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# Introduction

This book explores a hole at the heart of Mercia, the great Midland kingdom of early medieval England. Chad, the kingdom's fifth bishop (669–72), had fixed his cathedral at Lichfield in 669 and, by 737, after the creation of four further Mercian bishoprics, the territory of the diocese had been confined to the north-west part of the Midlands (now Staffordshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire and parts of Shropshire and Warwickshire). When compared with other regions of early medieval England the diocese of Lichfield is bereft of the kinds of evidence that typically inform histories of this period.[1] The region has no parallel to the voluminous corpus of land charters, surviving from the seventh century, preserved in the archive of the see of Worcester in the south-west Midlands, while the textual exuberance associated with the English Benedictine monasteries of the tenth and eleventh centuries concerns places to the south and east, with only a single north-western outlier in Burton-on-Trent.[2] Turning to archaeological evidence, the distribution of furnished burials dated to the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, long thought to be characteristic of 'Anglo-Saxon' culture, tails off at the eastern edges of the diocese, excepting only the enigmatic barrow burials of the Peak District.[3] Special burials of the seventh and later centuries – local saints with Old English names – occupy a similar distribution.[4] Even Bede, whose *Historia Ecclesiastica* has provided so much material to those who would attempt to construct a narrative of seventh- and early eighth-century English history, has scarcely anything to say about the region apart from his tribute to Bishop Chad.[5] This book tackles the challenge offered by this 'Mercian hole' in the north-west Midlands by synthesising evidence from a number of different sources – archaeological, textual, topographical and toponymical – and comparing it with other regions where evidence is more plentiful. In doing so it seeks to realise the promise of the best kinds of local and regional history: those that define and explain distinctiveness within the context of a wider world.

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1 Regional studies in Britain and beyond have relied overwhelmingly on more plentiful textual evidence; examples include N. Brooks, *The early history of the church of Canterbury* (Leicester, 1984); P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and literature in western England 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990); W. Davies, *An early Welsh microcosm: studies in the Llandaff charters* (London, 1978); M. Innes, *State and society in the early Middle Ages: the middle Rhine valley, 400–1000* (London, 2000); H.J. Hummer, *Politics and power in early medieval Europe. Alsace and the Frankish realm, 600–1000* (Cambridge, 2005).

2 P.H. Sawyer, *The charters of Burton Abbey, Anglo-Saxon Charters 2* (Oxford, 1979).

3 A. Ozanne, 'The Peak dwellers', *Medieval Archaeology*, 6/7 (1962/3), pp. 15–52.

4 J. Blair, 'A saint for every minster? Local cults in Anglo-Saxon England', in A. Thacker and R. Sharpe (eds), *Local saints and local churches in the early medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 455–94, at pp. 457–8.

5 *HE*, iv.3.

The north-west Midlands region has appeared in previous studies primarily as a locus of conflict, a borderland contested by Mercians, Welsh and Vikings. Scholars have made use of martial allusions in early Welsh poetry and annals marking battles between Mercian kings and their Welsh and Viking counterparts, and have undertaken archaeological and topographical analyses of that striking epitome of the Anglo-Welsh border, Offa's Dyke.[6] The region has also been viewed through the prism of clashing polities and cultures within a wider 'Irish Sea province'.[7] There is much to appreciate in these studies, and a recent contribution on the 'Anglo-Welsh borderland' has demonstrated that territorial divisions need not always imply conflict.[8] Nonetheless, a broad-based consideration of the Mercian side of this borderland has not yet been attempted. Indeed, excepting relations with the Welsh, the excellent collections of essays on Mercia published in 1977 and 2001 hardly mention the region, focusing instead on the more plentiful evidence to the south and east, and particularly on the sculptural and archaeological riches of the east Midlands.[9] In this book the bounds of the diocese of Lichfield, at least as they can be reconstructed from late thirteenth-century evidence, are used to delimit a study of this neglected region (see Figure 1).[10] In particular, the persistence of this episcopal territory throughout the medieval period raises questions concerning the creation, development and transformation of communities in the region.

## Early medieval communities

Concepts of 'community' are central to the following study, and thus require careful consideration here. The word has often been used in relation to ecclesiastical

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6 D.P. Kirby, 'Welsh bards and the border', in A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian studies* (Leicester, 1977), pp. 31–42; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Wales and Mercia, 613–918', in M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001), pp. 89–105; D. Hill, 'Mercians: the dwellers on the boundary', in M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001), pp. 173–82; D. Hill and M. Worthington, *Offa's Dyke: history and guide* (Stroud, 2003); K. Ray and I. Bapty, *Offa's Dyke: landscape and hegemony in eighth century Britain* (Oxford, 2016).

7 D.W. Griffiths, 'Anglo-Saxon England and the Irish Sea region AD 800–1100: an archaeological study of the lower Dee and Mersey as a border area', PhD thesis (Durham, 1991).

8 L. Brady, *Writing the Welsh borderland in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 2017).

9 A. Dornier (ed.), *Mercian studies* (Leicester, 1977); M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001); exceptions to this neglect in the latter include Jane Hawkes' exploration of the Sandbach crosses (J. Hawkes, 'Constructing iconographies: questions of identity in Mercian sculpture', in M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001), pp. 230–45) and Michelle Brown's consideration of the possibilities offered by the cathedral at Lichfield as a centre of Mercian manuscript production in the eighth and ninth centuries (M.P. Brown, 'Mercian manuscripts? The "Tiberius" group and its historical context', in M.P. Brown and C.A. Farr (eds), *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in Europe* (London, 2001), pp. 278–91).

10 The papal taxation of 1291 enables the diocesan allegiance of individual parishes to be determined, although the earliest delineation of their boundaries must be sought in nineteenth-century tithe maps; for useful searchable access to the taxation see the following webpage hosted by the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Sheffield: https://www.dhi.ac.uk/taxatio/.

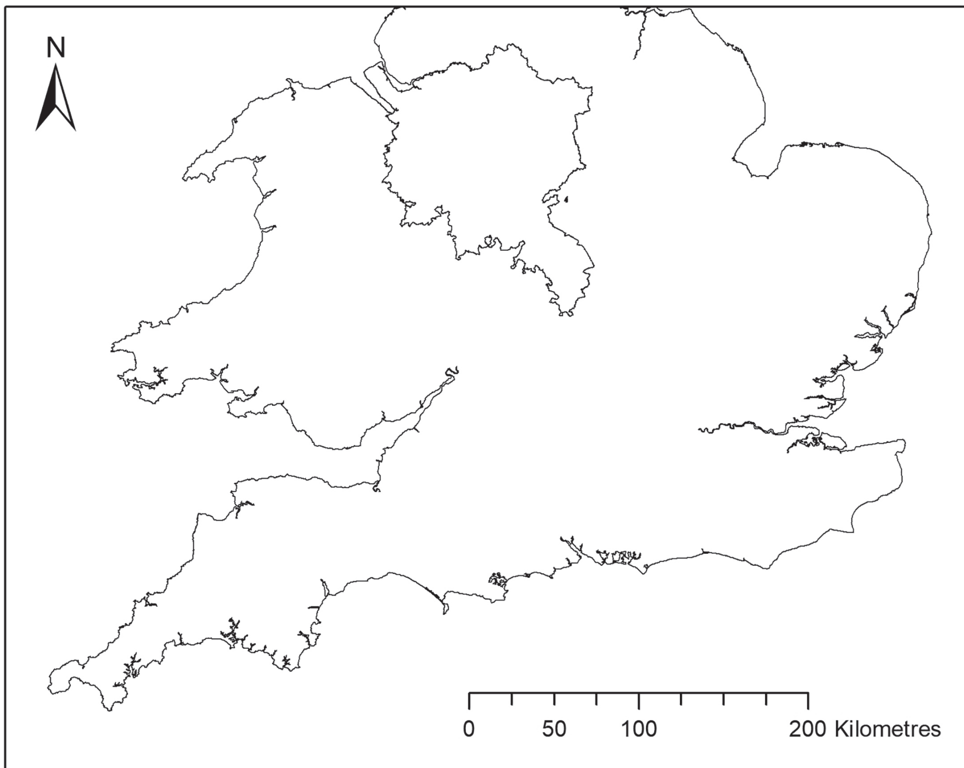


Figure 1 Bounds of the diocese of Lichfield in the late thirteenth century, excluding a northern extension between the rivers Mersey and Ribble probably added to the diocese in the tenth century.

organisations during the medieval period; in particular, monastic life was lived 'in community'.[11] This has particular relevance to early medieval England owing to the dominance of such communal institutions in the early English Church, which were established in great numbers between the seventh and ninth centuries. Scholars often call these 'minsters' – a modernised form of Old English *mynster*, itself borrowed from Latin *monasterium* – and the promotion of the term has been boosted by John Blair's definitive study *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*.[12] Blair's definition of the minster deserves full quotation:

> A complex ecclesiastical settlement which is headed by an abbess, abbot, or man in priest's orders; which contains nuns, monks, priests, or laity in a variety of possible combinations, and is united to a greater or lesser extent by their liturgy

11 A good synthetic study is provided by S. Foot, *Monastic life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.600–900* (Cambridge, 2006).

12 J. Blair, *The church in Anglo-Saxon society* (Oxford, 2005).

> and devotions; which may perform or supervise pastoral care to the laity, perhaps receiving dues and exerting parochial authority; and which may sometimes act as a bishop's seat, while not depending for its existence or importance on that function.[13]

The inclusive scope of this passage emphasises the variety observable in minsters, in terms of both their scale and the numerical proportions of monks and nuns (people living under religious vows) to clergy (formally ordained members of the church hierarchy) living within them. Nevertheless, despite such flexibility, Blair is clear that minsters were institutions, and his book presents what we might label a 'minster narrative', in which 'the evolution of institutions through the whole period is a central argument'.[14] Approaching the study of early medieval religious life through an institutional framework such as this has borne much fruit, but the elision of minsters as institutions with minsters as communities of people sharing specific approaches to their lives has obscured broader perspectives. This book recognises a more complex meshwork of communities, including, for example, those formed from among the elite members of minsters' inhabitants who attended provincial synods, or those outside the minsters altogether, whether the highest of the lay elite who attended the royal court or those whose significance extended no further than a local assembly drawn from a handful of settlements. Communities can be defined and observed in many varied contexts, at different scales, nested, overlapping and interacting, and encompassing different segments and groups within the population.

The predominantly institutional appearance of the church and of individual churches (including minsters) may well have encouraged scholars interested in questions concerning the malleability and intersection of different forms of community to focus on other sectors of medieval society. Susan Reynolds' seminal work, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, focuses specifically on lay communities, but otherwise ranges extremely widely over different kinds of community across western Europe, such as villages, towns, principalities and kingdoms.[15] By considering Reynolds' treatment of such communities, we can begin to formulate a definition of 'community' to act as a useful tool of historical analysis. It should be stated initially that the communities discussed here are primarily those that can be defined by historical analysis (i.e. observable comings-together of people acting in some collective fashion), and not necessarily by contemporary discourse (i.e. contemporary ideas *about* communities), although the two may overlap to varying degrees and must often be considered together. Reynolds largely recognises this distinction in her methodology, prioritising evidence for communal activity over its written representation in law codes and custumals, and analysing the ways labels for various kinds of community were used rather than any meaning 'intrinsic' to the label itself. Reynolds' own definition of community is to some extent ambiguous, but she is explicit about her focus, setting her work against historians who 'have concentrated on kingship and the vertical bonds of society', and focusing instead on what she identifies as 'horizontal bonds' and the creation of a community,

13 Blair, *Church*, p. 3.

14 Blair, *Church*, p. 7.

15 S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and communities in Western Europe 900–1300* (Oxford, 1984).