

SAINTS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN THE
KINGDOM OF MERCIA, 650-850

By

WILLIAM MICHAEL FRAZIER

Bachelor of Science

Oklahoma State University

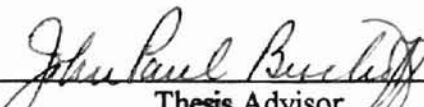
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Chapter I

Historiography, Mercia, and the Cult of Saints.

Christianity was slow to reach the Anglo-Saxons. The Germanic invaders had inhabited England for nearly one hundred years before the first missionaries began creeping into the island from the north and south. The lands which had been Christian under the Romans were now overrun by the Germanic tribes, and their pagan religions had replaced the orderly Roman Christianity. The clergy were forced to build a church from nothing. From the beginning, the missionary efforts focused on the rulers of the kingdoms. The king's approval was essential to the success of the conversion efforts, and only a king could provide the financial support the church required. As the church grew, it depended on grants of land and gifts from royalty to support itself and expand. But by binding itself to the fortunes of the kingdom's rulers, the church linked its very existence to an unstable institution. The Anglo-Saxon kingship was not a constant, unbroken line: kings were often killed, successions were disputed, and warfare was nearly constant. Even the kingdoms themselves were unstable, and many smaller kingdoms were absorbed into larger kingdoms by force. To grow and prosper under these conditions, the church had to remain flexible and adapt itself to the political and economic conditions of the kingdom.

The church acted this way throughout Anglo-Saxon England, but unfortunately, most kingdoms were not suitable for tracing this process. When a kingdom was absorbed into another, or when the church was driven from the kingdom by a pagan resurgence, the development of the church was interrupted. Mercia did not have this problem. Between the time that the kingdom rose to power in the seventh century and its decline in the mid-ninth century, the church was never driven from the kingdom, which maintained its independence throughout this time.

Because of its stability, Mercia can be used as an example to show how the church responded to external political and economic pressures.

Compared to that of Northumbria, Kent, and Wessex, Mercian history is barely known. Under the rule of Penda, Mercia first became a great power, and it maintained its strength for nearly three centuries, ruling all England south of the Humber for most of this period¹. But despite its importance, the only contemporary sources that discuss Mercian history in detail are the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, primarily composed in Wessex, and the works of Bede, written in Northumbria. Both of these mention Mercia, but their emphasis is on local and major events, and this bias is evident in the works. For much of Mercia's history, all these sources contain are the names and successions of kings, major battles, and details of outstanding personalities.

Luckily, a large body of charters survived after the seventh century. These records exist for most Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and record grants of land or privilege by the royalty or church. Most of the Mercian charters focus on the west midlands, where the Danish armies caused less damage. It is probably safe to assume that the charters originally gave evidence for all Mercia, but the Danes destroyed most of the records in eastern England². Although incomplete, those remaining can still be used to study aspects of the kingdom. By analyzing the location of the grants and the list of subscribers, the area of Mercian hegemony comes to light, especially when the grants are in other kingdoms, done by permission of the Mercian king³. The emphasis on ecclesiastical grants, which arose because virtually all surviving documents were kept in church archives, shows a great deal about the church. Many charters are for the founding of monasteries or the endowment of existing churches, allowing the historian to trace the development of the Mercian church and the pattern of royal donations. Also, the attestations reveal who the bishops

¹ Cyril Hart, "The kingdom of Mercia," in Mercian Studies, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 59

³ F. M. Stenton, "The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings," in English Historical Review 33 (1918): 433-451.

and abbots were at the time of the charter, and fill the history of the church with individuals that would often be otherwise unknown.

After the Danish invasions there was little written about Mercia. The mass of chronicles in the later middle ages primarily copied older works, so they only gave the same information, although a few, such as Henry of Huntingdon, Matthew Paris and Roger of Wendover, do give facts not found elsewhere⁴. The lives of saints also give some information about Mercia. The earliest lives date from the eighth century, and a large number were created during and after the tenth century monastic reform. In the descriptions of the lives and miracles of the saints, these works give details about the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but there is again very little evidence in them about Mercia. Throughout the middle ages, Mercian history was lost.

Modern interest in the kingdom began in the nineteenth century, when English historians began looking for their Germanic roots in the Anglo-Saxon period. It was this antiquarian interest that led to the editing of the majority of the original Anglo-Saxon and medieval texts. The best and most complete editions of most medieval works date from this period. The best known chronicles, such as the Polychronicon, William of Malmesbury's Gesta Regum and Gesta Pontificum, as well as many monastic chronicles were printed in this period. Also, nearly all of the surviving charters and records for Anglo-Saxon England were collected into large editions, of which Birch's Cartularium Saxonicum and Haddan and Stubbs's Ecclesiastical Documents are the most complete. Saints' lives also received some attention, but this was primarily via modern editions of late medieval collections such as the Nova Legenda Anglie. These works and the studies based on them did much to illuminate and describe the Anglo-Saxon period, but again the primary emphasis was on Wessex, Kent, and Northumbria, the kingdoms which left behind the most written records. Despite their limitations, these sources provide the best, and for some areas the only source for Mercian history, so they are essential for a study of the kingdom. The

availability of primary sources did allow F. M. Stenton to reconstruct a rough outline of Mercian history at this time, focusing on the Mercian kings with the best evidence⁵. Unfortunately, Stenton's efforts seem to be the only ones devoted to the study of Mercia, except for a few books on the most famous kings or subjects that are related to the kingdom⁶.

In the last thirty years, the development of modern historical methods and their application to the Anglo-Saxon period have made new discoveries much easier. Between 1960 and 1979, H. P. R. Finberg, C. R. Hart, and M. Gelling made great contributions by collecting, translating, and subjecting to criticism the early Anglo-Saxon charters on a regional basis⁷. This approach, although it uses artificial boundaries, has made the body of early English charters available to scholars who cannot read Latin or Old English. The same method, organized by kingdom and the type of grantor, was used for all of England by P. H. Sawyer in Anglo-Saxon Charters⁸. A major limitation of these modern collections is that they only give summaries of the charters, leaving out the language of the document, the list of witnesses, and other potentially useful information. If these are used in conjunction with a collection such as Birch, however, modern historical criticism can be combined with an analysis of the actual text. Another important historian, Dorothy Whitelock, spent most of her life editing and studying the documents of Anglo-Saxon England, and translated some of the most important in English Historical Documents. These collections make it possible to use the primary sources with a great deal of confidence, without being completely familiar with the entire corpus.

⁴ Wendy Davies, "Annals and the Origins of Mercia," in Mercian Studies, ed. Ann Dornier (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), 17-29.

⁵ F. M. Stenton, "The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings," in English Historical Review 33 (1918): 433-451.

⁶ Henry Mackenzie, Essays on the Life and Institutions of Offa (London: Hamilton, 1840) and Nathan Heywood, The Kingdom and Coins of Burgred (Manchester: H. Grey, 1885).

⁷ H. P. R. Finberg, The Early Charters of Devon and Cornwall (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1963), The Early Charters of Wessex (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1964), and The Early Charters of the West Midlands (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1972); M. Gelling, The Early Charters of the Thames Valley (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979); C. R. Hart, The Early Charters of Eastern England (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), The Early Charters of Essex (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1971), and The Early Charters of Northern England and the North Midlands (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1975).

Archaeology is also another source of historical information that has recently undergone significant developments. In the antiquarian period, archaeology was very limited as a source for the historian because it focused on grave goods and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries. This method yielded limited results, and its application to other fields was difficult. In the last thirty years, the introduction of newer techniques including aerial photography, scientific dating, and more stringent excavation, has made great advances in the knowledge of Anglo-Saxon England possible. One of the most active archaeologists in Anglo-Saxon archaeology was Dr. H. M. Taylor, who with his wife Joan catalogued all of the English churches known to contain Anglo-Saxon material⁹. Also important as a benchmark is The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England, edited by David Wilson, which contains articles describing the state of the field at its publication in 1976.

These developments in Anglo-Saxon history have made several new studies of Mercia possible. The collection Mercian Studies, published in 1977, included articles covering aspects of Mercian history including the origins of the kingdom, numismatics, urban development, and the subdivisions of the kingdom¹⁰. The authors combined archaeology with intensive studies of the written sources, and were able to describe aspects of Mercian history that earlier scholars could not. Several years later, Margaret Gallyon used a limited number of sources to create an overall description of the introduction of Christianity to Wessex and Mercia in The Early Church in Wessex and Mercia¹¹. This work focused on the seventh century, when Christianity gained footholds in the two kingdoms. Della Hooke, whose work has focused on the settlement patterns and landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, produced an excellent study of the sub-kingdom of the

⁸ P. H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters (London: Butler and Tanner, Ltd., 1968).

⁹ H. M. and Joan Taylor, Anglo-Saxon Architecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965-78).

¹⁰ Dornier, Ann, ed., Mercian Studies (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977).

¹¹ Margaret Gallyon, The Early Church in Wessex and Mercia (Lavenham, Suffolk: Terence Dalton Ltd., 1980).

Hwicca¹². She used place names, charters, and boundaries to determine the extent of the kingdom, which she believed to be British and organized by Penda as a buffer on the boundary with Wessex. This work showed how several types of limited evidence could be combined to form a coherent picture of a very obscure area. In 1985, Pauline Stafford used primary sources and the results of recent studies to describe the history of the east midlands from Roman Britain to the Norman Conquest, and her information on Mercia shows how much knowledge of the kingdom has developed since the turn of the century¹³. All of these works have been able to describe the political aspects of a kingdom essentially unknown forty years ago, but there are still several areas that need more effort, especially the Mercian church and the function of saints in it. Very little is known about this subject between the kingdom's conversion and the tenth century monastic reform.

The cult of the saints was a vital part of the Mercian church, but had its origins in the early church. In the third and fourth centuries, martyrs frequently resulted from Roman persecution and the dangers of spreading the faith into hostile areas. After their death these people were given an honored status in the church, and were considered to have joined God immediately instead of waiting for judgement day. This special heavenly status gave the saints the ability to intercede with the divine on behalf of mortals, and these martyrs soon filled the role of an invisible protector, much like a guardian angel. Since they were simultaneously present in heaven and earth, their corporal remains and secondary relics, such as clothing, also shared in their sanctity. Through these relics, saints were able to exercise their power in the physical world via miracles¹⁴.

¹² Della Hooke, The Anglo-Saxon Landscape: The Kingdom of the Hwicce (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

¹³ Pauline Stafford, The East Midlands in the Early Middle Ages (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Based on Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

In antiquity, the realm of the dead was kept separate from that of the living. The dead were buried in separate "cities" outside of the living city, and there was very little interaction between the two areas. The saints were buried in these cemeteries, and as miracles occurred shrines were developed around the graves. These shrines were then expanded and made into churches as the saints' popularity and reputation grew. Over time, the churches outside the city and the popularity of saints began to break down the classical world's sharp division between the living and dead. Veneration for relics decreased the revulsion for the dead. Bones that would have been shunned before were honored, and often touched or even kissed in hope of healing. The saints blurred the spiritual line between life and death, and their cults bridged the same gap on earth. In some places the popularity of a cult actually resulted in a population shift from the old city to the graveyard, and the creation of a new town surrounding the saint¹⁵.

As Christianity spread into areas without martyrs, a need for more saints arose. By the beginning of the seventh century, it was deemed necessary for a new church to possess its own relics¹⁶. Churches without saints were forced to acquire relics in other ways. Many churches were able to gain relics as gifts from other churches. English clergy, notably Benedict Biscop and Wilfrid, actively sought relics for their churches on trips to the continent¹⁷. But the movement of relics from established churches was not able to meet the needs of the growing church. Since persecution was rare, few new saints were being created, so the church expanded the concept of sanctity to include virgins and confessors. These people rejected secular life to devote themselves to God, and it was this devotion that allowed them to achieve sanctity. The new category of saints allowed the growing church in Gaul, Britain, and Ireland to create their own saints and protectors. By the ninth century, the demand for relics again outstripped supply.

¹⁵ Martin Biddle, "Archaeology, Architecture, and the Cult of Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," in The Anglo-Saxon Church, eds. L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (London: Council for British Archaeology Research, Report 60, 1986), 3-5.

¹⁶ Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 106, 484.

and a flourishing trade developed in the remains of saints and items associated with them. This naturally encouraged unscrupulous practices, and theft of relics from cemeteries and shrines became common, as well as outright fabrication of relics¹⁸.

Since late antiquity, the promotion of cults was a necessary part of devotion. Saints whose acts were not remembered would not exercise their power on Earth, and unknown saints did not receive gifts and pilgrimages. As Christianity spread into Britain, saints were created by the new church. Like the saints of antiquity, they became the centers of cults, and their cults needed sponsorship to survive. The most common form of promotion was devotional writings, of which the earliest were the saints' lives. These works would describe the events and miracles of the saint's life, and would show, often through borrowing events from other lives, how the saint fit into the overall ideal of sanctity¹⁹. These accounts usually incorporated true events, but the miraculous or borrowed items warrant caution when using them as historical evidence. For instance, the life of Kenelm preserves authentic material about his date of death and burial place, but also incorporates fantastic events. According to the legend, his sister, who was actually an abbess, had him murdered so she could gain more power. The site of the murder was unknown until a dove dropped a letter written in Anglo-Saxon on the altar of St. Peter's church in Rome, which named the murderers and the site. When his body was brought to Winchcombe to be buried, his sister stood in the upper story of the church reading the bible backwards, perhaps as a curse. But God punished her, and her eyes literally fell out of her head²⁰. Kenelm's legend shows how imaginative medieval writers could enlarge a legend to the point where it held little truth, and is an example of the dangers that these sources can have for the historian.

As the number of cults rose, martyrologies also became common. These works showed the glory of either a region or Christendom as a whole by listing the saints, their feast days, and

¹⁷ Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 33.

¹⁸ Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39-40, 44-5.

¹⁹ Charles Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1947), 74-9.

often their resting places. These could act both as a guide for pilgrims and as a list of the feasts associated with the liturgical calendar. The earliest lists, such as the Martyrologium Hieronymian, contained primarily Roman saints²¹. These martyrologies were distributed, then altered and expanded by authors such as Bede, who added Anglo-Saxon saints to the list. Also, over time saints that were forgotten or no longer popular were removed from the lists. These documents were a living tradition used by the church to honor saints, and they can be used to help determine when a saint's cult was popular. Unfortunately, outside of the lives and martyrologies very little was written about saints. They occasionally make appearances in chronicles or documents, but these occurrences are rare and usually inconsequential.

The cult of saints became a source of controversy when the reformation swept through Europe. This attitude was perhaps strongest in England, where the creation of the Anglican church was accompanied by the destruction or sale of many relics and icons. To the reformers, these objects represented the corruption of the Catholic church. To Catholics, however, the relics associated with the saints were an integral part of their faith, and represented the strength and holiness of the church. Most saints were great men or women who had lived holy lives or died as a martyr for the faith. But some of the saints were obvious fabrications, while others were saints of whom little was known except their name. To justify the saints, apologists began collecting and publishing saints' lives. These works told who the saint was, and explained why he or she was worthy of veneration. The finest example of this effort is the Bollandists. This group of Jesuits began collecting, editing, and printing the best versions of lives in the seventeenth century, and they continued this work over the centuries, until nearly all saints have been included²². Their work has formed a valuable foundation for hagiographers, and contains a

²⁰ Carl Horstmann, Nova Legenda Anglie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 2:110-113.

²¹ J. Rossi and L. Duchesne, ed., Martyrologium Hieronymianum (Brussels: Typis Polleunis et Ceuterick, 1894).

²² David Hugh Farmer, The Oxford Dictionary of Saints, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xxiv.

wealth of detail. The only criticism is that the Bollandists chose the best lives for printing, and often overlooked older lives or ones that preserve a purer tradition. More recently, the nineteenth century interest in antiquities and Germanic roots also led to the editing and publishing of hagiographic materials. The earliest and often only editions of many lives, chronicles, and martyrologies date from this time. As in political history, these records form a solid foundation for later work, and their importance can easily be appreciated by examining modern bibliographies in detail.

The study of hagiography has taken several broad paths. The first and simplest approach is to study one or a few lives intensively, to reveal in great depth the factual details known about the saints. This method can also illuminate the authorship of a work, why it was written, and the sources used by the author. One of the finest examples of this approach is the work of Bertram Colgrave, who has done very important studies on the lives of Cuthbert and Guthlac²³. For Guthlac, Colgrave examined all known sources for the saint, including lives of the saint, chronicles, art, and martyrologies. Sifting through these sources allowed him to determine the relationship between the manuscripts, what sources were used by the authors, and then all of the known details about Guthlac. This method can reveal a great deal about a saint, but it is limited in its scope because it studies only one saint, and does not place the cult in a broader context.

Another approach is to analyze all the saints of a region or time period to determine their shared characteristics, an approach used by David Rollason and Susan Ridyard for Anglo-Saxon royal saints. In 1983, Dr. Rollason wrote an article in Anglo-Saxon England that examined several royal cults, and he used their similarities to show a consistent tradition that spanned three centuries²⁴. In The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England, Ridyard developed the concept of royal saints further, examining why the cults developed, their role in society, and how they were

²³ Bertram Colgrave, Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), and Two lives of Saint Cuthbert (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

created and maintained²⁵. This method has also been used by Thomas Head in his analysis of saints in the diocese of Orleans²⁶. He studied how churches in the diocese promoted saints between 800 and 1200.

The third approach, and the one that has the most relevance for other fields, is the fitting of sanctity into the structure of society. One of the most important works of this type is The Cult of Saints by Peter Brown. He applied modern historical methods to show how the concept of sanctity developed and grew in late antiquity. One of David Rollason's most recent works, Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England, and to some extent Ridyard's and Head's works, also used this approach. Rollason looked at the cult of saints in Anglo-Saxon England as a whole. He examined how the sponsorship of the cults changed over time, and the importance of the cults for the secular population²⁷. In 1977, Ronald Finucane analyzed over 3000 miracles associated with medieval saints to show how the people and saints interacted²⁸. Patrick Geary has also published several works that examine how saints and society interact, focusing on political aspects²⁹. This approach was also used by Peter Kraemer, who showed how German rulers used saints and religious reform to strengthen their power³⁰. This method allows the saints to be incorporated into other fields of medieval history, and will probably provide some of the richest results in the future.

This last approach is also well suited to the study of saints in Mercia. The type of people who were made saints in the kingdom changed between 650 and 850, but an analysis of the church alone does not show why the changes occurred. To reach the reason behind the evolution

²⁴ David Rollason, "The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," Anglo-Saxon England 11 (1983): 1-22.

²⁵ Susan Ridyard, The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4th ser., Vol. 9, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Thought and Life.

²⁶ Thomas Head, Hagiography and the Cult of Saints (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 4th ser., Vol. 14, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Thought and Life.

²⁷ David Rollason, Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

²⁸ Ronald Finucane, Miracles and Pilgrims (Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1977).

²⁹ Patrick Geary, Living with the Dead (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), and Furta Sacra.

³⁰ Peter Kraemer, "Sanctification and Servitium Regis" (M.A. thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1991).

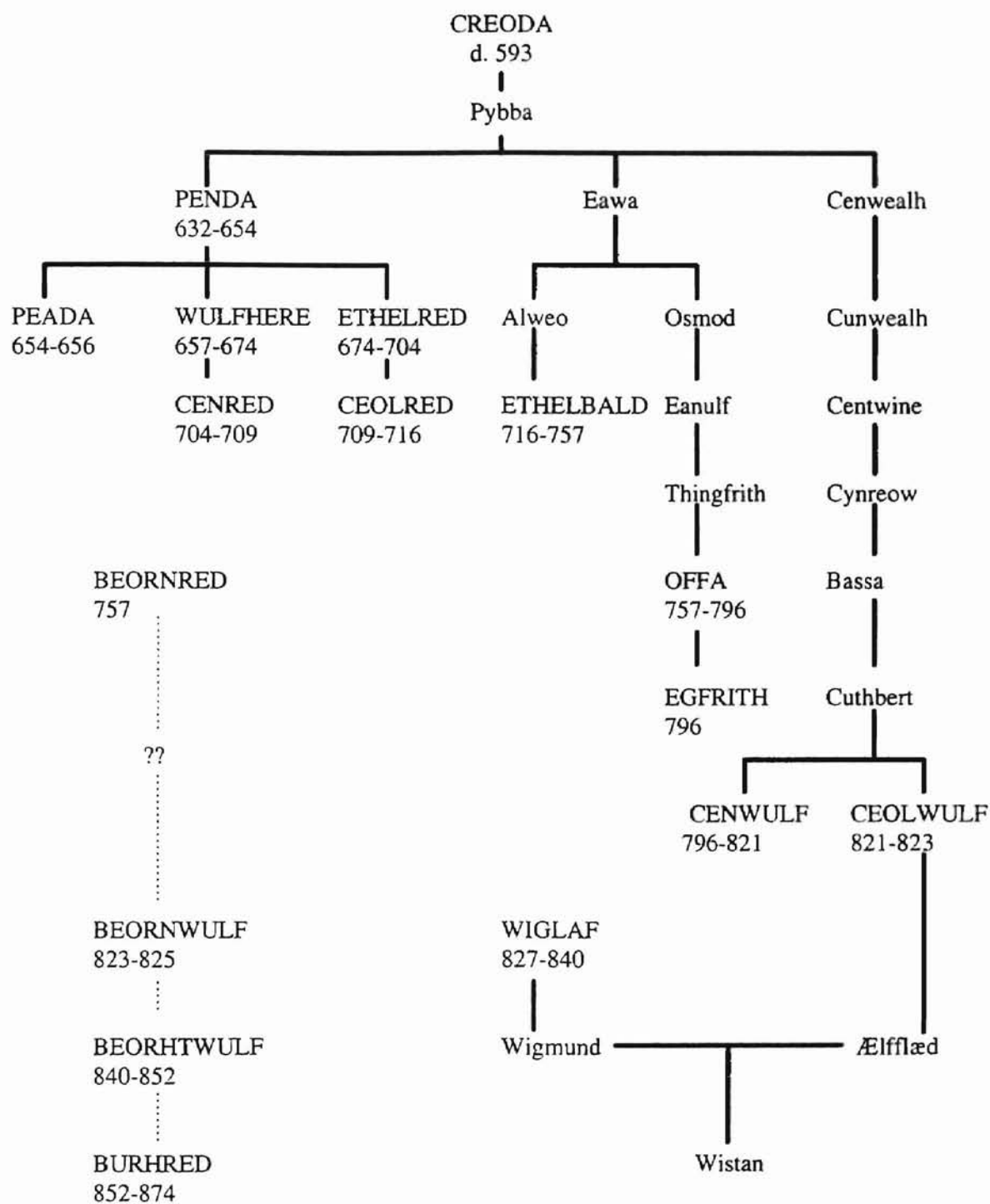
of the cults, it is necessary to incorporate the saints into a larger context. By combining the church's history with the varying political and economic fortunes of the kingdom, the role of saints in the Mercian church becomes clear.

The Mercian saints were used by the church to adapt to changes in royal patronage. As Christianity developed in Mercia, it relied on royal support for much of its livelihood. Grants of land and privileges were essential for the creation of new monasteries and churches, and the church actively sought this aid. But the Mercian nobility was not always willing or able to meet all the church's needs, and in lean times the church had to develop other forms of income. To maintain and expand its power and influence, the church was forced to adapt itself to the political and economic climate. This included accommodating royal desires and goals when necessary, and creating alternative sources of income when patronage was insufficient. As one of the best documented and flexible aspects of the Mercian church, the cult of saints shows how this was done.

Between 650 and 850, the Mercian saints were used by the church to respond to royal patronage. The type of people who were made saints changed over the two centuries, and each change illuminates the Mercian church and how it responded to external pressures. The earliest group of Mercian saints were the founders of the church. These men were the missionaries and clergy who spread Christianity throughout the kingdom. Soon, royalty became personally involved in the expansion of the church, often renouncing the secular world for the church, and they were made saints to reflect their importance. Finally, as Mercia declined and the royal families became less able to support the church, individual monasteries created cults around royal "martyrs" and exploited the cults as a source of income. These saints were a vital part of the Mercian church, but before examining them it is necessary to consider the condition of the kingdom of Mercia over this period and how the church came to Anglo-Saxon England.



Figure 1. Anglo-Saxon England



Key: Probable relationships
 — Definite relationships
 Kings of Mercia are listed in capital letters.

Figure 2. The Mercian Royal Family
 Based on Cyril Hart, "The Kingdom of Mercia," 55, 57.

Chapter II

The Kingdom of Mercia

Mercia's history does not begin until the seventh century. The entry for 626 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records briefly that in this year Penda came to power and ruled for thirty years¹. After that short entry, Penda came to dominate Anglo-Saxon history for the remainder of his life. His reign was one of nearly constant warfare. He fought with the West Saxons in 628, the Northumbrians five years later, the East Anglians three years after that². But what set him apart from contemporary kings was not just the frequency of battles, which can be expected from a king forging a new kingdom, but Penda's extraordinary success in those battles. In just over twenty years, he slew King Edwin of Northumbria, Edwin's son Osfrith, King Ecgric of East Anglia, the retired king and monk Sigebert, King Oswald of Northumbria, and King Anna of East Anglia³. Penda was a scourge on the Christian kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England for his entire reign. But although pagan, Penda was not waging war against the Christian faith, merely expanding his kingdom into areas controlled by Christian kings. Contemporary sources show his ambivalence to the new religion. Bede tells us that Penda had allowed four priests into Mercia, and that he only despised Christians who did not have faith in their God⁴. He even allowed his son Penda to be converted to Christianity. Also, not all of his battles were waged to gain plunder or land. In 645 Penda drove King Cenwealh from his kingdom for setting aside his wife, Penda's

¹ Charles Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles Parallel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 25.

² *Ibid.*; Thomas Forester, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 14.

³ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 25, 26; Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 14, 17.

⁴ Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, ed., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 280.

sister⁵. From these actions, Penda appears as a strong king who was willing to avenge an insult to his family through warfare as well as maintain an open mind about another religion.

In 654, his way of life finally led to his downfall. In the battle of Winwaed, King Oswy of Northumbria defeated Penda and his ally, King Ethelhere of East Anglia. The extent of Penda's power was revealed in this battle: thirty *cynebearne*, probably rulers of smaller kingdoms under Mercian control, were killed with him⁶. Information from place name studies and from the written evidence for the earliest periods of Anglo-Saxon England suggests that soon after the migration, the Germanic tribes formed small kingdoms throughout England based on kinship. Over time, these smaller political units fell under the control of an overlord, such as Penda, while the original king maintained control over his kingdom as an underking⁷. It is likely that the *cynebearne* fighting under Penda were the rulers of these subkingdoms, and the army was composed of their men and Penda's soldiers.

After the battle, Oswy gained control over all England and made his cousin Peada, Penda's son, king of the Southern Mercians. At this time, Diuma, one of the four missionaries to Mercia after Peada's conversion, was made the first bishop of Mercia. Unfortunately, Peada's reign was cut short by his murder the following year. After his death, Oswy ruled all Mercia directly for three years before three Mercian ealdorman rebelled and placed Wulfhere, another one of Penda's sons, on the Mercian throne⁸. Wulfhere soon became the dominant ruler of nearly all England. By 660, he had taken the district of Meanvara in Wessex and the Isle of Wight, and given them to his godson, King Ethelwold of the South Saxons⁹. Three years later, he was able to sell Wine the bishopric of London and the East Saxons, showing his control over

⁵ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 15.

⁶ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 29; Stafford, *East Midlands*, 95.

⁷ Steven Bassett, "In Search of the Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms," in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Steven Bassett (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989), 23-4.

⁸ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 19.

⁹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 372.

the Middle Saxons. In his last recorded battle in 674, Wulfhere led a force composed of people from all the southern kingdoms¹⁰.

Under Wulfhere, the Mercian church became firmly established. In 669, the seat of the bishopric of Mercia was fixed at Lichfield under bishop Chad¹¹. Chad was also given land by Wulfhere to found a monastery at Barrow¹². Prior to Chad's episcopate, Mercia's bishops had no fixed seat, and moved throughout the kingdom. Binding the see to Lichfield allowed the Mercian church to become more stable and laid the foundation for its later expansion in the kingdom.

In 674, Wulfhere invaded Northumbria, leading an army collected from all the southern kingdoms. He was defeated by King Ecgfrith, who took Lindsey and laid Mercia under tribute¹³. Ecgfrith's control was soon broken, though, when Wulfhere's successor Ethelred defeated him in the battle of Trent and retook Lindsey in 679¹⁴. Unlike his brother Wulfhere, Ethelred did not extend his control over all England, and his reign was more important for his support of the church. Several authentic charters exist that show Ethelred was a strong patron of the church. He gave gifts of land to St. Peter's at Worcester and Abbot Aldhelm at Malmesbury and granted land for the establishment of monasteries at Pershore and Fladbury¹⁵. He also endorsed grants by the underkings of the Hwicce for monasteries at Rippel and Bath¹⁶. His wife, Ostryth, translated the remains of her uncle, Saint Oswald, to Bardney for the benefit of the monastery there¹⁷. Also, during his reign the see of Mercia was split into five bishoprics to meet the needs of the Mercian church. Finally, in 704 Ethelred renounced the throne and became a monk at Bardney, which he and his wife probably founded¹⁸.

¹⁰ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 85.

¹¹ Bertram Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 32.

¹² Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 336.

¹³ Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 42.

¹⁴ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 370, 400.

¹⁵ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* (London: Whiting and co., 1885-1893), 1:92-3, 95, 109-111

¹⁶ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 27-28; Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:69-70.

¹⁷ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 244, 246.

¹⁸ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 34-35; 34 n.

Ethelred's successors did not maintain Mercia's strength. His immediate successor was Cenred, Wulfhere's son, who ruled for five years and then abdicated and went to Rome. He was succeeded by Ceolred, a son of Ethelred, who ruled seven years. According to tradition, Ceolred oppressed monasteries, and died insane¹⁹. Both of these kings are virtually unknown today. No authentic charters exist for either, although there is a large body of spurious charters attributed to them, which were created by the abbey of Evesham²⁰. Only one battle is recorded for either king, between King Ine of Wessex and Ceolred in 715. From the lack of written evidence, it appears that these kings were weak and overshadowed by King Ine, who expanded and strengthened Wessex during their reigns.

At the death of Ceolred, his cousin Ethelbald took the throne. While Ceolred reigned, Ethelbald, a potential claimant to the throne, had stayed in exile for his own safety. It is likely that he stayed in East Anglia while Ceolred ruled, since he often appeared as an exile visiting the hermit Guthlac²¹. Once he became king, Ethelbald probably had to work hard to regain Mercia's glory, but the records do not show any military actions or their results until 731, when Bede considered him the ruler of all England south of the Humber²². As a whole, Ethelbald's reign appears to have been unusually peaceful. Henry of Huntingdon records raids in Northumbria in 737, Bede in 740²³. Three years later, he fought with King Cuthred of Wessex against the Welsh, and nine years later the two kings were fighting each other. Considering the length of his rule, Ethelbald fought very few battles.

¹⁹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 203.

²⁰ To make up for a lack of evidence relating to its earliest history and endowments, the abbey of Evesham forged several charters, effectively creating a tradition of ownership for its possessions. These charters fall into the reigns of Cenred and Ceolred, the kings contemporary with Saint Egwin, the traditional founder of the abbey. For information on individual charters, see Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* 91-2.

²¹ Bertram Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 148.

²² Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 558.

²³ Thomas Forester, trans., *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 128; Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 572, 574.

The peace and prosperity that Ethelbald's reign brought to Mercia is evident in the large amount of royal donations to the church. Early in his rule, Ethelbald's grants were all in Mercia, giving the churches at Worcester and Evesham land and part of a building at the saltworks of Droitwich²⁴. In the latter half of his reign, the charters give evidence for international trade. In several charters, Ethelbald gave the rights to tolls due on ships at London to the churches at Minster-in-Thamet, Rochester, and Worcester²⁵. Not only was the king generous to existing churches, but he also granted land for the creation of monasteries at Daylesford, Acton Beauchamp, Bradley near Inkberrow and several other places²⁶. Based solely on the charters, Ethelbald emerges as the strongest Mercian king to this point, and his generosity to the church is impressive, especially when it is considered that the charters from the East Midlands are lost. Despite the large amount of support given to the church, his support from clergy was not universal: there is an extant letter from Pope Boniface to Ethelbald, in which the pope criticizes the king's way of life and his oppression of the church²⁷. Unfortunately, this is the only surviving document mentioning this behavior, leaving no details to support the accusation.

Ethelbald's reign is the first period in which information exists for the Mercian economy. During the eighth century, the sceatta, a small silver coin, was the primary currency used throughout England. Numismatists have developed rough dates for most sceattas, allowing them to be placed into a larger context. The coins of the early eighth century mirror Ethelbald's expansion of Mercia and the resulting prosperity. Two mints were striking coins under Ethelbald, one at London and one in southern Mercia. Modern finds of coins show a concentration of the use of currency on the southern and eastern borders of Mercia. This indicates that the coins were primarily used in trade with merchants from Kent and the continent,

²⁴ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:202-4, 237-9

²⁵ Ibid., 1:216-17, 220-1, 246, 253-4,

²⁶ Ibid., 1:204-5, 213, 221-3, 227-80

²⁷ Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 816-822.

where Mercian sceattas have also been found. Very little is known of the nature of trade during Ethelbald's reign, but it has been suggested that continental merchants were trading for Mercian wool²⁸. Although there is not evidence linking them directly to Ethelbald's reign, written sources show that wine, honey, bronze vessels, and slaves were all traded to the continent by Anglo-Saxons, and some or all of these items were probably part of the international trade of the eighth century²⁹.

The quality of the coins also shows the status of the economy. In the third and fourth decades of the eighth century, the sceattas were nearly pure silver, indicating prosperity and an adequate supply of bullion for coining. This period is when Ethelbald expanded Mercian control throughout southern England, and it is likely that the royal coffers were filled by warfare. Near the middle of the century, Mercia entered a recession. Over several coinings, the silver content of the sceattas was reduced, eventually dropping from ninety percent to near twenty. At one point, tin was even added to the now coppery coins, in an attempt to whiten them and make them more acceptable³⁰. The reasons for the recession are not fully understood. Since Mercia was no longer expanding, the economy was not benefitting from influxes of precious metals from conquest, and the only sources of silver were trade with the continent and mining, which played a minor role. If the recession also affected international trade, the decline in silver from the continent would help explain the debasement. Interestingly, the grants to the church of tolls on ships to London occurred during the time of recession. Perhaps they were a means of maintaining royal income by keeping as much land as possible in royal hands, while maintaining generosity to the church via the gift of an income source that had decreased in importance to the crown.

²⁸ D. M. Metcalf, "Monetary Affairs in Mercia in the time of Æthelbald," in Mercian Studies, 89-90, 93-4.

²⁹ Levison, England and the Continent (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 8.

³⁰ Metcalf, "Monetary Affairs," 89, 96.

In 757, Ethelbald was killed for unknown reasons by his bodyguard at Seckington, near the royal palace of Tamworth³¹. He was buried at Repton, and the kingdom was usurped by Beornred, who was almost immediately deposed by Offa the same year. The beginning of Offa's reign is very obscure. For the first twenty years, the only existing records show Offa making grants or confirming grants by the sub-kings of the Hwicce in western Mercia. This is followed by a succession of battles with Kent, East Anglia, and Wessex³². These conflicts probably represent the expansion of Offa's power, and soon after, he was able to make grants in Kent, choose the bishop of Dorchester, and control the monastery at Bath³³. In 786, King Cynewulf of Wessex died, and Offa was able to bring the kingdom under his control by supporting the weak king Beorhtric. Beorhtric was not of the royal family, and he was opposed by Egbert, a descendant of King Ine's brother Ingeld. Offa supported Beorhtric in his bid for power, and helped him drive Egbert from Wessex and into exile in the kingdom of the Franks. To help strengthen his position, Offa married a daughter to Beorhtric, an action which surely increased Offa's influence in Wessex³⁴. After this, Offa controlled all southern England. An impressive example of the power he wielded is Offa's Dyke. This earthwork runs over seventy miles of the border between Mercia and Wales and was probably constructed between 784 and 796³⁵. It shows not only that Offa was capable of mobilizing enormous resources, but also that his kingdom was stable enough to finish such a work.

Offa also had influence outside of England. Correspondence with Charlemagne shows that Offa was capable of acting as an equal with him³⁶, and that his preeminence in England was unchallenged. The stability of Mercia resulted in an increase in international trade in the last

³¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 205.

³² Henry T. Riley, trans., *The Annals of Roger de Hovedon* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853), 9; Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 51.

³³ Birch, 1:300-3; A. W. Haddan and William Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 3:438-9; Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 46.

³⁴ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 209-10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 212-215.

decades of Offa's reign. The currency which had been debased was restored to high levels of purity and reissued. Also, Offa made 240 pennies equal to a pound bringing Mercian currency into line with the Frankish currency, which was given the same division in 780³⁷. Mercian coins from Offa's reign are found in France, and French coins are found in England, supporting evidence of a resurgence in trade. Unfortunately, very little is known about the nature of the trade. Charlemagne agreed in a letter to Offa that certain "black stones" which Offa was to receive would be cut to a certain size, but requested in turn that the cloaks from England be restored to the length of an earlier time to satisfy the French people. The letter also contained an agreement between the kings that merchants would be protected when visiting the other king's country, and that the merchants would be able to call on the crown if in need³⁸. This letter shows that Offa was considered capable of maintaining control over manufacturing as well trade, and also pushes evidence for the cloth industry back to the eighth century. Little else is known of the goods traded across the channel at this time, but it can be assumed that standard items such as wine, honey, and slaves were still traded with the continent.

The contact with the continent also resulted in cultural borrowings. In 781, Charlemagne had his sons Pippin and Louis anointed as kings by Pope Hadrian. Only six years later, Offa's son Egfrith was anointed as king³⁹. This was the first time that the practice had taken place in England, and the continental influence is clear. The changes in the Mercian coinage during Offa's reign also show the intellectual trade. Although its influence in Mercia was great, the Frankish kingdom was not in a dominant position. Offa insisted upon his equality with Charlemagne. Offa arranged marriages for his daughters with King Beorhtric of Wessex and King Ethelred of Northumbria⁴⁰. Charlemagne also sought a daughter of Offa for his son

³⁶ Whitelock, Historical Documents, 848-9; Haddan and Stubbs, Councils, 3:496-8.

³⁷ Levison, England and the Continent, 11.

³⁸ Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 221.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 218-9.

⁴⁰ Plummer, Two Chronicles, 54; Riley, Roger de Hovedon, 11.

Charles, but refused when Offa demanded that Charlemagne's daughter marry his son Egfrith in turn⁴¹. The break was serious: the two kings broke off all correspondence for a time, and closed ports to merchants from the other country. This last item is very interesting, because it shows that trade was important enough to both kingdoms that it could be wielded as a political weapon.

Despite Mercia's political dominance, it was still religiously subject to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The archbishop's seat was in the kingdom of Kent, which was often hostile to Mercia. Because of this, the archbishop, who was at least partially dependent on the support of the Kentish ruler, often supported Kent in conflicts with Mercia. This opposition to Mercian policies could be a problem for the Mercian ruler, and Offa took steps to reduce the archbishop's power over Mercia.

In 786, Pope Hadrian sent legates to the English church for the first time since the mission of Augustine. Before they left England, a synod was held at which Offa promised to pay St. Peter's pence to Rome every year⁴². Around this time, he was also sending correspondence to the pope, discussing his plans to raise the bishopric of Lichfield to an archbishopric, ostensibly because of the excessive size of the province of Canterbury⁴³. His efforts were soon rewarded; at the synod of Chelsea in 787, Archbishop Janbert agreed to give up a portion of his see, and Offa declared Bishop Higebert of Lichfield an archbishop⁴⁴. Higebert received the pallium from the pope by the end of 788; he witnesses a charter as bishop, then as archbishop the same year. Offa's emphasis on foreign relations, the building of Offa's Dyke, and his ability to create an archbishopric all show the power and influence of Offa, a strength which no earlier or later Mercian king possessed.

⁴¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 220.

⁴² T. Arnold, ed., *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* (London: Longmans and Co., 1885), 2:51; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:524-5.

⁴³ Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:524.

⁴⁴ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 52.

Offa's death signaled the beginning of the decline of Mercia. His son Egfrith ruled for only 141 days before he died. The next king was Cenwulf, who traced his lineage back to Penda through a separate branch⁴⁵. Immediately, Cenwulf faced a rebellion in Kent, which he quickly put down⁴⁶. Northumbria and Wessex were not as easy to control, and soon both slipped from Mercian control under new rulers⁴⁷. Cenwulf was able to maintain control over southern and eastern England, and with the exception of a battle with Eardulph of Northumbria, and raids into Wales, the reign appears to have been peaceful. Soon after his accession, Cenwulf began correspondence with Pope Leo III about abolishing the see of Lichfield. The Anglo-Saxon church was no longer as unified in support of the third province, and Cenwulf admitted to the pope that Offa had desired the pallium for Lichfield because of hatred for Archbishop Janbert and Kent. He proposed to Leo that England return to two provinces, but instead of making Canterbury the sole southern archbishop, he suggested that London replace it. The original plan of Pope Gregory for the English church had specified London, so there was a strong precedent, but the primary advantage to Cenwulf was that the see would be moved to a city firmly under Mercian control. Leo agreed to return England to two provinces, but was unwilling to move the see to London, a situation which was not as important to Cenwulf after he had reasserted control over Kent⁴⁸. In 799, Higebert signed his last charter as archbishop, and Cenwulf restored lands to the archbishop of Canterbury⁴⁹. Four years later, the archbishopric of Lichfield was officially abolished at the synod of Clovesho. The demise of Lichfield as an archbishopric introduced a new tradition into the English church. After Canterbury was restored to power, each new bishop submitted a written oath of obedience to the archbishop, a measure which would help prevent the division of the province from occurring again. For the remainder of Cenwulf's reign, he acted as

⁴⁵ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 47; Stafford, *East Midlands*, 103.

⁴⁶ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 56.

⁴⁷ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 225.

⁴⁸ Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:521-5.

⁴⁹ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:409-10; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:528.

a strong patron of the church, making many donations to the churches at Worcester and Canterbury⁵⁰. He was probably equally generous in other areas of the kingdom, but the charters for those areas no longer exist. In 811, Cenwulf founded Winchcombe Abbey, and it was there that he was buried in 821.

Cenwulf was succeeded by his brother Ceolwulf, who ruled only two years before he was deposed by Beornwulf⁵¹. Very little is known of Beornwulf: he was not of the Mercian royal family, and the only charter evidence for him prior to his reign is a charter of Cenwulf and one of Ceolwulf in which he witnesses as an ealdorman⁵². The Mercian ealdormen each controlled a region of the kingdom, and in several cases it appears that they were the descendants of lesser kings who gave up their independence and became wholly subject to the Mercian king⁵³. The fact that an ealdorman was able to seize the throne shows the decline of the royal family. Beornwulf was a man with a great deal of support and power, but he was not powerful enough to maintain the kingdom. In 825, he fought with King Egbert of Wessex at Ellendune and was defeated. The same year, Egbert seized Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Essex, and East Anglia, and Beornwulf died in battle with the East Anglians. He was succeeded by the ealdorman Ludecan, who only controlled the center of Mercia, Lindsey, and the Middle Angles until he died two years later in battle with East Anglia⁵⁴. In 829, Egbert became Bretwalda by expelling the Mercian king, Wiglaf. Bretwalda was an Anglo-Saxon term meaning 'ruler of the Britains,' which was applied to rulers controlling all England south of the Humber. Egbert ruled Mercia directly for a year until Wiglaf regained the throne. Egbert's ability to control the Mercian

⁵⁰ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:470-3, 475, 481-2, 485-90, 491-2, 500-1; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:570-1, 585-6.

⁵¹ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 60.

⁵² Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:475, 511-12.

⁵³ The best evidence of this is the last king of Essex, Sigereð. He is listed as a witness on many of Cenwulf's charters, appearing first as a king, then an underking, then as an ealdorman. See also Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 236, 305, and for examples of the charters Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 1:466-8, 475, 497-8.

⁵⁴ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 60; Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 231.

throne shows that the process began by the death of Cenwulf and Beornwulf's defeat at Ellendune had finally reached its end: the age of Mercian power has passed.

After he regained the throne, Wiglaf was only able to exert control over the heartland of Mercia and Middlesex, including London⁵⁵. At Wiglaf's death in 840, Beorhtwulf gained the throne. He was also a king of unknown background, but was probably a descendant of Beornwulf⁵⁶. Although he made several grants to the church, the balance seems to be shifting: several charters exist which show the church supporting Beorhtwulf. In a grant to Abbot Eanmund of Bredon, the king gives exemptions in return for "gifts," in a grant to bishop Heahbert the gifts are more clear: three pounds of silver in return for exemptions⁵⁷. The church also helped Beorhtwulf reward his men. In 844, Bishop Ceolred gave land to the king, which he then gave to his ealdorman Ethelwulf. A similar charter records a gift of land by Bishop Ealhhun to the king, who then gave the land to his thegn Ecgbert in return for 60 pounds of gold and silver⁵⁸. These charters show the king's dependence on the church, a circumstance which probably resulted from the decline of the kingdom and its revenue.

In 851, the Danes ravaged Kent and London, then went up the Thames and put to flight Beorhtwulf and his army. The following year Beorhtwulf died, and was succeeded by Burhred⁵⁹. Under Burhred, the kingdom appeared to have become more stable, and Burhred resumed the generosity to the church once common, giving land to Worcester, Gloucester, and the Archbishop Wulfred⁶⁰. He married the daughter of King Ethelwulf of Wessex, and the two kingdoms were at peace, undertaking joint operations against the Welsh in 853 and the Danes in 868⁶¹. His reign ended when the Danes wintered at Repton in 874 and drove him from his kingdom. Burhred

⁵⁵ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 233-4.

⁵⁶ Stafford, *East Midlands*, 103.

⁵⁷ Finberg, *Charters of the West Midlands*, 46, 102.

⁵⁸ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 2:20-1; Finberg, *Charters of the West Midlands*, 103.

⁵⁹ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 54-55.

⁶⁰ Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 95, 109-11, 119-20; Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils*, 3:654, 656.

⁶¹ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 55-56, 61.

went to Rome and died there, and was buried in the church of Saint Mary⁶². When he was deposed, the ancient Mercian kingdom ended. It continued into the next century, but only as an administrative unit or sub-kingdom of the Danes or Wessex.

During most of the two and a half centuries between the rise of Penda and the fall of Burhred, Mercia was the dominant kingdom in Anglo-Saxon England. Like most kingdoms, its fortunes varied greatly: Mercia's history is filled with great kings who were able to expand the kingdom and maintain power, as well as weak kings who were barely able to keep their throne, let alone control other kingdoms. The Mercian church was directly influenced by the fate of the kings. Under Wulfhere, Ethelbald, and Ethelred the church expanded as the kings granted lands for the creation of monasteries. Later kings, such as Offa and Cenwulf, also supported the church, but by then it had expanded throughout Mercia. Instead of creating new churches and monasteries, they granted land and privileges to existing foundations. Although Offa's archbishopric was soon abolished, its creation shows the respect and influence that the Mercian church commanded during his reign. Under the weaker kings, the church did not benefit as much from grants, and prior to the Danish invasions, the church was even helping maintain the power of the kings. Any discussion of the Mercian church necessarily revolves around the fortunes of the kingdom, and it is in this framework that the Mercian cult of saints must be placed.

⁶² Plummer, Two Chronicles, 72.

Chapter III

The Origin of the Anglo-Saxon Church

The earliest attempt to convert the Anglo-Saxons occurred at the end of the sixth century when Pope Gregory organized a mission to reclaim Britain for the church. At the head of the mission Gregory placed Augustine, who was the prefect of Gregory's own monastery¹. A group of monks departed Rome with Augustine and travelled through Gaul to the kingdom of Kent, which was ruled by King Ethelbert. Ethelbert was a pagan, but his Frankish wife Bertha was a Christian, and she had been accompanied to Kent by a bishop, Liudhard. Interestingly, that is all we know of Liudhard. There is no more mention of Liudhard, nor any mention of influence he may have had in the growing church. The king met with the missionaries outdoors, supposedly to prevent Augustine from using magic, but more likely to calm his retainers, since he was familiar with Christianity through his wife. After the meeting, Ethelbert gave Augustine a dwelling in Canterbury, although personally refusing to convert at the time. Ethelbert's gift provided support for Augustine's mission, showing that Ethelbert was not truly opposed to them. No doubt Bertha and Liudhard were great influences in Ethelbert's positive reception of the missionaries.

Augustine brought with him the format of the church in Italy, which was organized around bishops and their dioceses. In Italy, every major city had its own bishop. The bishop's spiritual sphere of authority, the *parochia*, was the city itself. The bishop also ruled an

¹ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* 3rd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 61.

administrative unit, the diocese, which contained the city and the surrounding rural area². This system was very well suited to an area with many large cities, such as Italy, but it had to be adapted in areas such as England that were primarily rural. Augustine's mission followed this general system, placing bishops in major cities such as Canterbury and London. Since large urban centers that could support a bishop were few, the church depended on royalty for support. Instead of the diocese being composed of the city and its surrounding rural area, a bishop was placed over an entire kingdom or tribal group, for instance bishop of the East Saxons³. The bishop then was able to move throughout the kingdom and preach in many places, not just in one city. This adaptation allowed the church to maintain the primary role of the bishop even in areas predominantly rural.

Augustine soon became the head of the Anglo-Saxon church, and four years later Gregory sent more clergy and a pallium, which granted Augustine the powers of an archbishop. Gregory also sent a plan for the development of the church. There were to be two metropolitan bishops, one at York and one at London, each of whom would have twelve bishops under him. The two archbishops were to also have control over the British bishops in the areas not under Anglo-Saxon control⁴. This plan showed Gregory's ignorance of the actual conditions in England. York and London may have been major cities in Roman Britain, but by Augustine's time neither city was Christian. Also, Augustine never had control over the British bishops, and had actually created enmity between them and the Roman missionaries at their first meeting⁵. But although Augustine's plan had several flaws, it served as the basis for the development of the English church, and its influence is still felt in the organization of the Anglican church.

Under Augustine, the church also began to spread outside the kingdom of Kent. Ethelbert was the overlord of all kingdoms south of the Humber, and his influence helped the

² John Godfrey, The English Parish, 600-1300 (London: S.P.C.K., 1969), 1-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 104.

church gain a foothold in Essex and East Anglia. Augustine consecrated Bishop Mellitus to preach to the East Saxons. His success was likely a product of Ethelbert's influence, for Ethelbert was able to build the first church in London, an act which doubtlessly enhanced his control over Essex and its king, Sabert. Redwald, the king of East Anglia, also accepted the Christian faith under Ethelbert, but he soon reverted to the old ways. Henry Mayr-Harting has argued very convincingly that Redwald's conversion and relapse were politically influenced. When Redwald accepted Christianity, he was subject to King Ethelbert, but before Ethelbert's death, Redwald was already considered the next *bretwalda*. By rejecting the new faith, Redwald was casting off Ethelbert's political and religious overlordship, and establishing his own power⁶. Redwald illustrated how even religion was used politically by kings to enhance their power.

Although it had quickly expanded into several kingdoms, the early church was not stable. Possessing no economic base, the church depended on royal support for its survival and expansion. When a Christian king was replaced by a pagan, the church suffered accordingly. At the death of Ethelbert, the throne passed to his pagan son Eadbald. Soon after Ethelbert's death, King Sabert died and his three pagan sons drove Bishop Mellitus from London. Mellitus left his church and went to Kent. Along with Bishops Laurence of Canterbury and Justus of Rochester, Mellitus decided to leave England. Mellitus and Justus departed to Gaul, but Laurence stayed a night longer in the church of Saints Peter and Paul in Canterbury. That night Saint Peter came to him in a dream and convinced him to stay. The next day, Laurence told King Eadbald of the dream and showed him the stripes from Saint Peter's scourge, which he had suffered for Eadbald's sake. Eadbald soon converted, and Christianity regained royal favor in Kent⁷.

Soon after Eadbald's conversion, King Edwin of Northumbria sought Ethelbert's daughter Ethelburh. Her brother Eadbald agreed to allow the wedding, provided that she and her

⁵ Ibid., 136, 138, 140.

⁶ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 65-7.

⁷ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 150, 152, 154.

companions be allowed to keep the Christian faith. Edwin agreed, and Ethelburh went to Northumbria with Paulinus, who was consecrated as a bishop. Paulinus was successful in his conversions, but Edwin waited several years before accepting the faith. As with Redwald, his acceptance of the faith may have been politically motivated, waiting until after his overlord's death. It is also likely that it took the near assassination of Edwin and a victory over the assassin's kingdom for his heart to change⁸. With the introduction of the church to Northumbria and the creation of a bishopric centered at York under Paulinus, the church came a step closer to fulfilling Pope Gregory's plan. Canterbury had replaced London as the seat of the southern archbishopric, but York gained an archbishop in Paulinus, as Gregory had suggested.

Although it appeared to be poised to spread the faith throughout the north, the Roman church faced a major setback when Edwin was killed in battle with Penda and Cadwalla in 633. Northumbria was temporarily without a king, and Paulinus and Ethelburh fled to Kent for their safety. The northern church had not completely collapsed, and the church at York was maintained by a Deacon, James, but the Roman push to convert the north had failed. When Christianity soon regained its strength in Northumbria, it was not because of southern efforts.

As the Anglo-Saxons pushed into England, Christianity survived as an organized church only in Wales and Ireland. The Irish played a major role in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, but the Welsh did not, probably because of the legacy of the invasion and the constant warfare with the Anglo-Saxons. According to tradition, the Irish church was founded by St. Patrick in the fifth century. Similar to the Roman missionaries over a century later, Patrick had to adapt a diocesan model to a rural land. Ireland had no major cities and was divided into a large number of small kingdoms organized by tribe, so Patrick ordained a bishop for each tribal group. The number of tribes was large, and soon there were hundreds of bishops in Ireland⁹. Within a century, the Irish church had completely changed from its earlier form. The strict monasticism

⁸ Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 66-7; Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 164, 166.

that had originated in North Africa had spread to Ireland via Gaul. The Irish quickly adopted this way of life, and soon monasteries spread throughout the island. The monastic form of life was well suited to a rural land like Ireland, and the abbots and their monasteries increased in importance and number as the bishops declined. By the end of the sixth century, monks trained in these monasteries began leaving Ireland and establishing monasteries throughout western Europe. The most important of these missionary churches for Anglo-Saxon England was the monastery of Iona.

In 563, an Irish monk, Columba, set out from Ireland and landed on the small island of Iona between Ireland and Northern Britain. According to tradition, Columba was forced to leave Ireland for his part in causing a large battle, and he resolved to convert one pagan for every life lost in the battle. Iona was excellently positioned for missionary work, and Columba used it as a base for his conversion of the Picts. As the monastery grew, it gained a considerable reputation as a scriptorium and source of training for monks. The monastery was organized on traditional Celtic lines which varied considerably from the Roman form popular at this time. The monks placed a large emphasis on living a simple life, and they practiced an ascetism not unlike that of the desert hermits of North Africa. The monks also tonsured their hair in the Celtic fashion from ear to ear, and their liturgy was marked by differences from the Roman form. Although these external differences set them apart from monks in the Roman tradition, the primary difference was that they calculated Easter differently from Rome, and the holy day often varied from the Roman calculation by several days. This came to be a great concern as the two forms of Christianity came into contact. A divided church was weakened, and a split over something as important as Easter could not be ignored. For several centuries the difference had not been an issue, but when the Northumbria church was revived under Irish influence, the two traditions met and the differences had to be resolved.

⁹ John Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 44.

Oswald, the king of Northumbria after Edwin, had spent Edwin's reign in exile on Iona, where he was converted to Christianity. When he defeated Cadwallon and united Northumbria in 633, the same year as Edwin's death, it was from his friends on Iona that he sought help. The first missionary they sent was not suitable for Oswald's needs, but he was soon replaced by a monk named Aidan. Instead of working from York, which still had a church left from the rule of Paulinus, Aidan founded a monastery on the island of Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne is directly opposite Bamburgh, where Oswald spent most of his time, and its location insured royal protection. At the same time, it was isolated by geography. The island was connected to the mainland only at low tide, and offered the monks seclusion, much as Iona did. As its mother church, Iona, was the center for the conversion of the Picts, Lindisfarne became the center of the growing Northumbrian church.

Under Aidan, Lindisfarne prospered and grew, and raised a new generation of monks in the Celtic tradition. Aidan was the epitome of the Irish monk. He spent most of his time preaching or praying, and often retreated to a smaller island where he could pray and meditate in seclusion. Unlike Roman bishops, Aidan moved about preaching, and he nearly always did so on foot, rather than by horse. His generosity and kindness was also renowned, as when King Oswine gave him a fine horse, which Aidan then gave to a beggar¹⁰. Although he was involved in royal affairs and spent much time in the presence of royalty, Aidan maintained the simple life in which he was trained, and passed this way of life to the monks that studied at Lindisfarne.

At Aidan's death he was succeeded as abbot and bishop by Finan, who had also trained at Iona. It was during Finan's rule that Peada visited Northumbria, seeking the hand of Alhflæd, King Oswy's daughter. Oswy agreed to the marriage provided that Peada become a Christian. Peada's time in Northumbria appears to have had an influence on him, because he responded that he was willing to accept the Christian faith with or without Oswy's daughter. He was soon

¹⁰ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 226-8, 258.

baptized by Finan, and when he returned to Mercia he brought with him a new wife and four priests. These four priests laid the foundations of the Mercian church, and they spread the Irish traditions with the Christian faith. From the beginning, Christianity in Mercia was a product of the Celtic church, and Irish traditions and clergy defined the early church of the kingdom.

Chapter IV

The Founder Saints

From its beginning, the Mercian church created saints. Cults developed at a local level, where the people were most familiar with the saint, and represented a way of remembering someone who led a holy life or was important to the church. Usually, the saint was buried in a normal fashion, and as miracles occurred near the grave, the saint's remains were moved to a place of honor. The act of exhuming the saint's body, cleansing it, and placing it in a shrine was traditionally what made a person a saint. This pattern was not always followed, however. Saint Erkenwald had three churches fighting over his body immediately after his death, and there can be little doubt that they considered him a saint at the time, or at least intended to honor him as one. In the seventh century, there was no established process for determining sainthood. The development of a cult occurred locally, and papal approval was not necessary. Often bishops were consulted, but this was primarily to lend prestige and legitimacy to the saint. Honoring someone as a saint was the church's way of remembering those most important to it.

The earliest group of Mercian saints reflected the condition of the church: they were usually bishops or founders of monasteries, and if from the kingdom at all, were not from the royal family. The outside influence developed because the church was built by missionaries from other kingdoms, who were forced to create the church from scratch, founding monasteries and churches throughout the kingdom. From the start, the royal family helped create the church, but this was often in the form of financial support, not personal involvement. As a result, the outstanding figures of this time were the founders of the church, and it is they who were raised up as saints.

The earliest Mercian saint, Diuma, is almost unknown. When Peada was baptized by bishop Finan in 653, four priests returned with him to Mercia: Cedd, Adda, Betti, and an Irishman, Diuma. At the death of Penda, Oswy gained control of Mercia and Diuma was consecrated bishop of the Mercians and Middle Angles. His efforts were successful, and he gained a large amount of converts before dying in a district called Infeppingum¹. Unfortunately, this is all we know of Diuma. At the time when he was bishop, Mercia had no fixed see, so the bishop moved continually through the kingdom, possibly following the king. The Secgan be ðam Godes sanctum ðe on Engla lande ærost reston, an eleventh century list of resting places, lists Diuma in its first half, which was composed in the eighth or ninth century². In the list, he is said to lie at Charlbury, which is an area that has been tentatively identified as the land inhabited by the Feppingas. Using the Tribal Hidage, an eighth-century Mercian tribute list, Cyril Hart has identified the Feppingas as a small tribal group in the larger subkingdom of the Middle Angles³. Once the major rulers had been converted to Christianity, the attention of the missionaries would have focused on the smaller political units, and it is likely that Diuma was preaching to this small tribal group when he died.

The reference in the Secgan indicates that Diuma did have an early cult, but the lack of a life or other references to him suggests local veneration that was short lived. In the seventh century the Irish church fell out of favor in Anglo-Saxon England, and a bishop trained in the Irish tradition who was Irish by birth may have been a less suitable object of veneration. This could have limited or even led to repression of Diuma's cult. Although the first bishop of the Mercians would be a logical choice for sainthood, no strong cult appears to have developed around Diuma, and no early life or evidence of a cult exists, except for the mention in the

¹ Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 278, 280.

² David Rollason, "Lists of Saints' Resting-Places in Anglo-Saxon England," Anglo-Saxon England 7 (1978): 68.

³ F. Liebermann, Die Heiligen Englands (Hannover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1889), 11; Hart, "Kingdom of Mercia," 44-51.

Secgan. There are several reasons that the creation of a cult around Diuma would have been hindered. When he died, the Mercian church had very little influence or power, making the creation of a strong cult difficult. The fledgling church did not have the strength to successfully promote a well known cult. Also, his death occurred at a time when Mercia was just freeing itself from Northumbrian control, diminishing the chance for royal sponsorship. Finally, he died at Charlbury, a relatively unknown place on the southern border of Mercia, not in the heart of Mercia⁴. Since the bishopric had no fixed see and he was buried at an unimportant location, there was no strong center for his cult to develop around. The next Mercian saint, however, did not have these handicaps.

The fifth bishop of the Mercians, Chad, is much better known. Again, most of his life is only known from Bede, but compared to Diuma, there is a great deal of information about him and his cult. Chad was a disciple of Aidan, and spent time studying in Ireland, probably after Aidan's death in 651⁵. Chad's study under Bishop Aidan at Lindisfarne gave him a great deal of prestige. His reputation was also enhanced because his brother Cedd was one of the four priests sent to Mercia in 653, had been bishop of the East Saxons, and had founded a monastery at Lastingham. In 664 Cedd died from the plague, and left Chad to govern Lastingham. The same year, the underking Alhfrith of Deira chose Wilfrid to be the next Northumbrian bishop. Wilfrid, desiring to be ordained by three orthodox bishops, was forced to go to the continent because of a shortage of bishops in England. In 314, the Council of Arles had decreed that a bishop should be consecrated by a minimum of three other bishops, and it is likely this requirement that Wilfrid had in mind when he departed⁶. In his long absence, King Oswiu of Northumbria declared Chad bishop. Chad went to Canterbury to be ordained by Archbishop Deusdedit, but since he had died, Chad was forced to go to Wessex, the nearest bishopric. Chad was consecrated by Bishop

⁴ Rollason, "Saints' Resting-Places," 67.

⁵ Carl Horstman, *Nove Legenda Anglie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 1:185.; R. H. Warner, *Life and Legends of St. Chad* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1871), 16.

Wine of Wessex and two British bishops not under the authority of the Roman church⁷. This was acceptable to Chad, who was taught in the Irish tradition, but it created problems later, which were only increased when Wine obtained the see of London through simony.

Chad then returned to Northumbria, and served as bishop for three years. His service began soon after the synod of Whitby, which dealt with the observance of Easter. At the synod, clergy representing the Irish and Roman sides met and debated the proper date of Easter, with King Oswy of Northumbria adjudicating. After much discussion, Oswy accepted the Roman arguments. His decision was accepted by most Northumbrian clergy, but there were notable exceptions. After the synod, Abbot Colman of Lindisfarne and thirty monks left for Ireland, rather than break their tradition. Chad accepted the Roman Easter, yet served as bishop in the Irish fashion: he constantly moved about preaching, and he traveled by foot, not on horseback⁸. Wilfrid finally returned from the continent, but since his see had been filled, he retired to his monastery at Ripon, and served in Mercia at the request of Wulfhere several times. When Theodore, the new archbishop of Canterbury arrived, he deposed Chad for being improperly consecrated and placed Wilfrid in his place. Chad then retired to Lastingham, which his brother founded, and served as abbot there⁹. When Wilfrid returned to his see, there was an opening for a bishop in Mercia, and King Wulfhere requested a bishop from archbishop Theodore. Chad was chosen for this position because of his reputation, and quite possibly at the suggestion of Wilfrid¹⁰. Chad agreed, and was made bishop of the Mercians under Wulfhere, who gave Chad land for a monastery at Barrow and allowed Wilfrid to establish a monastery at Lichfield¹¹. At the beginning of Chad's episcopate, Lichfield was permanently fixed as the see of the bishopric,

⁶ Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England*, 13-14.

⁷ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 314, 316.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁹ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 21-22.

¹⁰ Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, 32.

¹¹ Colgrave and Mynors, 336; N. E. S. A. Hamilton, ed., *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi: Gesta Pontificum* (London: Longman and Co., 1870,) 216.

an action that helped the development of his cult. Chad also created a small retreat for himself and several companions away from the cathedral. Unlike Wilfrid, who attempted to emphasize the glory and power of the bishopric through ostentatious displays, Chad remained humble and unpretentious even as bishop, in the Irish fashion. On March second of 672, Chad died from the plague, after serving as bishop of Mercia for only three years¹².

Evidence for an early cult is strong. Fifty years after his death, a new church dedicated to Saint Peter was built by bishop Headda at Lichfield, and Chad was translated to a place of honor in the new church¹³. His body was placed in a wooden coffin with holes for pilgrims to collect dust through. This is recorded by Bede no later than 731, so his cult was a center of devotion by that time¹⁴. Chad is also listed in the calendar of St. Willibrord. This document predates Bede's history by ten to twenty years, pushing evidence for his cult back to the beginning of the eighth century¹⁵. The evidence of subsidiary cults also point to an early cult. The legends preserve stories about Chad, as well as people associated with Chad who were venerated at Lichfield with him. The tradition includes both his brother Cedd, and a monk named Owin who worked with Chad at Lastingham, and then at Lichfield. The inclusion of details about an unimportant monk in the legend shows that the cult was based on authentic material, and had developed early enough to benefit from the testimony of eyewitnesses. Also, Owin's claim to sanctity almost certainly stemmed solely from his association with Chad, and the veneration of Owin supports an early development of Chad's cult. The details about Chad's shrine also show that early in the Mercian church there was active promotion of saints and the pilgrimage they encouraged.

The early cult of the next Mercian saint, Egwin, was localized around the small monastery he founded, Evesham. Because of this, contemporary evidence for his cult is very

¹² Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 336-44.

¹³ Warner, *Life and Legends*, 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 344, 346.

limited. He is not mentioned by Bede or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and there is no early life of the saint. Only a few genuine charters attest to Egwin's role as abbot and bishop. Most of the evidence for his cult is at least five centuries later than his death, linked to Evesham's growth and the active promotion of his cult in the eleventh century. But these sources are problematic, because Evesham was a major source of false charters and documents. The tradition of their founder was not exempt from fabrication, either. In an eleventh-century life, Egwin was deposed from his bishopric for political reasons, and went to Rome with King Cenred and King Offa of East Anglia to be vindicated by the pope. Along the way, he put himself in chains and threw the key into the river Avon; In Rome he caught a fish that had the key inside of it. But once the later material and legends are removed, the key events of Egwin's life are still preserved in these legends. Despite the lack of contemporary evidence, it is possible to use the later sources with the early sources to gain some information about his life and cult.

In 692, Bishop Ofor of Worcester died and was succeeded by Egwin, who also founded the monastery at Evesham with the aid of King Ethelred¹⁶. Only four authentic charters exist from Egwin's time as bishop. In two of these, he is a witness to grants to the church of Worcester by King Offa of East Anglia and King Ethelbald of Mercia. Another charter records a land exchange done by Egwin, and the fourth is a transfer between laity which Egwin witnessed. These charters do not tell much about Egwin, but they do prove that he existed and was bishop, and they support the dates associated with his life. Egwin was also associated with Saint Aldhelm of Malmesbury. At his death in 709, Egwin helped transfer his body from Douling to Malmesbury and conducted his funeral¹⁷. In a later life contained in the records of Evesham, Egwin resigned his see in 710, and retired to Evesham as abbot until his death in 717¹⁸. This contains some truth, because he was abbot and bishop, but Egwin witnesses an authentic charter

¹⁵ H. A. Wilson, ed., *The Calendar of Saint Willibrord* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1918).

¹⁶ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 33.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Gesta Pontificum*, 385.

as bishop within a year of his death, so he remained bishop until at least 716. After his death, there is no evidence for a cult until his translation in 1039, which is also when his first life was created by Byrhtferth of Ramsey¹⁹. Saint Egwin was probably venerated only at Evesham until his cult was actively promoted in the eleventh and twelfth century, but it does appear that his cult was continuous and based on fact.

The final founder saint, Erkenwald, was active in London. During his life, London was in the kingdom of the East Saxons, but London and the kingdom of Essex were under Mercian control. In 666, Wine purchased the see of London from King Wulfhere after being driven from the see of Wessex. In 675, Archbishop Theodore made Erkenwald the next bishop²⁰. The sources do not say what happened to Wine, but he was probably removed from his see by Theodore for simony, especially considering the removal of Chad from York for a lesser offense. Nothing is known of Erkenwald's activities as a bishop, but he did have strong influence. In his laws, King Ine of Wessex refers to Erkenwald as "my bishop," and he was instrumental in repairing the relationship between Theodore and Wilfrid²¹. He also founded monasteries at Chertsey and Barking prior to his term as bishop. Chertsey was founded by 672-4, as a grant by Frithuwold, underking of Surrey shows, and Barking was probably founded about the same time, although no specific date is known²². Erkenwald personally controlled Chertsey, and he placed his sister Ethelburg over Barking, which was evidently a double monastery. The ability to found two monasteries shows that Erkenwald was certainly rich, possibly of noble blood. Unfortunately, the lack of records from this period and this area make it impossible to determine more about his origins.

¹⁸ William Dunn Macray, ed., *Chronicon Abbatiae De Evesham* (London: Longman and Co., 1863), 12-14.

¹⁹ I. G. Thomas, "The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England," (Ph. D. diss., University of London, 1974; Michael Lapidge, "Byrhtferth and the Vita S. Ecgwini," *Mediaeval Studies* 41 (1979): 333.

²⁰ Hamilton, *Gesta Pontificum*, 142.

²¹ Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, 399; E. Gordon Whatley, *The Saint of London* (Binghampton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 58, 1989), 57.

²² Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 55-9.

His sister Ethelburg was also considered a saint, although very little is known of her life. The traditional date for her death is 675, but she is the recipient of a land grant which dates between 690 and 693, and is not mentioned in the story of her brother's death, so it appears that she died at Barking between 690 and Erkenwald's death in 693²³. Erkenwald also died at Barking, and as word reached them groups from Chertsey and London quickly arrived there, claiming the body. The nuns of Barking refused to give up Erkenwald's body, so the London party took the body by force²⁴. Although most saints were buried and then translated to a place of honor after miracles occurred, the way in which Erkenwald's body was handled shows that churches were very aware of the potential benefits of relics, and it also shows their willingness to go to extreme measures to gain them. For Barking, the loss was not great; they already had Ethelburg. But for Chertsey, their inability to gain the body must have been a serious problem, and indeed Chertsey did not sponsor a cult at all before the Danish invasions. Once the body was safely in their hands, the canons of London wasted no time developing a cult: the litter which Erkenwald was carried on in his old age was kept, and splinters from it were distributed and resulted in many miracles. This shows deliberate creation of a cult, because they not only brought the cart back to London when stealing the body, but also kept it and used it as a source of secondary relics. The cult developed so quickly that Bede, writing just over thirty years after Erkenwald's death, was able to talk of the miracles caused by splinters from his litter.

The type of men who were chosen as saints show a great deal about the early Mercian church. In its first seventy years, Christianity became established in the kingdom, and it expanded into new areas through monastic foundations. The men who were raised as saints reflected this: they were founders of monasteries and the bishops who helped define the ecclesiastical structure of Mercia. They also show the influence that Irish tradition had in the kingdom. Mercia was converted to Christianity via the Northumbrian church, in which

²³ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 115-6; Whatley, *The Saint of London*, 90.

monasteries were the most important feature, and the bishops and ecclesiastical structure were less important. The earliest Mercian saint, Diuna illustrates this very well. He had no fixed see, and moved throughout the kingdom as necessary. This conflicted strongly with the Roman tradition, in which the focal points of the church were the bishop's sees placed in major cities. After the synod of Whitby, however, the bishoprics became more important under the strong influence of clergy such as bishop Wilfrid and archbishop Theodore. Chad, although trained in Ireland, showed how the Roman form was becoming more important in Mercia. During his episcopate, the bishop's seat was fixed in one of the major cities of the kingdom, Lichfield. Chad still maintained Irish traditions, and was probably an abbot in the monastery at Lichfield or Barrow, in addition to bishop. He also kept things simple: he built a small monastic retreat near the city, and did not build large churches or engage in displays of power as Wilfrid did.

The importance of monasteries never diminished in the Mercian church. Even after the kingdom had been split into five bishoprics after the death of Chad, the bishops of these smaller areas still served as abbots and founded monasteries, as Egwin and Erkenwald did. The Mercian church was a combination of the two traditions, and this remained true throughout the centuries of Mercian strength. The bishops who became saints were just as important for their activities in their monastery, and the legends place more importance on this aspect. As the church grew in power and influence, the royal families of Mercia and its subkingdoms became personally involved in the church. In the first seventy years of Christianity, these families were outsiders, giving grants of land and financial support to the church. But once the faith had spread throughout the kingdom, they began to take an active role. By this time, Christianity was more important and prestigious than any pagan traditions remaining, and religious activity became an acceptable option for people who were not capable of or successful at competing in the political arena. The group who benefited the most from this were women. They were barred from

²⁴ Whatley, *The Saint of London*, 90.

participation in politics, but could gain great power in the ecclesiastical structure as abbesses. The royal men and women who became involved in the church increased its influence and wealth, and it was from this group that the next saints were created.

Chapter V

The Royal Founders

The royalty of Anglo-saxon England were well aware of the political benefits of religion. Through accepting or rejecting Christianity, kings were able to extend their authority over other rulers. Ethelbert strengthened his control over King Redwald of East Anglia when he convinced him to accept the faith, but later Redwald left the church as his power eclipsed Ethelbert's, showing his independence. The foundation of monasteries also brought benefits to royalty. A monastery was usually owned by its founder, and could be passed on as property. The founder and his descendants, as owners of the church, would gain prestige as its protectors. The hereditary nature of monasteries also led to abuses, since a secular family could found a monastery and live there, enjoying royal exemptions from taxation and military service. By owning monasteries throughout the kingdom and endowing them, a royal family could extend its authority over an area religiously as well as politically. Churches also served as repositories for royal records and treasure, and served as administrative units¹. Sponsorship of and involvement in the church allowed royalty to expand their secular and religious authority.

The church also gained from royal involvement. As royalty became personally active in the church, donations and endowments increased. The Anglo-Saxon church relied on royal patronage for its livelihood and ability to grow in new areas. Since the royal family gained from its association with the church, it acted as a protector of the church, protecting its interests from secular encroachments. When members of the royal family became abbots or abbesses, they were given an honored place in the church, and were often elevated as saints. This recognition of

the importance of the royal family could have only increased royal gifts and association with the church. The Anglo-Saxon clergy were as aware of the benefits from political ties as rulers were, and were quick to exploit political relationships.

The first direct involvement by the Mercian royal family in the church occurred in the reign of King Ethelred. In 679, he married Ostrythe, the daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria². Together, they endowed many monasteries, but they paid special attention to the monastery at Bardney. This monastery was located in Lindsey, which was regained by Ethelred in a battle near the river Trent with the Northumbrians in 679³. Enriching the monastery helped strengthen the Mercian claim to Lindsey and diminish any links to Northumbrian patrons. As part of their support of the monastery, Ostrythe decided to translate the bones of her uncle, Saint Oswald, to Bardney. But when the cart with the remains arrived, the monks refused to let them in. According to Bede, this was because Oswald was from another kingdom and had once conquered Lindsey. The following night, a column of light shone over the relics, and they were accepted by the monks because of this miracle.⁴ The fact that the monks were not immediately willing to accept the relics begs further consideration. If the monks at Bardney considered themselves Mercian, accepting the relics of the queen's uncle would not be a problem. If they were closer to the Northumbrians, what better way to show it than possession of the relics of one of the kingdom's greatest kings? Yet, evidently neither of these was true, as the monks' actions suggested. The explanation to these events lies in the history of Lindsey. In 1926, F. M. Stenton used a regnal list to show that Lindsey had an independent king until the eighth century⁵. If this was the case, the monks of Bardney were most loyal to Lindsey, and the relics of a conqueror of Lindsey would be objectionable. These circumstances also explain why Ostrythe would be

¹ Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10 (1985): 1-2.

² Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 27.

³ Idem.

⁴ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede*, 247.

determined to move the relics somewhere they were not wanted. Translating the relics into Lindsey emphasized Mercia's control over Lindsey and its king not just in the present, but as a continuation of the control exercised by Northumbria before.

In this translation, Ostrythe showed a knowledge of the political power of relics rare at that time. According to Bede, she visited Bardney after the translation, so the monks appear to have forgiven her, an action which was probably encouraged by the miracles and popularity of Oswald's relics⁶. In 697, Ostrythe was murdered by the Mercian nobles for unknown reasons, and was buried at Bardney⁷. Seven years later, Ethelred gave the crown to Cenred and became the abbot of Bardney, where he was buried twelve years later. In time, both Ethelred and Ostrythe became the center of cults. This happened before the Viking invasions, since both appear in the first half of the Secgan, but there is no evidence for an immediate cult, since Bede gives several details about their lives but records no miracles.

A contemporary of Ethelred and Ostrythe was Saint Werburga. Her father was Wulfhere, and at his death she and her mother, Eormenhild, entered the monastery of Ely under Eormenhild's aunt, Abbess Etheldritha. Werburga was later recalled to Mercia by her uncle, Ethelred, and was placed over several monasteries, including Hanbury, Threckingham, and Weedon, where she spent most of her time⁸. It has been suggested that Threckingham was in the kingdom of Lindsey, which would date her move back to Mercia after 697, when Mercia regained control of the kingdom. The southern boundary of Lindsey is usually placed farther north than Threckingham, but at the same time, the boundaries are not firmly known, so it is a possibility that Threckingham was part of Lindsey. She later died at Threckingham, and was

⁵ F. M. Stenton, "Lindsey and its Kings," in Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 127-35.

⁶ Colgrave and Mynors, Bede, 246.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 564.

⁸ James Tait, The Chartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester (Manchester: Chetham Society, Vol. 79, 1920.), ix.

translated to Hanbury as she had requested⁹. Traditionally, her cousin King Ceolred translated her from a grave to a shrine nine years after her death, which would place her death prior to 707, since Ceolred died in 716¹⁰. Unfortunately, nearly all the information about Werburga is from her later cult at Chester, whither her body was translated during the Danish invasions. Despite the centuries between her actual life and the earliest written account of it, the cult may have an authentic basis. Her genealogy and relationships with the Mercian and Kentish royal family are all accurate, and no obvious anachronisms exist in that area. It would not be out of place for Wulfhere's wife and daughter to retire to a monastery ruled by a relative upon the king's death. Ethelred was a strong supporter of the church in Mercia, and he and his wife would not have been unaware of the advantages of keeping the monastic houses under the control of the royal family, which placing Werburga over several would help achieve. This would be especially true if Threckingham was located in Lindsey. Placing Werburga in control of this monastery would emphasize Mercian control over Lindsey, just as Oswald's translation did. The basic facts of Werburga's life appear to be true, even though there is virtually no evidence for a cult before her translation to Chester. She was mentioned neither in Bede nor in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the only charter at all related to her is a grant to Abbot Colman of Hanbury by Wulfhere, which proves the existence of a monastery there. Although early evidence is lacking, Werburga's cult seems to be authentic.

The Mercian royal family was not the only family involved in the church. Smaller kingdoms under Mercian control also became active promoters of the church and produced saints. The next two saints considered, Milburg and Frideswide, are of this type. Milburg was from the royal family of the Magonsaetæ, a tribal division in the area that is now south Shropshire and north Herefordshire. In the mid-seventh century, this area was ruled by a king named Merewalh. He was said to be the third son of Penda, which makes it likely that Penda

⁹ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 25.

gave him control over this area of Mercia in the same way that Penda placed his son Peada over the Middle Angles. Merewalh's kingdom was fairly small, but it appears that he ruled with a considerable degree of autonomy, since he is never referred to as an underking or ealdorman. Merewalh was converted around 660 by a Northumbrian priest, Eadfrith, who was probably one of the first missionaries preaching in Mercia. Merewalh founded a church at Leominster, and placed Eadfrith in charge of it. Although he already had two children, Merchelm and Mildfrith by a pagan woman, he remarried the daughter of a Kentish prince, Domneva, who bore him four children: Milburg, Mildrith, Mildgith, and a boy who died very young, Merefin. By 673, Domneva had left him to found Minster-in-Thanel, and Mildrith and Mildburg were sent to France to the monastery at Chelles for training as nuns¹¹.

After Domneva left, Merewalh continued his support of the church, and founded a double monastery at Wenlock around 680. The first abbess was Liobsynde, possibly a nun from Chelles, and she was soon succeeded by Milburg. Most of the activities of Milburg's life are known from her testament, which was first printed by Finberg¹². In this first person document, Milburg details the possessions of her monastery, and how she acquired them. After she returned from Chelles, Milburg gained control of Wenlock by giving land at Bampton to Abbot Edelheg of Icanho and Liobsynde. She also declared that the house would remain under Icanho as a daughter house, since that church had purchased the land at Wenlock from Merewalh. This statement is the strongest proof that the testament is authentic, because no other document mentions the ties between Icanho and Wenlock. The founder of Icanho, Botulf, had spent part of his youth at Chelles, and Abbot Edelheg was his successor. After sending Mildburg to Chelles, it makes sense that Merewalh would have sought experienced clergy from there, and it seems that this is why he linked Wenlock to Icanho. Liobsynde has been identified as a Frankish name, and

¹⁰ Tait, *Chartulary*, xiii; Plummer, *Two Chronicles*, 42.

¹¹ Finberg, *Charters of the West Midlands*, 217-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 197-216.

it is likely that she was trained in Chelles, then placed over the new monastery at Wenlock by abbot Edelheg to prepare it for Mildburg¹³.

While abbess, Milburg received grants from her stepbrothers Merchelm and Mildrith, King Ceolred, King Coenred, and Sigward, a follower of King Ethelbald¹⁴. From these grants, Milburg appears to be an active seeker of benefits for her monastery, who was able to successfully gain benefits for her church over nearly fifty years. Traditionally, Milburg died in 722, but this date is too early because her last charter dates from between 727 and 736. After this, there is no evidence for Milburg or her cult until a charter of 901 in which Wenlock is referred to as St. Milburg's. This shows that the monastery, which was not affected by the tenth century reform, had survived and maintained continuity through the Danish invasions, although now it was under a male head and probably no longer a double monastery.¹⁵ At the end of the eleventh century, the house was reestablished by Cluniac monks, and around this time the monk Goscelin wrote a life of St. Milburg. With the exception of the testament included in it, this work did not give much new information, but an account of a translation written in the beginning of the twelfth century does.

The monks of the new foundation had received, probably from their predecessors, a silver casket which was believed to hold the relics of Milburg. When this was opened, it contained only a rag and some ashes. The monks despaired, but soon a small box was found which contained several English texts. One of these said that Milburg's body was buried near her church's altar, which was long lost. The monks began digging in the old church, and soon found the altar, as well as a body and the iron hinges of its wooden coffin¹⁶. The story of this

¹³ E. D. C. Jackson and Sir Eric Fletcher, "The Pre-Conquest Churches at Much Wenlock," Journal of the British Archaeological Association 28, 3rd ser., 17; A. J. M. Edwards, "An Early Twelfth Century Account of the Translation of St. Milburga of Much Wenlock," Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society 57 (1964): 141.

¹⁴ Finberg, Charters of the West Midlands, 202-3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197-8.

¹⁶ Edwards, "Translation of St. Milburga," 144-6.

discovery appears to be authentic: placing the saint's body at a place of honor near the altar was a common practice. The body was then translated, and became the center of a revitalized cult. Prior to the discovery of her relics, Milburg's cult appears to have been centered around the casket believed to hold her relics. Goscelin's life preserved authentic details, most importantly Milburg's testament, so the church had maintained information about her cult. Unfortunately, there is no contemporary information for her cult between her death and 901, but it is highly probable that she had an early cult that was continuous throughout this period, since a reliquary and texts related to her cult were kept by the monks..

Milburg's family would have benefited greatly from her sanctity. Wenlock and Leominster would have been the primary churches in the kingdom, and the royal family's foundations would have created a strong link between the royalty and the church. When Milburg was recognized as a saint, the prestige of the family would have grown even more, strengthening its control and influence. If Merewalh was the first king of the Magonsæte, the patronage of the church would have helped the new ruling family consolidate its control over the kingdom, since it practically created the church in the kingdom. Making Milburg an abbess and endowing her church allowed the ruling family to expand its authority through the church, and her sanctity only increased their power.

The next saint, Frideswide, is one of the most unknown saints of the Anglo-Saxon period. In the past, she was rightfully regarded as an invention of the church in Oxford because of the late origins and lack of evidence in her medieval life, but a recent study by John Blair makes a strong case for a factual basis for her cult. Traditionally, she founded a double monastery at Oxford, where she died in 727. At the time of her death, Oxford and the surrounding area were under Mercian control¹⁷. Unfortunately, only two references to her prior to the Norman Conquest exist. The first is in the second half of the Secgan, which deals

¹⁷ Stenton, "St. Frideswide and her Times," in Preparatory, 229.

primarily with saints associated with the tenth century monastic reform and the period of Wessex domination¹⁸. The second is a charter of 1004 in which King Ethelred confirms the lands and privileges of Saint Frideswide's church after it was burned to kill Danes hiding in it¹⁹. From these, we know that the cult of Frideswide existed by 1000 and was possibly older, but the evidence does not verify her existence, only the presence of a later cult.

In 1987, John Blair wrote an essay that examined three lives of Frideswide, one in William of Malmesbury's Gesta Pontificum, and two from St. Frideswide's church. All three of these lives date from the twelfth century, and Blair used textual criticism to show that they were based on an earlier exemplar, now lost²⁰. The traditional view was that William of Malmesbury wrote the first life, and that the other lives, which contain more details, were mere embellishments of his account²¹. Blair showed that the lives were contemporary with William of Malmesbury's account, making them equally valuable as sources. From a comparison of the legends, Blair isolated the details about Frideswide which are probably true. Her father Dida was an underking of a small tribal unit centered around Eynsham and Oxford. He probably created several minster churches, and his daughter was the first abbess at Oxford, where she died. Similar to Milburg, Frideswide's role in the church would have strengthened her father's position by linking their family to the church. Assuming that the legends preserve authentic details, an assumption supported by Blair's research, Frideswide bears a marked resemblance to Milburg, and both of these women show the royal families of subkingdoms using the church for their benefit.

The final royal founder is Guthlac. His parents, Penwalh and Tette, were Mercian nobles of the Guthlacingas tribe who were able to trace their lineage back to the royal family. Guthlac was born in 674, and his boyhood was a perfect childhood full of promise. At adolescence

¹⁸ Rollason, "Saints' Resting-Places," 68; Liebermann, Die Heiligen Englands, 19.

¹⁹ Stenton, "St. Frideswide and her Times," 226-7.

²⁰ John Blair, "Saint Frideswide Reconsidered," Oxoniensia 52 (1987), 72-93.

Guthlac, inspired by past heroes, gathered together a band of warriors and soon became a very successful leader. His time was probably spent in combat with the Welsh, because he was said to have spent time in exile with the Britons, perhaps as a hostage, and had learned their language²². Two grants by King Ethelred to the church of Worcester that date between 691 and 699 support this, because they are signed by a man named Guthlac, although the identification is not positive²³. After nine years of warfare, Guthlac renounced his way of life, and became a monk at Repton under Abbess Elfhryth. He trained for two years there, then inspired by the stories of the desert hermits, went into the fens to find a suitable site for hermitage. After spending time becoming acquainted with the fens, a man called Tatwine led Guthlac to Crowland, where he fashioned a looted burial mound into his hermitage. He soon returned to Repton, and stayed there for ninety days, then went back to Crowland with two boys²⁴. Despite his status as a hermit, Guthlac did not live alone. Living with him were the two unnamed boys and a few monks, of which Cissa and Bettelin are named. He also received frequent visits from nobility and other clergy. His life tells of visits by Ethelbald while he was an exile from Mercia, Bishop Headda of Lichfield, a monk named Wilfrid, an abbot, and the retinue associated with each of these men²⁵. On one of his visits, Bishop Headda consecrated Crowland and made Guthlac a priest²⁶. Like many saints, Guthlac was known for healing during his lifetime, and the cures of a noble boy and two retainers of Ethelbald are recorded in his life, along with his ability to predict future events²⁷.

After fifteen years as a hermit, Guthlac fell ill and died in only seven days. His final request was for his sister Pega, who appears to have been a nun, to wrap him in a linen cloth

²¹ Stenton, "St. Frideswide and her Times," 225-6.

²² Bertram Colgrave, ed., *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 2, 72-80, 110.

²³ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 109-11.

²⁴ Colgrave, *Life of Guthlac*, 80-94.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 90, 110, 116, 124, 142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

given to him by an East Anglian abbess and bury him at Crowland. She did this as he wished, and several posthumous miracles soon occurred. Almost immediately, a cult developed around Guthlac, and he was found to be incorrupt when translated by Pega twelve months after his death. After the translation, his shrine was enriched by King Ethelbald, perhaps in return for the advice and support Guthlac had given him while he was in exile²⁸. Guthlac was succeeded at the hermitage by Cissa, and Pega appears to have stayed and helped maintain the shrine, although in later traditions she went to Rome and died there. Between 730 and 740 Felix, an East Anglian monk, wrote a life of Saint Guthlac for the East Anglian King Alfwold. This life is the source of virtually all the information about Guthlac. Although Crowland was under Mercian control, the cult transcended borders and was popular outside Mercia. Interestingly, at no point in the life is there evidence for Crowland being the site of a monastery, and it is impressive that a hermitage was able to sponsor such an important cult. After 740, there is nearly no evidence for the cult until after the Danish invasions when Crowland was refounded. Guthlac does appear in the first half of the *Secgan*, and he and Pega are listed in the *Old English Martyrology*, which was based on a Latin exemplar written in Mercia during the eighth century²⁹. Unfortunately, these are the only evidence of a cult before the Danish invasions.

Later writers created a foundation legend for the monastery with little factual basis other than details from Felix's life, and they expanded Guthlac's cult to include Pega, Cissa, and Bettelin as saints. Although there is no information for a cult from roughly 750 until these later works, Felix's life shows that Guthlac was the center of a very important cult that developed immediately after his death. His cult was a boon for Crowland, which began to receive pilgrims and was richly endowed by Ethelbald. Ethelbald's association with Guthlac would have increased his reputation, since Felix's life places Ethelbald in a very good light and links him to

²⁷ Ibid., 126-32, 138-40, 148.

²⁸ Ibid., 154-62.

Guthlac. According to Felix, Guthlac predicted Ethelbald's eventual rule after Ceolred's death, and as the life grew in popularity, it would have increased Ethelbald's legitimacy as king. It is possible that by endowing the church, Ethelbald was encouraging the dissemination of Felix's life of Guthlac, as well as strengthening his bonds to the hermit.

As the royal families became involved in the Mercian church and became saints, they formed a broad group that varied greatly from the initial Mercian saints. The earliest saints were people who were completely devoted to the church, and they were concerned mostly with its growth and development. More importantly, they gained their reputation for holiness solely through their good actions. The royal founders had a different emphasis. They were interested in the development of the church, but were also willing to use it to their political advantage. Ostrythe and Ethelred are perhaps the best example of this. They endowed Bardney, translated Oswald there, and then were buried at the monastery, primarily as a way of consolidating Mercian control over Lindsey. There is no doubt that they were also concerned with the religious aspects of their actions, but their choice of this monastery for their attention was certainly politically motivated. Werburga, although not personally acting on political reasons, was used by Ethelred in the same way that his wife used Oswald. She was removed from the monastery in Ely and brought back to Mercia, then placed over several monasteries in the heart of Mercia. The major benefit from this was that these monasteries were placed under the direct control of the royal family through Werburga. Also, the prestige of her cult would enhance the reputation of her royal relatives.

The underkings of Mercia were also aware of the benefits of monastic sponsorship. Milburg was placed over a monastery owned and endowed by the royal family. The monastery gained from their patronage, and the family gained from its close ties to the church and the sanctity of its members. Frideswide's cult also appears to have been used in this manner,

²⁹ Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes, *England Before the Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

although the evidence for it is very limited. Unlike the Mercian royal family, these lesser kings were not as able to use the monasteries for political purposes. Their efforts focused on a few monasteries, and did not have the political repercussions that royal actions did.

Finally, Guthlac represents the expansion of the noble families into the church. At the royal level, families created monasteries and placed relatives in control of them, but at the noble level, the church is seen as an option to the noble life. Guthlac's life shows how the ideal of a warrior could be adapted to the church, creating a warrior of the faith who fought the ultimate foe for the highest prize, eternal life. His sister also shows the difference money and power had: instead of being the abbess of a monastery founded by her family, she was only a nun at an unspecified church. For nobles, the church was an alternative to their station in life, not a way of expanding their power and influence. This was partly because of the large cost of creating a monastery or making a large endowment, a cost few families could afford.

The church also benefited from royal involvement. The most obvious result was the increased wealth of the church resulting from patronage. Churches competed with each other for influence, and donations and sponsorship were a major factor in this competition. A monastery whose abbess was from the royal family was very likely to attract a large amount of grants, as the testament of Milburg shows. Also, when the monastery needed more land or privileges, a royal saint linked to the church created a precedent for gifts and a personal connection to the royal family. As the church grew, the saints were used by the clergy and the royalty as a way of achieving their goals in both the political and economic realms. With the death of Offa in 796, the kingdom's fortunes began declining. To deal with this and the subsequent decline in patronage, the church again changed the cult of saints.

Chapter VI

The Royal Saints

The reigns of Ethelbald and Offa were the longest in Mercian history. Together, they formed an eighty year period of peace in which Mercia was able to expand its control over all southern England. The church benefited from these stable conditions. The charters list more donations to the church than at any previous time, and the saints from this period reflect an increased involvement in the church by the nobility. The death of Offa began the decline of Mercia. His successor Cenwulf was able to maintain the kingdom for a short period, but after his death the throne never again passed to a strong king. The church was affected greatly by the decline of the kingdom. Grants became fewer over time, and the church was clearly receiving less royal support. To make up for declining revenues, the church began developing other sources of income, as the saints of this period show.

With royal involvement in the church decreasing, the available candidates for sanctity dropped. There were no longer royal founders serving as abbots and abbesses, who could be the source of a profitable cult after their deaths. To increase revenue, individual churches began looking for new people who could be made into profitable saints. Although royalty who had lived a holy life were no longer an option, there were several royal men who had died a violent death, and churches soon created cults around these "martyrs." There was a precedent for this in kings such as Oswald, who had died in battle with pagans. What made these saints different, however, was their deaths. They were not holy men who died at their church, nor were they martyrs for the faith. The only claim to sanctity these new saints possessed was their royal birth.

The first of these saints is King Ethelbert of East Anglia. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that in 792 Offa had Ethelbert beheaded¹. This entry occurs during a period in which the Chronicle recorded dates two years early, so the murder actually occurred in 794. Unfortunately, no other contemporary sources mention the event, and this short entry is the only positive proof of his death. The next references occur in the Hyde Registry, which was written at the beginning of the eleventh century, and in the first half of the Secgan². Both of these support an early date for Ethelbert's cult, but no precise dating is possible. The earliest lives of Ethelbert appear several centuries later, but may preserve accurate information. According to the legends, Ethelbert became king of East Anglia near the end of Offa's reign. Like Charlemagne's son, he sought a daughter of Offa for marriage. While the Mercian royal family was at Sutton Walls, a town near Hereford, Ethelbert went there to court Offa's daughter Alfrida. He was killed there by the order of Offa, whose wife convinced him that the murder would give Offa control over East Anglia. After his murder, Alfrida became a hermit at Crowland and remained there until her death³.

The basic premise of the story is reasonable. Offa's daughters were very desirable to suitors, and the king of East Anglia would certainly be interested in marrying one of them. But the lack of information about a historical Alfrida severely undermines the credibility of the story. What is more reasonable is that for whatever reason, Ethelbert was at Sutton Walls and Offa ordered him to be killed. The murder was likely purely political: East Anglia was under Mercian control at this time, and Offa could have used the killing to place a more favorable man on the throne of East Anglia. The later lives support this, claiming that Offa was encouraged to order the slaying so that he could gain direct control over East Anglia. This would not be

¹ Plummer, Two Chronicles, 54.

² E. Sidney Hartland, "The Legend of St. Kenelm," Transactions of the British and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society 39 (1916): 53; Liebermann, 11.

³ M. R. James "Two Lives of St. Ethelbert, King and Martyr," English Historical Review 32 (1917): 220; Forester, 2:323.

unreasonable: to support King Beorhtric of Wessex, Offa married a daughter to him and drove his rival from the kingdom⁴. The site of Ethelbert's death also supports this, since the body would not be able to be developed as a center of opposition to Mercian control of East Anglia.

According to the life, Ethelbert was killed and hastily buried at nearby Marden. The body was miraculously revealed and translated to Hereford three days later, where a cult immediately developed. The problem with this is the speed with which the cult is said to have developed. Ethelbert would have been a logical choice for a cult in East Anglia, where he was well known, but Hereford would have to promote his cult for it to become a source of pilgrimage. Also, Offa was a shrewd man who was well aware of the meaning of religion, as his creation of the archbishopric of Lichfield showed. He would not have allowed a cult to develop around a man he had killed, and would probably suppress such a cult. What is likely is that Ethelbert was murdered, hastily buried, and then translated to Hereford and buried with the honor due to a king. Then, after Offa's death the church began promoting the cult for financial reasons. What sets Ethelbert apart from the earlier saints is that he did not fit into the traditional model of sanctity: he was not a martyr for the faith and had not lived a holy life worthy of veneration. Rather, Ethelbert's cult appears to have developed for the economic benefits it would bring, which would have been a great boon to Hereford as royal patronage diminished.

The next royal saint, Alcmund, is also not of Mercian stock. Alcmund's father was King of Northumbria from 765 to 774, when he was deposed by the Mercian nobles. He had two sons, Osred and Alcmund. Osred ruled as king for one year, but Alcmund appears to have never held the throne. In 796, Eardwulf became king of Northumbria. Alcmund was at this time in exile in Mercia, but Eardwulf had his tutor capture him, and then he was killed⁵. The reason behind the murder is clear: Alcmund was a potential claimant to the throne, and killing him strengthened

⁴ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 209-10.

⁵ C. A. R. Radford, "The Church of Saint Alcmund, Derby," *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* 96 (1976): 55; Arnold, *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, 2: 63.

Eardwulf's position. Eardwulf's ability to send agents into Mercia at this time is no surprise. The following year he invaded Mercia and fought with King Cenwulf⁶. A second version of the legend is that Alcmund died in the battle between the Ealdorman Ethelmund of Mercia and the Ealdorman Weohstan of Wiltshire in 800. This story appears in his later lives and the Polychronicon, but appears to be a combination of two entries for the year 800⁷. In Florence of Worcester's chronicle, the battle between the ealdormen and Alcmund's death are two separate events listed in the same year⁸.

Unfortunately, most of the sources for Alcmund are late and do not show how quickly his cult developed. The only reference to an early cult is a listing in the first half of the Secgan, indicating a cult prior to the Danish invasions, especially since his resting place is listed by the pre-invasion name of *Norðwordig* instead of Derby⁹. Luckily, archaeology has provided a great deal of information about the church where Alcmund was venerated. In 1967 the 19th century church was demolished to make way for a road, and the site was excavated in advance of construction. At the lowest level, a church was found that was probably started earlier than 800. Near the altar of this church was a stone sarcophagus which was almost certainly the repository for Alcmund's relics. Near it was another burial, obviously an honored person to be placed so near the saint. The sarcophagus had been sunk into the floor in the twelfth century when Alcmund's relics were placed behind the altar. Even then, the sarcophagus must have had value, since the lid was kept level with the floor to be viewed¹⁰. The church obviously did well during the ninth century, being able to erect large carved stone crosses¹¹. The ability to commission this kind of work shows that the church remained prosperous during difficult times for the kingdom

⁶ Riley, Roger de Hovedon, 18.

⁷ P. Grosjean, "Codicis Gothani Appendix," Analecta Bollandiana 58 (1940): 180-1; J. R. Lumby, ed., Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden (London: Longman and Co., 1876), 6:290.

⁸ Forester, Florence of Worcester, 48.

⁹ Liebermann, Die Heiligen Englands 11.

¹⁰ Radford, "The Church of Saint Alcmund," 34-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

of Mercia. Pilgrimage almost certainly contributed to this prosperity, and the archaeological evidence shows that Alcmund's body was kept in a manner that encouraged devotion. Also, the shrine may have had political ramifications. The veneration of Alcmund would have helped develop opposition to Eardwulf, an important factor since he was strong enough to invade Mercia. Like Ethelbert, Alcmund was a political martyr, but again this is not sufficient grounds for sanctity. Rather, the church at Derby promoted his cult by placing his relics in an ornate sarcophagus designed to be venerated and encouraged pilgrimage.

The next saint is almost unknown. Kenelm was the son of King Cenwulf of Mercia. Kenelm signed several charters between 803 and 811, but disappears after that¹². It is likely that he died near 812, possibly in battle with the Welsh¹³. He was then buried in the abbey of Winchcombe, as was his father in 821. Winchcombe Abbey was founded in 787 by King Offa, and then monks were added by Cenwulf in 798¹⁴. It also served as a royal mausoleum, and housed some Mercian archives¹⁵. Other than these details, nothing is known of Kenelm's life. All the legends around him are from the tenth century or later, and they usually claim that Kenelm became king as a boy after his father's death and ruled for one year before his sister murdered him to gain power. S. R. Bassett has suggested that since the mausoleum at Winchcombe was originally dedicated to the boy saint Pancras, making Kenelm a boy at the time of the murder represents nothing more than a medieval confusion of the physical evidence¹⁶. Other than the lack of evidence, this account is also obviously false because his sister Quenthryth was the abbess of Suthminster and possibly also Winchcombe. It is rather unlikely that in this time of limited political opportunity for women that she murdered her brother to gain political

¹² Hartland, "The Legend of St. Kenelm," 16; Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 443-4, 474-5.

¹³ Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent*, 250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁵ Della Hooke *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 76-7.

¹⁶ S. R. Bassett, "A Probable Royal Mausoleum at Winchcombe, Gloucestershire," *The Antiquaries Journal* 65 (1985): 93.

power¹⁷. The evidence for an early cult is also lacking. The earliest references are in the last half of the Secgan and in calendars after 975¹⁸. Most likely, Kenelm died, possibly in battle, then was buried in the abbey. His cult probably did not develop quickly, and if it did, it was limited geographically and only expanded throughout England in the tenth century after the details of his death had been lost.

The final royal saint, Wistan, died nearly fifty years after Kenelm. Wistan's grandfather, Wiglaf, reigned as king of Mercia between 827 and 840. He was not of the traditional Mercian dynasty. After his death, the throne passed to a man from another family, Beorhtwulf, who was possibly a descendant of Beornwulf. It is between the reign of Wiglaf and Beorhtwulf that the legend of Wistan's martyrdom fits. Wistan's life is relatively well known through later sources. The earliest source is a life of Wistan that exists in only one manuscript, which appears to be based on a ninth century exemplar¹⁹. After the Danish invasions the cult of Saint Wistan died out, until it was revived when his relics were translated to Evesham in the early eleventh century. The manuscript makes no mention of the translation, indicating that the origin of the life is prior to the Danish invasions. This life identifies Wistan as the grandson of King Wiglaf and his wife Kyneswith. His parents were Wigmund and Ælfflæd, daughter of King Ceolwulf. After the death of Wiglaf, Wigmund succeeded to the throne of the Mercians. When he died the people of the kingdom demanded that Wistan become king, but he refused the crown to devote himself to the church. Hearing this, his relative Beorhtric, son of King Beorhtwulf, sent three messengers to Ælfflæd to suggest a marriage. With Wistan not seeking the throne, the marriage would be highly desirable: Ælfflæd was the last living woman descended from the Mercian royal house, and Beorhtric would have gained legitimacy by marrying into the family in the same way that

¹⁷ Levison, England and the Continent, 257.

¹⁸ Liebermann, Die Heiligen Englands, 19; Levison, England and the Continent, 249.

¹⁹ Early English Text Society, Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253 vol. 255 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), fol. 140 v.

Wigmund had. Wistan convinced her to refuse the offer, and when Beorhtric heard this he murdered Wistan in 850²⁰.

According to the chronicles, Wiglaf died in 840 and was immediately succeeded by Beorhtwulf²¹. But, the charters tell a slightly different story: Wiglaf's last charter was in 836, and four years passed before Beorhtwulf's first charter²². If Wigmund's reign was very brief, the chroniclers might have overlooked it and assumed that Wiglaf reigned until 840. At the death of Wigmund, Beorhtwulf gained the throne. If Wistan was not old enough to rule or had truly devoted himself to the church, the succession is not unusual. Beorhtwulf was a relative of Wigstan's, and the throne often did not follow hereditary right. Indeed, if Wistan was not murdered until 850, then Beorhtric could have sought Ælfflæd for nearly a decade before killing Wistan to remove his influence. After the murder, Wistan's body was carried to the crypt at Repton where his grandfather Wiglaf had been buried. According to the life a cult soon developed, a statement which is supported by Wistan's appearance in the first half of the *Secgan*²³. But the strongest evidence for Wistan's cult comes from archaeology.

Studies of the crypt at Repton have revealed a great deal about its history. It was possibly built as early as the mid-eighth century, and around 830 a church was built over it. It was finished by the death of Wiglaf in or around 840, when it was used as his tomb. No changes appear to have taken place until after 849. To gain easier access to the crypt, two passageways were cut with great effort into the crypt from the church above. These modifications were completed before the Danes wintered in Repton in 873-4, because that event ended monastic life at Repton and the crypt was incorporated into earthworks by the Danes²⁴. The history of the

²⁰ Idem.

²¹ Forester, *Florence of Worcester*, 52.

²² Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* 1:581-3, 2:4-5.

²³ Liebermann, *Die Heiligen Englands*, 11.

²⁴ Martin Biddle, "Archaeology, Architecture, and the Cult of Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxon Church*, eds. L. A. S. Butler and R. K. Morris (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1986), Report 60, 15-18; H. M. Taylor, *The Anglo-Saxon Crypt and Church: Repton Studies* 2 1979, 2.

crypt shows that it was a site of pilgrimage within twenty years of Wistan's death. The church went to a great deal of effort to make sure that the relics of Wistan were accessible, an action that could only be associated with active promotion of the cult. Recent excavations have found a large number of high status graves near the crypt, which also indicates the popularity of the cult²⁵.

The church at Repton certainly prospered from the success of the cult, but there was another reason for the promotion of Wistan's cult. Through promotion, Wistan's murder became better known, and Beorhtric's reputation suffered accordingly. Even if he had been able to marry Ælfflæd, Beorhtric would have had a difficult time gaining the throne after the cult developed. Indeed, when Beorhtwulf died in 852 he was not succeeded by Beorhtric. It appears that Wistan was made a saint not only because of the benefits he could bring to Repton, but also because of the political advantage it gave his family.

The royal saints vary greatly from the earlier saints. The most distinguishing characteristic is that these men were not associated with the creation of the church, did not die for faith, and did not renounce secular life for the holy. Indeed, the only claim these men have to sanctity is that they were royal. But even this is not enough: many kings and princes had been killed throughout Mercian history without becoming saints. What made this group different was the promotion of their cults. After they died, the churches with their relics developed cults around them to reap the financial benefits associated with pilgrimage and veneration. This is strongly supported by the decreasing royal patronage at the time, which limited ecclesiastical income. By focusing on the cults, the churches were able to develop pilgrimage and compete for royal patronage. Financial concerns were not the only reason for these cults. They were also used for political purposes, as in Wistan, who clearly represented a center of opposition to his family's political opponents.

²⁵ D. W. Rollason, "The Cults of Murdered Royal Saints in Anglo-Saxon England," Anglo-Saxon England

Another possible explanation of the popularity of these royal saints is a letter by the papal legates who visited England during the reign of Offa. While in England, the legates placed before the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and church several decrees which they accepted. The twelfth of these included a strong condemnation of the murder of kings²⁶. It is possible that the development of the royal cults arose at least partly as an extension of this synod's decrees. If so, the cults were used as an example to help prevent regicide, an action which was apparently less than successful. The church may have also created the cults for financial gain, while maintaining the pretext that they were a result of the decree. After Wistan, no more saints were created in the kingdom of Mercia, and within twenty years of his death the kingdom of Mercia had fallen under the control of the Danes and ceased to exist as an independent kingdom.

11 (1983), 6.

²⁶ Whitelock, English Historical Documents, 837-8.

Chapter VII

The Mercian Church and its Saints

Prior to Peada's conversion, Christianity had not existed in Mercia since Roman times. Because of this, there was no established structure for the church to build upon. When missionaries came from Northumbria, they brought with them Irish traditions which emphasized the role of monasteries and mobile preachers. The earliest missionaries, like Diuma, moved from place to place preaching. There is little evidence of the establishment of monasteries at this time, although there were probably small churches and monasteries throughout the kingdom. Diuma's death supports this, since he was buried at an otherwise unknown church at Charlbury, and he never seems to have had a strong cult. From this limited structure, the Mercian church developed its basic form within twenty years.

Under Bishop Chad, Lichfield became the seat of the Mercian bishops. This change reflected the growing influence of the Roman tradition, which emphasized the role of bishops. soon after Chad's death, Mercia was split between five bishops, an acknowledgment of the size of the kingdom, and the needs of the church. Each of these five bishops presided over a subdivision of the kingdom. For instance, the Episcopal seat of the Hwicce was at Worcester, and the see of the Magonsætæ was at Hereford. But despite the influence of bishops, monasteries were the most important feature in the Mercian church. The Anglo-Saxons used the term minster for the institutions that spread the faith to the common people. In later times this function was filled by the parish churches, but in Mercia a network of monasteries met local needs. These monasteries, or minsters, retained their importance because of their function, and

this was why the Mercian bishops never gained the importance that they had for the church in Italy and Gaul, where Roman traditions were dominant.

As the monasteries spread, they created cults centered around their founders. These people were often good men, and made logical candidates for sainthood. Peter Kraemer's work on eleventh century Germany found similar results. The German abbots which helped institute reforms became saints after their deaths. These new saints acted as a means of cementing the reforms, since it would be more difficult to overturn reforms created by a popular saint. In the same way, the founder saints granted monasteries legitimacy, and increased their prestige. Kraemer, however, focuses on the royal aspect of cult development. His research found that the primary force behind the creation of the German cults was royalty, who expected to benefit from the reforms. The earliest Mercian saints appear to have been primarily sponsored by the church, not the crown. Royal support certainly helped these cults to grow, but the primary impetus appears to have been from the growing church itself. The Mercian royalty did not become heavily active until the church was established in the kingdom..

Monasteries had an early beginning in Mercia. The earliest recorded foundations are in the reign of Wulfhere in the center of the kingdom, and they soon spread to the edges of the kingdom, often under the patronage of subkings. As the church became more prestigious and powerful, personal involvement by royal families became more common. Instead of just providing land for monasteries, the families also provided abbots and abbesses to rule their foundations. When these founders died, their churches frequently created a cult around them, which benefited the saint's secular family as well as their religious family. The advantages from personal involvement in the church varied between classes. The Mercian royalty was able to use the church as an extension of its political goals, as Ethelred and Ostrythe did at Bardney. A lesser king could create a monastery and use it to enhance the family's prestige by placing a relative in control of the church, as was done with Milburg and Frideswide. If the royal abbot or

abbess became a saint, this also increased the reputation of their family. For nobles, the church provided an alternative to their roles in secular life, as Guthlac and Pega show. The church also gained from the creation of cults. A royal saint gave its church a close tie to the royal family, making future grants more likely. Pilgrimage to the shrines of saints was also a major source of income. The saints were an advantage to their family as well as their church.

In the third quarter of the eighth century, Christianity had finally spread throughout all of Mercia. The reign of Ethelbald was filled with grants for the founding of monasteries, but his successor Offa created few churches, instead giving to existing monasteries. The reigns of Ethelbald and Offa were a peaceful time, and the church enjoyed great prosperity. After the death of Offa the kingdom began to decline, and grants to the church became rarer. The church found other ways to maintain revenues, and the cult of saints was definitely part of this. The church began creating saints of royal men who had died a death of "martyrdom." These men were rarely holy, and the only thing that distinguished them from normal people was their royal status and way of death. The evidence is limited, but for Alcmund and Wistan it is clear that cults developed around them very soon after their deaths, and that their cults were pilgrimage sites. The cults may also have benefited the royal families, as Wistan certainly may have done for his family, but the most striking feature of these cults is their dubious claim to sanctity.

These cults are unusual. Ridyard's study of Anglo-Saxon found that royal saints were not considered holy at birth, but rather earned their sanctity through their actions. Royalty became holy either by renouncing their worldly status and entering the church, or by becoming a martyr for the faith. This does not seem to be true for the late Mercian royal saints. These saints were not active in the church, so according to Ridyard's model, they would need to be saints because of their martyrdom. But this is not the case, either. We know that most of these saints were murdered, but their deaths were not for the faith. Other Anglo-Saxon royal saints, such as Saint Oswald or Saint Edmund, were killed in battle with pagan opponents, so it is at least

arguable that their deaths were for the church. This became even easier to support as hagiographers began writing legends which emphasized their deaths for the faith. But the late Mercian saints do not fit this ideal. Their murders appear to be solely political, which means that the church did not have martyrs who deserved to be saints. Rather, the church justified these cults by embellishing the saints' lives, and created saints to meet its needs.

Mercia existed as an independent Christian kingdom for over two centuries. During this time, the Mercian church used the cult of saints to respond to changes in royal patronage. Soon after the church was established, it made saints of its founders. Then, as royalty became personally involved in the church, the cult of saints was altered to accommodate royal needs and goals. Finally, patronage declined, and the church used pilgrimage based on new saints to make up for decreasing revenue from grants. The Mercian saints shows how the church adapted to the activities of royalty. Other studies have examined saints geographically or temporally, but have not examined a specific area of Anglo-Saxon England to see how sanctity changed over time. The exception to this is Rollason's Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England. His work focused on all Anglo-Saxon England, considering all the kingdoms and their saints. He found a similar progression from church sponsored founder cults to royal support of cults. His work also saw an increase in the incidence of royal saints throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. It is interesting that the Mercian church contains all these stages, which occurred over a longer period of time elsewhere. The Mercian church did not create saints using a static image of sanctity, but rather developed cults to meet its needs. The flexibility of the cult of saints made it a powerful tool for responding to external conditions, and in Mercia it was used to adapt to variations in royal patronage.

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Vita

William Frazier

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: SAINTS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN THE KINGDOM OF MERCIA, 650-850

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Education: Graduated from Perry High School, Perry, Oklahoma in May, 1991; received Bachelor of Science degree in Animal Science from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 1995. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree with a major in History at Oklahoma State University in December, 1998.

Experience: Employed on the family farm from 1982 to 1997; Employed by Oklahoma State University, Department of History as a Teaching Assistant in Fall 1997 and Spring 1998; Currently employed at Creative Labs, providing technical support.