

# OSYTH, FRITHUWOLD AND AYLESBURY

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*The life and origins of Aylesbury's saint were discussed in Vol. 29. Mr Bailey here sets her and her family in their historical setting: the dynastic manoeuvrings of the seventh century, and the pivotal role played by royal families in the spread of Christianity.*

## I

It may be considered superfluous in the light of several previous studies of St Osyth and her life in the Vale of Aylesbury and Essex in the seventh century to return to the subject, but it must be said that in cases such as this we are concerned as much with balancing probabilities as with establishing demonstrable facts.<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to examine in more detail the political and religious contexts within which the life and times of St Osyth may be interpreted. It should be said at the outset that these observations are predicated on the assumption that St Osyth of Chich in Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury are one and the same person, and that the much later hagiography has garbled her into two separate, contemporary saints living in similar royal milieux only eighty miles apart. This seems to be stretching coincidence too far, for although there is more than one example of Anglo-Saxon saints bearing the same name, they do not exhibit such close relationships in time and space.<sup>2</sup> This view is supported by the fact that the name Osgyð is most uncommon during the whole of the pre-Conquest period.<sup>3</sup> (The commonly accepted spelling Osyth is used in this paper to avoid confusing the reader.)

There are several strands of this complex story which need to be elucidated:

1. The emergence of the kingdom of Mercia as a major power in the second half of the seventh century, and especially its expansion into the south Midlands and its relations with other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the area.
2. The marriage relationships between the rulers of the various kingdoms, and also their sub-kings.

3. The role of kings and royal ladies in the foundation and control of a network of minster churches across southern England in the mid to late seventh century, and of the development of many of them into saints with localized cults.

Space precludes more than a brief consideration of the first of these, and several of the statements made here are still subject to debate among historians of the period, and await a fuller treatment in the specific case of Buckinghamshire.

Mercia does not appear to have been a political and military force to be reckoned with outside its original heartland in the upper Trent Valley until after 625, but by 700 it had hegemony over virtually all of the southern English kingdoms apart from Wessex.<sup>4</sup> The role of Penda (ruled c.625–55) in this process was clearly significant, but is unfortunately obscured through lack of evidence.<sup>5</sup> His sons, Wulfhere and Æpelred (657–704) firmly laid the foundations of the Mercian supremacy in southern England which was to culminate in the reign of Offa (757–76).

The first recorded conversion of a prominent Mercian was that of Peada, Penda's eldest son, who in 653 was made king of the Middle Angles, a hitherto heterogeneous mixture of peoples living along the southern and eastern fringes of 'Outer Mercia'.<sup>6</sup> Peada brought four priests trained in the Irish tradition back to Mercia with him, and one of these, Diuma, became first bishop of the Mercians and Middle Angles. The extent of Peada's kingdom is never made clear.

After his father-in-law, Oswiu of Northumbria, had killed Penda at the battle of *Winwæd* in 655, and assumed control of Mercia, Peada was made puppet king there, but was soon murdered, apparently at the instigation of his wife, and in 657 was succeeded by Wulfhere, who had been kept in hiding by some nobles during the Northumbrian ascendancy.<sup>7</sup> Peada apparently had no successor as king of the Middle Angles. In the document known as the Tribal Hidage, which was drawn up, probably as some kind of tribute or taxation list, either in the reign of Wulfhere (657–74) or that of Æþelred (674–704), they appear as a series of peoples, assessed separately at amounts ranging from 300 to 4,000 hides.<sup>8</sup> It is two of these groups, the *Ciltornsætan* and the *Hendrica*, assessed at 4,000 and 3,500 hides, respectively, who occupied present-day Buckinghamshire, most of Oxfordshire and Hertfordshire and part of Bedfordshire, who provide the stage for St Osyth and her relations. Although the etymology of the name *Ciltornsætan* ('dwellers around Chiltern') is clear enough, it seems to conceal a mixed Anglian-Saxon-Celtic people, similar to the *Hwicce* of Gloucestershire and adjacent areas.<sup>9</sup> *Hendrica*, on the other hand, has not been satisfactorily explained. An origin in *Hindringas* ('dwellers behind (the Chilterns)') has been suggested, but this seems too large an area to have an *-ingas* name. Its appropriateness, of course, depends on the viewpoint of those giving the name.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The *Ciltornsætan*, at least in the vicinity of St Albans, do not appear to have succumbed to English rule until late in the sixth century, probably as a result of one of the campaigns of Cūþwulf, a relative of Ceawlin, the West Saxon king who ruled c.560–93 and who became *bretwalda* or overlord of the southern English. A battle fought at *Biedcanford* (which the balance of a long-lasting debate by historians and place-name scholars suggests was *not* Bedford) in or about 571,<sup>11</sup> led to the takeover of four *tunas* (which can be translated in this case as royal villas), and by implication their extensive dependant territories: Limbury (close to Luton), Aylesbury, Benson and Eynsham.

(The order in the Chronicle account proceeds from the north-east to south-west, towards the West Saxon heartland in the Upper Thames valley.) This suggests that the whole of the Chiltern area, with the possible exception of the immediate environs of St Albans, was taken over, from the Thames in the south-west to the borders of the East Saxons in the north-east.

In the absence of archaeological evidence, it would be unwise to be dogmatic about the nature of the first Anglo-Saxon settlers in Buckinghamshire. In the north, the Ouse valley was open to influences from the east of a so-called 'Anglian' type, although there is little evidence for such activity on a permanent basis upstream of the major early site at Kempston next to Bedford until the sixth century, and even then little beyond the later county boundary.<sup>12</sup> In the lands below the Chiltern escarpment there is little evidence of a sixth-century Saxon presence other than at Walton near Aylesbury, in contrast with the large cemeteries at Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable.<sup>13</sup> The large areas of woodland which were to be found in the clay vale, for example Bernwood and Chetwode, together with the survival of Celtic place-name elements, suggests that the area was not attractive to early English settlement, especially when extensive agricultural land lay available along the region's major rivers.<sup>14</sup> In the south of the county, the Thames Valley was open to settlers coming up-river, or crossing from the Surrey shore, or from west Middlesex, although there is little enough evidence of them prior to the seventh century.

Wulfhere was the first Mercian king to gain permanent control of the south Midlands, reaching the London area by 655, as well as the kingdoms of the East and South Saxons, although the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as usual has little detail of the campaigns involved. The reign of his brother Æþelred was generally marked by an absence of warfare. A lasting peace with Northumbria began after the battle of Trent in 679, Wessex was riven by internecine strife until the emergence of Ine in 688, and virtually the whole of the rest of southern England was under the direct control of Mercia.

These thirty years were ones of marked progress in the religious sphere, coinciding largely with the archiepiscopate of Theodore (668–90), who had been sent by Pope Vitalian to reorder the church in England after the first hectic years of the conversion and in the aftermath of the synod of Whitby.<sup>15</sup> During this formative period, new dioceses were set up for several of the kingdoms and sub-kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, for example Worcester for the *Hwicce* and Hereford for the *Magonsætan*.

A series of regular synods was instituted for the better governance of the church, and many of these meetings took place in the London region, rather than at Canterbury or at a location in the heartland of Mercia. It is likely that Theodore, as a newcomer to local political rivalries and realities, depended heavily on the support of somebody like Æþelred to push through his reform programme. Another key player in these events was Eorcenweald, first abbot of Chertsey and then bishop of London (675–93).<sup>16</sup> He was probably of Kentish royal stock, and was active in founding minsters in Surrey and Essex in the 660s, as well as in relations between the four kingdoms which contended for control of London and its hinterland. It is during the period between the synod of Whitby and the severe visitation of the plague in 664, and the synod of Hatfield (Herts) in 679/80 that many of the events associated with the life of St Osyth were enacted and there is just enough surviving material to enable the story to be pieced together in a logical sequence. The key factors seem to be the need for a network of minster churches in southern Middle Anglian territory, and the religious ethos surrounding the court of Æþelred and his various female relations, many of them daughters of Penda, who seems to have had an exceptional number of surviving children, several of whom failed to find marriage partners. (See Fig. 1.)

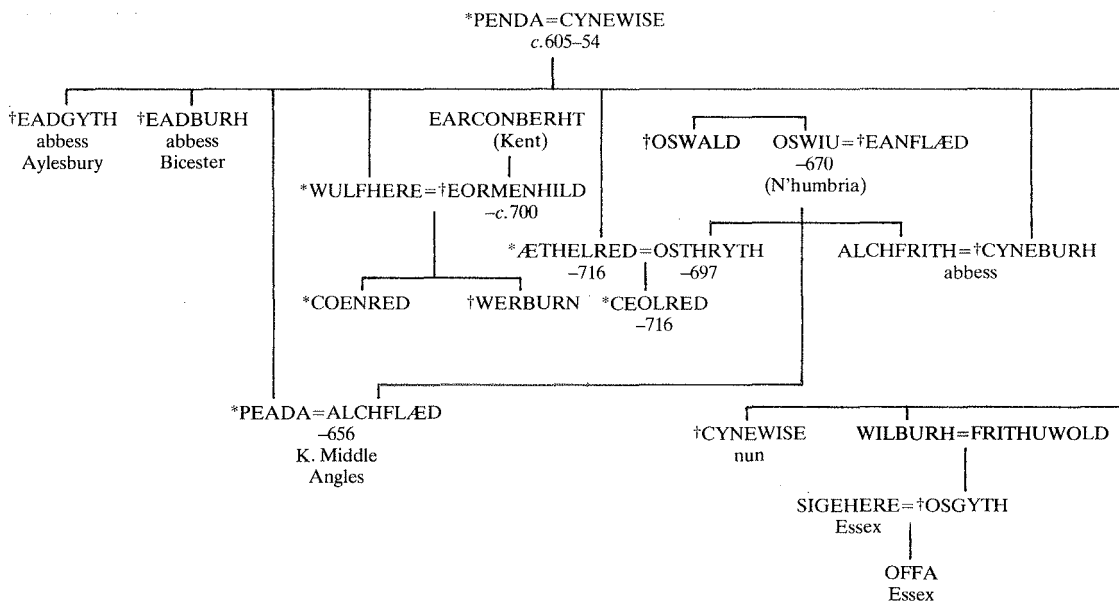
Details of the way in which the seventh-century Mercian kings governed their vastly-extended realm are sketchy in the extreme, and this is not the place to engage in a prolonged discussion of the subject. There is, however, no concrete evidence that Mercia practised the joint-

kingship which characterized certain other southern English kingdoms, notably Kent and the East and West Saxons.<sup>17</sup> Mercia seems to have relied in part on the rulers of absorbed kingdoms to continue governing, for example the kings of the *Hwicce*, *Magonsætan* and Lindsey, rather in the way which the British ruled India, drawing tribute, arranging marriage alliances and controlling 'foreign' policy. Elsewhere, in areas not apparently ruled by kings c.660, Mercia used local lords or members of the Mercian ruling classes as *subreguli*. Peda seems to have been such a sub-king under Penda, and it is more than likely that others, only named once or twice if at all, existed in the south Midlands in the period after 660. By the time of Æþelbald and Offa (716–96), however, the tendency was to reduce the status of local rulers, and they appear in the charter witness lists as *duces* and *principes*. Osyth's father Friþuwold was a *subregulus*, apparently installed in the period 655/65 to control parts of Buckinghamshire and later, in the mid 670s, at least the north-western part of Surrey.

### III

Penda appears to have had eight children who survived to adulthood. There were three sons: Peda, king of the Middle Angles and briefly of Mercia c.655–6, Wulfhere and Æþelred, who between them ruled a much enlarged Mercia for almost fifty years.<sup>18</sup> If it is assumed that Penda was born c.605, and that he married Cynewise between 625 and 630 (although there may have been other, unrecorded, wives and concubines), then Peda cannot have been born long before 630. He married Alchflæd c.650–2, and was killed, aged only 25–30 in 656, allegedly with the connivance of his wife, whose father Oswiu of Northumbria had taken control of Mercia on the death of Penda at the battle of the *Winwæd* in 655.<sup>19</sup> No children of this short-lived union are recorded.

Wulfhere, probably born 630–5, was also only a young man when brought out of hiding in 657 to assume the throne of Mercia. He married Eormenhild, daughter of king Earconberht of Kent, probably shortly after his accession. She outlived him, retiring to become abbess of



\*Kings of Mercia

†Saints

Fig. 1. Penda and his family.

Minster-in-Sheppey and dying *c.*700.<sup>20</sup> Their recorded children are Coenred and Werburh. The former was a minor at the time of his father's death, and did not succeed until 704. He abdicated in 709 and went to Rome with his cousin Offa, king of the East Saxons, whom we shall meet again.<sup>21</sup> Werburh became yet another of the 'holy cousinhood' of royal ladies.<sup>22</sup> After becoming a nun at Ely, she was recalled to Mercia by her uncle, Æpelred, as part of a programme of developing minsters in the West Midlands. Her first resting place was Hanbury (Worcs).<sup>23</sup>

Æpelred, apparently the youngest of Penda's sons, seems unlikely to have been born before 640-5. He became king in 675, abdicated in 704 to become a monk and died as abbot of Bardney in 716. He was married to another of Oswiu's daughters, Osþryþ, perhaps *c.*665. She was killed in internecine conflicts in 697, apparently because of her Northumbrian origin.<sup>24</sup> Their only recorded child, Ceolred, became king of Mercia in 709, aged about 40, and died in 716. The policy of contracting marriage alliances

between such apparently implacable enemies as Mercia and Northumbria is entirely characteristic of relationships between the rulers of the so-called 'Heptarchy' in the seventh century, even though it often led to murder, warfare and annexation of territory.

The five known daughters of Penda are as interesting in their way as the sons who became kings. It is impossible to judge the order of their births, although it may be that Cynewise and Cyneburh, who share a name-element with their mother, were the eldest. Both became nuns at Castor (Northants), in a house which Cyneburh may have founded. She married Alchfrid, son of Oswiu, a third link between the two dynasties, but is reputed to have remained a virgin. Although only a sub-king in Deira, Alchfrid played a prominent role in church affairs in Northumbria, and was a supporter of Wilfrid.<sup>25</sup> The milieu of his court doubtless encouraged Cyneburh to take the veil when she was widowed, some time in the 680s, returning to her homeland to rule a minster. Cynewise seems not to have married, and may have been a

nun elsewhere prior to the foundation of Castor.

The three remaining daughters of Penda are central to the story of St Osyth and the Aylesbury region in the late seventh century. Two of them, Eadgyð (Edith) and Eadburh, seem to have remained unmarried, proceeding directly to become nuns and abbesses in minsters founded by their brother Wulfhere, probably in the period 660–5, during the first real attempt at the conversion of the southern Middle Angles. The context for this would be the missionary activities of Diuma's successors, Ceollach, Trumhere and Jaruman, the first two of whom at least were trained in the northern/Irish tradition. We have no charters comparable to those recording the endowment of Chertsey and Barking, but it seems from later tradition that Eadburh, (whose name appears in Adderbury, north Oxfordshire, 'Eadburh's fortified place'<sup>26</sup>), ruled a minster at Bicester. Her cult survived there until the Reformation, and part of her shrine is now in Stanton Harcourt church (Oxon).<sup>27</sup> Bicester lies just north of the Roman settlement at Chesterton, where Akeman Street, the major road from St Albans to Cirencester, crosses the road from Silchester and Dorchester to Watling Street at Towcester. Bicester derives from OE *beorna*, *ceaster* ('[Roman] town of the warriors'),<sup>28</sup> and it appears that the new Anglo-Saxon royal vill developed away from the Roman town. It may be that only the minster was placed here, since it was common practice to have a slight separation between *villae regales* and minsters.<sup>29</sup>

Eadgyð was installed at a minster at Aylesbury, almost certainly on the hilltop now occupied by the parish church, and apparently within the ramparts of the Iron Age hillfort which gives the place its name.<sup>30</sup> If the northern boundary of the *Ciltensætan* followed the Thame in this area, then Aylesbury minster lay just inside their territory, responsible for evangelizing the hill district to the south. It lies on Akeman Street, about fifteen miles from Bicester, and close to its crossing of the Icknield Way, a vital cross-country routeway in pre-historic and later times.

Wilburh is the only one of Penda's daughters not to be revered as a saint, although she is named in the *Liber Vitae* of Durham as 'queen and abbess'.<sup>31</sup> She is nevertheless important as being the wife of Friþuwold and mother of Osyth. It may be that she fell from favour in one of the factional episodes which typify royal courts of the time. (Cf. the murder of Æþelred's Northumbrian queen, Osþryþ in 697.) We have already encountered Friþuwold briefly as a *subregulus* of Wulfhere.

The hagiographical tradition concerning Osyth says that she was born at her father's 'palace' (i.e. *villa regia*) at Quarrendon. This now-deserted village lies immediately north-west of Aylesbury, close to Akeman Street. John Blair has suggested that his *regnum* stretched from north Buckinghamshire to Surrey.<sup>32</sup> If so, this represents the deliberate break-up and reforming of two territories which had hitherto run north-east to south-west with the grain of the geology and relief.

#### IV

Friþuwold introduces a name-element into the story which needs to be considered in more detail. First among the witnesses of his grant to Chertsey in 672–4 was one Friþuric, who, as a *princeps*, granted estates to Peterborough minster to found a daughter house at Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire 675–92.<sup>33</sup> He was probably another Mercian *subregulus*, controlling the eastern part of Middle Anglia. If so, his central place may have been the former Roman *civitas* capital at *Ratae* (Leicester), which was later the see of the bishop of the Middle Angles. Although Theodore does not appear to have created a separate diocese for this substantial area in the 680s, this may have been because at that time it was considered to be part of Mercia proper. It should be noted, however, that Wilfrid acted as bishop in this region, possibly in the 680s for a short while, and from about 692 until 705–9.<sup>34</sup> He was buried at his minster of Oundle, and may have been responsible for other foundations in Middle Anglia, for example Wing and conceivably Brixworth, both grand basilican churches of the type likely to be associated with Wilfrid.<sup>35</sup>

The relationship of Friþuwold and Friþuric is nowhere made explicit, but the most likely is that they were brothers. A third member of this group is probably the Friþugils *minister*, who appears in the witness list of Wulfhere's grant to Medeshamstede (Peterborough) in 664.<sup>36</sup> There is no record of his having been a *subregulus*, but there were plenty of newly-won lands to administer in Wulfhere's Mercia in the mid 660s, and he could have controlled areas such as west Oxfordshire or Bedfordshire/Hertfordshire (to use later, anachronistic, terms).

The best-known of the individuals bearing this distinctive name-element in seventh and eighth-century south Mercia is Friþuswid (more familiar as St Frideswide whose shrine remains in part in Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford).<sup>37</sup> She is said to have died in 727 and had been active in the Eynsham/Oxford area. Her father was called Dida and her mother Sefrid (Sæþryð). Her suitor, Algar (Ælfgar) was said to have been the sub-king of Leicester.<sup>38</sup> These people belong, therefore, to exactly the same *milieu* as Friþuwold and Friþuric, and are quite possibly related to them. Sæþryð bears a name which would fit well with the ruling house of the East Saxons, and may represent another of the dynastic alliances so common in the period. If this is the case, it represents the reverse side of the coin which saw Osyth, Friþuwold's daughter, married to Sigehere of the East Saxons.

Æpelheard, king of the West Saxons (726–c. 740), married a lady called Friþugyd,<sup>39</sup> who is likely *prima facie* to have been of royal stock. Given the dominance of Mercia under Æpelbald at this time, she may have been a daughter of one of the late seventh-century *subreguli*, and considered a suitable partner for a subject king.

There remains the question of the origin of the Friþu- clan, a subject which has attracted some controversy among scholars.<sup>49</sup> The name Friþuwold occurs in the Bernician genealogy and seems to belong to a king who ruled between 579 and 585–7. It has been suggested that during the Deiran ascendancy of Edwin (616–

32) members of the Bernician royal house went into exile, and that some threw their lot in with Penda who was just then beginning the expansion of Mercia, initially into the south-west. Although their background lay with his long-term enemies, it does not necessarily follow that the loyalties of such men would always have remained with their own kin, especially if the ascendancy of their rivals prevented them having a share in the rule of Northumbria. At an average of 25–30 years per generation Friþuwold of Surrey could have been the great-grandson of the king of that name, being born in the period 630–5. Friþuric may have been slightly younger (born say 635–40). Both of them would have been in their prime during the 660s, when Wulfhere was acquiring control over such large territories that he would have been in need of able sub-kings. His apparent failure to associate his own brother, Æpelred, in this process seems to be further confirmation of the latter's youth.

## V

If Friþuwold was born in the early 630s, he probably married in the period 655–60, suggesting that Wilburh was born c. 635, which fits well with the proposed chronology for Penda and his children outlined above. The context for the marriage may therefore lie in the period when Oswiu ruled Mercia after the death of Penda. Alternatively, it may have been arranged by Wulfhere soon after his accession in 657 in order to ally his family with that of already powerful territorial magnates in Middle Anglia. The choice of the name Osgyð for Friþuwold's daughter brings a characteristically Hwiccan (and Northumbrian) element into the family, and may be seen as further evidence for his family having had a connexion with either or both of these areas. Osyth was later said to have been a Hwiccan princess, a pardonable confusion given the limited knowledge which any medieval hagiographer would have had of seventh-century Mercia in the absence of any records. Friþuwold, however, may well have originated in the territory of the *Hwicce*.

It seems reasonable therefore to place Osyth's birth in the period 656–61. If the legend

of her being thirteen when married to Sigehere is true, then this event may be dated 669–74, rather later than Dr Hagerty has suggested, and not to be associated with the lapse into paganism caused by the outbreak of the plague in 664.<sup>41</sup> Confirmation of this dating may be found in Sigehere's life. The son of Sigeberht Parvus, who ruled 635–53 and was born around 620, Sigehere is unlikely to have been born before 640–5 and therefore to have married before 665–70. He died in 688, aged about 43–5.<sup>42</sup> The marriage alliance with Fripuwold may be seen in the context of the latter having reached the height of his own power and influence to the west of London, and the same time as the East Saxons were suffering from the annexation of Middlesex and a reduction in status of their own dynasty.<sup>43</sup> Wulfhere evidently did not consider one of his own sisters as a suitable partner for one of several co-rulers in Essex, especially a recent apostate, whereas the daughter of a prominent *subregulus* was. It also seems improbable that Wulfhere, closely concerned as he was with the campaign to bring the lapsed part of the East Saxons back into the church, would have permitted Osyth to have married Sigehere until *after* this process had been completed. The legend may, however, imply that like some of his forebears, Sigehere was a rather nominal Christian at the best of times.

Further confirmation of this general chronology comes from the legend concerning Osyth's veiling by Acca and Beaduwine, the two priests she took to Essex at the time of her marriage. About 672 (perhaps at Theodore's first major synod at Hertford in 673) they were both made bishops for the newly-divided East Anglian sees: Acca at *Dommoec* (usually considered to be Dunwich, but perhaps more like to be Felixstowe, Suffolk, possible resting place of St Felix, apostle of the East Angles) and Beaduwine at Elmham (Norfolk).<sup>44</sup> The veiling took place after they had become bishops, and by inference long enough after her early marriage for Osyth to have borne a son, Offa, to Sigehere. These events suggest that she was at least 18 at the time (i.e. 674–79) and perhaps, given that she was soon to lead a community at Chich, in her twenties (i.e. after 676–81). It may that Chich was *founded* by Cedd a generation

earlier as part of his mission to the East Saxons, rather than being newly-created for Osyth, whose husband was of course still alive, since her veiling took place against his wishes. The task of Acca and Beaduwine in Essex was no doubt to reinstate the minsters founded by Cedd in the 650s at Bradwell and Tilbury and possibly elsewhere, and to create others. They had probably been royal chaplains, and possibly abbots, in Mercia, hence their selection for this important ecclesiastical and diplomatic mission to the East Saxons. Eorcenwald was no doubt involved in this process, for although he did not replace the simoniacal Wini as bishop of London until 675, his activities at Chertsey and Barking in the 660s suggest a conscious plan to create a network of well-endowed minsters in the London region, a process fostered by Theodore.

If the legend that Osyth was killed by pirates is true the event may have occurred at any time after 680. Assuming that this was prior to the death of her parents, it would have been feasible for them to retrieve her body to be enshrined at Aylesbury minster, where she is said to have been educated by her aunt Eadgyð twenty years before. The removal of Anglo-Saxon saints to their place of origin, both before and after death, is by no means uncommon.

Offa, the son of Sigehere and Osyth, is unique amongst East Saxon rulers in not having a name in S-. This clearly shows the significance of the Mercian impact in the area, for the name was carried by a fourth–fifth-century ruler of Angeln in northern Germany, whose name was well-known in seventh-century Mercia, and was later given to the most famous Mercian king of all. Offa of Essex was probably born between 670 and 675 and was therefore in his thirties when he abdicated in 709 to accompany the Mercian king Coenred, son of Wulfhere, to Rome. Bede describes him as a noble young man, even though they were contemporaries: it may be that his informant on East Saxon affairs wished to portray Offa in a favourable light.<sup>45</sup> It appears that Offa retained family estates among the Hwicce, for he was granting lands to Evesham minster in the 700s.<sup>46</sup>

Returning to Friþuwold, it seems that he was a *subregulus* of Wulfhere and then of Æpelred from about 665 until 680–90. Contrary to the view recently put forward by John Blair,<sup>47</sup> I suggest that he was first entrusted with the territory of the *Hendrica*, and possibly that of the *Cilternsætan* in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire when these were taken in the 660s, with his centre at Quarrendon. Later, when Surrey was annexed by Mercia c.670, he was given this territory, including the southern approaches to London, to control, this phase lasting until the irruption of Cædwalla of Wessex into the area c.685. In Surrey, Friþuwold was based near the *Fullingadic*, an ancient boundary in the centre of the county,<sup>48</sup> and closely analogous to Quarrendon, lying on boundaries between different folk groups, and close to a minster.

## VI

Having explored the political background of Osyth and her family, and suggested a chronological framework which does not violate the known facts of the history of Mercia and Essex between 660 and 680, it remains to examine the processes underlying the creation of a network of minster churches in the southern part of Middle Anglia.

The position of St Albans in this process is unrecorded, but this is not to say that it was non-existent. Bede says that the cult of the martyred St Alban was still alive in his day c. 730, although he has no details, and there is no link with any of the missions or bishops active in the London region and southern Mercia of which he had knowledge.<sup>49</sup> This suggests that the area had retained a degree of separateness from the creation of the English diocesan and minster system during the seventh century. The evidence for *Verulamium* having had a bishop in the fourth century is merely inferential, if plausible given its size and importance in Roman Britain.<sup>50</sup> Equally, it is not universally agreed by historians that this was the scene of St Germanus of Auxerre's famous confrontation with the Pelagians in 429, nor that the victory against the Picts was in the area.<sup>51</sup> It is likely, however, that St Albans retained some kind of sub-Roman administration into the sixth century

which was capable of controlling the extent of Anglo-Saxon settlement in the central Chilterns, if not of preserving the rural villa economy for which the region was noted before 400.<sup>52</sup> Given that Romano-British Christianity was essentially an urban religion, we need not look for a substantial survival in rural areas, where the *pagani* dwelled. Unless there was contact with other dioceses surviving in areas away from the Anglo-Saxon zone, it is difficult to see how an apostolic succession could have been maintained at St Albans as late as 571, and any priests keeping the martyr's shrine would periodically have to be replaced.

By the time of Augustine's mission, and even that of Birinus forty years later, Christianity in the St Albans area is likely to have been at its lowest ebb. If the cult of Alban were really vigorous, it is difficult to explain why no mention of its existence is found in the activities of such noted clerics as Theodore, Eorcenwald or Wilfrid, all of whom had the opportunity to raise a minster on the site. The choice of Hertford, Hatfield, several venues in the London area and *Clofesho*, which may have been in the Chiltern area,<sup>53</sup> for a whole series of synods between 672 and the 820s shows that the area was significant in the formative period of the English church, and emphasizes the absence of St Albans. Mercia was initially converted by priests of Celtic origin/training, who are unlikely to have been as hostile as Bede to any surviving Celtic churches in the south Midlands. On balance, it seems that whatever Celtic Christian presence survived after 571 in the immediate vicinity of Alban's *martyrium*, it was not the centre of any missionary activity, and seems to have been late in coming within the fold of the network of minster churches created after 660. It is difficult to imagine that the post-conquest monks of St Albans, including in their ranks such men as Matthew Paris, would not have claimed as ancient an origin as possible for their abbey and grants from kings long before those of Offa in the 790s, if they had had even flimsy evidence or legend on which to base such a claim.

The movement to create a system of minsters as missionary centres in southern Middle Anglia



can scarcely have begun before the arrival of the priests Diuma, Cedd, Adda and Betti with the newly-converted Peada in 650–2.<sup>54</sup> Cedd soon went to begin the process of reconverting the East Saxons, and Diuma may be presumed to have concentrated his efforts on Mercia proper, and the Leicester area of Middle Anglia which seems likely to have been Peada's 'capital'. It is just possible that Adda and Betti are the priests later known as Acca and Beaduwine, who accompanied Osyth to Essex and became bishops in the 670s. The upheavals associated with the death of Penda in 655 the murder of Peada in 656, and the rule of Mercia by Northumbria until 657/8 were doubtless not conducive to a stable religious life and the rapid succession of Mercian bishops in the 650s suggests that there was little progress in the creation and endowment of minsters. The foundation of St Peter's church at *Medeshamstede* (Peterborough) by Wulfhere in 664 may be compared with Eorcenwald's activities round London and it is probably to the 660s that we should look for the context of creating minsters such as Bicester under Eadburh and Aylesbury under Eadgyð, both of them in the recently-defined *regnum* of their brother-in-law Friþuwold. The sisters were probably aged 25–30 by that time.

Other minsters of this first phase may have been at Eynsham, an important royal *tun* in the sixth century,<sup>55</sup> Luton, which lay close to Limbury, another *tun* taken by Cuthwulf in '571', and Bedford.<sup>56</sup> (The fourth of these *tunas*, Benson, was close to the minster at Dorchester founded under West Saxon patronage in 635.) It may be that churches such as Eynsham, Bicester and Aylesbury were founded by the mission of Birinus and his successors and subsequently taken over by Wulfhere and provided with new, Mercian, abbesses and abbots. Unfortunately, there is no evidence one way or the other. Bede says only that Birinus, whose mission was independent of both Augustine and the Celts, evangelized the people, baptised Cynegils in the presence of Oswald of Northumbria, and was given Dorchester where he built several churches.<sup>57</sup> He was succeeded after a pagan interlude by Agilbert c.650, who spoke no English and was

replaced by Wini c.660, when the see was removed to Winchester by king Cenwall. Agilbert was a leading protagonist of the Roman party at the synod of Whitby in 664, but returned to Gaul as archbishop of Paris, where he consecrated Wilfrid as bishop.<sup>58</sup> Agilbert does not seem on balance to be a likely candidate for a mission to the people of the upper Thames Valley and the Vale of Aylesbury, and it seems more likely that Diuma and his colleagues were responsible for the first real attempt to convert this region. Hitchin church was also probably founded during this first phase to serve the territory of the *Hicce*, a small Tribal Hidage people of 300 hides, covering some 90–100 sq. m.

In summary, the following minster churches seem likely to have been established by the end of the first quarter of the eighth century in southern Middle Anglia: Dorchester, Eynsham, Bicester, Aylesbury, Bedford, Luton, Hitchin, and possibly St Albans. The complete absence of charters and other records makes it impossible to analyse the way in which these minsters were endowed and the extent of their *parochiae*. If we are right in identifying those listed above as the primary minsters of Buckinghamshire and adjacent areas, they seem to have been spaced at 15–20 mile intervals, and hence responsible for vast tracts of territory, about 150 sq. m, or the equivalent of 35 average-size later parishes. These churches were soon followed by others under the impetus of Theodore's expanded bench of bishops, and provided a network of primary or mother churches with territories equivalent to approximately 30,000 acres, approximately 10–12 later parishes. Professor Everitt has estimated that the *parochiae* of Kentish minsters averaged 49,500 acres, whilst including what he calls 'primary mother churches' (otherwise secondary minsters), which gives a figure of about 25,500 acres for each major church, reasonably close to that given for our region given the differences in terrain and organization.<sup>59</sup>

It seems also that Wilfrid, that long-lived and litigious Northumbrian cleric, also played an important, if poorly-recorded, role in the Christianizing of Middle Anglia, as well as of

the South Saxons and Frisians, during his periods of exile. Wilfrid enjoyed a close relationship with Æpelred of Mercia, no doubt cemented by the piety of the latter which eventually led to his abdication to become a monk. When Wilfrid was exiled by Ecgrifd of Northumbria in 681, he travelled south and was met by a *praefectus* named Berhtwald, said by his biographer to have been a nephew of Æpelred.<sup>60</sup> It seems unlikely that Berhtwald was a son of Wulfhere, who had only been married in the late 650s. Equally, he is not likely to have been a relation of Queen Ospryp. He may have been the son of one of Penda's married daughters, and also related to Wulfhere's 'kinsman' Berhtferd, who was granted an estate at Dillington (Hunts) c.674, an unusually early example of such a grant to a layman.<sup>61</sup> Berhtwald himself granted land at Somerford Keynes (Glos) to Aldhelm for his minster at Malmesbury in 685, when he is called king or *subregulus*.<sup>62</sup> He is recorded as having granted part of his estate (?sub-kingdom) to Wilfrid in 681, upon which the latter without delay founded a little monastery, which was still occupied in the 720s by his monks. Despite the later connexion between Berhtwald and the territory of the *Hwicce*, it seems probable that this land and minster lay in the south-eastern part of Mercia, where Wilfrid had founded a minster at Oundle. It may be one of the sites mentioned below, for example Wing, whose imposing basilican church and ambulatory crypt could conceivably date from the seventh century.<sup>63</sup> It is certainly worthy of the builder of the crypt-churches at Hexham and Ripon.

Clues to churches which may once have been minsters are found in Domesday Book, where they may have unusually large endowments, or be served by groups of priests.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, these churches today often have parishes far larger than the average size of about 2,700 acres, although one must beware the fact that parishes in areas of low settlement density, such as the high Chilterns and the Surrey heathlands, are often also large. The *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291 shows that many former Anglo-Saxon minsters have higher than average assessments, and it seems reasonable to assume that others in this category may also have been minsters at

some stage in their history.<sup>65</sup> There does not, however, seem to be any systematic relationship between church dedications and former high status, although the veneration of often obscure Anglo-Saxon saints at many former minsters is often a clue to their antiquity.<sup>66</sup> Churches in this region which may belong to the secondary phase of minster creation are: Wing, Oakley, Haddenham, Burnham, Amersham and Buckingham (Bucks); Leighton Buzzard and Houghton Regis (Beds); and Oxford, Bampton, Thame, Tackley and Charlbury (Oxon) (although the latter may have been founded for the Tribal Hidage group called the *Færpingas* by Diuna during his mission). Abingdon (Berks) lies just across the Thames from Dorchester, and seems to have been founded under the auspices of Ine of Wessex about 687.<sup>67</sup>

The subsequent history of almost all of these churches is even more obscure than the circumstances of their foundation in the late seventh/early eighth centuries. Several still retained their ancient primacy as late as 1086, however, to be recorded in Domesday's usual chaotic way when churches were at issue. Aylesbury was supported by dues from the Eight Hundreds *in circuitu* and if, as seems likely, it had jurisdiction in both Chilterns and Vale, then it must have gained territory from churches such as Wing, probably during the upheavals of the ninth and tenth centuries associated with the Danish wars.<sup>68</sup> Buckingham church had a considerable rural estate of its own and was in the hands of the bishop of Dorchester/Lincoln.<sup>69</sup> Leighton Buzzard church had four hides of land and appurtenances worth £4, and was also in the hands of the bishop.<sup>70</sup> Luton church had a five-hide estate betokening its continued importance, although nearby Houghton Regis church had half a hide, suggesting that the process of eroding the original minsterland was well under way by 1086.<sup>71</sup> Hitchin (Herts) was also a substantial royal estate with its own Hundred, and its minster still seems to have housed a community in 1086, with two hides of land.<sup>72</sup> St Albans had already become an urban centre at the gates of the minster which was refounded and handsomely endowed by Offa in 792, but Domesday does not record specifically the en-

dowment and rights of the church.<sup>73</sup> The Domesday record of churches in Oxfordshire is virtually non-existent, although mention is made of the Canons of St Frideswide and the abbey of Eynsham (refounded 1005) had a church in Oxford.<sup>74</sup> Charlbury, although noted c.1000 as the resting-place of Diuma, was subsumed in the Banbury estate of the bishop of Dorchester/Lincoln,<sup>75</sup> and seems to have lost its former importance.

Although it has not been possible to piece together the full story of the annexation of southern Middle Anglia by Mercia after 660 and its subsequent conversion, it seems that Wulfhere, his *subreguli* such as Friþuwold, and his sisters and other female relations were central to the process. Between c.660 and 675 they laid the foundations which ensured Mercian domination of the country between Northampton and London, west Oxfordshire and the river Lea until the eclipse of its power in the 880s in the face of Danish wars and settlement, followed by the emergence of Wessex as the leading Anglo-Saxon power. The various groups which were recorded in the Tribal Hidage almost at the very moment of their absorption and extinction have left few legacies

apart from a name, even though some occupied considerable tracts of country, as large as the later shires which not only superseded them, but also obliterated most traces of the former administrative geography. The minster churches founded by and for various royal ladies and abbots, who also seem to have belonged in many cases to royal clans, fared better in this respect although their original huge endowments from the royal patrimony had been all but lost by the late eleventh century, not least to the new wave of proprietary churches which formed the basis of the present parish network.

It is into this context that Friþuwold, his wife Wilburh and daughter Osyth fit so well. It was a world of dynasties contending for power, by war, marriage alliance and other means, overlaid by the spread of a new religion which required not only royal support to succeed but also the irrevocable granting of agricultural estates to support its new minsters, abbots and bishops. The lives of these three individuals are a microcosm of the late seventh century preserved by chance, partly in contemporary records, and partly in the obscure world of the medieval hagiographer.

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