alhflæd.'[93] It has been suggested that Peada sought this alliance as a means of enhancing his prospects of gaining the Mercian succession on the death of Penda.[94] Oswiu's motives were presumably similar to those attributed above to Penda in the marriage of Cyneburh and Alhfrith; clearly Penda was not the only one who could manipulate the royal 'marriage market.' Moreover, Oswiu was able to require that Peada accept baptism, and to take a Northumbrian Christian mission back to Middle Anglia with him, extending Oswiu's influence into the south-east midlands.[95] This marriage and the related mission were clearly detrimental to Penda's interests, and the resultant tensions may have been an important factor leading to the final confrontation between the two kings at *Winwæd*.

It was suggested above that a daughter of Penda may have been married to King Merewalh, ruler of the people later to be known as the Magonsæte. If this is correct it is likely that this link gave expression to Merewalh's tributary status.

The taking of tribute, and its redistribution as gifts, were central factors in the maintenance of overkingship. On a symbolic level, tribute made obvious the inequalities within the system. The ability to exploit the surplus of other kingdoms also gave to overkings an important source of extra wealth. This enabled them to reward their followers the more lavishly, which as we have seen meant that they were able to maintain larger establishments of young noble warriors than could less powerful kings, which in turn helped them to maintain their dominance.

We have only one literary reference to tribute taking relevant to Penda. When he was ravaging Bernicia for the last time, Oswiu, in desperation, attempted to buy him off by offering a large tribute.[96] In fact literary allusions to *any* Anglo-Saxon kings taking tribute are extremely rare, but nevertheless it seems likely that tribute payments formed an integral part of relations between kingdoms in early-medieval Britain. Oswiu himself made the Picts and Scots tributary,[97] and Penda's son Wulfhere gathered a large army and attacked the Northumbrians with the intention of taking tribute from them, though his defeat in battle led instead to tribute being levied from his own people.[98]

Tribute taking and its reverse, gift giving, were the two aspects of a non-commercial redistribution of high status luxury goods. The successful overking was not a miser,

hoarding his wealth; he was an open-handed giver of rich gifts, jewelry and fine weapons.[99] Gifts carried with them obligations which bound recipient and donor together.[100] The acceptance of a gift from a more powerful king was an acceptance of his superiority - he gave gifts, you gave tribute. It has been suggested that gift giving was an even more potent expression of superiority than tribute payment was of inferiority.[101]

Given the silence of our literary sources, we cannot definitely assert that Penda practiced gift giving, though it seems probable. Artefacts found in seventh-century barrow burials in the Peak District, the territory of the Pecsæte, are, however, highly suggestive. These include a range of high-status luxury goods produced in south-east England and continental Europe,[102] and may have reached this comparatively obscure group as gifts from an overking, possibly Penda himself.

It is also likely that much of this gift giving, and the payment of tribute, took place at the Mercian court, in the context of ceremonial visits of tributary kings. Ritual and ceremonial were highly significant in the articulation of relative status, and in order to get the maximum ideological benefit from transactions of this kind it would have been desirable to conduct them face-to-face, before as large and influential an audience as possible.[103] The best place to do this would be at the overking's court. In the early middle ages, when kings met as equals, they generally did so on frontiers (often rivers), where their territories met. When one king travelled into the territory of another, it was a mark of inferiority.[104] In Ireland we know that the king, or *rí*, was required to periodically attend the court of his *ruiri* (literally 'king of kings').[105] There are suggestions that in England also tributary kings attended the court of an overking.

Rædwald, king of the East Angles, accepted Christian baptism while at the court of King Æthelberht of Kent.[106] According to Bede Oswiu urged East Saxon king, Sigeberht, to accept Christian baptism, '[...] on his frequent visits to the kingdom of Northumbria, [...].'[107] Æthelwalh, the South Saxon king, received baptism at the court of King Wulfhere.[108] Bede only gives examples of such visits when they resulted in a royal conversion, but it is probable that these were the exception: we note that Sigeberht visited Oswiu 'frequently', though he was only baptized once.

It is of no surprise that Bede records no visits of subject kings to Penda's court. Penda's kingship *per se* was of no interest to him. Nevertheless, we can with some confidence hypothesize that the Mercian court in the 640s and early 650s was a comparatively cosmopolitan centre, accustomed to accommodating other kings, the rhythms of its life punctuated by ceremonial occasions redolent with the symbolism of power and hierarchy.

Another possible strategy used by Penda in binding other kings to his *imperium* may have been the taking of hostages. Again, a comparison with Ireland is illuminating. In Ireland one of the methods employed by the mense and provincial overkings in retaining the loyalties of the *ríg* was an institutionalized system of hostage taking. Close male kin (frequently sons) of tributary kings would live in the household of the overking. While relations between the two rulers were amicable, the life of the hostage was not unpleasant; his position in the household was an honourable one little different to that of a youth being fostered there. The lot of the 'forfeited hostage', whose kinsman had broken his obligations, was rather less comfortable.[109] Because of the differing nature of the sources relating to Anglo-Saxon England, we cannot tell

whether or not English kings had institutionalized hostage taking to this degree. We do know, however, of at least one royal hostage held by Penda. Bede tells us that when Oswiu and his son Alhfrith confronted Penda at *Winwæd*, 'Oswiu's other son Ecgfrith was at the time a hostage in the Mercian kingdom with Queen Cynewise.'[110] Ecgfrith's residence at the Mercian court was most probably engineered by Penda as a means of exerting pressure on Oswiu; in view of Ecgfrith's youth it is unlikely in the extreme that he was there on his own initiative, in defiance of his father.[111] This may, of course, have been an exceptional arrangement, but the possibility exists that hostage taking was a routine part of Penda's overkingship.

One method which Penda does not appear to have used to strengthen his dominance is the development of a favoured cult as a unifying 'state religion', in the way that contemporary Christian kings were doing. He neither adopted Christianity himself, nor, so far as we can tell, did he attempt to use traditional Anglo-Saxon cults in a similar way. Two related issues arise from this. Firstly, the question of why Penda did not convert himself, and secondly, of why did he not utilize Anglo-Saxon cult as an alternative unifying ideology.

As Henry Mayr-Harting has noted, historians have generally concentrated on the reasons why certain Anglo-Saxon kings became Christian, and have largely neglected the motivations of the large numbers who did not.[112] This is a difficult issue, and one which potentially involves many factors.[113] Mayr-Harting himself suggests that the ideological significance of conversion was greater for the last kings to abandon traditional cult, who knew that if they changed their loyalties the old gods would go un-honoured, than it was for earlier converts.[114] This may well be so, but for most of

Penda's career there were more non-Christian than Christian Anglo-Saxon kings, so this cannot really explain his continued adherence to traditional cult. More convincing is the suggestion of Nicholas Higham, who argues that given Penda's frequent victory in battle over Christian kings, Christ may well have seemed to him a much less credible patron of warriors than did Woden.[115] At the same time, it was probably not a viable proposition to push traditional cult as an alternative unifying ideology (even if it occurred to him to try). Penda relied on Christian kings, and the Christianity of the British kings at least, and their peoples, was probably too securely established to make apostasy a feasible option. It could also be that traditional cult was not sufficiently hierarchic and centralized to be a suitable vehicle for this kind of ideological manipulation. If Christianity was unappealing to Penda and the Anglian section of the Mercian elite, and Anglo-Saxon cults equally unattractive to the British elements within Penda's *imperium*, then the internal logic of his position demanded that religious affiliation should not be made a significant issue.

Thus far we have considered Penda's *imperium* largely from the top downwards. There are dangers in this perspective, it can lead us into a false vision of the significance of the overking.[116] Most kings entering into a tributary relationship with an overking probably did so voluntarily. Though these relationships were unequal, they were also mutually beneficial, and we should consider them from the perspective of less powerful rulers also.[117] Few kings at any one time could have had a realistic chance of achieving supremacy for themselves, and most kingdoms were probably inherently too under-resourced for their rulers ever to have aspired to *imperium*. The most obvious benefit of overkingship to these men was protection. For what must often have seemed a reasonable price, these kings were able to achieve a far greater

degree of security than they could provide for themselves. In addition, however, there were other benefits. Overkings acted as conduits channelling high-status goods, often from overseas, to other, more minor rulers. These goods would have served to enhance the status of their recipients, and may well have been further redistributed by these recipients within their own kingdoms. It is likely that there would have been competition within the *imperium* of an overking such as Penda, with individual kings striving for a 'most favoured ally' status, competing among themselves as to who should pay the least, and receive the most, both materially and ideologically.

**<u>Conclusions</u>**

It is clear that, despite Bede's reticence, Penda did wield an *imperium* similar to those of other seventh-century overkings. His hegemony emerges as a heterogeneous amalgamation of polities loosely tied together by personal links between Penda, the overking, and other rulers. This system of relationships was ethnically and ideologically pluralist, embracing British kings as well as Anglo-Saxon, non-Christians as well as Christians. It is likely that Penda's court, used to visits from these other kings and their retinues, was a cosmopolitan centre, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, and tolerant of religious diversity. It was probably here that much of the ritual and symbolic interaction binding kings together took place. The links tying the lesser kings into Penda's *imperium* took a variety of forms, both symbolic and pragmatic, and included fear, protection, military service, kinship by marriage, tribute payment, hostage taking and probably also attendance at his court and gift giving. Though very diverse in detail, these strategies fall into essentially three broad categories, ideological, economic and military/coercive.[118] The relative importance of these different elements to individual relationships would probably have varied,

underlining the personal nature of the bonds between overking and tributary king. Additionally, there would probably have been other factors at work, harder for us to identify but equally strong; things like friendship, mutual respect and shared interests.

Warfare does seem to have been an important factor among the methods used by Penda to establish and maintain his position. While this was certainly a traditional method of extending power, Penda (if we can trust our sources) stands out as an exceptionally belligerent king, even in the often-violent world of seventh-century southern-British politics. In part this may be attributable to personal factors; he may have been an inherently violent, aggressive man. We should, however, also seek for other, structural explanations. A non-Christian, Penda lacked the alternative strategies of dominance which Christian clerics were by this date providing for other kings; one thinks in particular of Edwin's use of royal conversions and 'religious imperialism' in Lindsey and East Anglia,[119] and Oswiu's similar policies in Middle Anglia and Essex.[120] As we have seen, it was probably not practicable for Penda to use traditional Anglo-Saxon cults in a similar way. This could in part explain the frequency with which he made war. The world was changing, and Penda, if he wished to retain his dominant position, was required to adapt. Arguably he did so by a dramatic escalation of a traditional strategy. This policy served him well for a generation, but war is always a chancy business,[121] and sooner or later even the most successful and experienced of warriors is likely to be beaten. Penda's end should not surprise us; it certainly would not have surprised him.

*Imperium* naturally had many benefits for Penda; after all, if overkingship had not been a desirable condition, it would not have been worth fighting for, and many

seventh-century kings clearly thought it was. The ability to raise tribute allowed an overking to tap the economic potential of a far wider area than merely his own kingdom. This, as we have seen, enhanced his position in a variety of ways. The obligation to provide 'military service' which lay on the subject kings enabled an overking such as Penda to raise large armies relatively easily and quickly, and given his frequent warfare this was probably a vital ingredient in his success. Probably even more important was the respect and fear which this enhanced military potential would have inspired in other kings, perhaps frequently making actual conflict unnecessary. Besides these material advantages the position of overking had enormous ideological significance, endowing its holder with immense kudos. The elites of seventh-century Britain operated in a hierarchic thought-world in which the pursuit of status, honour and peer-approbation were vitally important aims. To these elites, an *imperium* such as Penda's was the ultimate achievement. This, more than anything else, explains why so many seventh-century kings were prepared to scheme, fight, and if necessary die in its pursuit.

Hegemony then clearly benefited the overking, but it was a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship, in which obligations were mutual. Overkingship consisted of personal relationships between individuals, and tributary kings were necessary links enabling Penda to tap the economic and military resources of their kingdoms. *Imperium* of this kind was therefore self-limiting in nature, and inherently unlikely to lead to centralization and the elimination of the constituent kingdoms. Thus, hegemony paradoxically safeguarded the positions of less powerful kings. Acknowledging the *imperium* of an overking was generally advantageous to weaker rulers. As we have seen, they obtained protection, and in addition gained access to status enhancing

goods. In return for these benefits they gave tribute, visited the overking's court, and were from time to time called upon to bring their warbands to his campaigns. It is likely that these obligations generally seemed neither unreasonable nor particularly onerous, and the junior rulers' kingly status and their dominant positions within their own kingdoms were left intact. All but the most powerful kings probably accepted tributary status as a matter of course, and it is likely that the chronological intersections between overkingships, when one hegemon fell and another arose, were very stressful times for minor rulers.

Though *imperium* was in the main mutually beneficial, we should not present too functionalist a picture of it. There would certainly have been tensions and strains, and some at least of Penda's tributaries may have resented their position. Others, such as Cadafael and Œthelwald, were prepared to break faith with the overking when it suited their purposes.[122] The ties binding the structure together, though strong, were not unbreakable, and hegemonal overkingships tended to collapse on the deaths of their creators.[123]

This inherent fissiparousness is one of the key distinctions between kingdoms and hegemonies: while the former normally had sufficient cohesion to allow them to be passed on to a successor, the latter had to be created afresh by each new overking.[124] Though a large and powerful system of relationships, Penda's hegemony, like the *imperia* other seventh-century overkings, was essentially a decentralized collection of polities, and as far as we can tell there were no essential offices or functions located at the centre which were not replicated in the dependent kingdoms. Thus Penda's *imperium*, in anthropological terms, emerges as a 'paramount chiefdom'.[125]

Hegemonal overkingship required other kings in order to function, and the degree of control which Penda could exercise over the central nodes of power within the hegemony would have been tightly circumscribed - other kings also had access to the ideological, economic and military bases of power. Penda was essentially a *primus inter pares*, and this particularism explains the ease with which his hegemony broke down when he met his end at *Winwæd*.

Thus far we have analyzed Penda's *imperium* from without. This is a valid and a necessary viewpoint, but we must also consider his vision of himself. It is true that we cannot say anything directly about Penda's personal world-picture, but we can infer a good deal. He certainly appears not to have shared Bede's vision of what it meant to be English. Given the significant British elements embraced by his overkingship, notably his close and enduring links with Gwynedd, his outlook seems to have been much more pluralist and inclusive than was Bede's. Though himself apparently Anglian in culture, and a non-Christian, he was certainly not militantly either (despite the view of Stenton expressed in the quotation at the head of this article). Penda appears to have owed his early success to his alliance with Cadwallon, the British king of Gwynedd,[126] and as we have seen his hegemony included both British and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.[127] Penda's court was probably multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-sectarian. He must have been intimately familiar with many Britons, and may well have himself been bilingual. This pluralism of outlook may not have been solely due to the presence at his court of visiting members of the elites of other kingdoms. As was noted above, there are suggestions that there was in the mid-seventh century a significant British, Christian element among the Mercian elite.[128] We can also develop a model of Penda's view of his position and role as an overking.

In pre-Christian England, a great king *had* to be a hegemon; he needed other kings because, lacking a literate administrative infrastructure, 'government' was necessarily based on personal relationships and face-to-face dealings. One person can only interact with a finite number of others, and so an early king could not personally supervise a very large territory.[129] Thus being a powerful king presupposed the existence, and safeguarded the positions, of other kings - inferior in status but equally regal. Despite his flexibility, Penda emerges as a hegemon in this tradition. Given this conceptual world, it seems probable that Penda would not have wished to pursue a centralizing agenda which would transform him into the sole southern British king, even if that were possible. Glory, adulation and self esteem came from defeating and/or making other kings tributary, and one could not do this if there were no other kings. Penda thus presents a marked contrast to the Mercian kings of the eighth and early-ninth centuries, who do seem to have embarked on centralizing policies.[130]

This article has necessarily been highly speculative. Nevertheless it has demonstrated that it is possible to consider in some detail the career of this rather neglected king. As an overking Penda seems to have been a highly adept, if conservative, politician, using a sophisticated and subtle amalgam of strategies to maintain his position. Though warfare was certainly a vital factor in his policies, the foregoing analysis makes it clear that Penda was more than merely a successful warrior, and hopefully goes some way to countering the picture presented by Bede of a furious, pagan warlord.

[1] See for example F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1971), (first published 1943), 32 - 6; E. John, ' "Orbis Britanniae" and the Anglo-Saxon Kings', in *idem*; *Orbis Britanniae and Other Studies* (Leicester, 1966), 1 - 63; B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990), 157 - 78; D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, (London, 1991), 14 - 20; D.N. Dumville, 'The Terminology of Overkingship in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in J. Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century - An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997), 345 - 65; A. Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England, c.500 - 1066*, (Basingstoke, 1999), *passim*.

[2] The tone for much subsequent work was set by Sir Frank Stenton, who largely ignored Penda in his seminal study 'The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings', *English Historical Review*, 33 (1918), 433 - 52; reprinted in D.M. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1970), 48 - 66. For a more recent example, see the chapter dedicated to Mercia in Barbara Yorke's *Kings and Kingdoms*, 100 - 27. Ian Walker's popular book on Mercia, *Mercia and the Making of England*, (Stroud, 2000), commences only with the accession of Offa in 757. The several chapters in M. Brown and C. Farr (eds), *Mercia - An Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London and New York, 2001), have little to say about Penda. A laudable exception to this general neglect is Nicholas Brooks's 'The Formation of the Mercian kingdom', in S. Bassett (ed.), *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (Leicester, 1989), 159 - 70. While I disagree with some of the views Professor Brooks expresses in this piece, it cannot be denied that he treats Penda's kingship much more comprehensively, and sensitively, than is the norm. On Penda see also D. J. Tyler, 'Kingship and Conversion -

Constructing Pre-Viking Mercia', (University of Manchester PhD thesis, 2002), 40 - 101.

[3] Though see the work of Nicholas Brooks, cited above in note 2.

[4] C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds.), *Oswald - Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, 1995).

[5] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds), *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969, 1991 reprint with corrections) (hereafter *HE*), V, 23.

[6] For discussions of Bede's purposes in writing see, *inter alia*, R.W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain: From Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York, 1966), 63 - 90; W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton, 1988), 235 - 328; N. J. Higham, *An English Empire - Bede and the Early Anglo-Saxon kings* (Manchester, 1995), 1 - 46.

[7] *HE*: III, 24.

[8] E.g. his involvement in the death of Edwin of Northumbria, *HE:* II, 20; his killing of Kings Sigiberht, Egric and Anna of the East Angles, *ibid.*; III, 18; his destruction of Oswald at *Maserfelth*, *ibid.*, 9.

[9] *HE:* II, 5.

[10] '[...] *barbarus erat pagano saeuior.*', *ibid.*, II, 20.

[11] On Penda and ethnicity see D.J. Tyler, 'Early Mercia and the Britons', in N. J. Higham (ed.), *Britons in Anglo-Saxon England* (forthcoming).

[12] For examples of Bede's hostility towards the Britons, see *HE:* I, 22; *ibid.*, II, 2; *ibid.*, 20; *ibid.*, V, 22; *ibid.*, 23.

[13] E.g. D.P. Kirby, 'Welsh Bards and the Border', in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), 31 - 42; Brooks, 'The Formation of the Mercian Kingdom', 168 - 70. For a detailed examination of this material see J. Rowland, 'A Study of the Saga of Englynion, with an Edition of the Major Texts', (University College of Wales, Aberystwyth PhD thesis,1982); *eadem*; *Early Welsh Saga Poetry - A Study and Edition of the Englynion* (Cambridge, 1990).

[14] See D.N. Dumville, 'Early Welsh Poetry: Problems of Historicity', in B. Roberts (ed.), *Early Welsh Poetry - Studies in the Book of Aneirin* (Aberystwyth, 1988), 1 - 16.

[15] For the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (hereafter *ASC*) see  J. Bately (ed.), *Volume 3. MS. A*, (Cambridge, 1986); C. Plummer (ed.), *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1892 - 9), I; M. Swanton (ed. and trans.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, (London, 1996).

[16] D.J. Tyler, 'Bede, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Early West Saxon Kingship,' *Southern History*, 19 (1997), 1 - 23.

[17] For discussions of the *Tribal Hidage* see for example C. R. Hart, 'The *Tribal Hidage*', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 21 (1971), 133 - 57; W. Davies and H. Vierck, 'The Contexts of Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 8 (1974), 223 – 93.

[18] The *Historia brittonum*, J. Morris (ed.), *Nennius - British History and the Welsh Annals* (Chichester, 1980) (hereafter *HB*), 60, 64, 65.

[19] See D.N. Dumville, 'On the North British Section of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Welsh Historical Review*, 8. 3 (1977), 345 - 54.

[20] It is true that there is a substantial body of hagiography devoted to royal Mercian saints. The majority of this, however, is late and of doubtful provenance. On this material see in the first instance A. T. Thacker, 'Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia', *Midland History*, 10 (1985), 1 - 25.

[21] It has usually been thought that the charter was introduced to England during the episcopate of Archbishop Theodore, thus post 669; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 141.

[22] On Anglo-Saxon cemeteries see, in the first instance, A. Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (London, 1964); T. Dickinson, 'The Present State of

Anglo-Saxon Cemetery Studies', in P. Rahtz T. Dickinson and L. Watts (eds.), *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries*, *British Archaeological Reports*, (British Series), 82 (1979), 11 - 34; C. Hills, 'The Archaeology of England in the Pagan Period: a Review', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 297 - 330; H. Geake, 'Burial Practice in Seventh- and Eighth-Century England', in M. Carver (ed.), *The Age of Sutton Hoo - The seventh century in North-Western Europe* (Woodbridge, 1992), 83 - 94.

[23] See G. Jones, 'Penda's footprint? Place-names containing personal names associated with those of early Mercian kings', *Nomina*, 21 (1998), 29 - 61.

[24] On 'eccles' place-names see in the first instance, K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), 227; M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past: Place-names and the History of England*, 2nd edition (Chichester, 1988) 96 - 9.

[25] On 'pagan' place-names see, *inter alia*, A. Meaney, 'Woden in England: A Reconsideration of the Evidence', *Folklore*, 77 (1966), 105 - 15; Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 158 - 61; D. Wilson, 'A note on *hearg* and *weoh* as place-name elements representing different types of pagan Anglo-Saxon worship sites', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 4 (1985), 180 - 3.

[26] On this issue see Tyler, 'Early Mercia and the Britons'.

[27] *HE:* II, 9, 12; III, 2, 6, 24.

[28] *Ibid.*, III, 21.

[29] J. Hines, 'The archaeology of the Cambridgeshire Region and the Middle Anglian Kingdom', in T. Dickinson and D. Griffiths, Dickinson (eds,) *The Making of Kingdoms*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 10 (1999), 135 - 49, *passim*.

[30] Dumville, 'Terminology', 358.

[31] D.N. Dumville, 'Essex, Middle Anglia and the Expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands', in Bassett, *Origins*, 123 - 40, at 132.

[32] *HE:* III, 18.

[33] *Ibid*., 24.

[34] *ASC* (A), *sub anno* 654.

[35] *HB:* 65.

[36] *HE:* II, 20.

[37] '[...] *reges Brittonum interfecti sunt, qui exierant cum rege Pantha in expeditionem usque ad urbem quae vocatur Iudeu.*' *HB:* 64.

[38] *HE:* III, 14.

[39] Davies, 'Contexts of the Tribal Hidage',  226.

[40] *HE:* III, 16, 17, 24.

[41] *Ibid*., 24.

[42] On this group see H.P.R. Finberg, 'St Mildburg's Testament', in *idem*, *Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester, 1961), 197 - 216; *idem*, The Princes of the Magonsæte ', *ibid*., 217 - 24; *idem*, 'Mercians and the Welsh' in *idem*, *Lucerna - Studies of Some Problems in the Early History of England* (London, 1964), 66 – 82, esp. 70 - 7; K. Pretty, 'Defining the Magonsæte' in Basset (ed.), *Origins*, 171 - 83.

[43] Finberg, after a close examination of this section of the text, concluded that the *Testament* is an authentic eighth-century text, as he argues that there are no serious anachronisms in its language, or in the diplomatic of the charters embedded in it; 'St Mildburg's Testament', 212 - 3.

[44] On these latter, see D. Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: A Study in Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester, 1982).

[45] Those considering Merewalh to have been a son of Penda have included Finberg, 'Princes of the Magonsæte', 219; Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 107; Gelling, *West Midlands*, 181 - 2; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 47 - 8. Those taking issue

with this interpretation have included Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 47; Kirby,

*Earliest English Kings*, 93

[46] Kirby, *Earliest English Kings*, 93; Pretty, 'Defining the Magonsæte', 175 - 6.

[47] Finberg, 'St Mildburg's Testament', 202.

[48] On the Hwicce see, *inter alia*,. H.P.R. Finberg, 'The Princes of the Hwicce', in

*idem*, *Early Charters of the West Midlands*, 167 - 80; Hooke, *The Kingdom of the*

*Hwicce*; S. Bassett, 'In search of the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms', in *idem*,

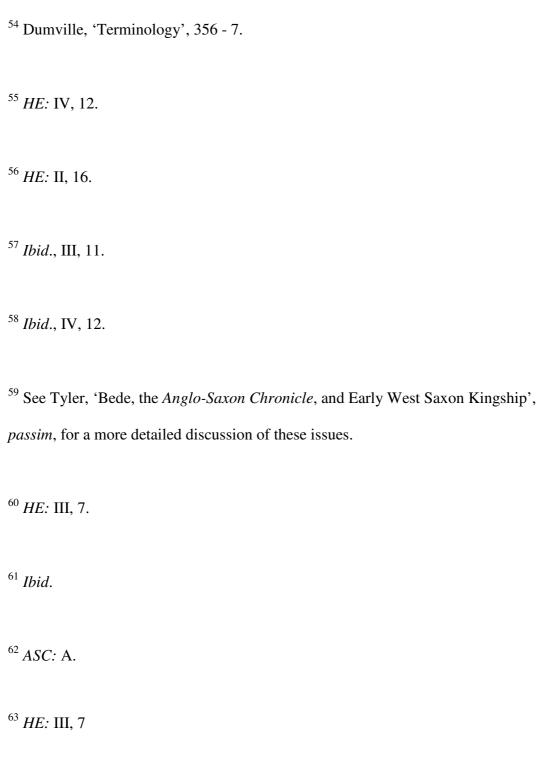*Origins*, 3 – 27, *passim*; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, *passim*.

[49] See Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 45; Finberg, 'Princes of the Hwicce', 167 - 8;

Gelling, *West Midlands*, 80; Hooke, *The Kingdom of the Hwicce*, 8; Yorke, *Kings and*

*Kingdoms*, 108 - 9.

[50] E.g. Bassett, 'In search of the origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms', 6; Kirby,

*Earliest English Kings*, 82 - 3; Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 33.

[51] On this issue see Kirby, *Earliest English kings*, 82 - 3; Sims-Williams, *Religion and*

*Literature*, 27.

[52] *HE:* III, 7.

[53] In British Library MS. Cotton, Vespasian B. vi, folio 109.

[54] Dumville, 'Terminology', 356 - 7.

[55] *HE:* IV, 12.

[56] *HE:* II, 16.

[57] *Ibid*., III, 11.

[58] *Ibid*., IV, 12.

[59] See Tyler, 'Bede, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and Early West Saxon Kingship', *passim*, for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

[60] *HE:* III, 7.

[61] *Ibid*.

[62] *ASC:* A.

[63] *HE:* III, 7

[64] The chronology of Cenwalh's reign is problematic, as neither his accession, his expulsion nor his return can be precisely dated from Bede's work. The dates given in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are not intrinsically improbable, but neither do they

inspire confidence. As, however, so far as we know Cenwalh spent the entire period of his exile at the court of Anna, and as the latter clearly predeceased Penda, the likelihood is that Cenwalh had returned to Wessex before the death of Penda, though this is ultimately beyond proof.

[65] In this context, James Campbell's view that Oswiu '[...] had a wider power in this island than any ruler till James I and VI.' is particularly misleading; J. Campbell 'The First Christian Kings' in *idem* (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (Harmondsworth, 1982), 45 – 68, at 54.

[66] *HE:* II, 20.

[67] *Ibid*., III, 24.

[68] On the issue of sources exaggerating or minimizing levels of violence see P. Fouracre, 'Attitudes towards violence in seventh- and eighth-century Frankia', in G. Halsall (ed.), *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 1998), 60 - 75, *passim*.

[69] *HE:* II, 20, III, 9, 24

[70] Dumville, 'Essex, Middle Anglia', 128 – 9; D.J. Tyler, 'Orchestrated violence and the "Supremacy of the Mercian Kings"', in D. Hill and M. Worthington (eds.), *Æthelbald and Offa* (in press).

[71] On the problems of accepting the historicity of this battle see Tyler 'Kingship and Conversion', 61 - 4 and the works cited there.

[72] *HE:* III, 7.

[73] *Ibid.*, 18.

[74] *Ibid.*, 16, 7, 24.

[75] Campbell, 'The First Christian Kings', 55.

[76] *HE:* II 9, 12; III, 2, 6, 24

[77] *Ibid.*, III, 9.

[78] For example Penda himself fought with King Cadwallon at Hatfield, *HE:* II, 20; King Æthelhere of the East Angles accompanied Penda on the *Winwæd* campaign, *ibid.*; III, 24, as did a number of British kings, including Cadafael of Gwynedd, *HB:* 64 - 5.

[79] *HE:* III, 24.

[80] T. Earle, *How Chiefs Come to Power - The Political Economy in Prehistory* (Stanford, 1997), 8.

[81] A. Andrewes, *Greek Society*, 2nd edition (Harmondsworth, 1971), 70.

[82] For example Bertha, the wife of King Æthelberht of Kent, was a Frankish princess, *HE:* I, 25; Æthelberht's sister, Ricula, married King Sledd of the East Saxons, *ibid*., II, 3; Æthelberht's daughter, Æthelburh was the queen of the Northumbrian king Edwin, *ibid*., 9 ; King Ecgfrith of the Northumbrians married Æthelthryth, a daughter of the East Anglian king Anna, *ibid*., IV, 19(17).

[83] *HE:* II, 3.

[84] *Ibid*., 12, 15.

[85] Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, B. Colgrave (ed.), *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), 2, 22.

[86] *HE:* III, 7.

[87] See Tyler, 'Kingship and Conversion', 79.

[88] *HE:* III, 7.

[89] *Ibid*.

[90] *Ibid*.; 18

[91] *Ibid*., 21.

[92] *Ibid*. For the date see *ibid*., V, 24.

[93] '[...] *uenitque ad regem Nordanhymbrorum Osuiu, postulans filiam eius Alchfledam sibi coniugem dari.*', *ibid.*, III, 21.

[94] N.J. Higham, *The Convert Kings - Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 1997), 232.

[95] *HE:* III, 21. For comment see Higham, *Convert Kings*, 232 - 4.

[96] *HE:* III, 24; *HB:* 65.

[97] *HE:* II, 5.

[98] Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, 20.

[99] See Campbell, 'The First Christian Kings', 54.

[100] On gifts the classic study is still M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans by I. Cunnison (New York, 1967), (first published 1922), *passim*.

[101] F.J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-kings* (London, 1973), 43.

[102] On the Pecsæte see A. Ozanne, 'The Peak-Dwellers', *Medieval Archaeology*, 6 (1962), 15 - 52; C.P. Loveluck, 'Acculturation, Migration and Exchange: the Formation of an Anglo-Saxon Society in the English Peak District, 400 - 700 A. D.', in J. Bintiff and H. Hamerow (eds.), *Europe Between Late Antiquity and the Middle*

*Ages - Recent Archaeological and Historical Research in Western and Southern Europe*, *British Archaeological Reports* (International Series), 617,(1995), 84 - 98.

[103] Arguably the most comprehensive, circumstantial surviving description of an early Anglo-Saxon act of royal patronage is to be found in Stephen of Ripon's account of the dedication of Bishop Wilfrid's church at Ripon; Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi*, 17. Because of the nature of this event it necessarily took place at the site of Wilfrid's basilica, but it seems likely that much patronage and gift giving occurred at royal courts.

[104] On these issues see J. Barrow, 'Chester's earliest regatta? Edgar's Dee-rowing revisited', *Early Medieval Europe*, 10, 1 (2001), 81 - 93, esp. 84 - 7.

[105] On early Irish kingship see in the first instance E. Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland* (Dublin, 1921); G. Mac Niocail, *Ireland Before the Vikings* (Dublin, 1972); Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*; D. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship* (Oxford, 1970).

[106] *HE:* II, 15.

[107] Sigerberht '[...] *frequenter ad eum* [Oswiu] *in prouinciam Nordanhymbrorum ueniret* [...]' *Ibid.*, III, 22.

[108] *Ibid.*, IV, 23.

[109] On Irish hostage taking see in the first instance Mac Niocaill, *Ireland Before the Vikings*, *passim*.

[110] '[...] *alius filius* [of Oswiu] *Ecgfrid eo tempore in prouincia Merciorum apud reginam Cynuise obses tenebatur;* [...]' *HE:* III, 24.

[111] Ecgfrith must have been about ten years old at this time, as he was in his fortieth year when he was killed at *Nechtansmere* in 685; *ibid.*, IV, 26.

[112] H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edition (London, 1991*)*, 6 - 7.

[113] I intend to deal at some length with the seeming reluctance of many Anglo-Saxon kings to accept Christianity in a future article.

[114] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 7.

[115] Higham, *Convert Kings*, 221 - 2.

[116] See Dumville, 'Terminology', 346.

[117] That overkingships are still frequently viewed 'from the top downwards' is demonstrated by Ann Williams's recent good, if brief, discussion, which is however marred by a striking concentration on those things which an overking could *take*, and an almost total neglect of what he could *give*; *eadem*; *Kingship and Government*, 32 - 48.

[118] Timothy Earle argues that these three elements are vital components of the power of all rulers; *idem*; *How Chiefs Come to Power*, 203 - 8.

[119] *HE:* II, 15 – 16

[120] *Ibid.*, III, 21 – 22

[121] Particularly in seventh-century Britain, where unexpected 'David and Goliath' style victories were not uncommon, e.g. Rædwald's defeat of Æthelfrith; *HE:* II, 12, and Oswald's victory over Cadwallon; *ibid*., III, 1 – 2.

[122] Cadafael abandoned Penda before the final battle, *HB:* 64; as did the Deiran king Œthelwald, *HE:* III, 24.

[123] E.g. those of Æthelberht, *HE:* II, 5; Edwin, *ibid*., II, 20 ; Cadwallon, *ibid*., III, 1; Oswald, *ibid*., III, 9; and Ecgfrith, *ibid*., IV, 26 (24) .

[124] Dumville, 'Terminology', 349.

[125] R. Cohen, 'Introduction', in R. Cohen, and E. Service (eds), *Origins of the State - The Anthropology of Political Evolution* (Philadelphia, 1978), 1 - 20, at 4 - 5; H. Claessen and P. Skalník, 'The Early State: Theories and Hypotheses', in H. Claessen and P. Skalník (eds), *The Early State* (The Hague, 1978), 3 - 29, at 22. .

[126] *HE:* II, 20.

[127] *HB:* 64 - 5; *HE:* III, 24.

[128] See S. Bassett, 'Church and diocese in the West Midlands: the transition from British to Anglo-Saxon control', J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish* (Leicester, 1992), 13 - 40; *idem*; 'How the West was Won: the Anglo-Saxon Takeover of the West Midlands', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, XI (2000), 108 - 18; P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England 600 - 800* (Cambridge, 1990), *passim*; Tyler, 'Early Mercia and the Britons', *passim*.

[129] On this issue see T. Charles-Edwards, 'Early Medieval Kingships in the British Isles', in Bassett, *Origins*, 28 - 39.

[130] There is a very extensive literature on eighth-century Mercia. See in the first instance Stenton, 'The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings'; S. Keynes, 'Changing faces: Offa of Mercia', *History Today*, 40.11 (1990), 14 - 19.