

Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 3

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed 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 and Reviews 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

ODJ is published by JAS Arqueología, and is supported by the University of Chester and the Offa's Dyke Association. The journal is open access, free to authors and readers: <http://revistas.jasarqueologia.es/index.php/odjournal/>. Print copies of the journal are available for purchase from Archaeopress with a discount available for members of the Offa's Dyke Association: <https://www.archaeopress.com/>

Editors

Professor Howard Williams BSc MA PhD FSA (Professor of Archaeology, University of Chester)
Email: howard.williams@chester.ac.uk

Liam Delaney BA MA MCifA (Doctoral Researcher, University of Chester)
Email: 1816919@chester.ac.uk

Editorial Board

- Dr Paul Belford BSc MA PhD FSA MCifA (Director, Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT))
- Andrew Blake (AONB Officer, Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership)
- Christopher Catling MA FSA MCifA (Secretary, The Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales)
- Dr Clare Downham MA MPhil PhD (Reader in Irish Studies, Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool)
- Dr Seren Griffiths MA MSc PhD FSA MCifA (Senior Lecturer in Public Archaeology and Archaeological Science, Manchester Metropolitan University; Honorary Research Associate, Cardiff University)
- David McGlade BA DMS (Vice-Chairman, Offa's Dyke Association)
- Professor Keith Ray MBE MA PhD FSA (Honorary Professor, School of History, Archaeology and Religion, Cardiff University)
- Dr Rachel Swallow BA MA PhD FSA (Visiting Research Fellow, University of Chester; Honorary Fellow, University of Liverpool)
- Astrid Tummuscheit MA (State Archaeological Department of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany)
- Dr Kate Waddington, MA, PhD, FSA (Senior Lecturer in Archaeology, School of History, Law and Social Sciences, Bangor University)
- Frauke Witte Dipl. Prähist. (Curator, Museum of Southern Jutland (MSJ))

Submissions: odj@chester.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 Authors

Front cover: Stained glass created by Stephen Bradley for the Offa's Dyke Centre to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Offa's Dyke Path in 2021 (Copyright: the Offa's Dyke Association). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney.

Offa's Dyke Journal

Volume 3 for 2021

Edited by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney



University of
Chester

Patrons, Landscape, and Potlatch: Early Medieval Linear Earthworks in Britain and Bulgaria

Paolo Squatriti

Often seen as exceptional monuments, comparative analyses of linear earthworks are rare. Exploring Offa's Dyke (Wales and England) and the Erkesiya (Bulgaria) as comparable expressions of authority in the early medieval landscape. This article is a revised and updated republication of an early study (Squatriti 2001), arguing that both linear monuments represent strategies to not only reflect, but actively create, royal power.

Keywords: Bulgarian Empire, Erkesiya, Offa's Dyke

Who built the seven gates of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
Brecht (1977: 109)

Nowadays we imagine the only thing Britain and Bulgaria have in common are the sunburned British tourists who throng the Balkan nation's Black Sea resort towns in summer. But despite the superficial modern impression of difference and disconnection between the two countries' past and present, in the Early Middle Ages remarkable synergies and similarities existed. For instance, both the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and 'protobulgar' Bulgaria were occupiers of former Roman territories administered by barbarians whose settlement there provoked fairly minor social changes. Both the Bulgars and the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, however, managed to sustain a separate cultural identity much longer than most barbarians who found themselves within the Roman *orbis terrarum*. While very minimal vestiges of Frankish, or Vandal, or Gothic cultural production survive, from both Bulgaria and lowland Britain we have a respectable corpus of literature in the settlers' language, a sign of the tenacity of their culture after centuries of slow Romanization. Latin and Greek became widely used as languages of power only after conversion to Christianity among the Bulgars (in the ninth century) and the Anglo-Saxons (in the seventh century). Unlike other barbarians, Bulgars and Anglo-Saxons were slow to adopt Christianity, clinging to pagan cultural models far longer than most folks in the 'Volkerwanderungen.' Even khans who were open to Byzantine cultural influence used the rather inscrutable, steppe-derived pagan calendar in official documents, while Anglo-Saxon poets, though they lived in Benedictine monasteries, populated their compositions with entirely credible pagan figures. Moreover, the mechanics of the two conversion processes are aligned. Indeed, England and Bulgaria's Christianisations have been studied comparatively by no less a scholar than Henry Mayr-Harting, for whom the mid ninth-century conversion of

the Bulgars is a clear mirror in which to glimpse how conversion worked in Britain during the 600s (Mayr-Harting 1994).¹ Nor is Mayr-Harting the first to stress the similarities between English and Bulgar experiences in the postclassical centuries. Already in the 860s, in Rome, far removed from the Balkans and the Channel, the polymath Anastasius the Librarian observed that papal policies deployed in seventh-century England would fit perfectly in the context of contemporary Bulgaria.² Some early medieval people were as conscious as some late twentieth-century ones of the similarities and comparability of Mercia and Bulgaria in the Early Middle Ages.

The point, then, is that Bulgar khans and Anglo-Saxon kings are far less unlikely bedfellows than one might think. During the Early Middle Ages, the geographical distance between the extremities of the European East and its West was bridged by a surprising series of historical parallels. A further unsuspected similarity between the two places on the fringes of Europe, and one which will occupy us here, is the willingness of the early medieval rulers of these places to effect large-scale landscape transformations. Both geographically and chronologically, the lowland Britain of Bede and *Beowulf* and the Bulgaria of the khans who worried Byzantium are far from sixteenth-century Tuscany. Yet just as in Medicean Tuscany 'ambitious new architectural and engineering projects were started all over the region,' where 'building activity [was] directed at supporting and glorifying the prince, [and] reinforced political and artistic control from the centre,' so too in postclassical Bulgaria and Britain major building projects in rural areas added to the rulers' authority (von Henneberg 1996: 24).

To achieve this goal, the rulers conspicuously consumed resources in a way reminiscent of the potlatches that the First Nations of British Columbia arranged on occasion, well into the twentieth century. Indeed, Anglo-Saxon and Bulgar rulers consciously used landscape and alterations of it as marks of rulers' authority, or what German scholars quite intimidatingly call 'Herrschaftszeichen.'³

The particular form of landscape change which will occupy our attention here is the digging of ditches (Squatriti 2002). There are remarkable affinities between the early

¹ This represents a departure from older scholarship, like Sullivan (1966: 56, 138) for whom Bulgaria's experience is unique.

² Anastasius Bibliothecarius, *Epistulae* 5. Since two of pope Nicholas' famous *Responsa* (letter 99) to the inquisitive neophyte khan Boris refer to the English precedent (items 64 and 68), it seems that in ninth-century Lateran circles the similarities of Bulgar and Anglo-Saxon circumstances were widely known (St Boniface's experience in Germany was also held to be relevant in Bulgaria; see Mayr-Harting 1994: 16; Sullivan 1966: 128–129). Angenendt (1986: 749–754) sees in the strategy of leaving a royal son pagan (in English and Bulgar cases) a sign of comparable difficulties for rulers in making the transition to Christianity.

³ This is an expansion to the canonical list of medieval *Zeichen* (thrones, crowns, scepters, coins, clothes, jewels, and relics; Schramm 1954–1956). Pferschy (1989) treats buildings in the same way I wish to treat ditches, as barbarian rulers' claim to authority.

medieval efforts to build monumental earthworks in central Bulgaria (Thrace, at the time of construction) and the Welsh Marches (then known as Mercia) (Figure 1). To begin with the English case, in the second half of the eighth century (scholars are unsure about exactly when),⁴ on the western fringe of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, then at the apogee of its power, a large-scale fosse was excavated, known today as Offa's Dyke. It extends along the foothills of the Cambrian mountains of Wales in a north-south line between Liverpool Bay in the Irish Sea and the Severn river's estuary some 240km further south. Recent archaeological discoveries prove that the medieval belief in Offa's authorship of the entire bulwark was misplaced. He seems to have had about half the dyke dug (Worthington 1999: 341, but see now Ray and Bapty 2016). Meanwhile, the northern dyke, 'Wat's Dyke' may have arisen in the mid-fifth century (Hannaford 1999; but see also Malim and Hayes 1998). Generally, the trench is some 2m deep, but it spans up to 6m from bottom of ditch to top of bank in places. It was made by piling the fill up on the ditch's east lip, and the resulting embankment is at least 2m high. The whole structure averages 20m in width (Fox 1955: 44, 78, 277; Hill 1985).

In the most desolate, unagricultural, highland stretches, where it is best preserved (e.g. across Clun Forest), the height and depth of Offa's Dyke still attains monumental scale, forming a bold landmark (Figure 2). Yet, it is prudent to recall that where the earthwork is now abraded and visually softened, in the eighth century it was highly noticeable. Britain's local historians, brandishing palynological and place-name studies, depict the early medieval west Midland landscape as lightly wooded and heavily humanised (Davies 1982: 11-12; Gelling 1992: 6-19; Rackham 1994: 7-8; Tyers *et al.* 1994: 12-22). Whereas Sir Cyril Fox, first and most glorious surveyor of Offa's Dyke in the 1920s and 1930s, opined that jungle-like woods engulfed portions of the monument's trajectory (as he nicely put it, 'damp oaken forests'), pollen analysis indicates increased agricultural activity at early medieval sites around the Dyke (Fox 1955: 207; Everson 1993: 53-59; Dark 1996: 32-33, 37-38, 40-44, 46-47). Eastern Cheshire and northern Warwickshire had clusters of thick woods, or so suggest groupings of place-names with the *-leah* ending, but the monument shied from them. Offa's Dyke traversed land dedicated to growing grains, pastures, and open moorland, where stands of oak, birch, and hazel were managed and exploited.⁵ In some portions of the earthwork where excavation has been tried, charcoal has indicated that vegetation was burned off before digging began (Hill 1977: 29; Wormald 1982: 121). Though within a season or two plants must have recolonised the raw earth exposed by diggers, and attenuated the chromatic impact of the earthwork, this was a highly legible, visible feature in the early medieval landscape. It was unmistakable from both sides of the embankment along most of its course, and the Anglo-Saxons, fine connoisseurs of protuberances in the soil who distinguished by

⁴ Scholars agree Offa built it, on Asser's authority. But though some think it was built in Offa's later, more secure years, there is no certainty (e.g. Stenton 1971: 214-215; Gelling 1992: 102).

⁵ On *-leah* endings as a topographical indicator in the area of Offa's Dyke, see Gelling (1992: 6). Squatriti (2004) analyses the dyke's environmental impact.

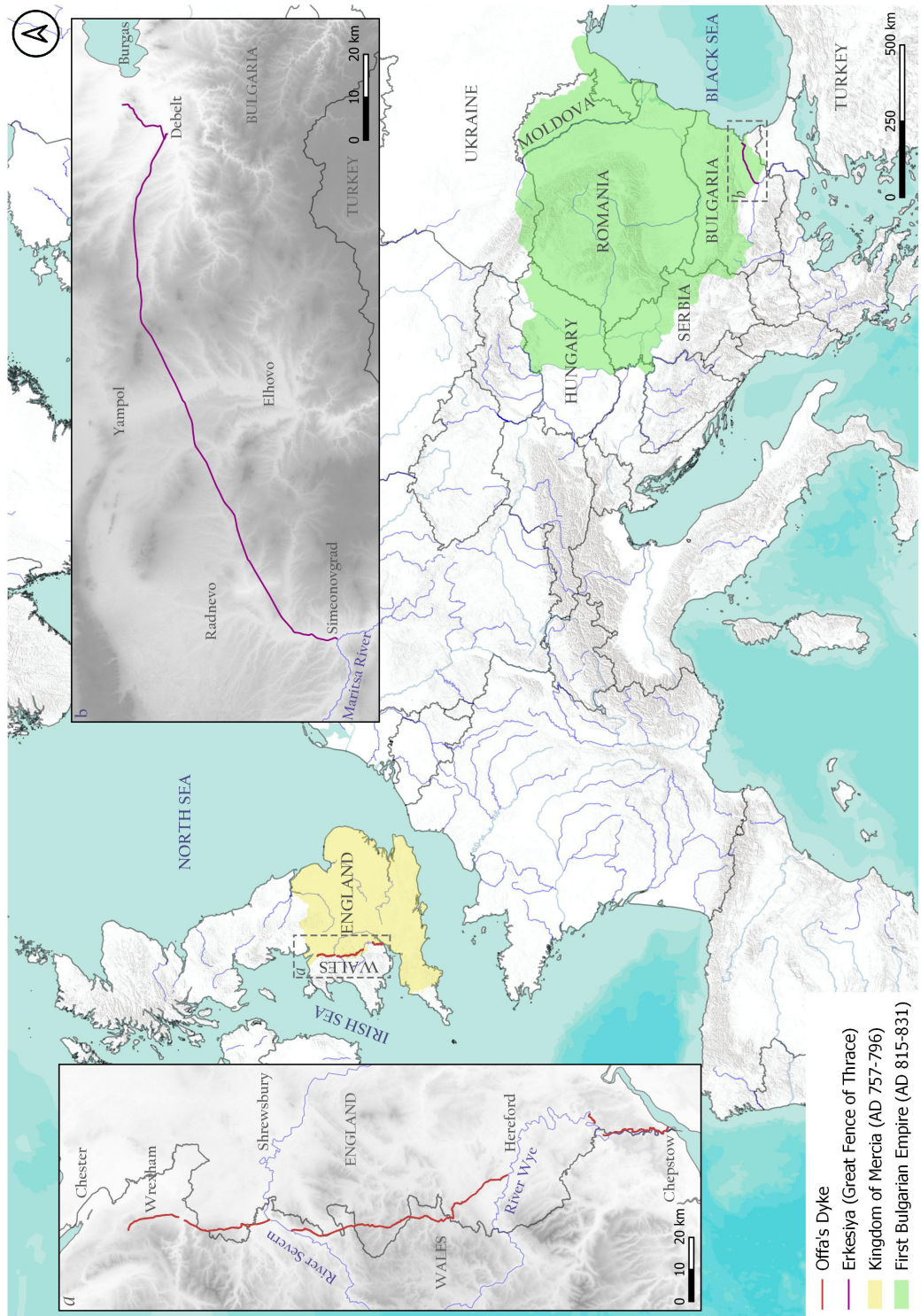


Figure 1 (opposite): The location of Offa's Dyke in relation to Mercia at the kingdom's greatest extent of hegemony under King Offa at the end of the eighth century AD and Erkesiya in relation to the Bulgarian Empire in the early ninth century (Map by Liam Delaney)

shape between a half dozen types of mound, would never overlook it (Hooke 1998: 3–5). Even when winter fogs enshrouded the low-lying sectors, the earthwork remained as sensible to the legs as it was, in clear weather, to the eyes.⁶

Far to the east of Mercia, within a generation of the completion of Offa's Dyke, another monumental ditch was dug in Bulgarian Thrace. What the Ottoman Turks called the Erkesiya, and what John Bury (1910) rechristened the Great Fence of Thrace, is a 130km linear earthwork from near the Black Sea port of Burgas along an east–west line to near the town of Simeonovgrad on the Maritsa river. Today it is severely eroded, the ditch seldom reaching deeper than one metre, with the embankment along its north lip about a metre high (thus, Bury's Fence was 'south-facing') (Figure 3). The 'Fence' is generally about 15m wide (Rasev 1982: 122–123; Soustal 1986, 150–152, 1991: 84, 261–262). It crosses lands of mixed relief, from the coastal plain to the southern foothills of the Balkan mountains (Soustal 1986: 151–152; see also Bury 1910: 276–281). The landscape through which the Erkesiya delves was, judging from literary and archaeological evidence, mostly farmland, with some vineyards mixed with woodland and open moors, in the postclassical period (Besevliev 1981: 1–5; see also Howard-Johnston 1983: 242–243; Poulter 1983: 90–101; Henning 1987: 35–40, 51–53; Randsborg 1991: 61–64). The almost treeless terrain of the eastern section of the Erkesiya contrasted somewhat with the Balkan piedmont, which was enough of a wilderness to provide a tenth-century Byzantine emperor with an excuse for returning thence to Constantinople with his army, instead of invading Bulgaria; but even there forest cover was patchy and interspersed with human structures.⁷ Hence, the 'Fence' was visible from afar, as well as from up close. This new, artificial landscape feature was, like Offa's Dyke, an ostentatious, unmistakable innovation in the territory.

Beyond the simple facts of their almost simultaneous construction, their technical similarities, and their visibility in the land, Offa's Dyke and Erkesiya share something else: both developed an early medieval reputation. By noticing, talking, and writing about these earthworks, early medieval people added another dimension to the ditches' prominence as landscape features, the dimension of memory. In the case of Bulgaria, whose culture was predominantly oral before the tenth century, one of the earliest

⁶ See Davies (1982: 6) on lowland fogginess. Transhumant shepherds and herders would have 'noticed' Offa's Dyke twice a year as they sought greener pasture.

⁷ Rasev (1982: 233–234) suggests that Bulgar ramparts adapted to the terrain they crossed (turves, earth, and wood alternated according to availability): if so, then the 'Great Fence's' builders found little woodland on which to rely, for they used only earth. See also Leo the Deacon, *Istoria* 4.5 (62–63).



Figure 2: Offa's Dyke looking north across the Clun Valley, Shropshire (Photograph: Howard Williams)

surviving Bulgarian texts refers to ditch digging by glorious rulers, which is suggestive of the centrality that activity enjoyed in Bulgarian culture.⁸ The early eleventh-century Vision of Prophet Isaiah credits Asparuch, the khan who in 681 first settled the Bulgars in what would become Bulgaria, with the excavation of a giant ditch in the Danube delta. In the eighth century, long before the Christian missionaries brought their alphabet, some khans began to use Greek to inscribe accounts of their deeds on stone pillars and in other official texts. One such pillar, fragmentary but extant (Figure 4), by chance records the Bulgar side of a treaty made with Byzantium in 816, and seems to refer to the Erkesiya. The inscription claims khan Omurtag 'established' his southern border with Byzantium along a line corresponding closely to the one Bury's 'Fence' follows.⁹ The pillar represents the ditch as a trophy of the khan, a sign of his prowess

⁸ The text is in *Bogomilski Knigi i Legendi*, with the pertinent chapter 3 on p. 282. *Visio Isaiae* is translated by Besevliev (1981: 499–500) and Petkanova (1979: 190–196). See Giambelluca Kossova (1983: 167–173) for background on its composition. Gjuzev (1984: 43–44) gives reasons for believing the *Vision* of Asparuch.

⁹ Fine (1983: 100, 106) claims 'the old frontiers' were restored and the 'Balkan mountains became the frontier again.' Bury (1910) was the first to connect the earthwork to the treaty inscription, and has been almost unanimously followed since (e.g. Besevliev 1981: 477–478). The inscription's text is in Besevliev (1960, n. 41, 190, with commentary at 192–206). For an additional useful commentary, see



Figure 3: Erkesiya (reproduced from vici.org: <https://vici.org/vici/35331/>)

and appropriate wielding of power.¹⁰ Early medieval observers outside Bulgaria agreed with Omurtag's evaluation of the earthwork. The Erkesiya entered the historical record in the account of the Byzantine chronicler Skyltizes, writing shortly after 1050, as a basic feature of Thrace's landscape in the 960s. In the tenth century, al-Masudi also singled earthworks out as the most significant monument in Bulgaria south of the Danube.¹¹ In the generations after Omurtag, landscape change ignited the historical imagination of Bulgaria's neighbours. Following Omurtag's triumphal inscription, the ditch had developed a set of cultural and political associations.

There survives no official Mercian inscription as plausibly related to the construction of Offa's Dyke as Omurtag's inscription is with the Erkesiya. Indeed, though Offa, the king of Mercia in the second half of the eighth century, worried about his posthumous fame and supported monasteries where history was written, almost all Mercian records have vanished, victims of the Vikings (see Jackson 1963: 22–23). The later, Wessex-inspired Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lists Offa's campaigns against rival rulers and his pious

Besevliev (1962: 11–12, 20). Treadgold (1984: 213–220) redated the treaty.

¹⁰ A trophy literally: the inscription was (evidently) kept at the royal palace in Pliska. Omurtag was innovative in his conscious use of building programs to assert parity with Byzantine emperors: palaces, bridges, and pillars claiming authority from God (à la byzantine) are known (Rasev 1983: 263–265; Besevliev 1981: 287–288; Stancev 1964: 347–349).

¹¹ Skyltizes, *Synopsis* 20 spoke of a 'megale taphrou.' see Al-Masudi, *Le livre*: 248). Omurtag's use of structures to communicate with foreigners is evident in another inscribed pillar now in Turnovo, but once at Pliska, about his erecting a residence on the Tica river 'displaying his power to the Greeks and Slavs' (Besevliev 1960: n. 56, 260). On his use of titles to claim parity with Byzantine emperors, see Besevliev 1971: 86–90.

patronage of religious houses without mentioning any construction activities (Keynes 1998: 39–45). But Asser, the Welsh biographer of King Alfred, writing less than a century after Offa's death, confidently ascribed the great embankment 'from sea to sea' to Offa, a king he disliked and characterised as an imperialistic bully ('*universis circa se regis et regionibus finitimis formidolosus rex*').¹² Asser and his Welsh audience were sensitive to the origin and meaning of the monument, and this attribution of its authorship was embraced by later Welsh writers (for instance in the *Brut y Tywysogion*: Williams 1860: 9).¹³ Nor were the literate alone in noticing, discussing, and attributing the earthwork. For at least 1000 years it has been called Offa's Dyke in both Welsh (Clawdd Offa) and English (Offa's Dyke). The popular association of formidable kingship and imposing ditch is further confirmed by the many pre-Norman place-names along the course of the Offan monument that allude to the king.¹⁴ Offa's Dyke made as deep an impression on the early medieval imaginations of the Welsh and the English as it did on the soil. The long trench inscribed royal hegemony on the topography. The ditch was a living testimonial to a king who otherwise risked becoming just like dozens of other Anglo-Saxon hegemons with odd, now unpronounceable names: quaint and forgotten. Frank Stenton, who thought Offa 'at once the most important and the most obscure of early English kings,' considered the monument 'the greatest public work of the whole Anglo-Saxon period' and precious evidence of Offa's political might. He was, in effect, continuing a historiographical tradition (Stenton 1970: 62; 1971: 212).

Thus, Omurtag's 'Fence' and Offa's Dyke became effective, long-term advertisements of rulers' authority. Such efficacy derived from their visibility, from the flagrant, enduring changes they made upon the landscape, changes which were impossible to ignore. But if the ditches enjoyed a second life in the minds of later people, it was contemporaries who constituted the primary audience for Omurtag and Offa. Longsighted as they may

¹² The phrase '*a mari usque ad mare*' was used by Bede (*Chronica*: 515) to describe Roman walls in northern Britain, and by the *Historian Brittonum* to describe Celtic settlement in Britain. Asser (*Alfredi* 14) adopted it to signal the dyke's (imaginary, as about 70km of the 240km seem not to have been built) completeness. On Asser's opinion of Offa, see Scharer (1996: 205).

¹³ See Keynes (1998) for a subtle reconstruction of Asser's milieu (to me, that Asser was not a Ramsey Abbey forger living c. 1000 is still the safest position: see Nelson 1998: 115–124). The reputation earthworks could create for themselves is exemplified in the fact that in the 500s Britons living far from Rome's linear defences in north Britain knew, thought, and (in the case of Gildas) wrote about these structures (Higham 1991: 1–5). Bede (*Hist. Ecc.* 1.5, 1.12) too, who lived closer to the Roman walls, cared about them and demonstrates how early medieval people preserved stories about these idiosyncratic monuments.

¹⁴ See Hill (1977: 312) on 'Offan' place-names. Omurtag's name was not attached to the Thracian soil in this manner, though attaching names of the mighty to places was a known practice (victorious Byzantine rulers liked to rename sites in Bulgaria after themselves or relatives: Preslav became Ioannoupolis in 976 and Preslavitza became Theodoroupolis (Jordanov and Tapkova-Zaimova 1988: 19, 120) while Pliska became Nicephoropolis in 811 (Fine 1983: 96).



Figure 4: The pillar with the treaty inscription of AD 816 claiming khan Omurtag established the Erkesiya (after Curta 2019: 22, fig. 2.3, reproduced with permission)

have been, the Mercian king and Bulgar khan were also pragmatic men enmeshed in difficult, contested political situations for whom the momentary, immediate impact of digging the vast trenches was vitally important. Indeed, the spectacular nature of the process of excavation was central to the manifestation of rulers' power which landscape change achieved.

For the actual digging of the gigantic ditches was truly a spectacle. Mercian (and Welsh) or Bulgar (and Byzantine) societies beheld in the excavation how much control over land and people Mercian kings or Bulgar khans exercised. For Omurtag and Offa, the months of construction were a moment of triumph, a brief time during which they carried out in practice the kind of control which at other times remained theoretical. Today, in totally different demographic and technological circumstances, we are accustomed to public works projects on a gargantuan scale, to states fully capable of mobilising many thousands of labourers and machines in order to build highways, dams, border surveillance systems, and the like. But as the Medici lords of Cinquecento Tuscany knew all too well (or realised each time they pondered large tasks like draining the Maremman marshlands), things have not always been so. Organising systematic work on the staggering scale necessitated by the Erkesiya or Offan dyke was a heroic

achievement in postclassical Europe: it is sobering, in this regard, to consider that 'Britain's leading motorway contractors threw up their hands in despair when... asked to cost (Offa's Dyke) today,' namely in the 1980s, and eventually concluded fifty million pounds sterling might suffice, though none of them considered such a project viable for their own company: such sums were unimaginable forty years ago.¹⁵ Surveying, designing the trajectories to be followed (disregarding local, traditional systems of land ordering), summoning the diggers, organising the work, providing equipment, and furnishing food and shelter so as to make it possible to move millions of tons of soil make the minimal list of difficulties which Offa and Omurtag overcame so spectacularly (see Grigg 2018: 63–83; Ray 2021).

Given the small populations of the West Midlands or northern Thrace in the early Middle Ages, given the very limited taxation rights of rulers, their limited ability to extract work from subjects, and their ongoing need to negotiate the terms of their authority with the aristocrats of the two realms, imposing some months of forced labour on several thousand peasants and conscripting slaves and prisoners to dig a vast furrow, the completion of such earthworks was an important political statement.¹⁶ Neither Offa's Dyke nor the Erkesiya was a credible military barrier, and neither lay on the border of Mercia or Bulgaria, so the political statement seems to have been the ditches' main purpose. For both Offa and Omurtag the ability to marshal and organise the resources which their earthworks represented was a mark of their legitimacy and authority. The fact that the ditches did little beyond represent, whether to the diggers themselves or to all contemporaries who saw or heard about the ventures, added to their impact. Rather like the Chinook of the American Northwest, whom Franz Boas famously portrayed as willing to 'waste' their resources very publicly so as to inform their peers and subalterns of their power and wealth, early medieval Bulgar and Mercian

¹⁵ Other bulwarks like the Ming period Great Wall of China or Hassan II's 450km sand embankment against Polisario had the advantage of crossing almost uninhabited wildernesses. For modern British data, drawn from a BBC television program, see Smith 1988: 26 (my thanks to Luisa Squatriti for this reference). Recent efforts to assess the labour invested in Offa's Dyke are in Grigg, 2018: 63–83, and Ray 2021.

¹⁶ Hill 1985: 140–142, using the Burghal Hidage of 917, reconstructed the schedule of labour in Mercia, suggesting two springs were sufficient to Offa. On English kings' labour appropriations, see: Brooks 1971: 69–84; Hollister 1962: 59–62; Hodges, 1989: 88). On the prevalence of small, self-sufficient farms in early medieval Bulgaria, see Henning 1987: 30–37, 40–41. Bulgar peasants served in the army, though unwillingly (to judge from the draconian punishments envisioned for the lackadaisical in Pope Nicholas, *Responsa* 22–23 and 40). On military arrangements see Browning 1975 114–134; Besevliev 1981: 347–354. Desertion was an acute concern for both Omurtag and his predecessor Krum (Besevliev 1981: 262; Bury 1912: 360). On forced labour in Bulgaria, see Browning 1975: 48, 51, 86, 112, 114; Gjuzelev 1988a: 50, 1988b: 87; Shepard 1988: 171–172. Slavery existed in both England and Bulgaria during the early Middle Ages, but it is difficult to establish its importance for the economy generally and the ditches in particular.

lords invested conspicuously in ditches (Mauss 1923–1924: 39, 95–96, 152–157, 167–174; SchulteTenckhoff 1986). Byzantine and Welsh neighbours, along with Bulgar and Mercian audiences, witnessed this earthy potlatch, and must have been duly impressed, as the immediate historical fame of the structures suggests. In fact, the ability of Omurtag and Offa to ‘waste’ their time, their often-challenged rights over other people’s work, and the endless logistical supports digging the dykes required, was central to the renown of these potentates. Stranded in the piedmont countrysides of the Cambrian and Balkan mountains, the great furrows presented an enduring reminder of these early medieval potlatches and the power behind them.

Instead of thinking about Bulgaria’s and Mercia’s large-scale earthworks as unique military installations to secure borders, therefore, we can appreciate their significance as landscape features by realising how much they had in common.¹⁷ The Dyke or ‘Fence’ slicing through humanised rural settings had a monumental quality which was appreciated by early medieval people. Traces on the earth like these had unmatched suggestive grandeur, and implied to contemporaries, not to mention later generations, something of how mighty men were, or had been, able to refashion the environment in which all lived. These were obviously laborious structures which served no clear purpose. The completion of the superfluous projects signalled the rulers’ status, their capacity to amass, order, and consume resources. Such prodigality could serve to warn hostile or recalcitrant neighbours. Rulers like Omurtag and Offa also found in ditch-digging a rare chance to actualise the kind of relationships between ruler and ruled which lay dormant during most of their lifetimes. Around 800, constructing earthworks was truly the bellows in the forging of the monarchy. The patronage of building projects that changed the physical appearance of the landscape reinforced and indeed created monarchical power.

In sum, dyke-making illustrates how close the experiences of barbarian ‘successor states’ like Bulgaria and Mercia could be, and shows that eastern and western Europe shared a great deal in the centuries after the fall of Rome. On the shores of the Irish Sea as on those of the Black Sea social, political, and cultural developments had a striking similarity. Whether on the western fringe of the early medieval West or on the northern edge of the Byzantine oikumene, ditches served symbolic purposes both for the powerful who originated them and for all observers, within and outside of Mercia and Bulgaria, who wondered about the place of humans on the surface of the earth.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Florin Curta for permission to reproduce Figure 4, Howard Williams and Liam Delaney for both including this essay here and steering it into a new format. The editors wish to thank the original editors, Pamela Berger, Jeffery

¹⁷ The earthworks have always been considered military structures (e.g. Higham 1995: 140; Kirby 1991: 164; Runciman 1930: 73, 288–290; Browning 1975: 51) or border markers (Skorpil 1931: 30; Fox 1955: 28, 44, 218; Hart 1977: 53; Hill 1977: 22; Davies 1982: 110; Hodges 1989: 144; Soustal 1991: 151;).

Howe and Susan A. Michalczyk, and the publisher Peter Lang, for permission to reproduce this article.

Bibliography

Primary sources

- Al-Masudi, *Le livre* Al-Masudi, *Le livre de l'avertissement et de la revision* (trans. B. Carra de Vaux), 1896, Paris: Imprimerie nationale.
- Anastasius Bibliothecarius, *Epistulae* Anastasius Bibliothecarius, *Epistulae sive Praefationes* (eds E. Perels and G. Laehr), MGH Epistulae 7, 1928. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Asser, *Alfredi* Asser, *De Rebus Gestis Alfredi* (ed. W. Stevenson), 1904. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bede, *Chronica Maiora* Bede, *Chronica Maiora* (ed. C. Jones), 1977. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Bede, *Hist. Ecc.* Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (ed. C. Plummer), 1896. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bogomilski Knigi i Legendi Bogomilski Knigi i Legendi (ed. I. Ivanov), 1925. Sofia: Pridvorna pechatnitsa.
- Brut y Tywysogion Brut y Tywysogion (ed. J. Williams), 1860. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.
- Historia Brittonum Historia Brittonum (ed. T. Mommsen), 1897. MGH Auctores Antiquissimi 13, Berlin: Weidmann.
- Leo the Deacon, *Istoria.* Leo the Deacon, *Istoria* (ed. C. Hase) 1878. Bonn: Weber.
- Pope Nicholas, *Responsa* Pope Nicholas, *Responsa* (ed. E. Perels) MGH Epistulae 6, 1925. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Skylitzes, *Synopsis* Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum* (ed. J. Thum), 1973. Berlin, De Gruyter
- Visio Isaiae Visio Isaiae (trans. D. Petkanova), 1979. *Quellen reinen Wassers* Berlin, Neue Wege.

Secondary sources

- Angenendt, A. 1986. The conversion of the Anglo-Saxons considered against the background of the early medieval mission, *Settimane di studio del CISAM* 32: 747–792.
- Besevliev, V. 1969. *Die protobulgarischen Inschriften*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Besevliev, V. 1981. *Die protobulgarische Periode der bulgarsche Geschichte*. Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert.
- Besevliev, V. 1962. Souveranitätsansprüche eines bulgarischen Herrschers im 9. Jahrhundert. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 55: 11–20.
- Besevliev, V. 1971. Die Kaiseridee bei den Protobulgaren. *Byzantina* 3: 81–92.
- Brecht, B. 1977. A worker reads history, in H. Hays (trans.) *Bertold Brecht. Selected Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovic.
- Brooks, N. 1971. The development of military obligations in eighth- and ninth-century England, in P. Clemons and K. Hughes (eds) *England before the Conquest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 69–84.
- Browning, R. 1975. *Byzantium and Bulgaria*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bury, J. 1910. The Bulgar treaty of AD 814 and the Great Fence of Thrace. *English Historical Review* 25: 276–281.
- Bury, J. 1912. *History of the Eastern Roman Empire*. London: Macmillan.
- Curta, F. 2019. *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)*. Brill's Companions to European History 19, Leiden: Brill.
- Dark, P. 1996. Palaeoecological evidence for landscape continuity and change in Britain, c. 400–800, in K. Dark (ed.) *External Contacts and the Economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain*. Woodbridge: Boydell: 23–51.
- Davies, W. 1992. *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Everson, P. 1991. Offa's Dyke at Dudston in Chirbury, Shropshire. *Landscape History* 13: 53–59.
- Fine, J. 1983. *The Early Medieval Balkans*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Fox, C. 1955. *Offa's Dyke. A Field Survey of the Western Frontier-Works of Mercia in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries A.D.* London: The British Academy/Oxford University Press.
- Gelling, M. 1992. *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Giambelluca Kossova, A. 1983. Osservazioni sulla tradizione paleoslava della 'Visione di Isaia'. *Atti dell'8 congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo*. Spoleto: CISAM: 167–173.
- Gjuzelev, V. 1977. Chan Asparuch und die Gründung des bulgarischen Reiches. *Mitteilungen des bulgarischen Forschungsinstitutes in Österreich* 6: 25–46.
- Gjuzelev, V. 1988. *Medieval Bulgaria*. Villach: Verlag Baier.
- Grigg, E. 2018. *Warfare, Raiding and Defence in Early Medieval Britain*. Marlborough: Robert Hale.

- Hannaford, H. 1999. An excavation on Wat's Dyke at Mile Oak, Oswestry, Shropshire, *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* LXXIII: 1–7.
- Hart, C. 1977. The kingdom of Mercia, in A. Dornier (ed.) *Mercian Studies*. Leicester: University of Leicester: 43–61.
- Henning, J. 1987. *Südosteuropa zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Higham, N. 1991. Gildas, Roman walls, and British dykes. *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 22: 1–5.
- Higham, N. 1995. *An English Empire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Hill, D. 1977. Offa's and Wat's Dykes. *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 79: 21–33.
- Hill, D. 1985. The construction of Offa's Dyke. *The Antiquaries Journal* 65: 140–142.
- Hodges, R. 1989. *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement*. London: Duckworth.
- Hollister, C. 1962. *Anglo-Saxon Military Institutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hooke, D. 1998. *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Howard-Johnston, J. 1981. Urban continuity: the Balkans in the Early Middle Ages, in A. Poulter (ed.) *Ancient Bulgaria*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham: 242–254.
- Jackson, K. 1963. On the Northern British section of Nennius, in N. Chadwick (ed.) *Celt and Saxon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 20–62.
- Jordanov, I. and Tapkova-Zaimova, V. 1988. Quelques nouvelles données sur l'administration byzantine au bas Danube, in H. Ahrweiler (ed.) *Géographie historique du monde méditerranéen*. Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne: 119–126.
- Keynes, S. 1998. King Alfred and the Mercians, in M. Blackburn (ed.) *Kings, Currency, and Alliances*. Woodbridge: Boydell: 1–45.
- Kirby, D. 1991. *The Earliest English Kings*. London: Seaby.
- Malim, T. and Hayes, L. 2008. The date and nature of Wat's Dyke: a reassessment in the light of recent investigations at Gobowen, Shropshire, in S. Crawford and H. Hamerow (eds) *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 15. Oxford: Oxbow: 147–179.
- Mauss, M. 1923–24. Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *L'année sociologique* n.s. 1: 30–186.
- Mayr-Harting, H. 1994. *Two Conversions to Christianity. The Bulgarians and the Anglo-Saxons*. Reading: University of Reading.
- Nelson, J. 1998. Waiting for Alfred. *Early Medieval Europe* 7: 115–124.
- Pferschy, B. 1989. Bauten und Baupolitik frühmittelalterliche Könige. *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 97: 257–328.
- Poulter, A. 1983. Town and country in Moesia Inferior, in A. Poulter (ed.) *Ancient Bulgaria*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham: 90–101.

- Rackham, O. 1994. Trees and woodland in Anglo-Saxon England: the documentary evidence. In: J. Rackham (ed.) *Environment and Economy in Anglo-Saxon England*. Council for British Archaeology Research Reports, York: Council for British Archaeology: 7–11.
- Randsborg, K. 1991. *The First Millennium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rasev, R. 1982. *Starobulgarski Ukreplenia na Dolnia Dunav, V/1–XI v.* Varna: Knigoidatelstvo G. Bakalov.
- Rasev, R. 1983. Pliska, the first capital of Bulgaria, in A. Poulter (ed.) *Ancient Bulgaria*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham: 255–269.
- Ray, K. and Bapty, I. 2016. *Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth-Century Britain*. Oxford: Windgather Press.
- Ray, K. 2021. How much work was involved in building the dykes of the Mercian frontier? Part 4, *The Offa's Dyke Collaboratory* 9 February 2021, <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/2021/02/09/how-much-work-was-involved-in-building-the-dykes-of-the-mercian-frontier-part-4-by-keith-ray/>
- Runciman, S. 1930. *History of the First Bulgarian Empire*. London: G. Bell & Sons.
- Scharer, A. 1996. The writing of history at King Alfred's court. *Early Medieval Europe* 5: 177–206.
- Schramm, P. 1989. *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik. Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte von dritten bis zum sechszehnten Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart: Hiersemann.
- SchulteTenckhoff, I. 1986. *Potlatch. Conquête et invention*. Lausanne: Editions d'en bas.
- Shepard, J. 1988. Byzantine Relations with the Outside World in the Ninth Century, in L. Brubaker (ed.) *Byzantium in the Ninth Century*. London, Routledge. pp. 167–180.
- Skorpil, K. 1931. Constructions militaires stratégiques dans la région du Mer Noire. *Byzantinoslavica* 3: 11–32.
- Smith, K. 1988. *Free is Cheaper*. Worcester: John Ball Press.
- Stancev, S. 1964. L'architecture militaire et civile de Pliska. *Actes du Xlle congrès international d'études byzantines* 3. Belgrade: Nauzno Delo: 345–352.
- Soustal, P. 1986. Bemerkungen zur byzantinisch–bulgarischen Grenze im 9. Jahrhundert. *Mitteilungen des Bulgarischen Forschungsinstitutes in Österreich* 1/VIII: 149–156.
- Soustal, P. 1991. *Thrakien*, Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Squatriti, P. 2001. Patrons, landscape, and potlatch, the cases of Bulgaria and England in the Early Middle Ages, in P. Berger, J. Howe and S.A. Michalczyk (eds) *The Plume & The Palette: Essays in Honor of Josephine von Henneberg*. Berlin: Peter Lang: 159–171.
- Squatriti, P. 2002. Digging Ditches in Early Medieval Europe. *Past & Present* 176: 11–65.
- Squatriti, P. 2004. Offa's Dyke between nature and culture. *Environmental History* 9: 38–57.
- Sullivan, R. 1996. Khan Boris and the conversion of Bulgaria, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 3: 55–139.

Stenton, F. 1970. The supremacy of the Mercian kings, in D. Stenton (ed.) *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 48–66.

Stenton, F. 1971. *Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Treadgold, W. 1984. The Bulgars' treaty with the Byzantines in 816. *Rivista di studi bizantini e slavi* 4: 213–220.

Tyers, I., Hillam, J. and Groves, C. 1994. Trees and woodland in Anglo-Saxon England: the dendrochronological evidence, in J. Rackham (ed.) *Environment and Economy in Anglo-Saxon England*. Council for British Archaeology Research Reports, York: Council for British Archaeology: 12–22.

von Henneberg, J. 1996. *Architectural Drawings of the Late Italian Renaissance: The Collection of Pier Leone Ghezzi in the Vatican Library (Cod. Ottob. Lat. 3110)*, Vatican City: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana.

Wormald, P. 1982. The Age of Offa and Alcuin, in J. Campbell (ed.) *The Anglo-Saxons*. London: Penguin: 104–129.

Worthington, M. 1999. Offa's Dyke, in M. Lapidge, J. Blair, S. Keynes and D. Scragg (eds) *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Blackwell: 341.

Professor Paolo Squatriti, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, University of Michigan.

Email: pasqua@umich.edu