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## **The Origin of the Mercian Shires**

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## THE ORIGIN OF THE MERCIAN SHIRES.

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THE word Shire means simply a share, something which has been shorn off, or separated. As applied to districts then, it is not applied to the lands of whole peoples: Essex, Sussex, Middlesex, Surrey, are not shires; but the district pertaining to Bristol or Gloucester is a shire, because it has been shorn off from the great territory of the Mercians. The word itself is a very ancient one. It occurs in the Laws of Ine, c. 690: § 36. "Let him who takes a thief, or to whom one is given, and he then lets him go, or conceals the theft, pay for the thief according to his 'wer.' If he be an ealdorman let him forfeit his shire, unless the King is willing to be merciful to him." § 39. "If any one go from his lord without leave, or steal himself away into another shire, and be discovered, let him go where he was before, and pay to his lord lx shillings."<sup>1</sup> Here the word is used for the dominion of the ealdorman, or the estate of the lord.

In the Old English paraphrase of Bede, made in King Alfred's time, the word is used for the district or estate dependent on a Church. II. 20, "thære cyričan scire onfeng. Paulinus took charge of the Diocese of Rochester." V. 20, "he gewat to his mynstre's scire thæt is on Læstinga ea, Ceadda ad monasterii sui quod in Læstinga curam secessit." In the Chronicle for 709 also we are told that the land of the West Saxons was divided into two bishop-shires—"todæled into twa biscopscira."

In the Laws the word is of frequent occurrence. In § 37 of King Alfred's laws it is used of an ealdorman's shire. In the *Judicia Civitatis Lundoniæ*, of the time of Athelstan, it is used of the districts of reeves of estates who are to track

<sup>1</sup> The References are to Schmid's *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, Ed. 1858.

out thieves. In the supplement to King Edgar's laws it is used in contradistinction to "byrig"; "in every burh and in every shire." In King Ethelred's treaty with the Danes Olaf, Justin, and Guthemund, made about 993, the word is used of the district in which a man who is to warrant lost property lives.

In King Edmund's laws, II. 4, it is laid down that the King will not permit sanctuary in his household to a shedder of blood, until he have made such amends as the Bishop in whose shire it may be shall teach. In Edgar's laws, III. 3, it is enacted that an unjust judge shall pay a fine of cxx shillings, which shall be handed to the King by the shire-bishop; and by III. 5 it is enacted that the shire-mote shall be held twice in the year, and that the shire-bishop and the alderman shall attend to teach both God's right and world-right. In King Ethelred's Institutes of 1008 it is enacted that a monk who has no minster shall come to the shire-bishop and engage himself to keep the three monastic vows: and this direction is repeated in the laws of the Council of Eanham under the same King.

The word is also used of the district pertaining to a single church or priest. At the Council of Eanham it was enacted that if a corpse is buried out of its proper shire, soul-shot must be paid to the minster to which it belonged. And in the laws of the Northumbrian priests of the tenth century it is ordered that—"If a priest conceal anything in his shrift-shire between men tending to wrong, let him make amends for it." But in King Æthelstan's laws of the Council of Greatanlea mention is made of the bishop's scrift-scire or diocese.

King Alfred left land in Triconshire, probably the hundred of Trigg in Cornwall, to his son Edward. In Domesday the account of the city of York runs thus: "In Eboraco civitate tempore Regis Edwardi præter scyram Archiepiscopi fuerunt sex scyræ;" and Pignoscire for Pinnock in Didbrook occurs in the record for Gloucestershire; while Hallamshire and Richmondshire are familiar enough to Yorkshiremen, and

Hexhamshire, Islandshire and Norhamshire, to Northumbrians, at the present day.

In fact, in old days any district which was carved out of a larger territory, whether for ecclesiastical or civil purposes, might be called a "shire"; and the purpose of this paper is to ascertain, if possible, the period at which the district now known as Gloucestershire was defined, and, indirectly, the manner in which the shire-system of England between Thames and Humber came into being.

The first mention of Gloucestershire in a contemporary document, so far as I know, is the record of the Chronicles under 1016, that after the battle of Assandun, "went King Cnut up with his army to Gloucestershire, where he learned that King Eadmund was." This entry was clearly made by the hand of one living at the time, for a short distance back in the record of the same year the writer says: "The army went then after that from London with their ships into Arewa,<sup>1</sup> and there went up, and proceeded into Mercia, and slew and burned whatsoever they overran, *as is their wont*,<sup>2</sup> and got for themselves food." The words in Italics could not have been written long after 1016, for on the death of Eadmund Ironside on St. Andrew's Mass Day in that year, Cnut obtained the realm of all the English, and the harryings ceased. We have then one fixed point, for we learn that Gloucestershire already existed in 1016.

On proceeding with the enquiry as to the probable period before that date at which the shire came into being, it is well to note at the beginning the very great difference in age of the shire-divisions south of Thames, and those to the north of the river. Every existing shire-division south of Thames is noticed in that part of the Parker MS. of the Chronicle which was written before the first change of handwriting under 892; while there is no mention of any Mercian shire in any copy of the Chronicles until after 1000, except in one instance, which will be dealt with hereafter. Clearly the West Saxon areas existed in King Alfred's time, while the

<sup>1</sup> The Orwell.      <sup>2</sup> Swa hira gewuna is.

Mercian shires, as we now know them, were unknown until long after his day. We may notice, however, that the only divisions of Wessex known to Bede, writing about 730, were the dioceses.

The passages in the Parker MS. are these:—

836. Ethelwulf, son of Egbert, took the kingdom of the West Saxons, and he gave his son Æthelstane the kingdom of the Kentish men,<sup>1</sup> and of the East Saxons, and of the men of Surrey, and of the South Saxons.

860. Osric Aldorman with Hampshire,<sup>2</sup> and Æthulwulf Aldorman with Berkshire,<sup>3</sup> fought against the army and put them to flight, and held the place of slaughter.

845. Eanulf Aldorman with the men of Somerset,<sup>4</sup> and Ealchstan Bishop and Osric Aldorman with the men of Dorset,<sup>5</sup> fought at the mouth of Parrett against the Danish army.

851. Ceorl Aldermon fought against the heathen men with Devonshire,<sup>6</sup> at Wicganbeorge.

898. In this year died Æthelm, ealdormon of Wiltshire.<sup>7</sup>

The Wilsæte, or people of Wilts, however, are mentioned as joining King Alfred in 878.

891. Three Scots came from Ireland, and came to land among the Cornishmen.<sup>8</sup>

Thus we see that all the territorial divisions of England south of Thames were already recognised as realms under king, or ealdorman, or bishop in the time of King Alfred. And we may well notice here an important point with regard to the development of the Mercian shires, to which Mr. Freeman draws attention.<sup>9</sup> South of Thames, only Hampshire takes its name from a town. Dorset and Somerset contain Dorchester and Somerton, but they are only the fortress and the dwelling of the peoples to whom the territory belonged; they do not give the name to the territory. Berkshire, Devonshire, and Cornwall are clearly not called from

<sup>1</sup> Cantwara rice. <sup>2</sup> Hamtunscire. <sup>3</sup> Bearrucscire. <sup>4</sup> Sumursætum.

<sup>5</sup> Dornsætum. <sup>6</sup> Defena scire. <sup>7</sup> Wiltunscire. <sup>8</sup> Corn walum.

<sup>9</sup> *Norman Conquest*, vol. i., Note E.

towns. Kent, Surrey, and Sussex are ancient kingdoms. Between Thames and Humber there is nothing like this. Except Shropshire and Rutland, all the Mercian shires take their names from towns, Scrobbsbyrig-scire appears in the Chronicles in 1006, and the Scrobsætas in 1016; but Shrewsbury seems to stand to Shropshire as Dorchester to Dorset, and Rutlandshire is later than Domesday.

Elsewhere in Mercia, the divisions of peoples and realms have passed away, and all is comparatively new. No one could tell by looking at a list of English shires where was the territory of the Huiccians, or of the Gyrvii, or of the Gainas, or where was the See of the Middle-Angles, or of the Magesætas; the sponge of the Danish Conquest has wiped them all away.

We can only guess at the nature of the civil government of the Mercians before the first invasions of the Danes. We know that there were five Bishops' Sees: Lichfield, the mother of them all, with a diocese extending to the north-west; Lindsey, in the north-east; Leicester, including the south-east, and stretching southward to Thames; Worcester, bounded on the west by Severn, including the territory of the Huiccians; and Hereford, west of Severn. It is probable that the boundaries of civil and religious government were identical, and that the history of the government of each of these districts was much the same with that of the Huiccians: in very early days there were kings, then viceroys, and finally only ealdormen: but that each was an administrative district as really as was Dorset or Somerset, with its own bishop and its own secular governor, by whatever name he might be called. At any rate, it would seem that, towards the close of Mercian independence, the government of the realm under the king was vested in five aldermen, for the Chronicles relate that, in 825, "Ludecan, king of the Mercians, was slain, and his five aldormen with him." But the ancient system of the civil government of the Mercians is as clean gone as are the satrapies of the Persians, and an entirely new system had to be built up by King Alfred and his successors.

It is clear, however, that the present system of Mercian shires was not framed by King Alfred. To begin with, he had no authority to the north-east of Watling Street; and, moreover, the line of division agreed on by him and Guthrum in 878 was not followed in later days by those who laid down the shire divisions. The boundary line was this: "Along Thames, thence up on Lea, along Lea to her source, thence straight to Bedford, then up by Ouse to Watling Street."<sup>1</sup> The river Lea divides Essex from Middlesex and Hertfordshire as far as Stanstead; but from that point the boundary line along Lea to the source, and thence by Bedford to Watling Street, is quite off the existing divisions of the shires. Watling Street again cuts right across Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire, Staffordshire and Shropshire, and only forms a division between shires for about twenty miles on the north-east of Warwickshire. It is quite clear that the existing divisions were laid down so long after the boundary of 878 was fixed between Danes and English, that the state of things to which it referred had quite passed away, and the whole of the ancient Mercian realm was once more under a single hand.

Again, there is a series of entries in the account of the wars of the Lady of the Mercians and Edward the Elder, where districts are spoken of as being dependent on towns in such a way that we should certainly expect shires to be mentioned if such administrative districts with well-defined boundaries had already been carved out. The passages are these:—

918. The whole army landed, and would go again to plunder in Irchingfield. Then there met them the men of Hereford, and of Gloucester, and of the nearest burhs, and fought with them, and put them to flight.

918. Eorl Thurcytel sought him to be his lord, and all the chiefs,<sup>2</sup> and almost all the principal men who owed

<sup>1</sup> *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Hold*, a title introduced into England by the Danes, probably a holder of allodial land.

obedience<sup>1</sup> to Bedford, and also many of those who owed obedience to Northampton.

921. After Harvest went King Edward with the West Saxon force to Passanhamme, and sat there while they surrounded the fortress at Towcester with a stone wall, and there turned to him, Eorl Thurferth, and the chiefs,<sup>1</sup> and all the army which owed obedience to Northampton, as far north as Welland,<sup>2</sup> and sought him to be their lord and protector.

The army which owed obedience to Cambridge chose him specially to be their lord and protector.

922. King Edward went with his force to Stamford, and bid build the burh on the south side of the stream; and all the people which owed obedience to the northern town bowed to him, and sought him to be their lord.

924. And the King went thence into Peakland to Bakewell, and bid build and man a burh nigh thereto.

There seems to be no trace of administrative districts; but both on the English and Danish sides of Watling Street, Hereford and Gloucester in the West, Bedford, Northampton, Cambridge, Stamford in the East, formed simply a series of military centres round which the forces of the neighbourhood might rally in case of need. Of course neither Alfred nor Edward could have carved out shires for Bedford, Northampton, or Cambridge; but certainly if definite shires had been assigned to Hereford and Gloucester by 918 we should have expected that the Chronicles would have mentioned them. "The men of Herefordshire and Gloucestershire" would seem a more natural expression than "the men of Hereford and Gloucester, and of the nearest burhs." If, moreover, a district known as Derbyshire had existed in 924, we should have expected to find it

<sup>1</sup> *Hyran*, to obey, be subject to, belong to. The same Old English word is used in the subsequent extracts.

<sup>2</sup> Northamptonshire is bounded on the north by Welland. The sentence might be taken to mean that the sphere of influence of Northampton really extended north of Welland, but that some other influence, possibly that of the Danes in Leicester, predominated beyond the river.

mentioned in the entry under that year. But in fact we find no mention of Mercian shires in any document written before A.D. 1000, so far as I know; and there is only one case in the Chronicles in which a Mercian shire is mentioned before that date. In the Abingdon Chronicle, C, under the year 980, occurs this entry—" & thy ilcan geara wæs Legeceaster scire gehergod fram Northscipherige." "And this same year Cheshire was plundered by a fleet of Northmen." But this MS. is written apparently in the same hand to 1046, and afterwards in different hands;<sup>1</sup> so that the entry cannot have been written down until at least sixty-six years after 980, and it affords no real evidence for the existence of a district known as Cheshire in 980.

Ethelwerd wrote a Chronicle, chiefly from a West-Saxon point of view, for the instruction of his relation Matilda who died in 1011; and as his Chronicle is carried down to the death of King Eadgar in 975, it must have been completed between those dates. In relating the raid of Ethelmund on the day of King Ecgbyrht's accession, he says: "Trans-eunte per quoddam prædium quod Huuiccum nuncupatur, volens ad vadum quod dicitur Cynemaeres forda, ibique ei occurrit Uuexstan dux cum centuriis populi provinciæ Uuilsætum."<sup>2</sup> Ethelwerd is paraphrasing the entry in the Old English Chronicle, but he is sufficiently far from the original to give him an opportunity of mentioning Gloucestershire instead of the district of the Huiccians, if such a name had already existed and he had cared to use it.

We have thus come to the year 1000, or within sixteen years of the date when we know that Gloucestershire was already in existence, without finding any trace either of that name or of any other Mercian shire, as used by a contemporary writer. It need not be said that such transparent fictions as the foundation Charter of Medeshamstede, and the Croyland Charters, are disregarded. In a Charter purporting to have been granted by King Eadgar to the Monastery at Ely in 970, which exists both in Old English

<sup>1</sup> *Monumenta Historica Britannica*, 76.    <sup>2</sup> *M. H. B.*, 509.

and in Latin, the King bestowed "the fourth penny on the public penalties in Cambridge" (thone feorthan pening on Grantabricge); which the Latin translates—"quartum nummum reipublice in provincia Grantaceaster." Kemble stigmatises the whole document, and adds a note: "The Latin version of this charter, which seems to me more modern than the Saxon which follows it, is peculiarly the object of suspicion. The Saxon charter itself bears marks of authenticity." It will be noted that the Old English Charter has nothing to say about a "provincia." The earliest instance of the existence of a sheriff of any Mercian shire occurs in the record of a Herefordshire shire-moot, in the time of Cnut;<sup>1</sup> and the first Mercian sheriff mentioned in the Chronicles is Ælfnoth, Sheriff of Herefordshire in 1056. Of course the evidence is merely negative, and therefore is liable to be modified by the discovery of fresh facts at any time; but at any rate, the absence of any mention of the Mercian shires is very suggestive.

Clearly Mercia could not have been mapped out into shires before the death of Edward the Elder; the work of division is not attributed to any Saxon king during the tenth century, and in fact it does not appear that any condition of things arose till quite the end of that century which would make such a division necessary. I believe that just as the former series of Danish invasions, which were finally met by King Alfred, had wiped out all trace of the ancient civil divisions of Mercia, so the later series, in the reign of Ethelred the Unready, were the final cause which led to the parcelling out of the amorphous mass of territory which lay between Thames and Humber into manageable districts.

It is clear that the portion of the Chronicle relating to the period lying between 997 and 1016, which tells the story of the last and worst of the Danish invasions, is the work of one who was living at the time. Not only is the story told in such a way as to imply personal knowledge, but expres-

<sup>1</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, DCCLV.

sions occur from time to time which betray the hand of an eye-witness. Such expressions are these:—

1009. "Hence everywhere in Sussex, and in Hampshire, and also in Berkshire, they ravaged and plundered as their wont is."

"All the people were ready to attack them. But it was then prevented through Ealdorman Eadric, as it ever yet has been."

"And oft they fought against the City of London; but praise be to God that it yet stands safe, and there they ever fared ill."

1016. The army "proceeded into Mercia, and slew and burned whatsoever they overran, as is their wont, and got for themselves food."

These expressions could only have been used almost at the time of writing; for on the accession of Cnut, at the end of 1016, the ravages of the Danes ceased, and Eadric was put to death by him in 1017.

1012. On the morrow after the martyrdom of St. Ælfeg, "the body was carried to London, and the Bishops Eadnoth and Ælfhun and townsmen received it with all reverence, and buried it in St. Paul's Minster; and there God now makes manifest the holy martyr's might." This must have been written before June 8th, 1023, when the body was translated to Canterbury. And it is in this part of the Chronicles that we first find mention of the Mercian shires. The following table shows the date at which each shire is first mentioned; the date after the shire-town showing that it was mentioned at an earlier date.

Deoraby, 917, C.	...	...	...	—scir. 1045
Snotengaham, 868, A	...	...	...	1016
Lindcylene, 942, A	...	...	...	1016
Scrobbesbyrig	...	...	...	1006
Stafforda, 913, C	...	...	...	1016
Ligeraceaster, 917, A	...	...	...	
Hereforda, 918, A	...	...	...	1048

				—scir.
Wigeraceastre, 992, E	...	...	...	1038
Gleaweceastre, 918, A	...	...	...	1016
Wærinwic, 915, D	...	...	...	1016
Hamton, 917, A	...	...	...	1011
Huntandune, 921, A	...	...	...	1011
Grantebrycge, 875, A	...	...	...	1010
Oxnaforda, 910, D	...	...	...	1010
Bedanford, 919, A	...	...	...	1011
Buccinghamme, 918, A	...	...	...	1010
Heorotford, 913, A	...	...	...	1011

It is certainly a very striking and suggestive fact, that though none of the Mercian shires appear by name before 1000, no fewer than thirteen of them are mentioned by the contemporary Chronicles in the first sixteen years of the eleventh century; after that period they afford the usual method of fixing localities, and it is to officers of the shires that the king's writs are directed. I believe that Mercia was mapped out into shires not only for military purposes, but also to facilitate the provision of the ships ordered to be built in 1008, and that the scheme was one of the first plans carried into effect by Eadric, who was set as Ealdorman over the realm of the Mercians in 1007. Shropshire is the only shire mentioned before 1008, and that appears as marking the region to which King Ethelred fled in 1006, only two years before. A contemporary writer might easily fall into so slight an anachronism as this.

It is quite clear that the assessment for the ships was by districts, each region contributing in proportion to its extent and means.<sup>1</sup> It is evident also that inland districts had to contribute as well as the shires on the coast, for Archbishop Ælfric, who died on November 16th, 1005, left in his will one ship to the folk in Kent, and another to Wiltshire. He had been Bishop of the Wiltshiremen before his translation to Canterbury, and he wished to relieve the burden of

<sup>1</sup> On the subject of this taxation, reference may be made to Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, i. 339, and Note LL.

taxation on his flocks.<sup>1</sup> Now there would be no difficulty in assessing the old West-Saxon realm, for the shires were comparatively small, and no doubt possessed their staff of officials to whom the work might be committed. But between Thames and Humber there is no evidence at all to show that there were any stated administrative divisions for military, or indeed for any secular purposes, larger than the Hundreds.<sup>2</sup> It would clearly be a very great help to good government in all respects if that huge and shapeless mass of territory were portioned out into areas of a manageable size.

It is certain that, towards the end of the eleventh century, Eadric was credited with very considerable interference with ancient boundary lines. Heming, a monk of Worcester in the time of St. Wulfstan, 1062—1065, writes of him thus: "In the time when Eadric, whose cognomen was Streona, that is, 'acquisitor,' first under King Athelred, and afterwards for a while under Cnut, was set over the whole realm of the English, and held dominion over it like an under-king, insomuch that he joined hamlets to villages and districts to districts at his will, for the county of Winchcombe, which then was independent, he joined to the County of Gloucester.<sup>3</sup> He being possessed of so great power, by force and might stole from the possession of this monastery three villages in the time of Bishop Leofsige."

It is certain that there was once a district of Winchcombe, for an agreement made between the Bishops of Hereford and Worcester concerning rights at Beckford and Cheltenham, at the great Synod of Cloveshoe, October 12th, 803, when the Arch-bishopric of Lichfield was abolished, is headed, "Into

<sup>1</sup> Thorpe, *Dipl.*, 549; *K., C. D.*, iii. 352.

<sup>2</sup> The Hundreds certainly appear to be of great antiquity. But it must not be forgotten that they are actually mentioned for the first time only in the laws of Edgar.

<sup>3</sup> *Quasi subregulus dominabatur, in tantum ut villulas villulis et provincias provinciis pro libito adjungeret, nam vice-comitatum de Wincelcumb quæ per se tunc erat vice-comitatui Gloceastre adjunxit.* (Heming, *Cartulary*, 280; Dugdale, *Monasticon*, i. 598.)

Wincelcumbe scire."<sup>1</sup> And the schedule of Gloucestershire lands belonging to the Church of Evesham in Domesday closes with the note: "In ferdingo de Wincelcumbe habuit S. Maria de Evesham LVI. hidas." This is the precise number of hides accounted for in the record, and the note shows that even seventy years after the death of Eadric the former independence of Winchcombe was not forgotten.

If, moreover, we examine the hidage of the Mercian shires, we shall see that the system bears every mark of being an artificial one; that it did not grow up naturally, but that it was made, that it was impressed on the face of the land without regard to the ancient distribution of the peoples, or the divisions of the dioceses. The shires of Lincoln, Northampton, Bedford, Buckingham, Leicester, Huntingdon, Oxford, Cambridge, and Hertford were indeed almost conterminous with the great Diocese of Dorchester though Hertfordshire includes the Deaneries of St. Alban's and Braughing from the Diocese of London. But there the close resemblance ceased. Warwickshire lay partly in Lichfield, partly in Worcester. Shropshire, partly in Lichfield, partly in Hereford. Gloucestershire, partly in Worcester, partly in Hereford. The ancient realm of the Huiccians was portioned out into the shires of Gloucester, Worcester, and part of Warwick; and the district between Wye and Severn, including the Forest of Dene, was taken from the territory of the Hecanas, and added to that of the Huiccian shire of Gloucester.

Again, we may trace a very close numerical relation between the hidage of the Mercian shires, a relation much more close than any one which would have been likely to arise by any process of natural growth. The following table is taken from Professor Maitland's *Domesday Book and Beyond*, p. 456; the first four columns give different forms of a table of hidage which Dr. Liebermann thinks was probably compiled in English, and in the eleventh century; the last column gives Professor Maitland's reckoning of the

<sup>1</sup> This document first appears in Heming's *Cartulary*.

Domesday hidage of each shire, omitting the boroughs. With regard to this last point, the hidage of the boroughs certainly ought to have been included in the reckoning.

	A		C	D	E
Wiltshire ... ..	4,800	4,800	4,800	4,800	4,050
Bedfordshire ... ..	1,200	1,000	1,200	1,200	1,193
Cambridgeshire ... ..	2,500	2,500	2,005	2,500	1,233
Huntingdonshire....	850*	850*	800½	850	747
Northamptonshire..	3,200	4,200	3,200	3,200	1,356
Gloucestershire ... ..	2,400	2,000	2,400	3,400	2,388
Worcestershire ... ..	1,200	1,500	1,200	1,200	1,189
Herefordshire ... ..	1,500	1,500	1,005	1,200	1,324
Warwickshire ... ..	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,200	1,338
Oxfordshire ... ..	2,400	2,400	2,400	2,400	2,412
Shropshire ... ..	2,300	2,400	2,400	2,400	1,245
Cheshire... ..	1,300	1,200	1,200	1,200	512
Staffordshire... ..	500	500	...	500	505

A. Cotton, *Claudius*, B vii., f. 204 b; Kemble, *Saxons*, i. 493.

B. Cotton, *Vespasian*, A xviii., f. 112 b; Kemble, *Saxons*, i. 494.

C. Gale, *Scriptores*, xv., p. 748, from a Croyland MS.

D. M.S. Jes. Coll. Oxon.: Morris, *Old English Miscellanies*, p. 145.

E. Domesday.

\* In Huntedunescyre sunt dccc hide et dimid. This means eight and a half hundreds.

In the first place we may notice that the table is worthy of some considerable credit; the numbers in the four documents are fairly consistent with each other, and in many cases there is a close correspondence with the Domesday figures. For instance, the numbers for Bedfordshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Oxfordshire, and Staffordshire agree very closely, so closely that any idea that they can be owing to mere coincidence must certainly be set aside. In other cases, such as Cambridgeshire, Shropshire, and perhaps Cheshire, the Domesday hidage is about half that given by the table; yet again the figures given for Northamptonshire seem to be quite inexplicable as they stand. With regard to the last case, Professor Maitland points out that a Northamptonshire Geld Roll of about 1075 gives

2,663 hides, about double the amount at which the shire was assessed in Domesday.

We see then that the table as it stands is worthy of attention. And looking at it more carefully, we shall be struck by its artificial character. It is not that round numbers are used,—that, in stating considerable sums, would be expected; nor again that the actual numbers in the Domesday column do not agree with the numbers given in the earlier scheme, for an existing condition of things cannot be squeezed into the mould of an artificial system, there will always be ragged edges. The artificial nature of the scheme is shown by the fact, that of the twelve Mercian shires included, no fewer than eight—Bedfordshire, Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Shropshire, and Cheshire—all appear in the table with 1,200 or twice 1,200 hides, and Cambridgeshire appears in Domesday reduced almost exactly to that unit.<sup>1</sup> Huntingdonshire contains about two-thirds of 1,200 hides, and the 500 hides attributed to Staffordshire correspond with the Domesday sum.

Northamptonshire is altogether anomalous. If, however, we suppose that the excessive hidage attributed to “Northamptonshire” includes not only the 1,356 Domesday hides belonging to that shire, but also the 2,500 hides attributed to Leicestershire which does not appear in the scheme, we have a total of 3,856 hides—a sum which lies between the extremes attributed to “Northamptonshire.” It will be seen that Leicestershire is not mentioned in the Chronicles at all before the Conquest. It may, therefore, have been a shire of late formation.

Even in Domesday, however, Northamptonshire includes places which now lie in Rutlandshire, Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Bedfordshire, and Huntingdonshire.<sup>2</sup> Neither Derbyshire nor Nottinghamshire is mentioned in the scheme.

<sup>1</sup> London also seems to have gelded at 1,200 hides; that is to say, at a separate shire. (*Domesday and Beyond*, 409 N.1).

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *Introduction to Domesday*, I. § 4.

Professor Maitland reckoned 679 hides in Derbyshire and 567 hides in Notts; giving a total of 1,246 hides, a result closely agreeing with an unit of 1,200 hides. These two shires were evidently closely connected together, they were under a single Sheriff, and the account of the two shire-towns stands on the same page in Domesday. Nottinghamshire appears in the Chronicles in 1016, Derbyshire not till 1045; it may not have acquired a separate existence till some little time after the scheme of shires had been mapped out. It is possible, of course, that Shropshire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire are all included under the excessive hidage attributed by the scheme to Shropshire.

Rutlandshire does not appear as a separate shire in Domesday. Roteland appears under that heading at the end of the account of Nottinghamshire, and the index of its seven tenants *in capite* is placed just after the index of the thirty Nottinghamshire tenants; parts of Rutlandshire are also described under the headings of Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire. But evidently the shire had not acquired a separate existence in 1087. The discrepancy between the hidage attributed to Cheshire in the scheme, and the much smaller number of hides found in the shire in 1087, may be accounted for by the fact that Cheshire was a border territory. The part of Lancashire which lies between the Ribble and the Mersey, containing six hundreds and one hundred and eighty manors, is in Domesday reckoned to lie in Cheshire; and it may be that the scheme intended to include a much larger part of that northern territory in Cheshire.

Thus we seem to learn with considerable certainty these points with regard to the Mercian shire-system:—

1. There is no mention of it before A.D. 1000.
2. Most of the shires were in existence within sixteen years of that date; but the system was not complete when Domesday Book was compiled in 1087.
3. The system consisted of mapping out the region between Thames and Humber into districts containing about 1,200 or twice 1,200 hides.

4. These artificial areas were, with two exceptions, planned to include certain towns; and the shire took its name from the town.

5. This system was therefore quite independent of anything which may have existed before the Danish invasions of the ninth century; and it had no essential relation to the original distribution of nationalities, or to the ancient Diocesan boundaries.

And it is not difficult to see how the condition of things which led to the settling of the system may have grown up. The Chronicle under 894, in relating King Alfred's measures for meeting the Danish raids, tells us: "After this went they forth over the weald in bands and troops on whichever side was unprotected by the fyrd.<sup>1</sup> And men sought them out with other troops most every day, or by night; both from the fyrd, and also from the burhs. The King had divided his fyrd in two, so that they were always half at home, half out; besides the men who must needs hold the burhs." Here we find a triple division of forces. First the men on garrison duty, either in fortified towns such as Gloucester and Hereford, or in the burhs, the fortresses dependent on those towns, whose green ramparts stud the country so thickly in many parts of England; these no doubt were stationed near their own homes, and went about their daily work with sword and spear near at hand like the men of Nehemiah on the wall of Jerusalem. But the men of the fyrd must needs serve where they were summoned, and lest the land should go untended if all were absent, it was arranged that half should always be at home, and half in the field. But each man would know the point where he had to serve, whether on garrison duty in a fortress, or if with the fyrd then the rallying point whither he must hasten in case of alarm.

And some such system as this seems to have obtained on both sides of Watling Street in the reign of Edward the Elder. On the west we hear of the men of Gloucester and

<sup>1</sup> The national army or militia.

Hereford and the nearest burhs; the men, that is, on garrison duty in town and camp who could be quickly summoned to repel a passing foray.<sup>1</sup> On the east of the boundary we hear of the landowners, and men, and army, who owed obedience to Bedford, Northampton, Cambridge, and Stamford. In each case there are local military centres; but in neither case is there any trace of a "scire" or land-division, shorn off from the rest, and pertaining specially to that centre. The men must rally to their own centre, but the land was as yet an undivided whole. The old divisions had been wiped out, and new land-boundaries had not as yet been laid down.

Professor Maitland gives in *Domesday and Beyond*<sup>2</sup> a list of fortresses in the South of England, which was drawn up probably in the latter part of the reign of Edward the Elder. No shires are mentioned in the list, but I have arranged the fortresses under their shires, giving the number of hides attached to each fortress, with the sum for each shire; and also the number of hides in each shire as derived from other sources.<sup>3</sup>

Sussex,—Crowborough, 324; Hastings, 500; Lewes, 1,300; Burpham, 726; Chichester, 1,500:—4,350. D, 3,474.

Hampshire,—Porchester, 650; Southampton and Winchester, 2,400; Twynelham, 470:—3,520. D, 2,588.

Dorset,—Wareham, 1,600; Bredy, 1,760:—3,360. D, 2,321. E, 2,650.

Devon,—Exeter, 734; Halwell, 300; Lidford, 140; Pilton with Barnstable, 360:—1,534. D, 1,119.

Somerset,—Watchet, 513; Lyng, 100; Langport, 600; Axbridge, 400; Shaftesbury, 700:—2,313. D, 2,951. E, 3,488.

<sup>1</sup> A similar expression is used in the entry for 921 in reference to an expedition from Essex and Kent and Surrey for the reduction of Colchester. But this would seem to include both fyrd and garrisons.

<sup>2</sup> P. 502, *Cart. Sax.* 1,335.

<sup>3</sup> C. II., County Hidage, see p. 45; D, Professor Maitland's reckoning of hides in Domesday; E, Rev. R. W. Eyton's reckoning of Domesday; J, Rev. W. H. Jones' reckoning of Domesday.

Bath,—3,200.

Wilts,—Wilton, 1,400; Tisbury, 700; Malmesbury, 1,500; Cricklade, 1,300:—4,900. C. H., 4,800. D, 4,050. J, 3,996.

Berkshire,—Wallingford, 2,400. D, 2,473.

Surrey,—Eashing and Southwark, 1,800. D, 1,834.

Oxford,—2,400. C. H., 2,400. D, 2,412.

Buckingham (and Scafelege?), 1,500. D, 2,074.

Essex,—1,200. D, 2,650.

Worcester,—1,200. C. H., 1,200. D, 1,189.

Warwick,—2,404. C. H., 1,200. D, 1,338.

So far as the country south of Thames is concerned, this is evidently a scheme designed for the defence of the coast. In Sussex, Crowborough is the station for Pevensey Rape, and there is a fortress for each Rape. Porchester guarded Portsmouth Harbour, Southampton and Winchester protected Southampton Water, and the large area from which their defenders would be drawn showed the importance which was attached to this point. Twyneham or Christchurch guarded the valley of the Avon; Wareham, Poole Harbour; Bredy or Bridport, Lyme Bay; Exeter, the valley of the Exe; and Halwell, the valley of the Dart.

On the north, Pilton and Barnstable protected the valleys of Taw and Torridge; Watchet, the coast of North Devon and Somerset; Lyng or Athelney lay on the Tone; Langport and Axbridge guarded the great central marsh of Somerset, and Bath lay on the Avon.

It is probable that the area from which each fortress drew its defenders was not limited by the shire boundaries; but that, for instance, Bredy or Bridport might draw some of its defenders from South Somerset, and that most of the men assigned to Shaftesbury might come from South-East Somerset. But it is not easy to explain the excess of hidage attributed to the fortresses in Sussex and Hampshire over the hides afterwards found in those districts; for Wiltshire, Berkshire, and Surrey seem to have no hides to spare. And in Devon the hidage of the fortresses is nearly half as large again as the Domesday hidage.

The four Wiltshire fortresses were supported by nearly the number of hides assigned to Wiltshire in the table of shires (p. 45), and the 2,800 hides assigned to Malmesbury and Cricklade are almost exactly coincident with the 3,000 hides of land by Ashdown committed by Kenwalch to Cuthred in 648. This may therefore have been a very ancient military district. The number of hides assigned to Wallingford in Berkshire, and Eashing and Southwark in Surrey, is also almost exactly the same with the Domesday hidage. It is probable that these two districts were likewise self-contained for purposes of defence.

Before attempting to apply this table to the question of the origin of the Mercian shires, it will be well to consider the period at which the points north of Thames may have come into the possession of King Edward, and the circumstances under which he may have acquired them.

Bath was certainly Mercian until the reign of King Alfred; for Burhred, King of the Mercians, held a gemote there in 864. It may have come into King Edward's possession on the death of Ælfred, Reeve of Bath in 906, it must have done so on the death of the Lady of the Mercians. The Parker MS. of the Chronicle states that in 912 Ethelred, Ealdorman of the Mercians, died, and the King took possession of London, Oxford, and all the lands that pertained to them. That in 913 King Edward built a burh at Witham in Essex, which was strengthened in 920, and that in 918 he built a burh at Buckingham. And finally, that on June 12th, 922, Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians, died, and that King Edward himself died in 925.

The short Mercian register inserted in the Abingdon Chronicle, however, states that Ethelred died in 911, and Æthelflæd on June 12th, 918.

It states also that in 919 King Edward deprived Ælfwyn, their daughter, of all power in Mercia, and took her away into Wessex. The death of King Edward is assigned to 924. There can be little doubt that these are the correct dates; there would therefore be a period of six years between the

death of Æthelflæd and that of her brother, and it is to this period of six years that I believe the table of fortresses is to be assigned.

The table seems to contain a complete account of the West Saxon fortresses, with a sketch of the military centres of that part of Mercia which had fallen into King Edward's hands.

Oxfordshire may very naturally represent the lands dependent on Oxford of which he took possession on the death of Alderman Ethelred.

Buckingham was very probably dependent upon London, but it seems to have fallen into the hands of the Danes, and to have been recovered by the King in 918. However, Buckinghamshire stretches to the east of Watling Street, and therefore the hidage of the table cannot be fairly compared with that of the later shire.

Essex was east of Alfred and Guthrum's line, and from the relatively small number of hides mentioned it is evident that the King had not complete possession of the land of the East Saxons.

Worcester was the capital of the old Huiccian realm, and Warwick lay just on the boundary. The Lady of the Mercians had built a fortress at Warwick in the autumn of 914.

It is very strange that Gloucester is not mentioned by name, for it was evidently the capital of Ethelred and Æthelflæd in the government of Mercia. Thither they brought the bones of St. Oswald from Bardney, and there they were both buried.

But as Bath appears it is clear that the scheme covers at least the whole area of the Huiccian kingdom, including Gloucestershire east of Severn, Worcestershire, and probably not only the part of Warwickshire which was Huiccian, but also the north-eastern portion up to Watling Street.

Gloucester, I believe, does not appear because it was the deliberate policy of Edward to abolish all traces of the

independence of Mercia. And therefore he transferred the military jurisdiction, which would naturally have belonged to Gloucester in the time of his sister, to Bath, which—Mercian though it had been—lay just on the edge of Wessex, and was therefore more directly under his power. If Bath were allowed to remain in Mercia for the time, the Mercians could not reasonably object to the transfer of military authority from one place to another in their own realm; and the period of the transference of Bath from Mercia to Wessex is quite uncertain. In this scheme it is clear that some of its dependent hides were drawn from Wessex and some from Mercia.

We have then the following fortresses with their dependent hides:—

Worcester	...	...	...	1,200 hides
Warwick	...	...	...	2,400 „
Bath	...	...	...	3,200 „
				<hr/>
				6,800 „
				<hr/>

And we have the following Huiccian shires:—

Worcester	...	...	...	1,189 hides
Warwick	...	...	...	1,338 „
Gloucester	...	...	...	2,388 „
				<hr/>
				4,915 „
				<hr/>

Giving an excess of 1,885 hides. If now we allow 700 Somerset hides to Bath, and consider that of the 2,400 hides allotted to Gloucestershire in the scheme on page 45, 1,200 were reckoned to Warwick and 1,200 were reckoned to Bath, we have 1,300 hides remaining; and if we conclude that these lay in Herefordshire, then we have accounted for all the shires which would seem to be included in the scheme. With regard to the division of the Gloucestershire hides, it will be remembered that there was originally a shire of Winchcombe as well as of Gloucester; and it may be that

each place had been the head of a 1,200-hide military district.

The 6,800 hides pertaining to Worcester, Warwick, and Bath would thus be accounted for :—

Somerset	...	...	...	700	hides
Warwick	...	...	...	1,200	„
Gloucester	...	...	...	2,400	„
Worcester	...	...	...	1,200	„
Hereford	...	...	...	1,300	„
				<hr/>	
				6,800	„
				<hr/>	

The subjection of what is now Herefordshire to Bath is not so strange as it might seem. The scheme is one of defence against the Danes, who could only attack Herefordshire from the upper part of the Bristol Channel, and Bath was by no means a bad centre for the defence of that district. It must be remembered also that at that time the Forest of Dene was dependent on Hereford and not on Gloucester; it lay in the Diocese of Hereford till 1541. So that in 920 the Diocese of Hereford, and therefore no doubt the civil district dependent on Hereford, extended to within less than twenty-five miles of Bath.

But it is probable that the scheme was in its details only a provisional one for dealing at the moment with a newly-acquired territory. Worcester and Warwick were within reach of the Danes, and must be well provided for. The rest was comparatively safe, and might for the present be attached to Bath in the place of Gloucester; the late capital of Mercia having been deposed.

But the point is, that we find in this scheme of Edward the Elder the 1,200-hide unit, which we recognised in the table of Mercian shires at least a century later. We have seen that the whole of what is now Essex and Buckinghamshire cannot have been in King Edward's hands when the scheme was compiled; but of the other three Mercian centres mentioned Worcester is credited with 1,200 hides,

and Warwick and Oxford with twice 1,200 hides. The territory allotted to Bath is clearly anomalous.

With regard to Warwick, we have seen that the only point at which Watling Street forms a shire-division is on the north-east frontier of Warwickshire; and it is more than likely that we have here the boundary of the old 1,200-hide military district of Warwick pushed by the Lady of the Mercians right out to Alfred and Guthrum's line.

Oxford is credited with 2,400 hides; Oxfordshire stands in the shire list at 2,400 hides, and contained in Domesday 2,412 hides.

Worcester is credited with 1,200 hides, just as it is in the shire list; and it included in Domesday 1,189 hides.

But although there were then garrison posts all over the country, there was only one army in Mercia and one army in Wessex. There is no trace, so far as I know, before A.D. 1,000 of a force being raised north of Thames from a smaller area than an Ealdormanship or ancient realm; and this must have made the task of national defence very difficult. It is likely enough that when the Mercian shires were formed early in the eleventh century they were formed, not simply for fiscal, but also for military purposes; and this being so, the old military divisions, where they existed, would form the most convenient areas.

If this were so, the words in the pitiful entry in the Chronicles for 1,010 have a very real meaning: "But although somewhat might then be counselled, it did not stand even a single month: at last there was no head man who would assemble the fyrd, but each fled as best he might; nor at the last would even one shire assist another." Even the new shire-system from which so much had been hoped had proved useless, and perhaps even harmful by splitting the land up into little isolated districts.

But military considerations were not the only ones which determined the boundaries of the shires. The chaotic character of the shire-boundaries on the north-east of Gloucestershire is chiefly caused by the fact that the ancient

estates of the Church of Worcester—Broadway, Cutsdean, Blockley, Shipston-on-Stour, Tidmington, Evenlode and Daylesford—were included in Worcestershire; and the ancient estates of the Church of Deerhurst—Todenham and Little Compton—were included in Gloucestershire, as were also the Deerhurst islands of Widford in Oxfordshire and Sutton Brailes in Warwickshire, and the Tewkesbury island of Shenington in Oxfordshire.

It is evident that great landowners, and especially great churches, were able to modify the shire boundaries to suit their own convenience. And even in the days of the Conqueror the Mercian shire-system was sufficiently fluid to permit of the carrying of estates from one shire into another. Under the head of "Terra Regis" in Herefordshire it is said that Roger de Pistres, Sheriff of Gloucestershire, had diverted into his own shire two hides and a half at "Niware," which formerly pertained to Bremese Hundred in Herefordshire.<sup>1</sup> Edward of Salisbury, Sheriff of Wilts, held Woodchester near Stroud in the ferm of Wiltshire; unjustly, as the jurors say, because it belonged to no ferm.<sup>2</sup> Roger of Berchelai held one hide, less half a virgate, of the King's ferm at Chippenham in Wilts. This, we are told, was a perpresture or encroachment of Edric the Sheriff.<sup>3</sup> The land is probably the parish of Kingswood, near Wotton-under-Edge; for if the hide, less half a virgate, be added to the fifteen hides and half a virgate attributed to Wotton, the rating of that manor becomes an even sixteen hides. Edric was Sheriff of Wilts in the early days of the Conqueror's reign, and seems to have carried off this slice of Gloucestershire to eke out the profits of his Wiltshire ferm. Here there was a real change of shire after the Conquest, for Kingswood lay in Wilts till quite recent times. This fluidity of the shire-system is probably an indication that it had not been very long in existence.

Thus we see why it is so impossible to fix the limits of

<sup>1</sup> Domesday, f. 181.   <sup>2</sup> f. 164.

<sup>3</sup> Wilts, xlv., Rogerii de Berchelai.

the areas mentioned in the old English list of early territorial names.<sup>1</sup> The men of the Peakland, of Elmet, of Lindsey, of Holland, of Spalding, of the Chilterns are recognised; but their land-divisions are gone. It is the difference between the map of France in Provinces and in Departments. Brittany, Normandy, Isle of France, Burgundy,—there is the history of the peoples and of the country written on the map. Finisterre, Cotes du Nord, Seine et Oise, Yonne,—there is the artificial system that has taken its place. And what the French Revolution was to the map of France, that the Danish Invasions were to the map of the land between Thames and Humber.

<sup>1</sup> Cart. Sax. 297, A and B. Earle, *Land Charters*, 458. Professor Earle says of these documents: "There are five several copies of it, one in Saxon, and four in Latin. The Saxon copy is not only the oldest of the five, being of the tenth or eleventh century, but it contains traces of archaism which suggest a much higher antiquity." The list of fortresses referred to is a continuation of one of the Latin copies.

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