KINGS

AND KINGDOMS OF EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

BARBARA YORKE

Kings and Kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England

Barbara Yorke

London and New York

To the several generations of King Alfred's College History students who have explored kings and kingdoms in early Anglo-Saxon England with me

First published 1990 by B.A.Seaby Ltd

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Yorke, Barbara *1951–*
Kings and Kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England.
1. England. Kings, to 1154
I. Title
942.010922

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0-203-44730-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-75554-5 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-16639-X (Print Edition)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

There are many excellent general surveys of Anglo-Saxon history, but their drawback for anyone interested in the history of one particular kingdom is that there is not usually an opportunity to treat the history of any one kingdom as a whole. This study surveys the history of the six best-recorded Anglo-Saxon kingdoms within the period AD 600–900: Kent, the East Saxons, the East Angles, Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex. The chapters, like many of the available written sources, approach the histories of the individual kingdoms through that of their royal families. Dynastic history is a major concern of the book, but the intention is to go beyond narrative accounts of the various royal houses to try to explain issues such as strategies of rulership, the reasons for success or failure and the dynamics of change to the office of king. More generalized conclusions suggest themselves from the studies of individual kingdoms and these are brought together in the final chapter which examines four main facets in the development of kingship in the period under review: kingship and overlordship; royal resources; royal and noble families; and king and church. The first chapter is also a general one and deals with the difficult issue of Anglo-Saxon kingship before 600 and introduces the main classes of written record.

Another aim of the work is to alert the general reader to the exciting research into early Anglo-Saxon England which has been carried out in recent years by historians and archaeologists, but which may only be available in specialist publications. Any writer is, of course, dependent on the primary and secondary works which are available and differences in the material which has survived or the type of research which has been done have helped dictate the shape of the chapters for the individual kingdoms. Readers who wish to follow up individual references will find full details through the notes and the bibliography. Notes have been primarily used for referencing secondary works, but there are some instances in which additional commentary has been provided through them. The reader is alerted to many major problems of interpretation through the text, but shortage of space and the nature of the book have prevented detailed discussion of the more complex issues.

Although I have been able to indicate the written works to which I have been indebted, it is more difficult to demonstrate the immense benefit I have gained from discussions with other Anglo-Saxonists. It would be impossible to name all those from whom at one time or another I have received advice and encouragement, but I hope that if they read this they will know that I am grateful. My thanks go, in particular, to Professor Frank Barlow with whom I began my study of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms for my doctoral thesis and to Dr David Kirby who very kindly read the book in manuscript and generously made many suggestions for its improvement. I am also most grateful to those who provided me with photographs and captions and to a succession of editors at Seaby's for their patience and assistance. Finally, on the home front, I must thank my husband Robert for without his continuing support 1 doubt if this book would ever have been completed.

WINCHESTER 30 SEPTEMBER 1989

LIST OF TABLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Conventions used in the tables

d=died; k=killed; m=married; †=died in infancy; A broken line in the tables indicates a hypothetical link.

For further information on the chronologies and family relationships of the Anglo-Saxon royal houses see the *Handbook of British Chronology* (Dumville 1986b) with which these tables are broadly in agreement.

Figures 1–7 appear on plates between pp. 90–91 and figures 8–14 on plates between pp. 106–107.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOMS

There is a sense in which the history of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms can be said to have begun with the arrival of Augustine and a band of nearly forty monks at the court of King Æthelbert of Kent in 597. Augustine and his followers had been despatched by Pope Gregory the Great 'to preach the word of God to the English race' and, as far as we know, their mission was the first sustained attempt to bring Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons.[1] Not surprisingly the arrival of Augustine and his followers was an event of the utmost significance to Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed in 731) is our main narrative source for the seventh and early eighth centuries, and he began his detailed discussion of the history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms at this point. Bede as a monk naturally believed that the conversion of his people began a new phase in their history, but it would also be true to say that it was only after the arrival of the Augustine mission that Bede was able to write a detailed history of his people. For Augustine and his fellow monks not only brought a new religion to the Anglo-Saxons; they also brought the arts of reading and writing.

Although the arrival of the Gregorian mission clearly marked a very important stage in the religious history of the Anglo-Saxons and in the production of written records, it is not an ideal point at which to begin an investigation into the history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. For it is evident that the majority of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were already in existence by 597 and that the complex political pattern of interrelationships and amalgamations which Bede reveals in his *Ecclesiastical History* had its origins in the pre-Christian period. This is frustrating for the historian for it means that many vital stages in the early growth of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms took place offstage, as it were, before the provision of adequate written records had begun. Fortunately the history of the country between AD 400 and 600 is not purely dependent upon written records and the evidence of place-names and archaeology has transformed our appreciation of the period. As new archaeological sites are constantly coming to light, and as much work which has already taken place has not yet been fully written up, the full potential that the archaeological evidence has for the understanding of the sub-Roman period is far from being realized.

Written sources: British

The settlement of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the origins of the Anglo-

Saxon kingdoms are two closely related, but not identical problems. Our nearest contemporary written source for the period of the Anglo-Saxon settlements is the homiletic work 'The Ruin of Britain' (*De Excidio Britanniae*) in which a British cleric called Gildas reviews the events of the fifth century from the vantage point of one of the surviving British kingdoms in the western half of Britain at a date (probably) around the middle of the sixth century.[2] Gildas' subject is not so much the advent of the Anglo-Saxons, but the sins of the British which, to his way of thinking, were ultimately responsible for provoking the vengeance of God in the form of Germanic and other barbarian piratical attacks. Gildas briefly sketches a picture of Saxons being utilized by the British as federate soldiers in eastern England following the recall of the Roman legions, of the federate settlements growing in size and confidence until they were strong enough to overthrow their paymasters, and of the Saxons then wreaking havoc on the hapless British until the famous victory of *Mons Badonicus* (Mount Badon) some forty-four years before the time that Gildas was writing.[3] The account is brief and lacks dates, and is clearly inaccurate on certain points such as assigning the building of the Hadrian and Antonine Walls to the fourth century. Gildas was relying on oral tradition rather than written records and gives an impressionistic version of events that had taken place before his birth; however, his is the only narrative we possess for the period of the Anglo-Saxon settlements and so it has provided the framework for a discussion of the events of the sub-Roman period from the time of Bede onwards.

Although Gildas is best known for his information on the *adventus* of the Anglo-Saxons, his testimony is equally important for the nature of British society in the sixth century when he was writing from personal knowledge. The castigation of this society was the real focus of Gildas' polemic and among his principal targets were British kings ruling in south-western England and Wales.[4] These areas had been part of the Roman province of Britain, but by the sixth century little that was characteristic of the late Roman world apparently survived except adherence to Christianity (which Gildas evidently saw as rather half-hearted). Control had passed to kings whom Gildas characterized as 'tyrants' and whose basis of power was their armed followings. It was a society in which violence was endemic. Gildas' brief sketch of British society in the west in the sixth century is broadly in accordance with what can be discerned from later charters, saints' *Lives* and annals from Wales.[5] There would also appear to have been many points of similarity between the exercise of royal power in Wales and in the Celtic areas of northern Britain,[6] and the *ruler* and his *warband are portrayed* in rather a different, heroic, light in the poem *Gododdin* which recounts a disastrous raid made from the kingdom *of the Gododdin* (in south-east Scotland) against the Deiran centre of Catterick.[7]

The tradition of events in the fifth century which Gildas reports seems to have been, in summary, that in part of eastern Britain those on whom power had devolved following the withdrawal of the Roman legions attempted to

provide for their defence by hiring Germanic forces who eventually seized power from them, whereas in the western half of Britain comparable circumstances saw the rise of native warlords who filled the power vacuum and established kingdoms within former Roman *civitates*.

Written sources: Anglo-Saxon

When Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in 731 he used earlier narrative sources to provide some history of Britain before the advent of the Gregorian mission and took the basis of his account of the Anglo-Saxon settlement from Gildas' work.[8] Gildas did not provide any identification of the Saxon leaders who commanded the federates 'in the eastern part of the island', but Bede interpolated a passage in which he identified the leaders as two brothers, Hengist and Horsa, who were claimed to be the founders of the royal house of Kent.[9] The information presumably came from Abbot Albinus of Canterbury who was Bede's chief Kentish informant.[10] More detailed versions of the activities of Hengist and Horsa appear in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and in the 'Kentish Chronicles' included in the *Historia Brittonum,* a British compilation written in 829–30 and attributed to Nennius.[11] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* also contains accounts of the arrival of Cerdic and Cynric, Stuf and Wihtgar and Ælle and his sons, the founders respectively of the kingdoms of the West Saxons, the Isle of Wight and the South Saxons.[12] These founding fathers arrived off Britain with a few ships and, after battling against British leaders for some years, established their kingdoms. Briefer notices for Northumbria and the Jutes of mainland Hampshire seem to conform to a similar pattern of events. By the eighth and ninth centuries it had apparently become conventional to depict the founders of royal houses arriving fresh from the Continent to set up their kingdoms. There seems to have been a standard 'origin tradition' which was utilized to explain the establishment of the various Anglo-Saxon royal houses; even Gildas' account may have been influenced by such a convention.[13] It would be unwise to assume that these foundation stories are historically valid.

Bede introduced his information about Hengist and Horsa with the phrase 'they are said…' *(perhibentur)*, a formula he used elsewhere in his history when he was drawing on unverifiable oral tradition. Bede's comment suggests that we should use the information on the Kentish *adventus* with caution and certainly when one looks at the fuller narratives of the foundation of Kent and at the activities of Cerdic and Cynric one can see further reasons for questioning their historical validity. One must remember that these sources are not contemporary with the events they describe, but written some three to four hundred years later. They contain a number of features which can be found in foundation legends throughout the Indo-European world.[14] Particularly suspicious are the pairs of founding kinsmen with alliterating names, who recall the twin deities of the pagan Germanic world, and other characters whom the founders defeat or meet whose names seem to be derived from place-names. Thus the *Chronicle* describes a victory in 508 by

Cerdic and Cynric over a British king called Natanleod after whom, it is said, the district *Natanleaga* was named. In fact the name of this rather marshy area of Hampshire derives from the OE word *naet* 'wet' and it would appear that the name of a completely fictitious king has been taken from the place rather than the other way around.[15] There are many other examples of this type, and the Kentish foundation legends also contain other traditional story-telling motifs such as 'the night of the long knives' in which the Saxons lured many British nobles to their death by means of a ruse also found in the legends of the Greeks, Old Saxons and Vikings.

The chronologies of these foundation accounts are also suspect. Gildas provided no actual date for the Anglo-Saxon *adventus,* but Bede interpreted his words to mean that the first invitation to the federates was given between 449 and 455.[16] The arrival of Cerdic and Cynric is said to have occurred in 494 or 495, but it can be demonstrated that the chronology of the earliest West Saxon kings was artificially revised and traces of the rather clumsy revision remain in the repetitive entries within the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.[17] David Dumville has argued that other versions of the West Saxon regnal list imply that the reign of Cerdic was originally dated to 538–54 which (following the time sequence of the *Chronicle*) would place the arrival of Cerdic and Cynric in 532.[18] The detailed critiques which have been made of the foundation accounts in recent years make it difficult to use them with any confidence to reconstruct the early histories of their kingdoms in the way which earlier generations of historians felt able to do. Even if there was a genuine core to the stories of Cerdic and Hengist it is impossible to separate it out from the later reworkings which the stories have evidently received. The accounts as they survive show how later Anglo-Saxons wanted to see the foundation of their kingdoms, rather than what actually occurred.

Cerdic was the founder king of the West Saxon dynasty from whom all subsequent West Saxon kings claimed descent. We know for a number of other kingdoms who the founders of their royal houses were believed to be and what their positions in regnal lists and genealogies were. As in the case of Cerdic (if we accept the revised date for his reign), these other examples suggest a sixth-century date for the formation of kingdoms. Bede, for instance, reveals that the kings of the East Angles were known as Wuffingas after Wuffa, the grandfather of King Rædwald.[19] As Rædwald died in c. 625, his grandfather presumably ruled around the middle of the sixth century. The key figure for the East Saxons was Sledd, from whom all subsequent East Saxon kings traced descent, and whose son was ruling in 604. Sledd must have come to power in the second half of the sixth century.[20] Although these dates could represent the limits of oral tradition when genealogical information was first written down, as they stand they suggest that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were creations of the sixth century rather than the fifth century and do not go back to the earliest origins of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain.[21]

Archaeological evidence

Archaeological evidence has a great potential for reconstructing the nature of the Anglo-Saxon settlements and the circumstances in which kingdoms developed. However, archaeologists have naturally been influenced in their interpretation of the material from settlement sites and cemeteries by the surviving written sources, although currently there is a greater appreciation of the written material's evident inadequacies.[22] It has been realized for some time that the date of around the middle of the fifth century for the Saxon *adventus,* which Bede derived from his reading of Gildas, was too specific. Germanic settlement in Britain may have begun before the end of the fourth century and seems to have continued throughout the fifth century and probably into the sixth century.[23] Nevertheless Gildas' explanation of why the Anglo-Saxons were allowed to settle in Britain has remained very influential. Confirmation of the use of Anglo-Saxons as federate troops has been seen as coming from burials of Anglo-Saxons wearing military equipment of a type issued to late Roman forces which have been found both in late Roman contexts, such as the Roman cemeteries of Winchester and Colchester, and in purely 'Anglo-Saxon' rural cemeteries like Mucking (Essex).[24] The distribution of the earliest Anglo-Saxon sites and place-names in close proximity to Roman settlements and roads has been interpreted as showing that initial Anglo-Saxon settlements were being controlled by the Romano-British.[25] However, it is not necessary to see all the early settlers as federate troops and this interpretation has been used rather too readily by some archaeologists.[26] A variety of relationships could have existed between Romano-British and incoming Anglo-Saxons.

The broader archaeological picture suggests that no one model will explain all the Anglo-Saxon settlements in Britain and that there was considerable regional variation. Settlement density varied within southern and eastern England. Norfolk has more large Anglo-Saxon cemeteries than the neighbouring East Anglian county of Suffolk; eastern Yorkshire (the nucleus of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Deira) far more than the rest of Northumbria.[27] The settlers were not all of the same type. Some were indeed warriors who were buried equipped with their weapons, but we should not assume that all of these were invited guests who were to guard Romano-British communities. Many, like the later Viking settlers, may have begun as piratical raiders who later seized land and made permanent settlements. Other settlers seem to have been much humbler people who had few if any weapons and suffered from malnutrition. These have been characterized by one archaeologist as Germanic 'boat people', refugees from crowded settlements on the North Sea which deteriorating climatic conditions would have made untenable.[28]

The settlers were of varied racial origins. In one of his additions to Gildas' narrative Bede says that the settlers came from:

> Three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The people of Kent and the inhabitants of the Isle of Wight are of Jutish origin and also those opposite the Isle of Wight… From the Saxon country…

> came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. Besides this, from the country of the Angles…came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all the Northumbrian race.[29]

Bede's account is in part a rationalization from the political situation of his own day, but he does seem to have been broadly correct in identifying the main North Sea provinces from which the bulk of the Germanic settlers in Britain came and their main areas of settlement within Britain, though the artefact evidence for Jutish settlement is less substantial than that for the Angles and Saxons.[30] However, archaeology reveals that the detailed picture is more complex. There seems to have been considerable racial admixture in all areas reflected in variations in dress and burial custom. 'Mixed' cemeteries, in which both cremation and inhumation were practised, occur throughout southern and eastern England.[31] Other Germanic peoples also settled in Britain, as Bede acknowledged in a later passage in the *Ecclesiastical History*.[32] Scandinavian settlers have been located in East Anglia and elsewhere along the eastern seaboard,[33] and there seems to have been some Frankish settlement south of the Thames.[34] However, there is always a difficulty in deciding whether archaeological material from a specific area of Europe is an indicator of movement of peoples from that area to Britain or merely of trade or gift-exchange of various commodities.[35] Although there does seem to have been some Frankish settlement in Britain, the bulk of the Frankish material which has been recovered is more likely to reflect the close links which existed between Francia and south-eastern England, and Kent in particular, in the sixth century.[36]

But what was happening to the Romano-British population while the Germanic settlement of Britain was taking place? Archaeology has been particularly useful in showing that many Roman communities throughout Britain experienced substantial changes during the fourth century before Anglo-Saxon settlement began.[37] The changes appear to have included a shift from an urban to a rural-based economy. In Wroxeter (Salop) and Exeter stone town houses were replaced in the late fourth and early fifth centuries by simpler, flimsier buildings made entirely of timber, while some areas of the towns were abandoned altogether or were farmed.[38] Comparable drastic changes seem to have occurred in towns like Canterbury and Winchester in the eastern half of the country.[39] The eventual result was the virtual abandonment within Britain during the fifth century of towns as centres of population. Some rural villas initially gained advantage from the changing economic circumstances, but there are also signs of villas being adapted in the fourth and fifth centuries to become more self-sufficient.[40] At Frocester (Gloucs) and Rivenhall (Essex) the villa buildings were allowed to decay or were turned into barns while new timber buildings, more typical of the early Middle Ages, were erected.[41] Although attacks by Anglo-Saxons (and in the west of Britain by Irish) exacerbated a difficult situation, they did not cause it, as Gildas' account seems to imply. The complex problems which caused the decline of the Roman empire affected the inhabitants of Britain well before

Anglo-Saxon settlement began on any scale,[42] and, by the time the Anglo-Saxons arrived, the Romano-British inhabitants had already begun to adapt themselves to a way of life that can be described as 'early medieval'.

By the end of the fifth century different settlement patterns are discernible between eastern Britain (which had been settled by Anglo-Saxons) and western Britain (which had not). One sign of changing circumstances in the west of Britain was the re-emergence of hill-top settlements which, it has been argued by Leslie Alcock in particular, may have functioned as chieftain centres and be linked with the emergent British kingdoms we can dimly discern in the written sources.[43] The reoccupation of the impressive Iron Age hill-fort of South Cadbury (Som) is a good example of the type.[44] The whole of the innermost rampart of nearly 1100 m in length was refortified in the subRoman period and a substantial timber hall built on the highest point in the interior. Yet there were very few finds of artefacts from the South Cadbury excavations, and this helps to explain why the British generally have proved very hard to detect in the subRoman period.[45] After the Romano-British lost access to Roman industrial products, they become all but invisible in the archaeological record as they were no longer using on any scale artefacts which were diagnostically Romano-British or, at least, not of a type that survives in the soil. The Britons of the west country received the occasional consignment of pottery from Mediterranean kilns brought by foreign traders;[46] the Britons in the east presumably made use of Anglo-Saxon craftsmen. We should not assume that every owner of an artefact of 'Germanic' type in eastern England was of Germanic descent.

In fact, the majority of the people who lived in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms must have been of Romano-British descent.[47] The large pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries like Spong Hill (Norfolk) which contained over three thousand burials, might at first sight seem to suggest that Anglo-Saxon settlement was on such a substantial scale that the native British population would have been completely overwhelmed by the newcomers—which is rather what Gildas seems to imply. However, when it is remembered that these cemeteries were in use in many cases for upwards of two hundred years it is apparent that the communties they served cannot have been that numerous; Spong Hill may have serviced a population of approximately four to five hundred people, though these would appear to have been dispersed over a wide area of countryside, rather than concentrated within one settlement.[48] Outside eastern England and Kent it is rare to find a cemetery of more than one hundred burials and, even allowing for the fact that the most westerly shires were not conquered until after the time the Anglo-Saxons were converted and had abandoned their distinctive burial customs, it is unlikely that the newcomers outnumbered the Romano-British, in spite of evidence for a substantial drop in the size of the Romano-British population in the fifth and sixth centuries.[49] Place-name evidence also provides indications of British survival even in the areas of densest Anglo-Saxon settlement.[50]

The Anglo-Saxons did not settle in an abandoned landscape on which they imposed new types of settlement and farming, as was once believed. Recent

landscape studies have suggested a high degree of continuity between rural settlement in the Roman and Anglo-Saxon periods and this links with indications of early Saxon settlement taking place under the aegis of the Romano-British.[51] Landscape studies are a complex matter which draw upon a variety of topographical, archaeological and written sources. There are major problems in trying to relate Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries to those of Roman estates for which there are no written records, and by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period there had been major changes to the organization of the landscape which can obscure earlier arrangements.[52] Interpretation is also hindered by uncertainty about late Roman administrative arrangements. Nevertheless, studies carried out throughout the country, in 'British' as well as 'Anglo-Saxon' areas, have found examples of continuity of territorial boundaries where, for instance, Roman villa estate boundaries seem to have been identical with those of medieval estates, as delineated in early charters, though settlement sites within the defined territory might shift.[53]

What we see in these examples is probably continuity of the estate or territory as an unit of administration rather than one of exploitation. Although the upper level of Roman administration based on towns seems to have disappeared during the fifth century, a subsidiary system based on subdivisions of the countryside may have continued.[54] The basis of the internal organization of both the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and those of their Celtic neighbours was a large rural territory which contained a number of subsidiary settlements dependent upon a central residence which the Anglo-Saxons called a *villa* in Latin and a *tun* in Old English.[55] These vills were centres of royal administration and visited by the kings and their entourages on regular circuits of their kingdoms when food rents which had to be rendered at the royal vill would be consumed.[56] In Anglo-Saxon England of the seventh and eighth centuries groups of royal vills and their dependent territories formed *regiones,* discrete territories within kingdoms for administrative purposes.[57] If this recent research is correct it suggests that the basic infrastructure of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms was inherited from late Roman or subRoman Britain.

In recent years a number of royal vills of the early Anglo-Saxon period have been identified from fieldwork and aerial photographs and some have been excavated. One of the best known is Yeavering in the kingdom of Northumbria, which is identified in the *Ecclesiastical History* as a *villa regalis* (royal vill) and seems to have been used by Northumbrian kings in the late sixth and seventh centuries, after an earlier history as a British cult and administrative centre.[58] Yeavering is a remarkable site and in addition to a series of large timber halls and a protective fort, had a unique wedge-shaped building which resembles a segment of a Roman amphitheatre (see Fig. 8). One notable feature of Yeavering is the small yield of diagnostic Anglo-Saxon finds or buildings; only a couple of sunken-featured buildings and a handful of pottery and other small finds betray their presence. All the other structures appear to have British or Roman antecedents. Nothing quite like Yeavering has been excavated further south, but comparable halls have been excavated at Cowdery's Down, near Basingstoke (Hants) which were in

use during the sixth and seventh centuries.[59] Although the Basingstoke area was part of the West Saxon kingdom at the end of the seventh century it is not clear what the political organization of the area was at the end of the sixth century. The size and sophistication of its large timber halls suggest that it too could have been a royal vill. Like Yeavering, the halls of Cowdery's Down have no exact parallels in the Germanic world, though they cannot be exactly matched in Romano-British tradition either (see Fig. 9). The great halls of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms seem to represent a fusion of Germanic and Romano-British building traditions.[60] They symbolize one of the most important contributions which archaeology has made to our understanding of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, namely the demonstration of the importance within them of Romano-British as well as Germanic roots.

We cannot expect archaeology to show us the exact point at which Anglo-Saxon leaders became kings, but as the sixth century progresses we can trace the evolution of a class of male burial which has a number of distinctive characteristics and is substantially richer than the average warrior burial. By the end of the sixth century particularly significant individuals were being buried under mounds, either on their own or as part of a cemetery of similar barrows, and with a rich array and variety of gravegoods including foreign imports and objects made from gold, silver and semi-precious stones.[61] Such burials are commonly referred to as 'princely burials' and, as has been argued for the appearance of rich burials in the prehistoric period, the focusing of attention on the burials of the élite of the community may be an important indicator of 'state formation',[62] or, in Anglo-Saxon terms, the growth and development of kingship during the latter half of the sixth century. The princely burials could be seen as showing the insecurity of the parvenu who needs to proclaim his new status with ostentatious display.[63] The best known and the grandest of the princely burials is the ship-burial from mound 1 at Sutton Hoo which has often been claimed as the burial of King Rædwald of the East Angles (d. c. 625),[64] but two other early seventh-century burials at Taplow (Bucks) and Broomfield (Essex), which unfortunately were not excavated under modern conditions, approach it in richness and range of grave-goods.[65] The archaeological evidence thus provides some support for the indications we have from the more reliable of the written sources that the sixth century was the period when most Anglo-Saxon kingdoms came into existence.

The political structure of Anglo-Saxon England c. 600

We do not have sufficient sources for the fifth and sixth centuries to be able to reconstruct a political map of the time, but it is possible to infer from sources of the seventh century something of the political developments which had taken place by 600. It is clear from the *Ecclesiastical History* that there were a large number of small kingdoms in England during the seventh century, but the most informative source on the early political structure of England south of the Humber is a document known as the 'Tribal Hidage' which is reproduced below.[66]

Myrcna landes	30,000 (hides)	Hwinca	7,000
Wocensætna	7,000	Cilternsætna	4,000
Westerna	7,000	Hendrica	3,500
Pecsætna	1,200	Unecung(a)ga	1,200
Elmedsætna	600	Arosaetna	600
Lindesfarona mid Hæthfeldlande	7,000	Færpinga	300
Suth Gyrwa	600	Bilmiga	600
North Gyrwa	600	Widerigga	600
East Wixna	300	East Willa	600
West Wixna	600	West Willa	600
Spalda	600	East Engle	30,000
Wigesta	900	East Sexena	7,000
Herefinna	1,200	Cantwarena	15,000
Sweordora	300	Suth Sexena	7,000
Gifla	300	West Sexena	100,000
Hicca	300		
Wihtgara	600		
Noxgaga	5,000		
Ohtgaga	2,000		
(Total)	66,100	(Total) (correctly	242,700 244,100)

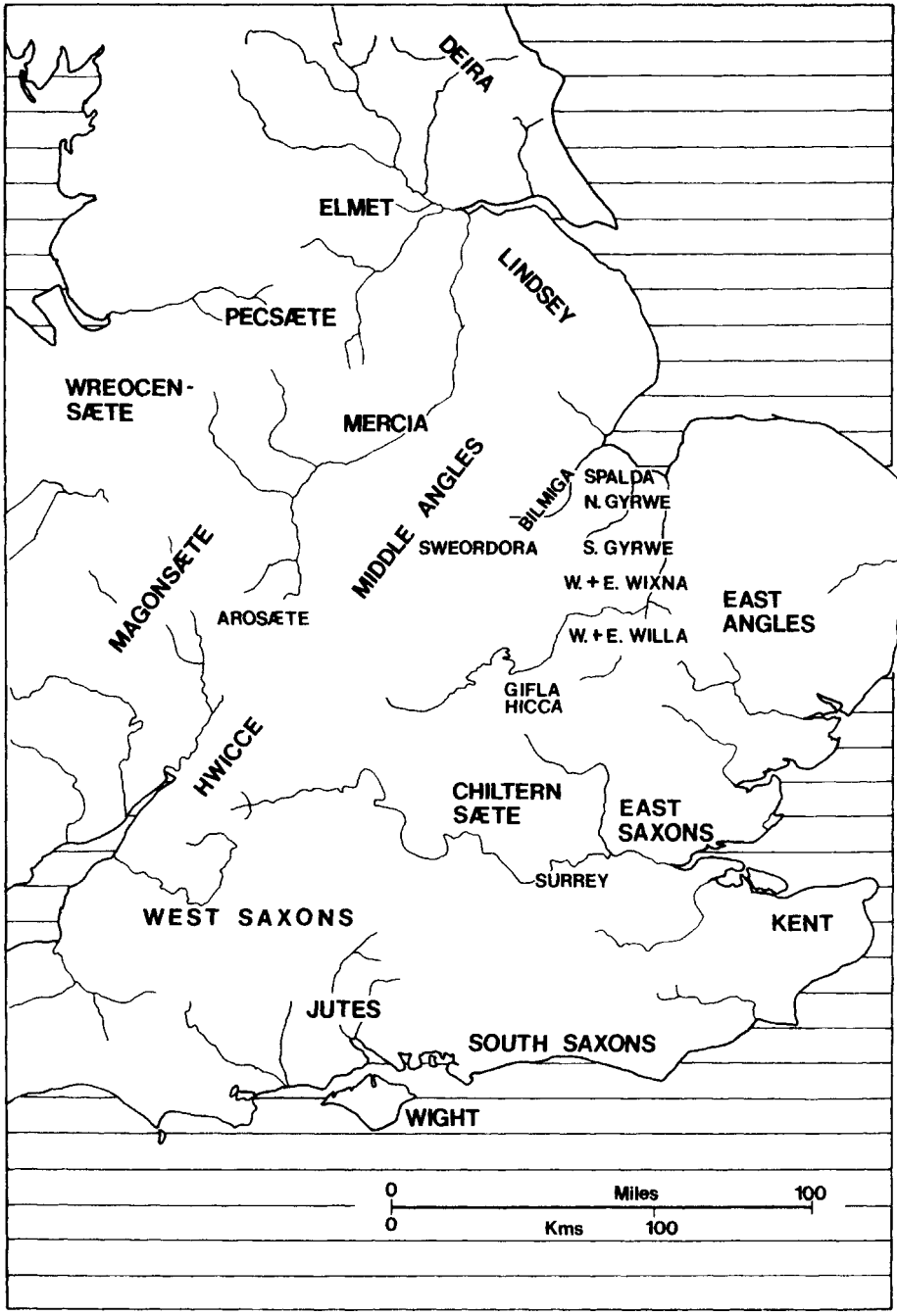
Like many of the key documents for the early Anglo-Saxon period the text of the Tribal Hidage only survives in later manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to the eleventh century. The list's focus of interest seems to have been the Midlands and so it is generally assumed to have been a Mercian compilation.[67] It is most likely to have been drawn up in the second half of the seventh century, that is after the conversion of the Mercians, but before many of the people listed in it became incorporated into one of the larger kingdoms. The Tribal Hidage's most likely purpose was assessment for the collection of tribute and the reign of Wulfhere of Mercia (658–75) who is known to have been overlord of the other southern kingdoms is perhaps the most probable time for it to have been drawn up.[68] Thirty-five peoples are listed with assessments in hides, a unit of land used throughout the Anglo-Saxon period for a variety of assessment purposes, but which cannot be given a precise value in modern terms, though a hide may have originally been defined as the area of land sufficient to maintain one family and is sometimes given the notional equivalence of 120 acres.[69] The territories dependent upon royal vills which were discussed in the previous section could be as much as 100 hides in size. Although the assessments presumably do reflect to a large extent the relative size of the provinces, the list was not necessarily drawn up on a strictly pro rata basis: fertility of the soil, population density and a kingdom's exact relationship with the overlord province might all have affected the size of the hidage assessment.[70] The exceptionally large figure of 100,000 hides for the West

Saxons may be a later emendation to the source of our surviving manuscripts which reflects Wessex's later growth rather than its size when the list was originally composed.[71]

The peoples listed in the Tribal Hidage seem to represent political units of differing size within seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England. Some are large and well-attested kingdoms which continued into the eighth century, including the West Saxons (? 100,000 hides), the East Angles and Mercians (30,000 hides) and the Cantwarena (people of Kent) (15,000 hides). Next in size are a number of peoples assessed at 7,000 hides: the Wocensætna (Wreocensæte), the Westerna (Magonsaete), the Lindesfarona (Lindsey), the Hwinca (Hwicce), the East Saxons and the South Saxons. All but the Wreocensæte are known to have had their own royal houses.[72] Little is known of the four peoples assessed at between 5,000 and 2,000 hides: the Cilternsætna (Chilternsæte)(4,000), the Hendrica (3,500), the Noxgaga (5,000) and Ohtgaga (2,000). The Cilternsætna (Chilternsæte) are usually presumed to be a people centred on the Chilterns, but the location of the other peoples is not known and the names Noxgaga and Ohtgaga may have become garbled in transmission. Finally there are twenty small peoples assessed at between 300 and 1,200 hides,[73] some of whom are known to have been ruled by kings in the seventh century. We have Bede's authority for kings of the Elmedsætna (Elmet) and the Wihtgara (Isle of Wight), both of which were assessed at 600 hides, and another 600-hide people, the South Gyrwe (who were probably based around Ely), are said by Bede to have had their own ruler, though he is called *princeps* rather than *rex*.[74]

Map 1 attempts to show the positions of those peoples of the Tribal Hidage who can be located with some confidence.[75] Although a large number of the peoples named in the Tribal Hidage are known from other written sources or from placenames, there are some names, such as Noxgaga, Ohtgaga and Unecungaga, which cannot be identified. Even for the names we can identify it is difficult to place them within exact boundaries on a map. In some instances this is because the people concerned, and this applies especially to the numerous small peoples of the east Midlands, lost their independence at an early date and cannot be linked with later adminstrative units. The map also includes one or two other provinces, such as Surrey and that of the Jutes of Hampshire, whose existence as self-governing areas seems well attested by other sources; they may be concealed beneath some of the unidentifiable names of the Tribal Hidage.

It is possible that although varying in size all thirty-five peoples of the Tribal Hidage were of the same status in that they were provinces which were ruled by their own royal houses and so assessed independently for payment of tribute.[76] Confirmation of this interpretation may come from Bede's account of the battle of the river *Winwæd* of 655 where it is said that Penda of Mercia, overlord of all the southern kingdoms, was able to call upon thirty contingents, each led by *duces regii* ('royal commanders'), to fight with him against the Northumbrians.[77] However, we should not assume that all the provinces in the Tribal Hidage had rulers of Germanic birth. The kingdom of Elmet had a

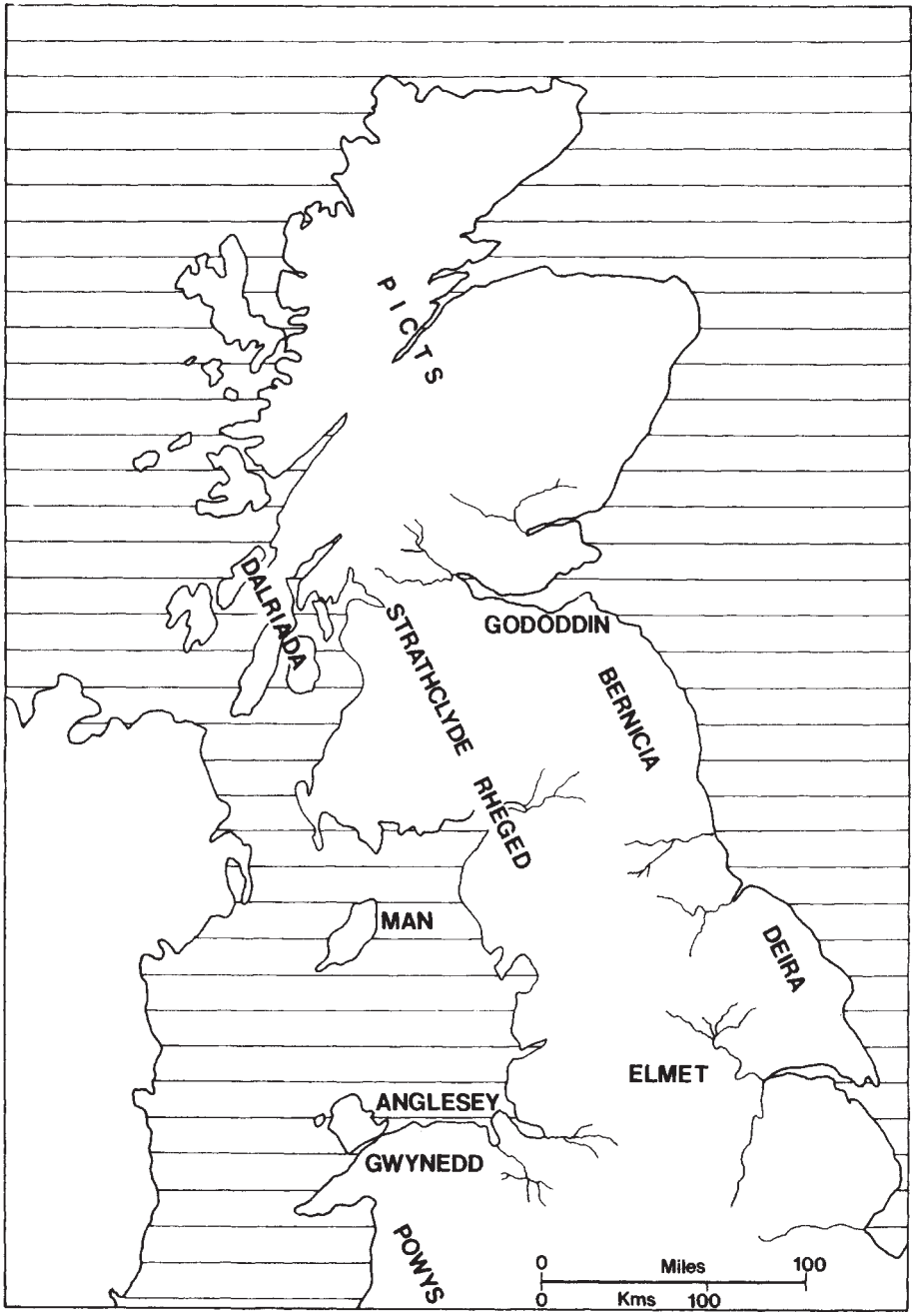


Map 1: Anglo-Saxon provinces at the time of the composition of the Tribal Hidage (? late seventh century)

British ruler early in the seventh century[78] and it has been suggested that the Chilternsæte may have remained in native hands for most of the sixth century.[79]

Although the most westerly kingdoms listed, the Westerna/Magonsaete and Hwinca/Hwicce, may have been created in the course of the seventh century, it is likely that the majority of the provinces listed in the Tribal Hidage were in existence by the end of the sixth century. There is a concentration of small provinces in the east Midlands and it is not clear whether this distribution reflects a peculiarity of the political organization of the area or merely reflects Mercian interests.[80] It does, however, seem likely that in the sixth century there would have been more small independent provinces within eastern and southern England comparable to the group of 300–1,200 hides in the Tribal Hidage, for units of this type, described as *provinciae* or *regiones,* can be detected within many of the larger kingdoms of the seventh and eighth centuries.[81] Sometimes something distinctive in the administrative organization of the *regio* or in its political history will betray its previously independent existence. One of the best documented examples is the *regio* (or lathe in Kentish terminology) of west Kent. Throughout Kent's independent history the province of west Kent had its own ruler from the Kentish royal house, though at some points in the seventh century it was detached from Kentish control and ruled by East Saxons. The people of west Kent had their own bishopric at Rochester and in the sixth century their material culture seems to have had more in common with the Saxon provinces to their west and north than with the Jutes of east Kent.[82] However, none of our sources indicate just when and how the Oiscingas of east Kent conquered west Kent; it is one of the many unrecorded events of the sixth century. Several small provinces can also be detected in Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Berkshire and Surrey, but by the seventh century when our records begin these are dominated by other kingdoms and have a complex history of fluctuating overlordships.[83]

The existence of these numerous small provinces suggests that southern and eastern Britain may have have lost any political cohesion in the fifth and sixth centuries and fragmented into many small autonomous units, though late Roman administrative organization of the countryside may have helped dictate their boundaries. By the end of the sixth century the leaders of these communities were styling themselves kings, though it should not be assumed that all of them were Germanic in origin. There were also by the end of the sixth century some larger kingdoms and the majority of these were based on the south or east coasts. They include the provinces of the Jutes of Hampshire and Wight, the South Saxons, Kent, the East Saxons, East Angles, Lindsey and (north of the Humber) Deira and Bernicia (see map 2). Several of these kingdoms may have had as their initial focus a territory based on a former Roman *civitas* and this has been argued as particularly likely for the provinces of Kent, Lindsey, Deira and Bernicia, all of whose names derive from Romano-British tribal or district names.[84] The southern and east coasts were, of course, the areas settled first and in greatest numbers by the Germanic settlers and so



Map 2: Bernicia and Deira and their Celtic neighbours

presumably were the earliest to pass from Romano-British to Anglo-Saxon control. Once established they had the advantage of easy communication with other Germanic territories in Europe via the North Sea or the Channel. The east and south coast provinces may never have fragmented to the extent of some areas inland and by the end of the sixth century they were already beginning to expand by annexing smaller neighbours. Such aggressiveness must have encouraged areas which did not already possess military protection in the form of kings and their armies to acquire their own warleaders. By the time of the Tribal Hidage there were also two large 'inland' kingdoms, those of the Mercians and West Saxons, whose spectacular growth we can trace in part in our sources for the seventh century, but it is not clear how far this expansion had proceeded by the end of the sixth century.

The nature of early Anglo-Saxon kingship

Kingship seems to have been widespread in England by the end of the sixth century, but there is a limited amount which can be learnt about the nature of the office before the seventh century. Not only are the birth pangs of kingship among the Anglo-Saxons lost to us, but it is also difficult to say exactly what the position of king meant to an early Anglo-Saxon. Tacitus and other Roman writers show that some at least of the Germanic peoples had kings in the premigration period and two different strands of early Germanic kingship have been recognized: the traditional kingship of rulers who exercised various political and religious functions and military leadership.[85] Some of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms claimed that their founders were scions of Continental royal houses. Hengist, the supposed founder of the royal house of Kent, may have been identical with the Jutish prince of that name who features in a Scandinavian context in the Anglo-Saxon poems *Beowulf and* the *Fight at Finnsburg*.[86] The Mercian kings included in their genealogies Wærmund and his son Offa, kings of Continental Angeln, who also appear in early Anglo-Saxon poems.[87] Clearly there was a desire by the eighth century to connect Anglo-Saxon rulers with some of the Germanic heroes of the fourth and early fifth centuries, the time at which much of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry was set, but the inclusion of these heroic progenitors in the pedigrees is more likely to have been literary embellishment than solid historical fact.[88] However, the possibility cannot be ruled out altogether that some of those who became kings in Britain came from families which had been similarly successful on the Continent. The shipburials at Sutton Hoo and Snape have been interpreted as implying a link between the East Anglian royal house and the Vendel dynasty of Sweden.[89]

Even if Anglo-Saxon kings were not descended from European royal houses they may have been influenced by inherited traditions of Germanic kingship. All the royal houses for whom genealogies exist claimed to be descended from one of the pagan gods. In the majority of cases the god was Woden,[90] but the East Saxons traced descent from Seaxnet, a god also worshipped by the Old Saxons of Germany,[91] and the kings of Kent who claimed to be Woden-born included in their genealogy Oisc who may also have been a god.[92] Whatever

their origins Anglo-Saxon kings seem to have wanted to buttress their power by linking themselves with older traditions of sacral kingship which raised the king above his followers and–and this may be what was most significant-made their family the only one from which subsequent rulers could be chosen.[93]

But it would appear that Anglo-Saxon kings really owed their positions to their abilities as warleaders, as did the other Germanic leaders who created kingdoms for themselves out of former Roman provinces in Europe.[94] The accounts of the first Anglo-Saxon kings concentrate on their successes in battle and list their victories over British kings. The sixth-century entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are frequently problematic, but they do give a vivid impression of the aggressiveness of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Some of the fighting was concerned with expansion of territory and competition over land, but collection of tribute and booty were no doubt also important motives.[95] By the end of the sixth century the most powerful kings were able to claim an overlordship over the rest, sometimes referred to by historians as the bretwaldaship from the word 'bretwalda', meaning 'ruler of Britain', applied in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to the ninth-century overlord Egbert of the West Saxons.[96] The *Ecclesiastical History* lists the first seven great overlords beginning with Ælle of the South Saxons whose activities in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are placed between 477 and 491.[97] It seems doubtful whether jfclle really ruled at quite such an early date, especially as the second in the list was Ceawlin of Wessex *whose floruit* seems to have been the 580s and early 590s. Ceawlin was followed by Æthelbert of Kent who was ruling when the Gregorian mission came to England. The origins of this system of overlordship are obscure, but judging from what we can learn of overlords of the seventh century its basis was military strength. Although there have been various ingenious theories to account for the origins of the bretwaldaship,[98] it is not such a surprising institution in a society of rival kingdoms. Tacitus observed that amongst the warring Germanic tribes of the first century AD a particularly powerful king could win the submission of neighbouring tribes on the reputation of the size and effectiveness of his army alone.[99] It is quite possible that the most powerful sixth-century rulers exercised a similarly superficial overlordship over surrounding provinces, though, unlike the most powerful seventh-century rulers, they may not have commanded all the provinces south of the Humber.

Woden was an appropriate progenitor for rulers who were essentially warleaders because he was the god of battle.[100] Archaeology also indicates that war was an all-important concern for the elites of the early kingdoms. In male pagan burials weapons were the primary status symbol. The king buried, or commemorated, in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo was not only provided with a veritable arsenal of everyday weapons, but took with him to the grave a magnificent set of war-gear, consisting of helmet, shield and an elaborate, jewelled harness and belt to support his sword.[101] The outfit must have been for ceremonial rather than practical wear and suggests the personification of the king as a great warrior. This picture is reinforced by the object generally interpreted as a sceptre which is in effect a giant whetstone; it seems the ideal

symbol for a ruler whose basis of power was his military strength (see Fig. 3).[102] Helmets too may have been a symbol of royalty and they were used in coronations instead of a crown until c. 900.[103] Only two helmets have been recovered from burials, at Sutton Hoo and Benty Grange (see Figs 1 and 2).[104]

In a society where the success of a ruler and the people dependent upon him derived from effectiveness in war, the relationship of the king with his military followers was of vital importance. Tacitus saw the relationship of king and warband *(comitatus)* as central to the success and failure of the Germanic provinces he describes.[105] The interaction between the king and his warriors is also a major concern of Old English heroic poetry. Poems like *Beowulf* stress the reciprocal nature of the relationship of king and *comitatus*. The followers fought loyally for their lord, but the loyalty had been purchased beforehand by the upkeep the king provided for his warriors and by the giving of gifts; conspicuous acts of loyalty in battle would be rewarded by further gifts-appropriate generosity was what made a 'good king'.[106] When not in battle, the king's hall was the place where the necessary bonding of lord and follower occurred.[107] The *comitatus* ate and slept in the hall at the king's expense. It was at feasts in the great hall that pledges of loyalty were made and gifts in the form of weapons and other items of a warrior's equipment were handed over; anything made or decorated with gold was especially desired.

The excavated halls of Yeavering and Cowdery's Down form a bridge between the world of *Beowulf and* the reality of Anglo-Saxon life. These sites were probably royal vills to which the people of the surrounding district brought food rents to support the king and his followers. The reconstructions of halls from Cowdery's Down and Yeavering, based upon the surviving posthole evidence, show that they could have approached in grandeur the great feasting-hall of Heorot in which the Danish king entertained Beowulf and his followers.[108] We can fit the halls out for a feast with some of the items that were buried with the Sutton Hoo king: a vast cauldron with its iron chain which would have hung from the rafters over a central fire, drinking vessels of wood and horn, and plates and bowls of Byzantine silver.[109] Glass drinking vessels are a common item in other rich burials. It was a world of conspicuous display and personal adornment in which the wealth and power of the Sutton Hoo king would have been immediately apparent from his splendid appearance in regalia of silver, gold and garnets. In *Beowulf* the Danish coastguard knew instantly that Beowulf was a man of rank from his outward appearance and Beowulf s gift to the coastguard of a gold-hilted sword ensured that the receiver would be more honoured in the king's hall than he had been before.[110] *Beowulf* celebrated the bond bet wen lord and follower, but also makes clear the economics behind the relationship; a good king was also a wealthy one.

By 600 royal lordship embraced not only the immediate followers of the king's warband, but the other members of his kingdom as well. So much seems clear from the earliest surviving lawcode, that of Æthelbert of Kent which was drawn up not long after his conversion.[111] The king is shown as exercising