

# Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 1

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney

## Aims and Scope

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

1. Notes of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Drone photograph of Offa's Dyke on Llanfair Hill, looking north (Photograph: Julian Ravest). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney, with thanks to Tim Grady and Adam Parsons for critical input.

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Volume 1 for 2019

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University of  
Chester

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# Offa's Dyke: 'the Stuff that Dreams are Made of'

Ann Williams

*Offa's Dyke has been much discussed in the past, and will no doubt continue to fascinate future archaeologists and historians. This article summarises the few historical sources for the Dyke which are available. It also explores the archaeological investigations which have taken place up to the time of writing in 2009.*

*Keywords:* Asser, Mercia, Offa, Offa's Dyke, Wales, Wat's Dyke, Whitford Dyke

This article is based on a paper delivered at a conference on boundaries, held at the Technical University of Darmstadt in 2005; a date seared into my memory because my flight to Frankfurt took place on the same day as the bombing of the London Underground on the 7 July. Since the subject of the conference concerned matters of security and defence, this seems, in retrospect, rather appropriate, though at the time it was merely terrifying. The paper which I gave was subsequently published in the conference proceedings in 2009 (Fryde and Reitz 2009). The frontiers studied ranged from Britain to China, and from Antiquity to the twenty-first century, including *inter alia* the Roman Limes, the *Danevirke* (Niels Lund), the Great Wall of China, the Maginot Line, and the Berlin Wall, so that each contributor concentrated on presenting the essentials of their topic rather than attempting in-depth studies. My brief was Offa's Dyke (Figures 1–3), and since I am an historian, not an archaeologist, I spent most of the time on collecting and discussing the references to the Dyke in the medieval sources; I did not, however, survey the work of the antiquarian writers from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth (Ray and Bapty 2016: 57–66). Written references to the Dyke are not abundant. The earliest mention of what is assumed to be Offa's Dyke dates from a century after its presumed construction, and it is not even called 'Offa's Dyke' until the twelfth century. This sparse historical record of what must have been a major monument is a reminder of how biased contemporary sources are towards royal and ecclesiastical affairs, with little direct reference to social and economic matters. It is this part of my paper which may still be of some interest, since I do not think that much documentary or literary evidence has subsequently emerged. Archaeological investigation of the Dyke has, on the contrary, proceeded apace, so that my attempt to survey the archaeological evidence has been overtaken by events, and can be explored via the other articles in this first volume of the *Offa's Dyke Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

Offa's Dyke, the great earthwork which stretches along the debateable land between England and Wales, has over the years presented both historians and archaeologists with

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<sup>1</sup>References to English counties are to the pre-1974 reorganization. For Wales, the 1974 counties (roughly coterminous with the early medieval kingdoms) have been given..

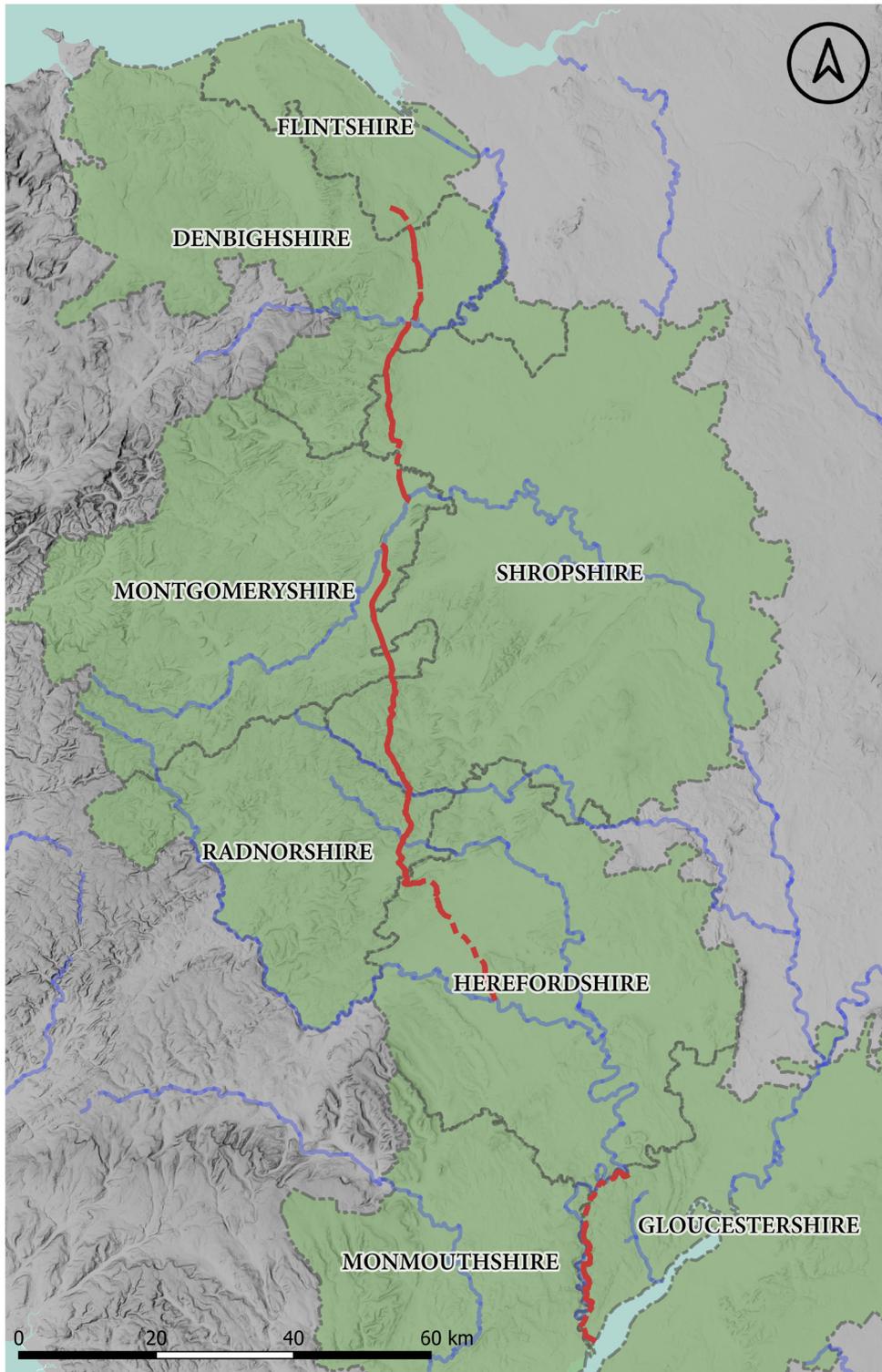


Figure 1: The established line of Offa's Dyke (Map designed by Liam Delaney)



Figure 2: Drone photograph looking north over Offa's Dyke from Llanfair Hill to Spring Hill Farm, Shropshire, showing (from left to right) the counterscarp bank to the left, the ditch, the bank and traces of quarry ditches to the right (Photograph: Julian Ravest)

a number of conundrums. It is difficult in the extreme to answer the questions which the existence of the Dyke raises: who ordered it to be built, for what purpose, how was the labour involved recruited and organised, and how was it used? The period to which it is attributed is one for which the historical sources, both for Wales and for England, are minimal. The archaeological record is scarcely better, since the regions which the Dyke traverses are, for the relevant period, largely aceramic and coinless, depriving us of two major means of dating the structure (Figures 2–3). Moreover, since no scrap of timber or wood has been recovered from the Dyke itself, the use of dendrochronology is precluded. The tasks of both historians and archaeologists are thus rendered even more arduous than is commonly the case. I am an historian, not an archaeologist, and my specialist field is the tenth and eleventh centuries, not the eighth and ninth. I have therefore no view of my own to present on Offa's Dyke. This may, however, be an advantage, since I also have no axe to grind. What I propose to do in this paper is lay out some of the problems which the Dyke presents, and summarise (I hope accurately) current thinking on them.

Let us begin with the sources. The scanty historical record is quickly enumerated. The earliest surviving mention of Offa's Dyke occurs in Bishop Asser's biography of King



Figure 3: Drone photograph looking south from Llanfair Hill over Offa's Dyke towards Cwmsanahan Hill (Photograph: Julian Ravest)

Alfred, written soon after 893, and thus a century after the death of King Offa in 796 (Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 71):

There was in Mercia in fairly recent times a certain vigorous king (*strenuus rex*) called Offa, who terrified all the neighbouring kings and provinces around him, and who had a great dyke (*vallum magnum*) built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea (*de mari usque ad mare*).

Since the dating evidence is so exiguous it is perhaps worth stressing the point that it is only on the strength of Asser's words that the longest of the Dykes on the marches of England and Wales is known as Offa's Dyke.

There is no record of Offa's Dyke in Asser's main source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, whose compilation began in King Alfred's time, and although the chronicler Æthelweard, writing in the years 978–988, describes Offa as 'a wonderful man', he does not mention Offa's Dyke (Campbell 1962: 24). The account of the Dyke in the historical collection made at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries by Byrhtferth of Ramsey is clearly derived from Asser (Arnold 1882: 66; Lapidge 1982: 97–122). The Dyke is not, however, mentioned by the Anglo-Norman writers of the early twelfth century (John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon) who drew both on Asser

and on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for much of their material. William of Malmesbury's silence is particularly remarkable, since his account of King Offa's daughter Eadburh is clearly dependent upon Asser; William echoes Asser's pejorative judgements on Eadburh and her fate (Asser's dislike arose from the marriage of Eadburh to Beorhtric of Wessex who ousted Ecgfrith, King Alfred's great-grandfather), but omits his praise for her father and his 'great dyke' (Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 71–72, 236; Mynors *et al.* 1998: 170–173). Unlike the Wansdyke in northern Wessex, Offa's Dyke does not make an impression in the estate boundaries appended to English royal diplomas. Several charters from the tenth century mention *Wodnes dic*, the Wansdyke (Sawyer 1968: nos 368, 424, 449, 647, 685, 694, 711, 777), and it may be 'the old dyke' on the boundary of Alton Priors (Wiltshire), recorded in a tenth-century will (Sawyer 1968: no 1513). In contrast to this, the only pre-Conquest charter to mention Offa's Dyke is the survey of Tidenham (Gloucestershire), which probably dates from the mid-eleventh century, and even there it appears simply as 'the dyke' (*dic*) (Sawyer 1968: no. 1555; Robertson 1956: 204–7, 451–54). One ninth-century charter does mention an *offan dic* but it cannot be Offa's Dyke, for the boundaries delineate an estate in Somerset (Sawyer 1968: no. 310). The survival of charters and diplomas, however, is linked to the presence of substantial religious establishments with the ability to make and preserve archives, and few such are to be found in the debateable lands of the Welsh marches. There are not many charters for Herefordshire, and even fewer for Shropshire and Cheshire, and many of these either have no boundary clauses, or relate to estates a few kilometres east of Offa's Dyke. The 'old dyke' (*ealdan dic*) included in the boundaries of Staunton on Arrow (Herefordshire) is the Rowe Ditch (Sawyer 1968: no 677; Finberg 1961: 141–42; Hill and Worthington 2003: 139–43).

As for the Welsh sources, if any Welsh kings issued written grants for lands in Powys, none have come down to us; the only early charter material is preserved in the twelfth-century Book of Llandaf (*Liber Landavensis*) and relates to south Wales (Davies 1982; Sims-Williams 1982: 124–29). The chief historical source, the *Annales Cambriae*, also has a south Welsh provenance; its compilation probably began at the church of St David's (Dyfed), in the early ninth century (Williams ab Ithel 1860; Winterbottom 1978; Hughes 1973: 233–58; Dumville 1977/8: 461–67). It does not, in any case, mention the Dyke. The collection of Welsh poems known as *Canu Llwyarch Hen* does refer to unnamed dykes, which may be those of Offa and Wat (Wat's Dyke runs parallel with Offa's Dyke in its northern reaches), but even if they are, the poems are no earlier than the ninth century and could be much later (Davies 1982: 210–11; Nurse 2001: 21–27).

It is not until the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries that clear references to Offa's Dyke appear; indeed, it is only in this period that we have specific evidence that it was called 'Offa's Dyke'. In the *Vita* (life) of St Oswald, king of Northumbria (d. 642), compiled by Reginald of Durham about 1165 (Arnold 1882: 353), the battle of *Maserfeld*, in which Oswald was killed, is located by reference to 'King Offa's dyke, which divides England from North Wales' (*fossa regis Offae quae Angliam et Waliam borealem*

*dividit*); North Wales here means Wales itself, as opposed to ‘West Wales’, i.e. Cornwall. Reginald adds that its purpose was to provide ‘a securer bastion against his (Offa’s) enemies, the Welsh’ (*cuius munimine vallatus securius ab hostibus suis Walensibus*), and that it stretched ‘from sea to sea’. In 1184, the Pipe Rolls, the annual records of the English Exchequer, mention a tenement called ‘the fee of Offa’s Dyke’, lying on the boundaries of Herefordshire and Powys (Hunter 1912: 77). This is probably the tenement later known as the fee of *La Dyche*, perhaps now marked by a motte below the Dyke on the road to Evenjobb (Radnorshire) (Noble 1983: 40, 92). Walter Map, whose ‘Courtiers’ Trifles’ (*De Nugis Curialium*) was written about 1200, says that Offa ‘girdled the Welsh into a small corner of their Wales by means of the dyke which still bears his name’ (James *et al.* 1923: 90–91), and in 1233, the men of Chirbury Hundred (Shropshire), who dwelt ‘this side of *Offediche*’ are distinguished from those who dwelt beyond it (Eyton 1860: 53).

This new interest in the Dyke in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was perhaps sparked off by the wars of attrition which began in the eleventh century and culminated in the English conquest of Wales by Edward I. This border warfare is the context for most, if not all, the literary references to the Dyke in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In 1159, John of Salisbury praised the tactics of Earl Harold of Wessex, whose campaign of 1063 led to the temporary imposition of English control over the north Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, and attributed to the victorious Harold the enactment that any Welshman found east of Offa’s Dyke was to lose his right hand (Webb 1909: 19–20; Dickinson 1963: 194–95). Walter Map also records this penalty, though in his version the trespasser was to lose a foot (James *et al.* 1923: 91). As we have seen, warfare with the Welsh is also the context for the appearance of the Dyke in Reginald of Durham’s life of St Oswald (Arnold 1882: 353). The idea of the Dyke as a legal and political boundary is also found in the *Description of Wales* by Gerald of Wales, completed in 1194 (Dimock 1868: 217; Thorpe 1978: 266). Gerald, like John of Salisbury, mentions Offa’s Dyke in the context of Earl Harold’s campaign of 1063; he celebrates Harold as the greatest of the English kings who campaigned against the Welsh, including Offa who ‘shut the Welsh off from the English by his long dyke on the frontier’ (*qui et fossa finali in longum extensa, Britones ab Anglis exclusivit*). Very similar is the earliest recorded appearance of Offa’s Dyke in a Welsh source, the *Brut y Tywysogyon* (‘Chronicle of the Kings’), which began to be compiled in the closing years of the thirteenth century (Jones 1952: xxxv–xli, 2–3; Hughes 1973: 67):

Offa had a dyke made as a defence between him and the Welsh, so that it might be easier for him to resist the attack of his enemies. And that is called Offa’s Dyke (*Clawdd Offa*) from that day to this.

The *Brut* enters the Dyke’s construction under the year 798, two years after Offa’s death, but the entry is probably misplaced, for Offa’s demise itself is correctly entered. The comparable entry in the fifteenth-century text, *Brehinned y Saesson* (‘Kings of the Saxons’) also claims that the Dyke stretched ‘from the one sea to the other, that is, from the South near Bristol to the

North above Flint between the monastery of Basingwerk and Coleshill', thus conflating, not for the first or the last time, Offa's Dyke with Wat's (Jones, T. 1971: 10–11).

Though they cannot be regarded as reliable sources for the Dyke's original purpose and early history, what the later writers say reveals what was believed about Offa and his Dyke in their own times. Indeed, in this, as in other aspects of pre-Conquest history, twelfth-century historians set the agenda for subsequent commentators. The idea of the Dyke as the 'frontier' between England and Wales, which first appears in the twelfth century, persists to this day despite the fact that it was never the actual boundary, except briefly in the sixteenth century (Noble 1983: 75–76). The Dyke as an embattled rampart also appears most clearly in the twelfth-century texts, though the germ of this idea is contained in Asser's words. But already the Dyke was beginning to pass from history into legend. Walter Map's references to it occur in the course of a long tale about the mythical hero Gado, who allied with Offa to beat off an attack from Rome. Gado is otherwise known as Wada or Wade, after whom Wat's Dyke is thought to be named (Nurse n.d.). Since Offa's Dyke overlaps with Wat's Dyke in its northern reaches, Walter Map's association of the two as allies, though chronologically impossible (Wade, if he ever existed, belongs to the fifth century rather than the eighth) has some interest (James *et al.* 1923: 90–95; Chambers 1912: 95–103; Alexander 1966: 38, 126–27; see also Fox 1955: 288).

These brief and mostly late references constitute the historical (i.e. written) sources for Offa's Dyke. Given their exiguous nature, modern scholarship on the Dyke has concentrated on archaeological and topographical evidence. The first major investigation of Offa's Dyke, which also covered Wat's Dyke and the numerous 'short dykes' found in the same area, was that of Sir Cyril Fox (Fox 1955). In his view, the Dyke was the last and greatest in a series of attempts by the Mercians to delineate their frontier with the Welsh. The 'short dykes' were the earliest of these, perhaps constructed during the sporadic warfare between the Mercians and the men of Powys in the time of King Penda (d. 653). Next in Fox's scheme came Wat's Dyke, 'a continuous bank and ditch frontier' in the north of the border region, which he associated with the dominance of the Mercian King Æthelbald (716–57), who exercised a loose overlordship over all the English kingdoms south of the Humber. Lastly, Fox concluded, 'the final effort to define the whole western frontier of Mercia was undertaken by Offa' (Fox 1955: 285–87). Fox's interpretation of the Dyke not as a defensive or military work but as a mutually agreed frontier between Welsh and English was accepted by Sir Frank Stenton, who in his preface to Fox's book described the earthwork as 'a boundary defined by treaty or agreement between the men of the hills and the men of the lowlands' (Fox 1955: xvii; Stenton 1971: 212–15, 224). In support of his theory of a mutually agreed boundary, Stenton pointed to the existence of English place-names west of the Dyke as evidence of 'the abandonment of English territory to the Britons' (Stenton 1971: 214).

Fox's survey of the Dyke took as its starting point Asser's description of it extending 'from sea to sea', i.e., from Prestatyn, Flintshire, to Sedbury Cliff on the Severn Estuary,

Gloucestershire. He explained the numerous gaps in its course in several ways. In some places the frontier was defined by rivers, notably the Severn and the Wye, ‘along which an artificial line was necessary in certain places only’ (Fox 1955: 277). In others notably the long stretch across the Herefordshire plain Fox postulated the existence at the time of construction of dense, damp oak-forests, which formed an impenetrable barrier between Wales and Mercia. Smaller gaps he interpreted as gateways or crossing-points, in line with his conception of the Dyke as ‘not only a visible frontier but also a barrier through which lawful passage could only be attained at fixed points ... doubtless watched by frontier guards’ (Fox 1955: 170).

It was the imprimatur of Sir Frank Stenton, then regarded as the final authority on the subject of English history before the Norman Conquest, which ensured that Sir Cyril Fox’s opinions on Offa’s Dyke became the definitive version. Not until the 1970s was another survey of the Dyke’s course begun, by Frank Noble (Noble 1978). Noble died before he could complete the full realization of his research, and the section of his projected book which was in a publishable shape on his death appeared in 1983, with an introduction by Margaret Gelling (Noble 1983). This covers only the southern two-thirds of the Dyke’s course (Noble 1983: vii); it is this section, however, which is least well served by Fox’s examination which concentrated on the northern reaches. Noble accepted Fox’s view of the Dyke as stretching ‘from sea to sea’, but differed from him on the details of the alignment, especially in the stretches where no obvious trace of the earthwork now exists. In particular he questioned the existence of the impenetrable oak-woods postulated by Fox to explain the gaps in the Dyke, notably in the case of the largest gap across the Herefordshire plain (Noble 1983: 18–24; Gelling 1992: 7–8, 14–19, 103–4). More fundamentally, Noble rejected the concept of the Dyke as a frontier, on the grounds that it ‘did not form the actual boundary between Mercia and the independent Welsh’, seeing it rather as ‘a control line, a barrier set well back inside Mercian territory behind a screen of valley settlements’; the settlements are those with English place-names which Stenton interpreted as evidence of a negotiated frontier (Noble 1983: 43, 58, 75–76). The apparent gaps became, in Noble’s scheme, crossing-points for legitimate traffic across the Dyke, regulated by customs similar to those recorded in the agreement known as the *Ordinance concerning the Dunsæte* (text and translation in Noble 1983: 103–109). The *Ordinance* concerns relations between Welsh and English populations on either side of a river usually identified as the Wye, though the Taradr has also been suggested as a possibility (Sims-Williams 1990: 9); it has been variously assigned to the second quarter of the tenth century and to the late tenth or early eleventh centuries (Wormald 1999: 381–82; Molyneaux 2012: 249–72).

The next investigation of the earthwork was the Offa’s Dyke Project, under the direction of Professor David Hill and Margaret Worthington (Hill and Worthington 2003), whose workforce clocked up twenty-three seasons of fieldwork, excavation and surveying from a beginning in the 1970s (Hill 2000: 195–206). Among the targets of this study were the supposed gateway sites, incorporated to allow movement to and fro



Figure 4: Photograph of the 2014 excavations of a damaged section of Offa's Dyke by Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust north of Chirk (Wrexham), looking north (Reproduced courtesy of CPAT: Photo Number 3697-0066)

across the earthwork. At all the sites examined, excavation revealed the presence of the accompanying ditch, even where no trace of the bank remained. Its presence, in places some six feet (approximately 2 m) deep, argues against the incorporation of crossing-points in the original design, for if they had been, the ditch 'would simply not have been excavated where any gateway was needed'; rather a causeway would have been left to allow access (Hill and Worthington 2003: 91). The conclusion must be that many, if not all, of the gaps in the Dyke's course were not made in the course of its building, but are the result of later, sometimes much later destruction (but see now Ray and Bapty 2016: 228–32).

One such demolition, in the area of Knighton, Radnorshire (now Powys), took place in the 1850s and was witnessed by the historian John Earle, whose incandescent fury still burns off the pages of the report which he published in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (Earle 1857). To quote his own words, 'it is grievous to see a noble monument like this ... allowed to fall into the power of persons who are incapable of appreciating its value, or understanding its nature'. The objects of his spleen, two brothers whom Earle contemptuously styles "men of the spade", had bought a piece of land where the Dyke crossed 'the hill top, which is called "The Ross"', at what Earle clearly considered the knock-down price of £11 an acre. When Earle arrived on the scene, they were engaged in making the former site of the Dyke 'as smooth as a garden-bed for a space of many hundred feet along the hill-slope'. On being questioned, the men responded 'We are

ridding of it down, Sir’, and when Earle asked them ‘Why do you destroy the old dyke that has stood so many centuries?’ they replied ‘Oh! to make ground of it, Sir; ’tis no use as it is’ (Earle 1857: 197–98). One can only sympathise with Earle’s rage and second his reproachful exhortations to the comfortable worthies of Knighton, who had not come up with the money to purchase the land over which the Dyke had run, and save it from ruin. Alas, such destruction persists even in our own times (Figure 4), though nowadays archaeologists are usually able to record the details of the Dyke for posterity before the demolition men move in (see Belford (2017: 69) regarding the unauthorised damage of the Dyke at Plas Offa, Chirk, in 2013).

As well as ruling out the presence of gateways, the Offa’s Dyke Project also truncated the monument’s length. When the northernmost section, from Treuddyn to the Dee estuary at Prestatyn, was examined, it was discovered ‘either that there are no earthworks for many miles or that where a Dyke exists, it is a separate earthwork, the Whitford Dyke, complete in itself and of a totally different construction from that in the central marches’ (Hill 2000: 198). In the south too, the Offa’s Dyke Project rejected all the earthworks south of Rushock Hill, Herefordshire, as integral parts of the Dyke (Hill and Worthington 2003: 129–43, 143–54). Thus redefined, Offa’s Dyke ‘consists of a major earthwork that runs for 103km (64 miles) from Rushock Hill [Herefordshire] to Treuddyn [Flintshire, now Clywd] ... continuous except for the length along the River Severn to the north of Buttington in Montgomeryshire’ (Hill and Worthington 2003: 107). It took the form of an earthen bank which still in places stands three metres high and was once perhaps twice this height, steeper on the west than on the east and accompanied on its western side by a ditch two metres deep by seven metres wide. Far from being a boundary marker, intended to regulate passage to and fro across a defined frontier, the Dyke emerges as a military and defensive structure designed to block Welsh access into Mercian territory, and following ‘a carefully engineered defensive line that dominates the land to the west’ (Hill and Worthington 2003: 101).

Not all Hill and Worthington’s conclusions have gone unchallenged, including recent questions raised again regarding the potential presence of gateways through the Dyke (Figure 5). The exclusion of the hypothetical line northwards to the Dee estuary, and the classification of the Whitford Dyke as an unrelated monument, have not been contested to date, and it seems to be agreed by many that the numerous short lengths of earthwork across the Herefordshire Plain and in the region of English Bicknor might not be part of Offa’s Dyke. It is the exclusion of the Gloucestershire earthwork, ‘once continuous from Highbury in the north to Sedbury Cliff in the south’, which has attracted dissent (Bapty 2004; Hare 2004: 205–6; Ray and Bapty 2016: 50–54; 89; 172–74; 275–77). One of Hill’s reasons for not considering this section as part of Offa’s Dyke is the existence of an eastern ditch in the stretch across St Briavels Common, whereas the main line of the Dyke has the ditch to the west. Some, however, have discerned a similar eastern ditch in sections of the main Dyke, both in Radnorshire (now Powys) and in southern Shropshire, and have argued that this is no reason to deny the inclusion



Figure 5: Two drone photographs of Hergan Corner (Clun Forest, Shropshire), where Offa's Dyke follows an angled turn, perhaps to assist with the surveillance and control of a possible gateway (Ray and Bapty 2016: 228–232, 237), looking south (above) and north (below) (Photographs: Julian Ravest, 2019)



Figure 6: Looking north along Offa's Dyke at Hawthorn Hill, Powys, where the ditch has long been denuded but the quarry ditch to the east of the bank is well preserved (see also Ray and Bapty 2016: 190–192). (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2019)

of the Gloucestershire earthwork in Offa's Dyke (Bapty 2004; Ray and Bapty 2016: 82–91; 191–92: see also Fox 1955: 277) (Figure 6). Indeed, part of the Gloucestershire section is actually called *Offedich* in a deed of 1321 (Hare 2004: 206), and though this is by no means conclusive, it should be recalled that the only pre-Conquest reference to the Dyke occurs in the survey of the Gloucestershire estate at Tidenham (Sawyer 1968: no. 1555). Perhaps we should envisage Offa building two dykes, one in southern and central Gloucestershire, the other in the central regions of the Welsh marches (Hare 2004: 206).

Having surveyed both the historical and the archaeological evidence for Offa's Dyke, it is time to try and answer some of the questions posed at the beginning of this paper: who built it, why, how was it accomplished, and how was it used? The fact that the dyke bears Offa's name is probably significant, even though the association cannot be taken back beyond the late ninth century. As Stenton observed, 'few, if any, earthworks on the scale of Offa's Dyke are associated so definitely with a particular person' (Stenton 1971: 213). Most are named, like Wat's Dyke, from mythological heroes (Offa himself, though a thoroughly historical figure, soon acquired a heroic, even a legendary aura), or from old gods, as in the case of the Wansdyke, 'Woden's dyke', and Grimsdyke, Grim, 'the

hooded man', another name for Woden (in later times the Devil was, and sometimes still is held responsible for such earthworks). Offa certainly had the resources to undertake such a project, for it was in his reign (757–796) that the kingdom of the Mercians reached its political apogee. By the late 780s, all the southern English rulers acknowledged his authority; the West Saxon King Cynewulf (755–787) held out, but in 787 his successor Beorhtric married Offa's daughter Eadburh. Offa's hegemony did not extend north of the Humber, but in 792 the Northumbrian King Æthelred married Ælflæd, Eadburh's sister. Not only did Offa have the power, he also possessed the necessary will and drive. Though it is difficult to look back through the later accretions to the real man, what little we know of him suggests towering, even over-weening ambition; when a Frankish embassy arrived in 790 requesting a daughter of Offa as a bride for the son of Charlemagne, Offa refused, unless Charlemagne's daughter Bertha was sent as the bride of his own son Ecgrith. Not unnaturally the demand was refused, and not only did no marriage-alliance take place, but commercial relations between Frankish and English ports were temporarily suspended (Nelson 2001: 132–33).

The Frankish kingdom under Charlemagne was the model for all the emerging kingships of Western Europe, and Offa's Mercia was no exception; one of the earliest royal consecrations in English history, that of Offa's son Ecgrith in 787 (which confirmed him as his father's successor), was inspired by the consecrations of Charlemagne's sons in 781 (Nelson 2001: 134). Frankish and English rulers of the seventh and eighth centuries drew their ideas on kingship from two sources: the image of the late Roman emperors, mediated through the Church, and the remote past of heroic saga. Both traditions, Roman and Germanic, might have provided Offa with the inspiration for a great boundary work. The physical remains of the Roman past were prestigious relics (Hunter 1974: 44, 48); when St Cuthbert visited Carlisle, for instance, the king's reeve took him on a tour of the city's walls and 'a marvellously constructed fountain of Roman workmanship' (Colgrave 1940: 123–24, 242–45). Perhaps Offa experienced similar feelings about the impressive Roman structures at Bath. A minster had been established there in the late seventh century, and in 781 Offa forced the bishop of Worcester, into whose possession the church and its lands had come, to relinquish it into his own hands (Sims-Williams 1990: 159–61). Bath's strategic position, on the frontier between Mercia and Wessex, might explain Offa's desire to control it, but the key structures were the surviving Roman buildings, celebrated in the Old English poem known as *The Ruin* (Alexander 1966: 29–31). Its provenance and date are unclear, but the author's admiration for the great works now ruined echoes the general regard for antiquity in the seventh and eighth centuries. Indeed, though it is often cited as evidence that the English feared the ruined cities as abodes of giants, its message might rather be 'come to Bath and see our splendid Roman remains'. Chief among them were the hot springs and the baths which gave the place its name. By the end of Offa's life a royal residence had been established in the city; one of the few diplomas issued in the brief reign of his son Ecgrith (Sawyer 1968: no. 148) was enacted at 'the famous place called in the English tongue, at the Baths' (*æt Baþum*). In developing the role of Bath, Offa may have had a Frankish as well as a

Roman precedent in mind, for it was in the early 790s that Charlemagne had ‘begun to adopt a more sedentary life by the hot springs of Aachen’ (Blair 2005: 274–75). If the Mercian rulers wished to emulate their Frankish contemporaries then Bath, with its antique architecture and hot springs, was the obvious candidate for an English Aachen. The untimely death of Ecgrifh and his replacement by a collateral line of kings meant that Bath did not develop into a Mercian capital on the lines of Aachen, though a charter of Burgred of Mercia, dated 864 (Sawyer 1968: no. 210), was issued ‘at the hot baths’ (*æt þæm hatum baþum*). It was also at Bath, variously called *Baðam/Hatabaðum*, and *Acemannesceastre* (the first element of which appears to relate to the Romano-British name *Aquae Sulis*), that the West Saxon king Edgar was consecrated as king of the English in 973 (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: Swanton 1996: 118–19).

It seems that Offa was open to both Frankish and Roman influence in his quest for the trappings of royal power. So far as the Dyke is concerned, the models might have been the greatest frontier fortifications in Offa’s Britain, the walls of Hadrian and Antoninus, which had already caught the imagination of some English and British writers. In the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, completed in 731, Bede describes what is clearly Hadrian’s Wall as ‘a great ditch and a very strong rampart ... from sea to sea’ (*magnam fossam firmissimumque vallum ... a mari ad mare*). Bede did not attribute the Wall to Hadrian, believing that the ditch and the *vallum* were constructed by the Emperor Severus, and that the stone wall was not added until the early fifth century (Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 26–27, 42–43); the British writer Gildas, whose work was used by Bede, also placed the building of the Wall at the very end of the Roman occupation (Winterbottom 1978: 21, 22–23, 93–94). We have no direct evidence for Offa’s knowledge of Hadrian’s Wall, but he owned a copy of Bede’s history, and though he is unlikely to have been able to read it himself, it could have been read to him (Levison 1946: 244–46). It may also be significant that Hadrian’s Wall lay in Northumbria, the only English kingdom which never acknowledged Offa’s overlordship, and the Antonine Wall not far to its north. In building his Dyke, was he perhaps trying to erect a Mercian counterpart to the prestigious Roman monuments controlled by his rivals, the Northumbrian kings? Wat’s Dyke, within the confines of Mercia itself, might also have inspired emulation, but its date is disputed; it has been assigned to the fifth century, but dating of the section of Gobowen seems likely to be early ninth century (Ray and Bapty 2016: 19–20; Malim and Hayes 2008: 147–79).

If the Roman past was a possible inspiration for Offa’s Dyke, another might be found in Germanic tradition. The remembrance of their ancestors was of the first importance to the élites of all the early English kingdoms (Wormald 1978: 32–90; Hunter 1974: 30–35). Tales of the legendary past were circulating in eighth-century England; the Mercian *atheling* St Guthlac was inspired by ‘the valiant deeds of the heroes of old’, and sagas were even performed in ecclesiastical refectories, much to the indignation of the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin (Colgrave 1956: 80–81; Dummler 1895: 183; Bullough 1993: 93–125). The series of royal genealogies, mostly composed in the later eighth century, are part of the same process of memory, tracing their subjects’ ancestry back to the pre-

migration past (Dumville 1976). Offa's own pedigree included the name of an earlier Offa who, if he was an historical person, ruled in Angeln in the late fourth century (Newton 1993: 64–71). It has been suggested that Offa of Mercia may have deliberately developed parallels between himself and his heroic namesake (Fox 1955: 289–90; Hunter 1974: 4; Yorke 2001: 16), memories of which may underlie the thirteenth-century *Lives of the Two Offas* (Chambers 1932: 217–43; Garmondsway 1968: 233–37) composed at St Albans, a house allegedly founded and endowed by the Mercian king (Whitelock 1951: 58–64; Vaughan 1958: 41–48, 189–94). Certainly, Offa of Angeln was well-known to English as well as Scandinavian legend (Garmondsway 1968: 222–237; Chambers 1912: 84–92), and the author of *Beowulf* calls him 'the best of all mankind between the two seas' (Klaeber 1950: lines 1954–62). More pertinent in the present context is his appearance in the heroic poem *Widsith*, which remembers how 'with one sword he marked the boundary with the Myrkyngs at Fifeldore; just as Offa struck it, Engle and Swaefe have henceforth held it' (*heoldon forth sibpan Engle ond Swaefe swa hit Offa geslog*) (Chambers 1932: 244; Alexander 1966: 39). The bones of the story consist of a combat between Offa and two enemy champions on an island in a river (assumed to be the Eider), Offa being armed with an ancient sword retrieved from a grave-mound. The twelfth-century Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus, gives the sword's name as *Skrep*, meaning 'firm, unyielding', or perhaps 'scraping' (Davidson 1979: i 109, ii 69; Chambers 1912: 91), and it is of some interest that a sword belonging to Offa of Mercia was bequeathed by the *ætheling* Æthelstan, son of King Æthelred *unraed*, to his brother, the future King Edmund II Ironside (Sawyer 1968: no. 1503); perhaps this sword was thought to be the legendary *Skrep*. The boundary in question seems to have settled by combat rather than by the building of a physical landmark, but the idea of establishing a permanent frontier may have had some influence on Offa of Mercia's construction of the Dyke which bears his name. Fox indeed adapted the quotation from *Widsith* to suit the circumstances of the Dyke: *heoldon forth sibpan Engle ond Cumbra swa hit Offa geslog* (Fox 1955: xvii, 288–90).

If we accept Offa as a likely architect of the Dyke, it remains to ask why he had it built. The theory of a negotiated frontier is no longer tenable. The form of the Dyke is clearly defensive; it looks towards Wales, and forms a formidable obstacle to anyone coming from the west. David Hill, who, as we have seen, accepts only the central reaches as the Dyke proper, proposed that it was built to defend Mercian territory from hostile incursions from the Welsh kingdom of Powys. The hypothesis is a tempting one, but there are difficulties involved, not least the lack of hard evidence for relations between Mercia and Powys in the time of Offa. Most of the English sources for the eighth century emanate from Mercia's rivals, Wessex and Northumbria, and largely ignore Mercian affairs, while on the other side of the Dyke the period between 679 and 825 has been described as 'the least well understood in the whole of Welsh history' (Charles-Edwards 2001: 94). The kingdom of Powys itself is first mentioned in the *Annales Cambriae* under the year 808, and although royal genealogies, none composed earlier than the ninth century, take the line of its kings back to around 600, there is no reason to suppose that the territory over which they ruled was coterminous with the ninth-century

kingdom; like many early kingdoms, Mercia included, Powys may have been formed by ‘absorption of smaller original units ... into a larger over-kingdom’ (Maund 2000: 32). One such unit may have been the territory of the *Wreconsaetan* (northern Shropshire), lost to the English in the mid-seventh century (Davies 1982: 99–101).

With such a dearth of material, it is difficult to discern any significant patterns, but the handful of relevant entries in the *Annales Cambriae* (which as we have seen is a South Welsh source) show Offa at war not with the rulers of Powys, but with the southern Welsh. In 760, there was a battle between British and English at Hereford, the outcome of which is not recorded; in 778 there occurred ‘the devastation of the South Britons’ (*Brittonum dexteralium*) by Offa’ (Welsh texts distinguish North and South Wales from the position of an observer across the Irish Sea so that the North is on the left, *sinister* and the South on the right *dexter*). In 784 occurred ‘the devastation of the Britons by Offa in the summertime’, while a further devastation of *Rienuch* in 795 may relate to an attack on Brycheiniog (modern Brecon) (Williams ab Ithel 1860). Finally, and ‘for what it is worth’, Matthew Paris in the thirteenth century alludes to hostilities between Offa and a Welsh king possibly to be identified as Maredudd of Dyfed (d. 796) (Sims-Williams 1990: 53). It may have been in the course of these campaigns that the Welsh kingdom of Ergyng, or at least the part of it which lay east of the River Wye, came under Mercian control; if the Wye was, as many have supposed, the boundary between Welsh and Mercians in Offa’s time (Gelling 1992: 116–17; Fox 1955: xvii), then the gap in the Dyke between Highbury in Gloucestershire and Rushock Hill in Herefordshire is less problematic, but this may not have been the case until the early ninth century (Davies 1982: 102). By the eleventh century Ergyng, anglicized as Archenfield, was certainly ‘English’, and attached to Herefordshire (Erskine 1986: fo. 179).

Fragmentary as it is, the evidence tends to bear out the suggestion that the southernmost portion of Offa’s Dyke at least was built against the southern Welsh kingdoms of Dyfed, Brycheiniog and Glywysing. Only after Offa’s death do the *Annales Cambriae* record warfare between the Mercians and the north Welsh and then with Gwynedd rather than Powys; a battle at Rhuddlan is recorded in 796 and in 798 Caradoc, king of Gwynedd was killed by the English. Powys appears only in 822, when ‘the fortress (*arx*) of Deganwy was destroyed by the English [i.e. the Mercians], and they took the kingdom of Powys into their control’ (Williams ab Ithel 1860). There is, however, the evidence of the enigmatic Pillar of Eliseg, erected by Cyngen king of Powys (d. 855) in honour of his great-grandfather Eliseg/Elise (Edwards 2009: 143–77), which stands at Llantysilio-yn-ial, near the ruins of Valle Crucis Abbey, which took its name from Eliseg’s ‘broken cross’ (Hill 2000: 202–203). The inscription which it bore is now illegible, but before it faded completely a transcription was made by the seventeenth-century antiquarian, Edward Lhyud (Hill 2000: 203), the relevant section of which reads as follows:

+ Concenn son of Cattell, Cattell son of Brohcmal, Brohcmal son of Eliseg, Eliseg son of Guoillauc.

+Concenn therefore, great-grandson of Eliseg, erected this stone for this great-grandfather Eliseg.

+ It was Eliseg who united the inheritance of Powys ... however through force ... from the power of the English... land with his sword by fire(?).

(Edwards 2013: 326).

Eliseg's exploits have been dated to the late 760s or early 770s, presumably by reckoning back through generations of thirty years duration, but a rather earlier date might be deduced from the death in 808 of his grandson Cadell, Cyngen's father, recorded in the *Annales Cambriae* (Williams ab Ithel 1860; Gelling 1992: 118). The Pillar erected in Eliseg's name certainly implies extensive hostilities between the Welsh of Powys and the Mercians, perhaps in the opening years of Offa's reign, perhaps a little earlier. The Welsh are envisaged as on the offensive, which might provide the context for a military and defensive structure along the Mercian boundary with Powys; it would be unnecessary to extend this to the Dee estuary, since the Welsh of Gwynedd were hostile to those of Powys, and likely to ally (as they had done in the seventh century) with the Mercians (Davies 1982: 113).

Warfare between the Mercians and the men of Powys might provide a context for the construction of the Dyke, but it remains to ask how it was used. There is no indication that it was ever garrisoned, but the idea that it might have been patrolled was mooted by Earle as long ago as 1857. Earle indeed believed that he had found traces of such a patrol system. He began with the record in the base text ('A') of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* of the death in 896 of Wulfric, described both as the king's *horsthegn* and as a *wealhgefera* (Whitelock *et al.* 1965). The word *wealhgefera* occurs nowhere else, and its meaning is obscure; the first element certainly means 'Welsh' and the second, *gefera*, has the meaning of 'companion, retainer'. Later recensions of the *Chronicle* emended the text to read *wealhgerefa* ('Welsh reeve'), presumably meaning 'an official in charge of the Welsh', or perhaps 'in charge of matters concerning the Welsh'. Earle, who preferred the original reading in the 'A' recension, gave Wulfric the grandiose title of 'patroller-general of the Welsh marches', seeing him as the director of 'a patrol system, with stations of guard at certain intervals' along the length of the Dyke (Earle 1857: 205–6).

The king whom Wulfric served was, of course, Alfred of Wessex, but Earle argued that his office was no innovation of the West Saxons but a continuation of Mercian practice; he pointed to the appearance of comparable officials in a diploma of the Mercian king, Burgred, dated 855, which freed an estate in Worcestershire 'from the feeding and maintenance of those men whom we call in English *wahlfæreld*, and from lodging (*fæsting*) them and lodging all mounted men of the English race and from other peoples (*ælþeodigra*) whether of noble or humble birth' (Sawyer 1968: no. 207). Like Wulfric *wealhgefera*, the *wahlfæreld* was clearly a mounted man, comparable with the royal *fæstingmen* whose entitlement to hospitality is recorded in Wessex and Kent as well as Mercia (Sawyer

1968: nos 186, 278, 1271). The word *wahlfæreld* is not found elsewhere, but its literal meaning is ‘Welsh (*walh*) expedition (*færeld*)’, perhaps even ‘Welsh military expedition’, since *færeld* comes from the same root as *fyrð*, the normal term for the English army: both are cognate with OE *faran*, ‘to make a journey’ as indeed is *gefera* (Barney 1985: 24). In Earle’s scenario, the *wahlfæreld* become ‘the military company on the Welsh service’ or even more grandly, ‘the *corps d’armee* on the foreign border’. He also suggested that the system was operating as late as 1053, when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the killing by the Welsh of a large number of *weardmenn* at Westbury (Whitelock *et al.* 1965). It should be noted that whereas Whitelock translated *weardmenn* as ‘patrols’, Michael Swanton’s translation of the *Chronicle* renders it as ‘guards’; the first conveys the idea of a mobile force, the other a static group, which demonstrates nicely the importance of checking the original text before coming to any conclusions (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: 128; Swanton 1996: 184). Earle went on to compare the landlocked barrier of the Dyke with the coastguard, citing the passage in *Beowulf* where the hero, landing in Hrothgar’s territory, is challenged by a coast-warden, who then leads him and his companions to the king. A similar passage describing events directly contemporary with the supposed date of Offa’s Dyke occurs in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 787 (Whitelock *et al.* 1965):

In this year King Beorhtric [of Wessex] married Offa’s daughter Eadburh.  
And in his days there came for the first time three ships of the Northmen,  
and then the reeve rode to them and wished to force them to the king’s  
residence for he did not know what they were; and they slew him.

Of course the account in the *Chronicle* is not, as it stands, contemporary, since the text was not compiled until the reign of Alfred, but it presumably draws on some earlier account; in the late tenth century Æthelweard, using a slightly different version, adds that the ships landed at Portland, in Dorset, and gives the name of the reeve, Beaduheard, who, thinking they were trading-vessels, tried to lead their crews to the king’s palace at Winchester (Campbell 1962: 27).

Earle’s argument is a compelling one, though it might be (indeed was) objected that whereas the *wahlfæreld* of Burgred’s diploma might represent ‘an English patrol of the borders’, they might equally well be simply ‘messengers who passed between England and Wales’ (Whitelock 1955: 486). Some support for the latter interpretation comes from the law-code of Ine of Wessex (c. 694), which specifies a wergeld for ‘the king’s Welsh horseman who can ride on his errands’ (*cyninges horswealh, se þe him mæge geærendian*) (Attenborough 1922: 46–47). Earle’s concept of the Dyke as a patrolled frontier was nevertheless taken up both by Noble and Hill and Worthington, and some support for the theory can be found in the place-names of the region (Hill and Worthington 2003: 40–42, 126–127). Margaret Gelling suggested that the concentration in the Welsh marches, and especially in Shropshire, of names derived from Old English *burhtun* (‘settlement belonging to the *burh*’) might indicate ‘remnants of a system of defensive posts and army mustering-places’, and that the men in charge of such mustering points

might themselves be commemorated in another group of names derived from Old English *burhweard* ('guardian of the *burh*') (Gelling 1989: 145–51, 1992: 119, 121–22). One such name survives as Bollingham House in Eardisley (Herefordshire) which coincidentally possessed a 'defensible house' (*domus defensabilis*) before 1066; only two are recorded in Domesday Book, the other being at nearby Ailey (Erskine 1986: fos 184v, 187). Gelling's theory has found some support from John Blair, who, however, interprets the *burhtunas* not as independent settlements but as outposts or guardposts of a central fortified place (the *burh*), each functioning 'as the 'eyes' of its parent site, greatly extending its field of vision' (Blair 2018: 196–219, quotation on 199). Blair gives several examples of such central settlements with their outliers, which demonstrate how such a system might work.

The fact remains that while it is possible to construct a hypothetical model for the Dyke's operation, to show how it might have been is not to show how it was. The root difficulty is best illustrated by comparison with another grandiose scheme, undertaken by another English king a hundred years after the presumed construction of Offa's Dyke. Alfred, king of the West Saxons, was faced, like Offa, with incursions from abroad, this time 'the roving fleets of seaborne heathen' known to history as the Vikings (Sawyer 1968: no. 134). One of his responses was to encircle his kingdom of Wessex not with a continuous earthwork, but with a line of *burhs*, enclosed and defended fortresses, which would not only provide refuge in case of invasion, but also a platform for attack on the enemy in his own strongholds. Many of Alfred's *burhs* still stand, and though not all are now occupied, some of them subsequently developed into towns and took on urban, rather than primarily military, characteristics. But in the case of Alfred's works, the physical evidence does not stand alone. We know of his achievements not only because his biographer Asser recorded them for posterity, but also from the survival of the *Burghal Hidage*, which describes how the *burhs* were maintained and manned (Rumble 1996: 14–35). Dating from the reign of Alfred's son and successor, Edward the Elder, the *Burghal Hidage* has been described as 'the earliest administrative record of English government that survives' (Wormald 1996: 64). It lists the fortifications built by Alfred and his son, and assigns to each an assessment in hides, the unit of taxation and service employed in England from the seventh century to the eleventh (notionally the amount of land which would support a single household for a year). It goes on to provide the basis for calculating the service due:

For the establishment of a wall of one acre's breadth and for its defence, 16 hides are required. If each hide is represented by one man, then each pole can be furnished with four men. Then for the establishment of a wall of twenty poles, there is required eighty hides; and for a furlong, 150 hides and ten hides are required.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A pole (OE *gyrd*) was equivalent to 5½ modern yards; four poles made up an acre's breadth (22 modern yards). Ten 'broad acres' made up a furlong (220 modern yards).

It has to be said that this represents an ideal scenario, and that the figures given in the document frequently do not agree with the wall-lengths which can be identified today, whether still standing or recoverable by archaeological means. Nevertheless, as a statement of the method used to put into effect King Alfred’s commands to build *burhs*, the *Burghal Hidage* is a remarkable text, which provides an insight into the administrative realities of its day.

It will immediately be obvious that some similar method might have been employed to construct Offa’s Dyke (Hill and Worthington 2003: 116–18). Mercia was hidated in Offa’s day (and indeed before), and the hidage was used to calculate obligations to service; one of Offa’s own diplomas lists the food-rent (OE *feorm*) due from an estate assessed at 60 hides (Sawyer 1968: no. 146). It is also from the late eighth century that the obligation to build fortifications, along with service in the royal host, was imposed on Mercia and the other regions under Offa’s control (Brooks 1971: 69–84). The weasel words, as usual, are ‘might have been’; there is no indication of any Mercian predecessor to the *Burghal Hidage*. This brings us back to the heart of the problem. Alfred’s court produced a biography of the king, a series of translations (some by the king himself) of works ‘most needful for men to know’, and the base text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which continued into the reign of his son Edward, when the *Burghal Hidage* also took shape. Offa’s entourage produced nothing comparable that has survived. There was no Mercian chronicler, no royal biographer, no written documents except the royal diplomas, themselves preserved only sporadically, and largely in religious communities removed from the main centres of royal power; most come from the archive of Worcester Cathedral Priory and relate to the subkingdom of the *Hwicce* (roughly the modern shires of Worcester and Gloucester and south-west Warwickshire). Why this should have been so is an enigma, but the fact remains that much of what Offa did, and still more how and why he did it, is irrevocably lost to us; and this includes the genesis and nature of the Dyke which bears his name.

It may be, of course, that we are asking the wrong questions. Perhaps, instead of seeking contexts in the political and military history of the eighth century, we should see Offa’s Dyke and similar structures as objects in the landscape, affecting and affected by their physical environment. Julie Wileman has set out the advantages of this approach: ‘lacking good dates, and therefore historical confirmation of the intentions of the builders, we may at least be able to identify what forms of interfaces these works do not represent’ (Wileman 2003: 64). In this respect, Offa’s Dyke, with ‘unsecured terminals’ and no discernible infrastructure in the shape of ‘forward defences, or accommodation for troops and supplies, or good lines of communication’ looks rather ineffective for any military purpose. Its function may have been ideological, in Wileman’s phrase, a ‘statement in the landscape’. Paolo Squatriti, who has urged a similar approach to that of Wileman, sees the Dyke as (in part at least) a proclamation that ‘the architect ... was a hero rather like a Beowulf or a Hrothgar’ (Squatriti 2004: 9–36). Or perhaps Offa’s Dyke failed of its purpose, or at least outlived it. There is no indication of any attempt

to maintain it, which is hardly surprising, given that Mercian power diminished sharply after Offa's death, to be replaced in the later ninth century by the rising star of Wessex. Nor did the Dyke play any discernible role in subsequent warfare along the English/Welsh border; in 893, for instance, an English host besieged a Viking army at Buttington (Montgomeryshire), right on the line of the Dyke, but though the river (the Severn) is mentioned as separating the combatants, the Dyke is not (Whitelock *et al.* 1965). English pressure on the Welsh kingdoms, north and south, during the later ninth century, brought the frontier west of the Dyke, and perhaps thus rendered it irrelevant, especially in the north. By the time that Edward the Elder established a burh at *Cledemutha* (Rhuddlan, Denbighshire), much of north-east Wales was under English control, if not permanently in English hands (Whitelock *et al.* 1965: annal 921).

As its original functions were forgotten or became irrelevant, the Dyke may have acquired others, not intended by its builder. Wileman, in the passage already cited above, lists the ways in which such a structure could have influenced its immediate locality, in 'forms of tenure and inheritance, subsistence strategies, language and social practices' among the communities on either side. It is, for instance, an as yet unexplained phenomenon that Wat's Dyke divides the eastern part of Flintshire, which was assessed in hides on the English pattern, from the western part, which was not; it also marks the boundary between English and Welsh place-names (Harris and Thacker 1987: 248). Not all such divisions were necessarily permanent. Offa's Dyke has been described as a barrier 'slicing through the symbiotic ties between lowland [English] and upland [Welsh] economies', but the cutting of so many gaps in its length suggests that local economic ties proved more resilient than temporary political estrangement (Squatriti 2004: 9–36).

The attempt to give Offa's Dyke a context in political and administrative history is perhaps misconceived. But it is in the nature of historians to speculate, even or perhaps especially when hard evidence is lacking. 'There is indeed a charm in the very mystery of our Grimsdykes and Wansdykes; and, as the antiquarian is half a poet, these monuments of the unknown have a power over him, and while tracing their course he seems treading the land of faëry'. The words are those of John Earle (Earle 1857: 196), and they serve to remind us that much of what has been written about the genesis, authorship, purpose and use of Offa's Dyke is little more than guesswork; informed guesswork, plausible guesswork, even likely guesswork, but guesswork all the same. In the absence of hard evidence, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Offa's Dyke, like so many monuments of the ancient world, is passing beyond the reach of history and becoming 'the stuff that dreams are made of'.

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