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Treaties, Frontiers and Borderlands: The Making and Unmaking of Mercian Border Traditions

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Offa's Dyke Journal



A Journal for Linear Monuments,
Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 5

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
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Treaties, Frontiers and Borderlands: The Making and Unmaking of Mercian Border Traditions

Morn Capper

This article explores the complexity and nuance of borderlands and border relations focusing on Mercia. Identifying a host of border maintenance strategies negotiating control over people, places and resources, mitigation of risk and maximisation of opportunity, but also strategic escalation and de-escalation of tensions, the study re-evaluates how Mercian border traditions supported expanded hegemony between the seventh and ninth centuries. The significant departures of the approach presented here are (i) rethinking the traditional focus on military, religious and ethnic identities to integrate these among other activities and experiences defining early medieval frontiers and borderlands and (ii) considering the reimagining not only Mercia's frontiers and borderlands during its emergence and heyday as a kingdom but also reflecting on how Mercian territory itself became a borderland under the rule of Aethelred and Aethelflaed during the Viking Age, and as such how it was formative in the creation of the Danelaw and of England. The Alfred/Guthrum Treaty and Ordinance of the Dunsæte are here contextualised against other strategies and scales of negotiation and activity framing Mercian/Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Danish borderlands. Different 'Mercian borderlands' are compared in this study and analysed as complex zones of interaction, responsive to geographical factors, but also criss-crossed by multi-stranded pathways of daily life. Mercian borderlands were understood and maintained militarily, physically, spiritually, and ideologically. The article considers how these zones were shaped by convenience but also need and were reinforced or permeable at locality, community and kingdom levels.

Keywords: Aethelflaed, Alfred/Guthrum Treaty, Anglo-Welsh borderland, charters, Danelaw frontier, Mercia, trade, Vikings

Introduction: Imagining frontiers, borders and borderlands

The interdisciplinary analysis of frontiers, borders and borderlands has great potential to examine the complexities and nuances of relations between early medieval kingdoms, societies and communities. However, the historiography of each of these overlapping terms carries significant tensions which must be recognised here.

Analyses of Mercian borders and borderlands emerged from a wider and older scholarship on 'frontiers'. Historically influential, Turner's (1921: 3) frontier was a limiting yet 'elastic' term, located in the 'peculiarity' of American expansionism and the ideals of frontier society. This approach had value in analysing 'Christendom's self-definition', particularly where 'frontier' perspectives deeply permeated societies bordering non-Christians, as in Iberia and Eastern Francia (Berend 1999: 71). Elsewhere, however, this approach failed to consider narrower, more incidental and more localised forms of borderland. Berend (1999: 68) therefore makes a differentiation: 'frontiers [operated] in the sense of border-lines delimit administrative units; [whereas] frontiers in the sense of

borderlands are places where interaction between societies (the form of which varies) takes place'. Difficulties with the meaning of 'frontier' for both a linear administrative feature in British English popular usage, and an American English use to refer to 'land of opportunity', saw a widespread retreat from that terminology in academic work during the twentieth century (Power 1999). By way of contrast, the term 'march' (from OE *mearc*), although appropriate, and familiar in Carolingian contexts, for early medieval Britain carries added anachronism in conjuring post-Norman Conquest associations, military organisation and territorial structures (Lieberman 2010; Brady 2017: 8). This terminological confusion renders the terms 'borders' and 'borderlands' preferred in this research, with frontier only cautiously used where the politics framing borders, borderlands and border agreements were themselves being re-imagined.

In the context of academic work on medieval Europe, frontiers between ethnic identities have received particular analysis following the breakup of eastern Europe in the 1990s (Geary 2002). For early medieval Britain, the continued use of 'frontier' terminology for the Viking Danelaw and *Alfred/Guthrum Treaty* (Davis 1982; Kershaw 2000; Griffiths 2001) has perhaps encouraged scholars seeking Viking perspectives to emphasise macro, ethnic and religious differences, whether interior or exterior; only gradually moving to explore the diverse agency of rulers or mixed local populations in formulating engagement across borders.¹ Despite cultural, ideological and linguistic differences, such borderlands still emphasise connectivity, affirming that communication across medieval borders could not truly be severed.

The emphasis on militarised frontiers was once pervasive. Studies focusing on the more archaeologically visible fortifications along Roman frontiers, including Hadrian's Wall, until quite recently perhaps stunted more nuanced analyses of those longer-lived borderlands (Petts 2013: 324; Hingley 2018). Imperial considerations also shaped conceptions of early medieval borders and borderlands. For instance, Curzon (1907: 13) differentiated 'natural' from 'artificial' borders, by which he categorised not only Hadrian's Wall, but also Offa's Dyke and the Watling Street line of Alfred and Guthrum, however his easy parallels between 'Mercia' or 'the Marches' and the neutralised frontiers of expansionist British and Roman Empires which 'have to be settled, demarcated and maintained' (p.9) also implied increasingly uncomfortable colonial legacies (Berend 1999, 67; Gardner 2017). Although warfare has long been rightly critiqued as only one among a rich tapestry of 'devices' enabling human interactions (Berend 1999: 61), for Mercians and other militarised societies warfare remained a vital strategy of governance and border maintenance, integrated with others in negotiating social and religious ideologies, acquisition of land and resources, kingship and kingdom formation, between rulers and ruled (Capper 2008 and forthcoming a). This article explores the diversity of Mercian borders and the interactions and authorities that framed them. Early medieval Britain and Ireland held many opportunities for exchanges of culture and ideas, but relations between the polities that met at borders were constrained by lordly imperatives, complex ethnic and religious ideologies and competing cultural traditions,

¹ The term: 'Viking' appears here in its broadest multi-ethnic sense to denote activities.

motivating and affirming their social cohesion. Diverse and regionalised, seventh-century polities were increasingly territorial and resource-centric, producing economic surplus that was exchanged at borders. Sites and landscapes core to local formulations of communal identity and assembly in political or religious terms became contested at political margins of larger polities as natural, prehistoric, Roman and contemporary features became entangled between contemporary political and ideological desires that responded differently to questions of scale. Such borders might reflect both physical and landscape boundaries, but also conceptual boundaries and 'gaps in social networks': emphasising the 'experiential reality' of borderlands therefore enables insight (Pelkmans and Umetbaeva 2018: 549). Negotiating borders was a stimulus to the emphasis of difference, or merely its recognition: 'borderwork', as termed by Rumford (2013: 23), might be equally driven by the agendas of locals as by those of the state.

Essential to understanding the shifting borders and borderlands of the Mercian kingdom (Capper 2020, forthcoming a) is recognition that royal and territorial hegemony remained a recursive relationship between the authority of Mercian overkings and the interests of regional peoples and their representatives. The Mercians (OE *Mierce*) were a people named early for their border status (*ASC* 657, *HE* I, ch.15, Latin *Mercii*). The seventh-century kingdom, its strategies and borders reflected royal authority, but also regionalised economic and cultural circumstances. The boundaries of hegemony were shaped by communities of experience, maintained as much by the socialisation of the Mercian community under arms and adaptation of local religious practices and trading settlements as by the elite gatherings and ecclesiastical councils that in written records more-visibly melded its ideology. The negotiation of border relationships was therefore ongoing during Mercian expansion, as geographical markers such as seas, rivers were adopted, breached or reinforced by human activity. At first the limited machinery of Penda's Mercian rule brought together peoples serving the same overlord but requiring only mutual understanding and fidelity over religious agreement (*HE* III, ch.21), Mercian hegemony only slowly linked common interest to identity, ideology, service, administrative systems, economic devices or common culture. This study demonstrates that analysis of any singular Mercian borderland may underestimate the disparity between them, the available sources of evidence, and the diversity and nuance of borderwork negotiated by the Mercian community and its leadership. Comparing Mercian borderlands through the crisis of hegemony (825–829) and divisions by the Viking Great Army in the 870s and Wessex in 911 illustrates how divergence or agreement between layers of political, military and ecclesiastical authority in borderlands gave rise to political orthodoxies, asymmetries and tensions, on both sides of the Mercian border, that those with authority, knowledge and cultural sensitivity could choose to uphold, manipulate or overcome. The interests of familiar neighbours and allies as much as incomers ensured the breakup and reconfiguration of Mercian borders as Mercia was transformed as a borderland for the tenth-century English kingdom (Figure 1).

Background: Seventh-century borders during Mercian expansion

Expanding seventh-century kingdoms operated by juxtaposing royal power, military and religious authority in search of resources, tribute and political capital. After conversion, seventh-century English diocesan bounds expanded alongside aligned military and political overlordships. For Northumbria, the key rulers in question are Oswy (r. 642–670) and Ecgrith (r. 670–685), while in Mercia the rulerships of Wulfhere (r. 658–675) and Aethelred (r. 675–704)² created nebulous borders and frontiers of opportunity based on aristocratic relationships, common interest and control of resources, reinforced by tribute taking (Higham 2006a; Capper 2008, forthcoming a). Markets, gift exchange, missionaries and even warbands easily permeated the borders between these vast overlordships, sustained largely by personal loyalties and the political capital from plunder, tribute and kin relations. Consequently, such fragile borders mattered deeply to royal authority. For example, Mercian monastic landholding by Bishop Wilfrid at Oundle (d. 709/710; Fig. 1) spanned across the borders of rival Northumbrian overlords and was considered dangerous, which caused him multiple periods of exile. This was particularly evident when Wilfrid sought rival royal patronage from Aethelred of Mercia's nephew, Beorhtwald, on Mercia's southern border (Capper 2013: 263, 271). A further illustration of border fragility arose out of competing Mercian and Northumbrian overlordship of Lindsey. Bishop Seaxwulf of Mercia in 674 and then Bishop Eadhead, the Northumbrian appointee to Lindsey in 679, fled when their respective political overlords Wulfhere of Mercia and Ecgrith of Northumbria lost control there. These long-running tensions eventually led Archbishop Theodore to create a local diocese at Lincoln after Mercian victory at the Trent in 679 to resolve the conflict (*HE* II, ch.16, IV, ch.3, ch.12; Thacker 1985: 3; Capper 2012, forthcoming a).

Expanding borderlands offered mixed opportunities. After King Aethelred of Mercia burned Rochester in 676, its Bishop Putta fled to his protection and received shelter in western Mercia. Meanwhile, St Guthlac's Mercian warband profited during his early military career in the 680s–690s: his *Vita* reported critically on the failure of Penda's grandson Coenred (r. 704–709) to defend Mercian borders (*VG*, ch.34; Capper 2020: 183, 194–197, 200).

These zones also had ideological roles. Post-Roman British Christian identities were themselves proud and diverse, the product of 'manifold' interactions and claims (Petts 2013). Identification of borderlands with British peoples, however, operated them as frontiers of belief and opportunity since they served to both deny legitimate British rule and perhaps also to encourage their ideological othering. This is evidenced most notably by Bede, who blamed the Britons for failing to convert the English. More specifically, Bede damned the Christian Caedwallon of Gwynedd, far more severely than he criticised his pagan ally Penda, with whom Caedwalla killed King Oswald and devastated the Northumbrian kingdom (*HE* I, ch.22; II, ch.20; Foley and Higham 2009: 155).

Religious ties operated across borderlands. On a European scale we can perceive early medieval clergy often facilitated engagement across borders reinforced by political,

² Special characters have been reduced for improved accessibility.

cultural and linguistic differences. This helps us to suppose how a west-Mercian Bishop Walhstod, named or by-named the ‘interpreter’, usefully preached beyond the Severn c. 731 (Compare S1410; Capper 2020: 201); a shallow font for adult baptism (or re-baptism) is among the speculated uses for a coarsely re-cut Roman pillar from Wroxeter found at Woolstaston, Shropshire (Bryant *et al.* 2010: 386–387). Opportunities to obtain exotic goods incentivised cross-border exchange and, in the mid-seventh century, both ecclesiastical networks and early emporia used borderlands between polities to facilitate wider networks of trade-routes, where councils, emporia or beach markets enabled the exchange of ideas, but also wines, incense and spices available to Bede (Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 584). These locales might have operated as ‘third spaces’ enabling ‘constant dialogue’: where ‘binary oppositions’ broke down and hybridity or co-mingling were possible (Naum 2012: 58). Over time, such ambiguities were arguably circumscribed as councils enforced orthodoxy and populous emporia became closely-supervised tools to allow local agricultural surplus and profits from warfare and slavery to be exchanged, processed and monetised by kings (Madicott 2005; Capper forthcoming a). The broad territorial stability of late-seventh-century polities, but also the economic and cultural exchanges across their borders, became important attractions for expanding eighth-century Mercian hegemony, over the richer kingdoms of the South East especially.

Asymmetry and identity as a tools in border relations

Borders that focus on maintaining interior identities or macro interests may modify or deny the needs of individuals or groups to achieve societal cohesion. Traces of political, social or juridical rights and economic networks reflect how agreements were negotiated to shape relations or boundaries within or between polities and peoples. Whereas Penda’s Mercian raiding promoted collaboration between English and British warbands in order to enhance the powers of his military overlordship, during West Saxon expansion, the seventh-century *Laws of Ine* granted the British/‘Welsh’ (*Wealh*) noble or ‘taxpayer’ (*gafolgelda*) under his rule a wergeld half that of ‘English’ identified ranks (Jurasinski and Oliver 2021: 399). Over time, as Woolf has argued, unfavourable status placed Britons, who were increasingly described as Welsh, at personal legal protective and economic disadvantage, discouraging British success under West Saxon rule (*Laws of Ine*, 23.3, 24.2; Woolf 2007: 127). Without fixed territorial borders the ‘borderwork’ was enacted socially, internal bordering applied by personal identification with specific linguistic, cultural and religious customs and legally reinforced was probably communally monitored and less easily modified (Rumford 2013). Eighth-century Mercian campaigning demonstrates hardened attitudes to Welsh kingdoms, but we lack evidence of their legal interpretation.

The late-ninth-century *Alfred/Guthrum Treaty* (EHD, no.34; Attenborough 1922: 98–101), used territorial boundaries to offer parity and groups under Alfred’s or Guthrum’s lordship received equal wergeld protection; although Alfred perhaps found such fairness easier because the negotiated border was drawn not through his West-Saxon territory, but through disrupted Mercian and East Anglian frontiers. The *Ordinance of the Dunsæte*

(*Ordinance*) memorandum also allowed each of six English and six Welsh '*lahmen*' equal legal responsibility (Brady 2017: 2–3, 2022: 8). However, by dropping penalties to a half-wergeld for visitors to the opposite riverbank, a locally agreed asymmetry of protection also encouraged each group, English and Welsh, to stay within their own territory unless supervised. The nested identities of individuals and the entangled loyalties of the *Wentsaete* and *Dunsæte* to each other and to their overlords are acknowledged – their ethnicities are clearly presented as English and Welsh, '*þa Angelcynnnes witan*' and '*Wealhþeode*' – situating border agreement within social networks of ethnic loyalties, local witnesses and lordly protections (Brady 2022, but compare Guy 2022): although for earlier tenth-century dating available sources suggested no recent conflict (Kershaw 2000: 44). Conversely, Molyneux (2012) preferred a late tenth- or early eleventh-century date. This layering of macro-politics with everyday concerns by the *Ordinance* illustrates the vital roles of local people in regular border maintenance and monitoring. Protection by distant higher powers was established by a request for royal permission for peace hostages from the *Wentsæte* (probably in/near Gwent) 'if the king will grant it' (9.1), but held in reserve, only to be invoked by border crossing or provoked by failure of the agreement. Circumspection was essential: although peripatetic kings offered vital security, mistreatment of their representatives or breach of protocols invited the disruptive presence of overlords, their armies or their representatives to adjudicate border flashpoints and risked unintended repercussions, interventions or exactions and services being imposed whereby local autonomy could be hampered.

Borders, protection and royal authority

Royal activity and responsiveness to border concerns operated on different scales and was circumstantial. As such, it was conditional on royal resources and rarely timely or proportionate over distance. Successful Mercian campaigns under Aethelbald (ASC 743), Offa (AC 778) and Coenwulf (AC 798) provided profitable demonstrations of royal authority over Welsh neighbours. Yet, military campaigning, once provoked, required resources and mobilisation for warfare and thus promoted instability. Alfred therefore repeated Ine's legal provisions for an elevated wergeld to protect his own '*horsewealh*' (probably a Welsh rider in royal service) as a preventative measure (Jurasinski and Oliver 2021, 399). Although southern Welsh kings submitted to Alfred's overlordship for protection, Asser's account left uncertain whether Alfred's intercession would reach beyond their presence at his court, despite depredations by other subordinates, namely Anarawd of Gwynedd, who swore loyalty to Alfred in person, and his close ally the so-called '*tyrannus*' Aethelred of Mercia (Asser ch. 80). Like Bishop Wilfrid previously, Asser found that his cross-border monasteries in Wessex risked the appearance of unclear loyalties: he eventually accepted the West Saxon bishopric of Sherborne, Dorset (Asser ch. 80, ch. 81; ASC 909); similarly, Alfred's Mercian mass-priest Athelstan later became Bishop of Ramsbury (Pratt 2007: 57). The Severn estuary, another Anglo-Welsh border, demonstrated layered obligations: a charter of King Brochfael ap Meurig granted his Bishop Cyfeiliog lands and perhaps landing rights at the mouth of the River Troggy, Gwent c. 895, whereas King Edward (a distant overlord), ransomed him only

when Viking raiders carried him away from Ergyng toward West-Saxon Somerset (ASC 914). Written records offered incomplete or retrospective justifications: many Mercian campaigns across borders were recorded by their victims.

Reporting events in 910, which ended in the victory at Tettenhall against the Northumbrians, the West Saxon Winchester *Chronicle A* ignored joint Mercian and West Saxon campaigning into Northumbrian territory in 909. It thus claimed the 910 Northumbrian invasion of Mercian borders was unjustified: ‘the army in Northumbria broke the peace, and scorned every privilege that King Edward and his councillors offered them’ (ASC A 909,910). Exceptionally, archaeological evidence for the burning of Llangorse Crannog (Brecon) supports the documented burh building among proofs of Aethelflaed’s decisive maintenance of her Anglo-Welsh and Irish Sea borders (Lane and Redknap 2019). Personal service and authority remained essential to secure ties of lordship. The murder of her Mercian Abbot Ecgbert in 916 during Mercian campaigning against the east-Mercian Danelaw saw swift retribution across the border, reinforced by hostage-taking: ‘three days later Aethelflaed sent an army into Wales and destroyed *Brecenanmere* and captured the king’s wife and 33 other persons’ (*Mercian Register* 916; Capper forthcoming b). Timescales here more closely parallel the precipitous invasion of Wessex in 802 ‘the same day’ (below) than the consideration given to favour peaceful resolution by the later and locally negotiated *Ordinance of the Dunsæte*: ‘...always after nine days right ought to be done’ (ch.2). Comparing the Welsh *Laws of Hywel Dda*, of contested date, with Alfred’s laws (Juraskinski and Oliver 2021: 399), even killing a royal servant might be mitigated, on either side of the Anglo-Welsh border, by payment of doubled wergeld to restore peace. Circumstantially, however, compensation was not acceptable. Instead, the Welsh killing of a Mercian churchman in wartime was considered provocation and betrayal of Aethelflaed’s overlordship, an act requiring fuller military response and hostage-taking was necessary to restore order. Responsibility for the maintenance of Mercian borders demonstrated Aethelflaed’s authority and Mercian autonomy.

Economic resources and cultural capital

Medieval borders rarely had sufficient infrastructure to prevent the determined from acquiring resources and/or ideas, nor should homogeneity within them be presumed. Although Bede (d. 735) criticised Britons as heretics, he admitted knowing elements of their language through written texts and personal communication, naming places and saints, whereas he refused to acknowledge Mercian saints. The ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* accessed English genealogical information, but its Preface, which probably reflects later attitudes, also famously acknowledges with some surprise the annals (or perhaps histories) of the Saxons and Irish used in its compilation, ‘*de annalibus Scottorum Saxonumque*’, alongside ‘our ancient traditions’, and pronounces their authors ‘our enemies’ (Campbell 1979; Dumville 1975/6, 79–80; Higham 2006b). In the material sphere, as Naismith (2017; 2022: 26–27) observes, the Mercian unitary coinage of King Offa (757–796) was a ‘watershed’ in the mobility of money. However, beyond the reach of coastal trade in the South and East, Portable Antiquities finds suggest agricultural economies across Wales, but also the West Midlands north of the *Hwicce* rarely exchanged using

coinage, presumably focusing on possession and judgement of livestock, bullion and renders (Capper forthcoming a). Coinage was rare on either side of Offa's or Wat's Dykes until the end of Mercian independence after 874, and, with no identified mints, despite Mercian taxation for Viking tribute and Alfred's small issues at Gloucester and Oxford or Edward's at Bath after the Welsh submissions to Wessex (below), monetisation in western Mercia proceeded reluctantly until Aethelflaed produced coin in her brother's name (Capper forthcoming b). On Mercia's other frontiers, ninth-century Northumbrian trade partners developed a long-lived but incompatible coinage of copper 'stycas' when demand exceeded bullion supply, until Viking silver revived coins of Viking York. Mercian London produced coin, if only in Alfred's name by c. 880, Scandinavian-held territories in former East Mercia and East Anglia also maintained monetisation but with explicit weight differences from Alfred's standards (Naismith 2017: 286, 301): in East Anglia some regional coinages persisted with pre-Alfredian lighter weights even after his son Edward was named on local coinage (Blackburn 2006: 208). Furthermore, not all prestige goods crossed even regional boundaries as successfully as bullion, traded easily or were exchangeable by prestation, unless value was authenticated by trust and legitimacy (Curta 2006: 675). The Lichfield Gospels, taken to Llandeilo Fawr in Wales in the early ninth century, record their secular exchange for only a good horse before being gifted to Llandeilo Fawr. Plausibly their regional style of illumination and numerous textual divergences from the Vulgate, only paralleled by the Hereford Gospels, perhaps made this heritage uncomfortable, devaluing them much beyond a western-British cultural context (Jenkins and Morfydd 1983: 46–47). Likely status as stolen relics probably further reduced their spiritual value (cf. Sims-Williams 2019: 12), their return to Lichfield maybe reflect its identity as a west-Mercian diocese with authority over formerly British churches about which we are insufficiently knowledgeable. Despite Mercian hegemony and pan European trading networks, the scope of daily communications ensured differences between Mercian border traditions and that many cultural practices retained more regionalised resources and characteristics.

Limits to Mercian expansionism: negotiating frontier territories, geography and physical experience

Natural frontiers, whether seas, difficult terrain such as mountain ranges (and forests) or resource poor areas deserts and marshes required skilled navigation and were often hard to close (Abulafia 2005), thereby creating obvious potential 'gaps' in social networks but also royal control. Naismith (2022: 17) describes the porous nature of maritime borders, particularly to traders. That numerous coins of Cynethryth, celebrating her as wife of Offa during the 780s, predate a unique new coin celebrating Fastrada (d. Frankfurt 794), as queen-consort of Charlemagne, may suggest Mercian as well as Roman inspirations for tools emphasising the status of a Carolingian queen. It also illustrates how symbols of the importance of authority over exchange within and across borders were made physical, held and handed over in daily interactions, allowing the connections and political influence of Offa's Mercian kingdom to be made visible (Coupland 2023). Early medieval maritime borders were usually enclosed at their landing-places: during Offa's famous disagreement with Charlemagne (768–814)

over marriage between their children, cross-Channel trade ceased. During this time, no-one among the English was ‘to set foot on the shores of Gaul for purposes of trade’ and both sides were forbidden to set sail (Alcuin, *Ep.* 104; Story 2005: 207; Naismith 2022). This was possible only because the two hegemonies controlled both the ports and the economic systems supplying the exchange of woollen cloth, its taxation (something avoided by costumed pilgrims; Alcuin, *Ep.*100) and also the coins minted for trade and taxation, which were by this time usually melted down on crossing into the Carolingian or Offan economic sphere – even then closure was short-lived. The sea therefore became an unexpected, and particularly ineffectual, border against seaborne Viking raiders.

The Severn and other rivers that remained stable within a flood plain (Pears et al 2020) were meeting places, but also weak points in social networks and in the expression of land-based power. A stable Mercian border along the upper and middle Thames was achieved first through common interest by coordinating military and administrative activities with Hwiccian and East Saxon allies in the seventh and eighth centuries, then by reinforcing prominences, rich estates and river-crossings via the foundation or sponsorship and then refoundation of monasteries at Cookham, Eynsham, Abingdon and Cirencester and expansion of Mercian royal influence over regional royal monasteries, East Saxon Barking and Hwiccian Bath, but then also Malmesbury, Gloucester, Abingdon and perhaps Glastonbury in the eighth and ninth centuries (Blair 1996). Offa thereby consolidated cross-border Mercian military victory over Wessex at Bensington in 779 with conciliar activities re-affirming the Mercian community, extending his authority in the south through Synods of Brentford (781) and Chelsea (787) until his installation of Archbishop Aethelheard in Canterbury (792) seemingly secured military control of Kent and Sussex (Blair 2006; Capper forthcoming a).

The Humber was a particularly hard-fought and negotiated border between Northumbria and Mercia; the death of King Penda in battle at the *Winwaed* in 655 saw catastrophic losses as the Mercian coalition tried to cross a flooded Humber tributary (*‘inundatio’*) and ‘many more were drowned in flight than were destroyed by the sword in battle’ (*‘multo plures aqua fugientes quam bellantes perderet ensis’*; *HE*, III, ch.24). Only Mercian victory in battle on the Trent in 679 and subsequent negotiations enabled long-term stability (Higham 2006a). However, the Humber estuary also made the Trent vulnerable to repeated Viking incursions (Nottingham 868, Torksey 872/873, Repton 873/874). Once estuaries that facilitated coastal trade became linkages shaping Viking-led economies and polities, Lincolnshire again looked north: Aethelweard’s statement that by 895 the York Army controlled territory in Lindsey, west of Stamford: ‘between the streams of the River Welland and the thickets of the wood called Kesteven’ was affirmed by similarities between the York St Peter and Lincoln St Martin coinages (Campbell 1962, 51; Blackburn 2006). Such new linkages enabled re-shaped political communities with varying long-held affinities across the maritime Scandinavian diaspora (Hadley 2009: 376; Abrams 2012; Vohra 2016).

Land borders responding to natural features such as peaks, watersheds and marshes historically have often been demarcated or reinforced by artificial structures (Curzon 1907).

The construction of Offa's Dyke evoked, at much greater scale, the same border language as other prehistoric and early medieval dykes expressing control over road and routeways, including the Cambridgeshire Dykes crossed by Penda c. 654 and Wansdyke (Langlands 2019; Capper forthcoming a). Yet underlying these since the Iron Age were persistent long-distance exchanges of minerals, cattle and slaves, and particularly metals and salt (Hooke 1983; Capper 2020); although it is uncertain that Flintshire and Cheshire ores and salt offered early Roman levels of productivity (Ward *et al.* 2012: 380–382). Contributions in this journal support the cumulative effects of border structures channelling and re-shaping these liminal border-spaces, arguing that Offa's and Wat's dykes together formed a reinforcing ninth-century border system (Williams 2021; Ray 2022). Yet despite the symbolic workload of vast earthworks and associated monuments in managing the borderland (Tyler 2011; Murieta-Flores and Williams 2017) and potential use of Wat's Dyke for administrative boundaries (Parsons 2022: 121–125), ninth-century Mercian overlordship over Powys clearly exerted influence across both Wat's and Offa's Dykes (Charles-Edwards 2013; Capper forthcoming a), affirming that they consciously delineated borders for Mercian kingdom and identity rather than limiting Mercian power and relations overall. The earthworks were focal to a borderland punctuated by points of access and leverage that attempted to stabilise and supervise border relations (Ray and Bapty 2016), and which like other Mercian borders continued to be managed by the Mercians and resisted by the Welsh via raiding.

Whether such physical borders reinforced linguistic and cultural frontiers between Mercian and Welsh kingdoms is harder to establish (Parsons 2022), but specific cultural differentiations were deliberately maintained. The Welsh Bishop Elfoddw accepted Roman Christian orthodoxy in 768 under Mercian influence (AC 768; Capper forthcoming a). Yet, charter traditions at Llandeilo Fawr and Llandaff, in ordering their ceremonial and records of British charter diplomatic west of the River Wye, resisted conforming with English charter tradition, even where both traditions recorded in Latin and used counter-payments (Sims-Williams 2019: 107). Edwards has even proposed the Pillar of Eliseg claimed kingship over Powys via a monumentalised charter inscription (Edwards 2009: 167). This self-definition persisted despite Mercian or West Saxon overlordship until after the Norman Conquest of England (Charles-Edwards 2013: 250–256; Sims-Williams 2019: 86).

Throughout Mercian hegemony, explicit strategies of boundedness were reinforced at Mercian borders by created or adopted royal ideological markers, including earthworks, defensive sites, monasteries and saints' cults, facilitated and supervised markets and mints, trade and at times extractive relations (Capper forthcoming a). Mercian rulers, like other kings, bound Mercia together using strategies that melded power and redemption. King Aethelberht of East Anglia was killed by Offa in 794 (ASC 794): his cult was promoted both by dedications at the borderland bishopric of Hereford and nearby hillfort of Sutton Walls, described in his legend, but also at Offa's tomb of Bedford, where his widow governed as Abbess (ASC 794, 796; Capper forthcoming a). Mercian overlordship over Powys was established by sparsely-recorded victories, including Degannwy (AC822; Charles-Edwards 2013). In 853, King Burgred of Mercia drawing on new West Saxon alliances 'subjected to himself the

Welsh with Aethelwulf's help' (ASC 853), such that in 854 Cyngen of Powys, who had once ordered the carving of the Pillar of Eliseg to record his Roman lineage alongside honouring his great grandfather's resistance against the Mercians, and used its Bronze Age barrow as a Powysian assembly site, departed for Rome (Edwards 2009; Petts 2013; Murrieta-Flores and Williams 2017). In 855 when 'pagani' entered the *Wreocensaete* (*pagani fuerunt in Wreocensetun*) King Burgred raised immediate funds for further campaigning by remitting Bishop Ahlwine of Worcester's feeding of the *Wahlfærelð* (Welsh host) for 300 shillings at his royal council at Tamworth (S207 855). The same year, he held an assembly at *Oswaldesdun*, 'Oswald's Hill', possibly Bardney but more plausibly the Iron Age hillfort of Old Oswestry; drawing on St Oswald's spiritual protection against Viking *pagani* and Welsh forces, echoing Mercian victory at *Maserfelth/Cogwy* and asserting his overlordship (Stancliffe's identification of *Maserfelth/Cogwy* at Oswestry is agreed by Charles-Edwards 2013: 391–392). He there granted Bishop Alhwin further privileges in return for another counterpayment of two bullion armlets weighing 45 (or 48 mancuses) (S206 855); 'Oswaldestreo', on the line of Wat's Dyke, at Domesday lay in *Mersete* Hundred, headed at Domesday by Maesbury ('boundary burh') to the south, also on the probable line of Wat's Dyke. Both place-names are believed to derive from OE '(ge)mære', suggest how different scales and affinities with traditions of 'boundary' status could be held or reinforced across the Mercian polity (Parsons 2022: 126).

Overall, ideological and territorial tools acknowledged regional priorities and defensive autonomy of borderlands in exchange for Mercian protection, but limited risks from cross-border entanglements to Mercian kings via unlicensed raiding, warfare, or formal political hegemony, oathtaking or kingly responsibilities extending beyond preferred limits. Mercian borders were therefore carefully established according to the capacity of eighth- and ninth-century Mercian overkings and consequently leveraged much from daily management retained in regional hands.

People, places and border relations

Borderlands as limits of political authority and landholding offered symbolic meeting places. Although mutually convenient assembly-sites for the entourages of kings and bishops, liminality also acknowledged independence, refusal to submit to rights of jurisdiction or hospitality and incomplete trust. Meetings within Mercian borderlands included attempts to deprive the Northumbrian Bishop Wilfrid of Oundle and his other cross-border monasteries at the Synod of Austerfield near the Trent in 702/3 (Capper 2013: 271). After Aethelbald of Mercia's influence over the church was emphasised by the Council of Clifesho in 747, in 748 King Eadberht I of Kent and Archbishop Cuthbert of Canterbury sought the neutrality of London's Thames-side episcopal enclosure for a conference which granted trading privileges (S91 748; Capper forthcoming a). In 906, Edward the Elder negotiated peace with the settled Northern and Eastern armies at Tiddingford for all the English seemingly 'out of necessity' (*for neode friað*; ASC E 906), although such details were inconsistently reported across versions of the *Chronicle*, Aethelweard and the Mercian Register. The submission of Earl Thurferth and the Northampton army while

Edward camped at the border at Passenham was marked by the theatre of him rebuilding (or refacing) Towcester walls in stone (ASCA 917; see also Baker and Brookes 2013: 83, 109 where the refacing is suggested). Border crossings were reinforced by practices that delineated limits of power: whether in the symbolic building and maintenance of border-structures such as Offa's and Wat's Dykes themselves (Tyler 2011), through the payment of tolls or tribute (Capper forthcoming a), or the execution cemetery overlooking the Thames crossing at Staines, Middlesex, which enacted the judicial border between Mercia and Wessex (Hayman *at al.* 2005; Reynolds 2009: 205). Campaigning armies transgressed the border differently than cattle thieves or movement of traders or herds to market.

Typically, throughout their hegemony, Mercian overlords expanded their borders by assimilation and adaptation, approving local strongmen or replacement royal representatives as overseers, with necessary assent, therefore, to a degree of local power and/or autonomy. Penda's kin served as subkings; a nephew, Beorhtwald, served Aethelred near the West Saxon border (Capper 2012); and in 802 Mercia's Hwiccian ealdorman Aethelmund invaded Wessex promptly at King Beorhtric's death (ASC 802). In the Anglo-Welsh borderlands, local agents later probably held lands beyond outright English control (Guy 2022: 95). In terms of social responsibility, therefore, territorially defined borderlands increasingly concentrated functions that received outsiders; royal representatives, sureties or witnesses, moneyers and toll-collectors, serving the coastal port, royal estate or burh. The availability of royal reeves varied considerably across the English kingdom before Edgar (957–975) (Molyneux 2015: 179). Consequently, whereas near borders port-reeves supervised emporia, travellers and probably ferry-points (e.g. South Ferriby, Lincolnshire), further into Mercia a Tamworth charter famously required Bredon (Leicestershire), a monastery under royal sponsorship, to offer hospitality and supervision of diplomats seeking the Mercian royal court (S193, Christmas 840; Capper forthcoming a). Beyond this infrastructure local monitoring and contingencies presumably facilitated cross-border travellers, a rare record being the locally nominated 'landmen' of the *Ordinance* who 'receive him at the bank and bring him back without deceit', '*se hine sceal æt stæðe underfon, and eft þær butan facne gebringan*' (Brady 2017: 2). Formal rulings and physical structures controlling the movement of people or livestock facilitated border permeability and enabled taxation in cash or kind; commercial rights at Aethelred's Hythe, London, were probably emulated at Chester's waterfront (S346 889; Capper forthcoming b). Gates have been proposed in Offa's Dyke (Ray and Bapty 2016: 87) and the Wansdyke (Reynolds and Langlands 2006). Sources rarely illuminate those local public deliberations described in the *Ordinance*, but other preventative local practices, including the marking of ships or group walking or riding of charter bounds, which affirmed jurisdiction and enabled dispute settlement (Kelly 2004: 150; Faith 2019: 84; Capper forthcoming a). As Lightfoot and Martinez (1995: 471) assert, borderlands were more than just 'passive recipients of core innovation'. Visible and layered, the creation and maintenance of borderlands and border structures, such as Offa's Dyke created border traditions, which at different scales benefitted both royal authority and local stability.

Authority and the renegotiation of Mercian borders

Surviving records of border negotiations are scarce, but both *Alfred/Guthrum* and the *Ordinance* first established the authorities under which oral agreement was reached, for *Alfred/Guthrum* probably with minimal Mercian involvement. The following terms negotiated between that authority and immediate interests; in *Ordinance* concerning local cattle theft (Brady 2022: 6). Under Aethelred and Aethelflaed, however, expanded Hiberno-Norse influence revived the ‘Irish Sea Zone’ as an area of wider political and economic connectivity, risk and opportunity (Griffiths 2001; Gardner 2017; Capper forthcoming b).

New arrivals across the Viking diaspora had to negotiate acceptance of kin identities, legal and social status (Vohra 2016) before the value of borders they negotiated could hold long-term weight. Ingimund’s settlement of the Wirral, early in the Hiberno-Norse diaspora from Dublin, illustrates how agreed borders might destabilise wherever the relative strength of participants sufficiently altered. Although certain individuals (traders, diplomats, pilgrims) and things were licensed by tradition and royal supervision to transit borders in small numbers without threatening border-stability, mass movements of people or wealth, whether armies or refugees, might trigger panic or destabilise local power structures. Following Hiberno-Norse expulsion from Dublin ‘half dead’ in 902 (*AU*902), although Ingimund ‘took *Maes Osfeilion*’ on Anglesey (*AC*902), after expulsion by Cadell ap Rhodri he reportedly appealed to Aethelflaed and the Mercians ‘for lands...for he was tired of war’. This suggests he negotiated lands near Chester from a position of relative weakness (*FA*§429; Capper, forthcoming b). Between the seventh and ninth centuries available economic evidence suggests Meols had languished economically compared with the southeast (Griffiths *et al.* 2007: 401). However, the position was arguably more typical of Viking settlements in Ireland than England, having an estuarine location, if not the high ground overlooking favoured by Irish settlements including Dublin (Wallace 1992: 39). The *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* are instructive: over time Ingimund’s position strengthened, but also modified, as a wider diaspora of ‘chieftains of the Norwegian and Danes’ (with Irish fosterlings) arrived and destabilised existing settlement. Repositioning himself as a petitioner within their councils, because negotiation of borders between former enemies first required mutual trust, they licensed Ingimund to negotiate more generous territory. Although the Mercians rejected his terms, triggering an attack on Chester (c. 903x7), this Irish image of Hiberno-Norse diaspora better matches the material record, with communities differentiated from each other and Irish allies, capable of weighing individual and group interests to propose multiple options for negotiated settlement. Mercian victory at Chester, without Edward’s involvement, secured Mercian borders, the Chester burh and trade access via Chester and Viking Meols to the Irish Sea which stimulated monetisation and taxation through coinage, establishing Aethelflaed’s reputation as ‘queen’ (*regina*) in Irish and Welsh Annals (*AU* 918.5; *AC* 917; Capper forthcoming b).

New Mercian borders

In both Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Danish borderlands, treaties recorded compromises, punctuating rather than ending the ebb and flow of negotiation left otherwise to more uncertain resolutions. Despite Mercian victory at Degannwy in 822, in 823 King Ceolwulf I was deposed and the deaths of Ealdormen Muca and Burghelm (824) enabled a new Mercian dynasty under Beornwulf to take power (AC 822, ASC 823, 824). In 825, while attempting to reassert Mercian overlordship, Beornwulf perhaps moving to pre-empt Egberht crossed the West Saxon border where Egberht, decisively defeated the Mercians at *Ellendun*; his son Aethelwulf took control of Kent and Sussex, while the East Angles killed Beornwulf themselves the same year. What linked his successor Ludeca to previous Mercian rulers remains unrecorded before his killing in 827 (ASC 825, 827; Keynes 2005). When Mercian hegemony over the southeast collapsed 825–829, that it did so largely into pre-existing territorial arrangements illustrated how Mercian hegemony had only temporarily negotiated control over elite personal loyalties and pre-existing territorial, political and ideological structures (Capper forthcoming a). From 865, however, the Viking Great Army forced borderlands suddenly into being in locations core to Mercian identity over generations. A decade of warfare and economic extraction, political and ideological uncertainty and mass movements of peoples driven by long-term conflict promoted fracture in agreed territories, but rarely drove such pragmatic compromise as in Mercia in 877, 'bordering' peoples and ideologically significant places once central. The division of Mercia in 874/877 denotes a crisis which perhaps deliberately rendered the vulnerable Mercian heartland of Tamworth, Lichfield and scarred Repton liminal. The English Mercia that emerged was itself a newly elongated frontier territory, thin and acknowledging at its several borders treaties with Danish settled populations, Welsh enemies and West Saxon allies that would reconfigure these relationships (ASC 874, 877; Capper, forthcoming b). Yet, although the *Chronicle* claimed Ceolwulf II negotiated a treaty in 874, sustained by oaths and hostages, it is highly uncertain his first agreement set up the Mercian division of 877.

877 generated (or perhaps acknowledged) a crisis of Mercian places and identities, but also triggered the emergence of multiple minor Anglo-Danish town-based polities in the east Mercian Danelaw, infilled by later settlers and only loosely sharing identity as 'five boroughs' (later seven; Hall 1989: 151). Plausibly the Mercian political community negotiated a division which fragmented lost territory rather than allow opposition by a single Anglo-Danish Mercian polity, as East Anglia became under Guthrum. The 877 division preceded *Alfred/Guthrum* in recognising Viking leaders as territorial rulers, and both were formative toward stabilising what was otherwise a frontier zone of unlimited Viking expansion. Coherent Anglo-Danish territories opposed by Alfred and Edward thus emerged in response to multiple treaties, possibly reported by *the Laws of King Edward*, ch.5.2, which acknowledge the north and east as separate parties ('*gif hit sy east inne, gif hit sy nord inne*' (II *Edward*, ch.5.2; Attenborough 1922: 120–121). Yet raiding in 893–896 and well-known cash purchases of land, such as the thegn Eadred's purchase of Chalgrave and Tebworth (Bedfordshire), guided by Edward and Aethelred of Mercia

(899x911), suggest that local representatives necessarily continued to hold autonomy and perhaps standing orders around opportunistic across-border maintenance, since Watling Street itself appears in these charter bounds (S396; Davies 1982). Despite its failings, the terms of *Alfred/Guthrum* illustrate features hoped for: security, stability, personal protection and trade (Kershaw 2000), subsequently renewed or modified, before being strategically breached and undermined by joint Mercian and West Saxon campaigns from 909 (ASC 909).

The social and human costs of bordering (Rumford 2013; Pelkmans and Umetbaeva 2018) as a violent, high-speed process were of insufficient interest to royal chroniclers, who found unoccupied frontiers conducive to narratives of state formation (for Iberia, see: Jarrett 2018: 203). The 877 Mercian border appears briefly in historical texts, probably too short-lived to establish archaeologically, although, surprisingly perhaps (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995), longer-term distribution of artefacts and placenames suggests it broadly held (Hadley 2009; Kershaw 2013). Notably, cemeteries at the Repton royal monastery and Heathwood, Ingleby which claimed the south shore of the Trent, suggest Viking negotiators prioritised river catchments and Scandinavian placenames described the English settlements there at Ingleby and also Derby, controlling the River Derwent (Richards *et al.* 2004: 25; Jarman *et al.* 2018). *Alfred/Guthrum* affirmed that ‘the concept of linear frontier’ could be speedily identified and demarcated at a macro scale by ninth-century English and Viking rulers, far earlier than Medieval examples cited otherwise (Berend 1999: 66; Curta 2011). Urgency and over a decade of warfare familiarised all parties with the landscape, making it plausible that the Watling Street Roman Road was a Mercian border chosen, perhaps temporarily, by Ceolwulf II as a pre-existing, long-distance banked and clearly observable structure before being adopted or modified by *Alfred/Guthrum* (contra Davis 1982, 805). Compared with other Mercian borders this blunt instrument required practical and ideological mitigations, plausibly explaining *Alfred/Guthrum*’s preoccupation with the movement of people, traders, cattle, horses and slaves: ‘Let every man know his warrantor for purchases of slaves, horses and oxen’ (ch.4), while the locally established and later parallel *Ordinance of the Dunsæte*, established compensation for theft of a slave ‘*man mid punde*’ (a man with a pound), but also differentiated prices for a much wider range of horseflesh and other property, allowing for non-bullion equivalents (ch.7).

How far up Watling Street the border went remains contested. In south-east Mercia, a more typical border carefully specified by watercourses of the Thames, Lea and Ouse, marked by lost East Saxon monastic communities including Barking and Waltham, proceeded to Bedford, becoming there the land boundary (*landgemæra*) of scholarly obsession (Kershaw 2000, 46). Edward captured Hertford (912), Buckingham (914) and Bedford (915); therefore as Davis (1982: 103) acknowledged the border had quickly failed, although Watling Street was reused in 1013 (ASC C(D,E) 1013). Importantly, comparing layered border management, features surrounding Offa’s and Wat’s Dykes were established over generations, with Wat’s Dyke perhaps the later and more defensive

structure, reinforced at its base in stone (Malim and Hayes 2008: 177). However, the road networks around both Offa's Dyke and Hadrian's Wall merely supplied logistics for built structures (Ray and Bapty 2016). What infrastructure emerged along the Watling Street routeway, a lengthy and perhaps insufficiently impressive or defensible border, is uncertain. Watercourses identified by *Alfred/Guthrum* boasted Mercian royal landmarks, including Bedford, a Mercian royal monastery and former sepulchre of King Offa (Capper forthcoming a, b). Fortunately given Alfred's lawcodes invoked him, Offa probably rested at St Albans, a monument of the new Mercian borderland around London which Alfred left with Aethelred (ASC 886); the hoarding of 46 debased Lunette coins of Burgred, Aethelred, Alfred and Archbishop Ceolnoth buried in the St Albans Abbey Orchard affirms the uncertainty during incursions by the Great Army in the mid-to-late 870s, after which a half penny of Alfred's heavier London Monogram type may indicate greater stability (Lyons and Mackay 2008: 69). Bedford and Hertford, once integral to Mercian hegemony over London, became liminal due to strategic fords that intersected existing road networks. Although Iberian towns frequently formed border infrastructure (Jarrett 2018), Brooks (2000) acknowledged strategic incentives to control both sides of river crossings, while underlying economic ties perhaps undermined the long-term sharing of strategic border settlements. The legal status of Anglo-Saxon roads may suppose a limited cleared area and royal mandate either side of Watling Street (*Laws of Aethelberht*: 19-20; *Laws of Ine*: 20; Langlands 2019: 65). Like other Roman roads or saltways, Watling Street was only for short distances a parish or charter boundary (Wolverhampton S1380 996 for 994), but as Hooke observed forms fewer parish boundaries than Fosse Way, while charters overall used rivers more commonly, with few roads forming long-distance boundaries (unlike ridgeways: Hooke 1983 1983: 58). Where evidence survives, Watling Street often traversed known existing territories at micro and macro scale and was not entirely convenient as a land border, however, crucially for tenth-century analysis, after Aethelflaed founded the Warwick burh in 914, Watling Street was taken in part as the Warwickshire border (ASC 914; Hooke 1983: 58). Whether depopulation or resource depletion enacted by Aethelred at Chester (ASC 893) typified emergent Danelaw borderlands is unclear, as equality of wergeld across borders may suppose a more complex zone of interaction and border monitoring was predicted, which in the end is scarcely illustrated beyond Danelaw imitations of some Alfredian coins, including of Oxford.

Borders established by treaty rather than open frontiers, however briefly, reflected desire to establish trust and stability through formal relations. The 877 division of Mercia, probably connected via Guthrum to *Alfred/Guthrum* and through Aethelred and Mercian ealdormen to the submission of 886, required consensus in delineating a community of interest and royal power. These treaties, negotiated by experienced military leaders in public, were ambitious in defining Alfred's powers, but before West-Saxon witnesses also expressly limited his representation. 877, *Alfred/Guthrum* and Aethelred's Mercian submission to Alfred at London in 886 all agreed to breach multiple previous loyalties and protections that had shaped Wessex and Mercia, most particularly in abandoning

lands or community members to foreign rule or actual slavery. *Alfred/Guthrum* (ch.5) is explicit: ‘we all agreed on the day the oaths were sworn, that no slaves nor freemen might go without permission into the army of the Danes, any more than any of theirs to us’. To date the impact on excluded east-Mercian populations remains under-recognised in analysis of this borderland.

Remaking Mercia: the reorientation of Mercia as a borderland

Whether at the Anglo-Welsh borderland or the Mercian-Danish border, pre-existing resource dependencies – on salt, metal ore (silver, gold, copper, lead), but also wine, incense and religious paraphernalia – encouraged trade and border-crossing unless alternate networks were established to meet local needs. To access emerging Viking trade via Meols, Aethelflaedan burh gates, including the modified Roman double gates at Chester (Mason 2005: 7), set up the potential for gradations of border community, differentiating the trading shore of the wharf (compare Worcester, S346), from Chester’s fortified administrative centre and market, its new mint and multiple churches, where spiritual communities of different purposes sheltered in close proximity (Mason 2007; Capper forthcoming b). Around St John’s, Chester, a recently excavated post-Roman ditch possibly formed a further boundary, whether for defence or demarcating a religious precinct. Possibly, as at Worcester the burh structure was segmented, or as later at Canterbury, communities belonging to and outside the burh were differentiated (Holt 2010: 60, 71) with bordering reinforced by access to different trading and communal opportunities later emphasised in different churches. Despite previous conflict, because landed wealth and survival relied on farming, a ‘moral economy’ still enabled agriculture. Some elements (loan of plough teams, compensation, witness of sale) were legislated early (Faith 2019: 79-86), but new land borders required local affordances, whether for access to water, salt and grazing, or exchange of breeding stock (a Welsh ram appears in a ninth-century Welsh charter of Llandeilo Fawr; Jenkins and Morfydd 1983, 50). Finds and a structure at Breinton may indicate the Wye near Hereford remained a meaningful border, potentially fortified, into the Late Saxon period (Ray and Delaney 2021), while the *Ordinance* supervised the Wye, probably between Hereford and Monmouth against cattle theft (Brady 2017: 6).

Borders were permeable for some people moving by tradition or under royal protection, namely traders, pilgrims, exiles and particularly hostages or diplomatic brides. However, cross-border marriages risked group cohesion; sociological studies suggest this is overcome via strategies of ‘marginalisation’, ‘encapsulation’ (usually of the bride within the husband’s social networks) and/or ‘reconfiguration’ of modes of connectedness (from ethnicity to shared religious beliefs) (Pelkmans and Umetbaeva 2018: 549–550), unsurprisingly therefore, brides who transited borders were rarely expected to return without damaging social fabric. Elite marriages often confirmed borders alliances, but differently according to tradition and circumstance. Seventh-century queens commonly performed such roles while retaining their own thegns. Keynes (2001) and Stafford (2005) contrast the marriage of Alfred’s sister Queen Aethelswith into Mercia, where her activity at court mediated the Mercian/West Saxon borderlands, with King

Alfred's marriage to Ealhswith, Mercian daughter of Aethelred of the Gaini, who was denied queenly status in Wessex. Despite apparent mutual respect neither Aethelflaed (d.918), her husband Ealdorman Aethelred (d.911), nor any identifiably Mercian nobles attested her West Saxon brother Edward's coronation grants founding the New Minster, Winchester, whereas Mercian bishops and royal priests subscribed (S1443; S365; S366; Keynes 2001: 51). Indeed, at Shrewsbury in 901 Aethelred and Aethelflaed exchanged lands with the ancient Mercian nunnery at Wenlock, Shropshire through a charter that invoked the royal 'wisdom of Solomon' '*sapiens salomon*', but no other royal authority than God, their most high king '*excelsi regis*' and 'consent' from the Wenlock community and the Mercians (S221 901; Sawyer 1989: 2) Alfred's will granted his wife Ealhswith three West-Saxon estates in her widowhood, but all reverted to the crown before Domesday (Eddington; Lambourn, near Ashdown, and Wantage; Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 303). To Aethelflaed, Alfred left only Wellow, a single estate in the West Saxon heartland, identifying her place with her husband beyond traditional West Saxon borders, limiting both her political influence or liability (S1507; Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 175). In 903, when Edward met Aethelred and Aethelflaed, with their daughter Aelfwynn, in Berkshire to resolve Ealhswith's 'family business' (Stafford 2005 46), West Saxon bishops seemingly absented themselves from what they likely considered external matters (Keynes 2001: 53–54).

On becoming sole ruler 911–918 Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, governed independently over an extended Mercian borderland, neither the kingdom which had faced the *micel here* in 865 or the broken polity of 886, if less fully than Stafford proposed 'ruler in her own right' (Stafford 2005: 35). Aethelflaed's burghal system (910–918), which in 915 completed three burh defences in one season, cannot easily be isolated from other Mercian fortifications and strategies (contra Blake and Sargent 2018), but extended topographical knowledge, resource management and statecraft drawn from accumulated Mercian experience facing a wide frontier of Viking expansion (Capper, forthcoming b). To alleviate the 'almost prohibitive' expense and resource needs of Alfred's burh building (Baker and Brookes 2013: 370–371) while controlling navigable rivers, routeways and fords (Abels 1988: 69), with her husband Aethelred, Aethelflaed had already re-fortified and modified the walls, markets and ecclesiastical rights of episcopal Worcester, allocating fines for damage to the burh wall '*burhwealles sceapinge*' (S223 884x99; S1280; Holt 2010). Gloucester's refortification protected sites upstream (S1441 896). At Shrewsbury access into the river loop was barred by a natural prominence excavated by Nigel Baker with this author (Baker 2020). The river thus protected ninth-century royal and episcopal churches at St Mary and St Chad which suggests a pre-existing royal centre (S221 901). It was later further dignified at St Chad by an internal tenth-century sculptural string course (Mardol 1–3) and St Mary's likely adoption by King Edgar (Bryant *et al.* 2010: 309, 311–312). Chester and its waterfront was fortified (ASC 907) and probably Hereford was also refortified (ASC 914; Capper forthcoming b). Coin from moneys later serving Shrewsbury and Chester in the Cuerdale Hoard (c. 905) may indicate limited minting before or during re-fortification of Chester and Shrewsbury (ASC 907; Lyon 2001: 74).

Working at pace on multiple fronts, Aethelflaed frequently used the Mercian royal tradition of ‘common burdens’ for military works (Abels 1988: 71; Brooks 2000) due from lay and ecclesiastical landholders to refurbish likely existing estates (Warwick, named for its weir, Chirbury its church), and archaeologically visible centres such as Stafford (*staep* ‘landing place’) known for its ninth-century kilns (Carver 2010). Other strongholds acknowledged named individuals outside Mercian royal naming traditions *Bremesbyrig* (unidentified) and *Eadesbyrig* (personal name elements ‘*Breme*’ and ‘*Ead*’; Blake and Sergeant 2018), alongside royal Tamworth. Her strategies more plausibly illustrate the speed and urgency Christie questioned in analysing construction of a West Saxon burh at Buckingham (ASC 914): ‘It is hard to believe...[in] strongholds built within four weeks, although it is feasible that sites were laid out’ (Christie 2016: 63). In particular, the overall scheme addressed known control points on the threatened Irish Sea river-systems of the Severn, Mersey and Dee already noted in the campaigns of 893–896, the Wirral territory granted to Ingimund and roads Viking armies traversed during the Tettenhall campaign of 910, addressed by refortification at Chester and Bridgnorth (ASC 892–896; Griffiths 2001). Defensive works in existing borderlands, by necessity layered works of mixed sizes and more ‘emergency’ character (Baker and Brookes 2013, 378), similar to Alfred’s sites of the 880s. These were enacted to refortify the hillfort of Eddisbury (oven base dated 860 +/-70 (cal. AD 745–980); Garner 2015: 198), then Chirbury, *Weardbyrig* and Runcorn (*Mercian Register* 914, 915). Alongside these, preparation of larger burh sites at Tamworth, Stafford and Warwick (*Mercian Register* 913, 914) ensured the administrative forward platforms of resource management Baker and Brookes described to enable Mercian campaigning parallel to Edward at the Danelaw border by 916. Yet more pragmatic activities also reached beyond Mercian borders: probably in 914 Aethelflaed exchanged Stanton-by-Newhall, Derbyshire with her thegn Alchelm, for livestock and money (60 pigs and 300 *solidi*) by charter, noting his obedience in purchasing it from Danes beyond her established borders (S224; Sawyer 1989, 1–2, no. 1).

Contesting authority over Mercia’s southern border

Opportunism by its allies, however also shaped the new Mercian borders. Edward succeeded ‘*feng to*’ (Winchester *Chronicle* A) his father Alfred in Wessex, overcoming a dangerous rebellion by his cousin Aethelwold, who was acknowledged king by Viking York (Stafford 2008: 112). Traditionally, Aethelwold’s bid for power from West Saxon perspectives was evaluated first as an internal dynastic ‘coup’ and then as external invasion (Lavelle 2010: 54): we might compare the autonomy won by Carolingian prince Karlomann in East Frankia who usurped ‘a considerable part’ of his father’s realm through alliance with Rostislav, king of the Wends before reconciliation with his father Louis the German (*Annals of St Bertin*, 861, 862). Aethelwold’s campaign, however broke peace with settled Viking armies bringing substantial damage upon Mercian territory before they crossed the Thames (ASC 900–902; Capper, forthcoming b). Although Keynes has emphasised Edward’s authority given that Aethelred and Aethelflaed lacked

independent coinage, yet his invitation to 'break free' of analysing Mercia and Wessex as opposed interests avoids exploring other tensions in Edward's authority as 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' which Aethelwold recognised and exploited (Keynes 2001: 57).

At Aethelred's death in 911 the Winchester *Chronicle A* asserted that Edward 'succeeded to' (*feng to*) Mercian borderlands around London and Oxford (ASC A911), conveniently recasting the greatest loss of Mercian territory since 877, which Edward prevented his widowed sister from inheriting. Alfred negotiated the 886 Mercian submission first as king of Wessex. Without hindsight, Mercia's Thames borders were strategically significant and perhaps as vulnerable as Mercian borders with Welsh or Scandinavian kings. Nor should Aethelred be considered Alfred's 'beneficiary', as Pratt (2007: 306) has proposed, in receiving Mercian fines at Worcester, he negotiated with Bishop Waerferth using status above that of ealdormen (Capper 2013). Yet the price of Alfred's early support in refurbishing Gloucester is implied from a rare Gloucester coin of reformed Alfredian weight from Cuerdale ('ÆT GLEAWA'; BM1838,0710.28), and a more numerous issue from Oxford (Naismith 2017: 171). Bishop Ealhheard of Dorchester-on-Thames, who replaced Mercia's Leicester bishopric, was so close to Alfred he died ranked among 'the king's best thegns' (ASC A 896), his successor, Oscytel, was sufficiently loyal he was entrusted with 400 pounds by King Eadred to redeem all Mercian churches (S1515 951x955). At Abingdon, formerly a strategic and influential Mercian royal house on the Thames border, the Abingdon *Chronicle* criticised Alfred pointedly: 'like Judas ... he violently seized the vill in which the abbey was sited' leaving it reportedly a royal vill until its tenth-century refoundation (S552a, Blair 2006, 325).

Within his own borderland of Wiltshire also, Alfred's overlordship of Aethelred's Mercians was paralleled by fortification of Malmesbury and, Mercians aided among those who judged Ealdorman Wulfhere of Wiltshire for desertion (S362; *EHD*, no. 101). Alfred's four-life lease of Malmesbury land at Chelworth near Crudwell to his minster Dudig (S356 871x899; Keynes 1994: 1139), would later be purchased back and exchanged with Malmesbury by Wulfhere's replacement Ealdorman Ordlaaf (S1205, 901); autonomy perhaps further reduced as the substantial royal burh at Cricklade enhanced defence of the Thames (Baker and Brookes 2013). More immediately, in 874 Burgred seemingly granted lands to Worcester at Bath, 'that famous town' (*illo famoso urbe*; S210), whose Mercian/Hwiccian royal monastery, once appropriated by King Offa (S1257 781), was symbolic of Hwiccian service to Mercian interests (Capper forthcoming a). Alfred had probably asserted West Saxon control over Bath since Edward's rare early coins titled '*rex Saxonum*' and minted at 'BAÐ' (Bath) appear in the Cuerdale hoard c.905 (Naismith 2017: 171). Whittock (2012: 12) proposed the coinage celebrated Bath's refortification. The Burghal Hidage included Bath in its West Saxon ambit although archaeological evidence thus far indicates only timber works there (Baker and Brookes 2013: 83). Sims-Williams (1990: 23) long ago proposed that the *Chronicle* describing the 577 Battle of Dyrham and West Saxon capture of Bath, Gloucester and Cirencester was 'inspired' by Alfred's ambitions to project claims to West Saxon control over strongpoints in the Mercian borderland, including Bath, but also Cirencester (Asser's *Caerleri*), which

controlled the road connecting the Mercian burh, royal estate and the couple's new mausoleum at St Oswald's, Gloucester with Winchester.

Cirencester, identified with Penda's victory of 628, like Bath arguably signified Mercian power and Mercian lordship over the Hwicce. Guthrum's winter camp at Cirencester in 878 indicated he had left Alfred's kingdom ('*suo regno exituros*'), placing Cirencester then beyond West Saxon territory (ASC 628, 878). The surviving amphitheatre offered Guthrum a potential site for defence or tribute exaction in Mercia, possibly paralleled in 893 by Viking occupation of Chester amphitheatre (McWirr *et al.* 1982: 27; Wilmott and Garner 2018: 435). However, the ninth-century Cirencester royal minster or church and enclosure at St John's, Chester, as parallels for Repton, plausibly offer significant stone structures of comparable strategic potential. By the reign of Athelstan a charter extract reported a royal meeting at the Roman city in 935: '*in civitate a Romanis olim constructa quæ Cirnecester dicitur tota optimatum generalitate sub ulnis regiae dapilitatis ovanti prescripta est*'. This fragment makes no claims that Athelstan's rare stay rebuilt the city or its pre-existing Mercian church. However, Cirencester was heavily critiqued by the Welsh poem *Armes Prydein* as a 'haven of tax collectors', suggesting this royal site too was reconstructed by Aethelred and Aethelflaed, if with Edward's agreement (SI792 935; Kelly 2004: no.11; McWirr *et al.* 1982).

Other pressures on Mercian border resources as Alfred and Edward secured power on the Severn estuary are hinted at by Aethelred's return of Old Sodbury, Gloucester to Worcester (SI446 c. 903); Athelstan's burial at the borderland monastery of Malmesbury, Edmund's charter leasing Wotton-under-Edge, on the western edge of the Cotswolds, containing an ancient ridgeway down from Cotswold grazing onto the Bristol plain (S467 940); and expanded royal presence in Somerset described by the estates granted Edward by Alfred's will (Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 317–318). Elsewhere in Mercian territory, as Aethelred's death approached and joint campaigning from 909 renewed attention to opportunities and threats from Mercia's Danelaw borderland, its potential rewards perhaps led other southern Mercian allies to commend themselves personally with Edward as Aethelred, Ealhswith and Aethelwulf of the Gaini and Aethelred himself had commended themselves to Alfred.

Breaking down borders

Early Mercian borderlands each held particular regional characteristics. Over time relatively shallow, stabilised, locally and ideologically managed riverine frontiers developed with seventh-century peer polities; Northumbria at the Humber (ASC829) and with Wessex on the Thames (ASC802). The apparent contrast between the aggressive militarised plundering of western Britain from the mid-seventh century prior to construction of Offa's Dyke and the subordination leveraged from East Anglian, Kentish and South Saxon kingdoms to absorb those territories wholesale by c. 800 is somewhat over-estimated. Written and archaeological sources reveal Welsh borderscapes continued to be zones of political interaction, negotiated and fought over, generating long-term social and political border traditions formed around mutually comprehensible nodes of influence, control

points, and routeways connecting a familiar landscape. Careful Mercian negotiation of the Iron Age hillforts and natural high-places by Offa's Dyke and of defensive locales by Wat's Dyke, show how the building or adaptation of strategic border structures could reinforce or negate long-lived strategic locales (Charles Edwards 2013; Ray and Bapty 2016: 75). For example, the Wye continued as a managed zone of interaction (Ray and Delaney 2018).

Mercian borderlands were broadly stable and managed, tested by occasional campaigning from both sides through strategies that reinforced broader political activity and local borderwork. Such occasional probing of borders was incomparable with sustained depredations Mercia suffered under the Great Army, which divided Mercia in 877, forcing both Alfred's swiftly militarised defended landscape illustrated in the Burghal Hidage, and Aethelflaed's layered system broadly reflecting Baker and Brookes 'defence in depth' (2013, 383). The 'frontier' model of eighth and ninth century borders however, also underplays how any one border, most visibly that of Offa's and Wat's Dykes, but also that with Kent might preoccupy networks of power in peripatetic and militarised overkingship. The authority and spoils to be derived by Mercian rulers from successful Welsh border activities connected politically with the mobilization costs of resources and rewards to armed followings for campaigning at other Mercian borders, while kings dispensed both prizes and punishment, either at the periphery with the army or Councils of the Mercian political community (Capper forthcoming a).

Strategic historic borders were acknowledged when opportune, long after the English passed under the same rulership. Ealdorman Aethelweard, royal historian and notorious commentator on Danish matters, acknowledged Aethelred of Mercia as a king in 893 and Chester the British border, '*Brittanum fines*' likewise noting the historic Mercian border with Wessex on the Avon in 910 (Campbell 1962: xv, 49, 52). In 1013, Swein and Cnut acknowledged Watling Street as a border, beyond it dealing 'the greatest damage that any army could do' (ASC 1013). However, retrospective authors often remade past borders in contemporary interest; Aethelweard numbered Alfred's accession in years since West Saxon victory over Mercia in 825 at '*Ellendune*', but described conflict between them as 'civil war' ('*civilia bella*'; Campbell 1962: 40); thereby promoting contemporary unity and obscuring historically separate motives and identities. Wulfstan, seeking precedent, forged legal codes by Edward and Guthrum (Whitelock 1941). Just as Welsh speaking communities long lived on both sides of Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke, likewise among the so-called 'Five Boroughs' early English names frequently mark major Scandinavian settlements, Derby excepted (Parsons 2022; Kershaw 2013). Despite its place-names and Mercian recognition, however, Chester's Scandinavian population and its limited hinterland later lacked the recognition and freedoms of more substantial Danelaw counterparts (Lewis and Thacker 2003).

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly given modern politics, borders and borderlands, particularly between ethnicities, have offered fertile ground for scholarship. Acknowledging the diversity of borderlands and modes of partition, but also identification of common features on either

side of boundaries rendered resource-filled historic borderlands comprehensible, operable and navigable at local and macro scales. Mercian borderlands were reinforced within the landscape by warfare and defence, building, taxation and legal traditions, but also enacted by a patchwork of local activities and material traces leaving ‘gaps’ felt by communities in their daily decision-making, legal and spiritual lives. Borders constructed relations with or without symmetry, but smaller polities felt resource appropriation and integration acutely. Some, particularly the East Saxons and Hwicce, chose stability under Mercian hegemony. Others continued to resist and re-negotiate. Unthinking colonial narratives of English-dominated negotiation are fruitfully overturned (Brady 2017: 13). However, the recognition of individual, local and regional strategies in negotiating ‘borderwork’ offers deeper nuances easily missed by the limitations of our sources across disciplines but also modern administrative or disciplinary boundaries. Furthermore, while at a macro-scale, English unification was only possible through internal recognition of differences, with only limited provisions applied universally across ethnic boundaries: ‘secular rights should be in force among the Danes according to as good laws as they can best decide’ (IV Edgar, ch.2.1, 2.2 and 12, and VI Aethelred, ch.37; Hadley 2009, 376), identification and freedoms among smaller communities were more vulnerable.

Raiding, campaigning and negotiation were features of border maintenance throughout Mercian hegemony and beyond. However, activities negotiating or reinforcing borders and management of cross-border activity frequently reflected local interests. Given medieval modes of communication rulers such as Offa and Aethelflaed evidently delegated details of border maintenance to leaders such as Aethelmund of the Hwicce or the discretion of local lawmen of the *Dunsæte*. Given their distance from centres of West Saxon royal power that dominated royal itineraries after Athelstan, it is unsurprising tenth-century lords held major border responsibilities, such as Aethelweard, who sought to rewrite histories in ways which obscured historic borders incompatible with perceptions of English unity. Likewise, Aethelred (c. 883–911) or Aelfhere of Mercia (956–983) and others in the borderlands retained substantial autonomy in determining how raiding and other maintenance of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands could serve their own interests (Charles Edwards 2013; Molyneux 2015). If the king’s aims were satisfied: raiding and other border maintenance offered a convenient, low-cost reward in keeping with long-held Mercian traditions of raiding beyond the formal border alongside plausible deniability of its excesses. Nonetheless, much of the power and responsibility to negotiate borderlands clearly remained in local hands.

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