

# Offa's Dyke Journal



Volume 4

Borders in Early Medieval Britain

Edited by Ben Guy, 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

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**Front cover:** The River Dee looking east from the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct. Here, the Offa's Dyke Path traverses the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct & Canal World Heritage Site (Photograph: Howard Williams, 2022, with thanks to Rose Guy for assistance). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams, Liam Delaney.

# Offa's Dyke Journal

*A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers and  
Borderlands Research*

Volume 4 for 2022

Special issue: Borders in Early Medieval Britain

Edited by Ben Guy, Howard Williams and Liam Delaney



University of  
Chester

# King Æthelstan and Cornwall

Oliver Padel

*During the three centuries from about AD 700 to 1000, Cornwall became a border area through the anglicisation and absorption into Wessex of its neighbour Devon, then ceased to be one when it was itself fully absorbed into the newly-formed kingdom of England. The particular focus here is on the reign of Æthelstan (924–939). Four events relating to Cornwall are considered in detail, including William of Malmesbury's twelfth-century account of Æthelstan's treatment of the Cornish. His statement that Æthelstan 'expelled the Cornish from Exeter', if accepted, refers not to native Devonians but to economic migrants from Cornwall itself.*

*Keywords:* Cornwall; England; tenth century; place-names; borders

The history of how Cornwall was incorporated into England provides a study in miniature of a region which became a border area and then ceased to be one. Cornwall gained a border with Wessex when its neighbour, Devon, became anglicised in the seventh to eighth centuries. By the late eleventh century, as seen in Domesday Book, Cornwall was no longer a border area but was fully incorporated as a county of England, albeit one with distinctive features, some of which endured. The ninth and tenth centuries are thus the period when Cornwall made the transition, and the reign of King Æthelstan, 924–939, is crucial for understanding that transition.

How and when Cornwall came to be incorporated into the nascent kingdom of England, and also its administrative assimilation, are necessarily part of wider questions concerning the formation of England itself from its component Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and also the standardisation of its administrative systems. These both took place during the tenth century, with Æthelstan the first king who controlled most of the later kingdom of England, including Cornwall, but not some of the northernmost counties. However, George Molyneux (2015) has suggested that it was not until the reign of Edgar (959–975) that England's administrative structures became fully standardised, rather than under Æthelstan as had often been suggested previously (for example, Loyn 1974: 3–6).

In order to understand the events of Æthelstan's reign, we need to recall the earlier background. Three aspects are important here. First, under the Roman empire Cornwall was evidently part of the *civitas* of the *Dumnonii* with its capital at Exeter, *Isca Dumnoniorum*. Although the \**Cornowii* are never named, it is very likely that the boundary within 'greater *Dumnonia*' at this period and in the following centuries between the *Dumnonii* themselves and the sub-tribe of the \**Cornowii* was always the River Tamar, which runs almost from coast to coast, cutting the south-west peninsula

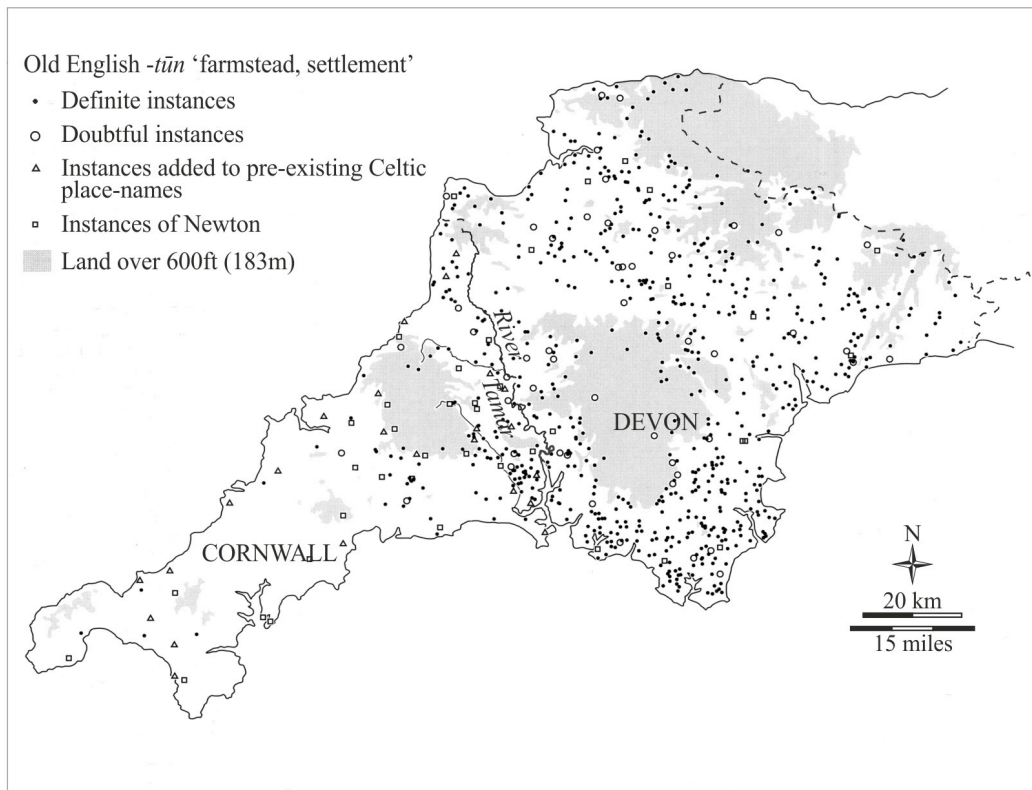


Figure 1: English *-tūn* in place-names in Cornwall and Devon (from Padel 2007: 220)

into two unequally-sized parts (see Figures 1–3). The names of the pre-Conquest and subsequent counties, Cornwall and Devon, stand as the best available indicators to the former territories of those two tribes.

Second, maps showing the distributions of place-names of English and Brittonic origin in the two counties indicate that the Saxon takeover of the two regions differed greatly in kind. Devon had been rapidly and thoroughly anglicised well before Æthelstan's time. There was some extension of similar Saxon settlement into two small areas of east Cornwall, with accompanying loss there of Cornish-language place-names; but apart from those two areas the River Tamar formed a linguistic and cultural boundary as well as an administrative one (see Figures 1–3 and Padel 2007; also Probert 2007). The question is when this change took place. In the first half of the eighth century, the control of Wessex over parts of western and mid-Devon is seen in two grants made by Æthelheard, king of Wessex (726–740): a lost one dated 729 in which he granted land in the valley of the River Torridge (north-west Devon) to Glastonbury Abbey (Sawyer no. 1676), and another dated 739 granting land at Crediton (mid-Devon) to Forthhere, bishop of Sherborne (Sawyer no. 255; and see Figure 4, below). A generation later Cynewulf, king of Wessex in 757–786, was said retrospectively to have 'often fought against the

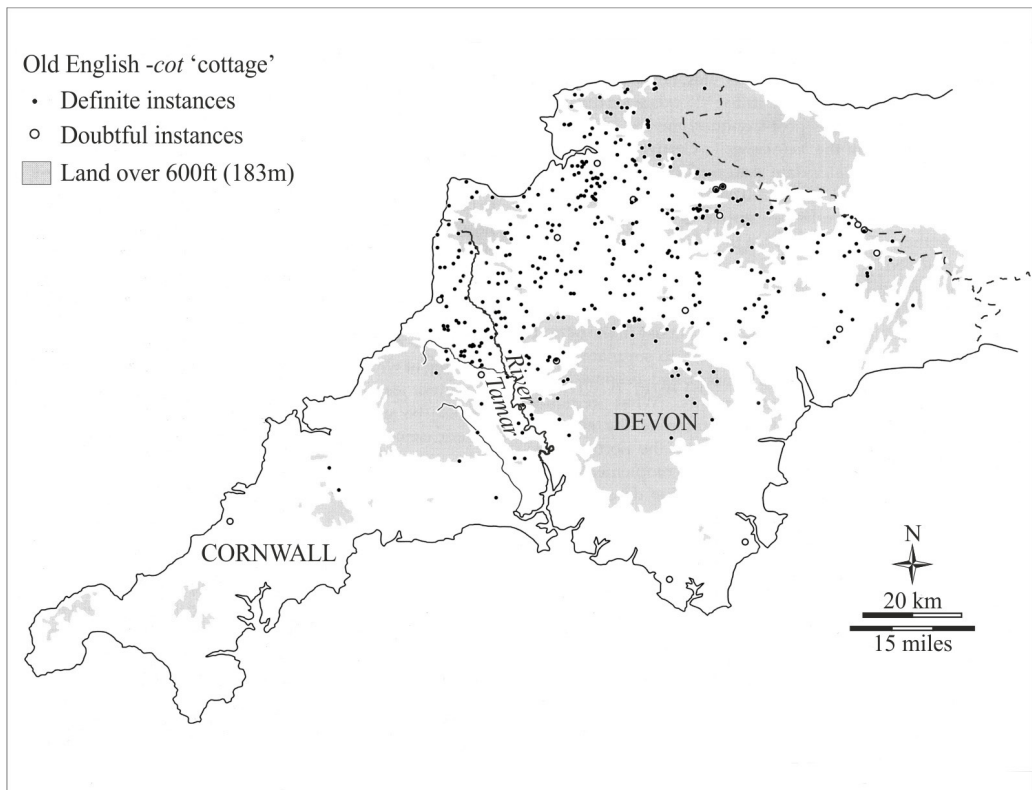


Figure 2: Old English *-cot* in place-names in Cornwall and Devon (from Padel 2007: 222)

British in great battles' (*oft miclum gefeohtum feaht uuip Bretwalum*, Bately 1986: 36, under the year '755'.) The vague term *Bretwalas* used in the Chronicle gains greater precision from the wording of a land-grant which he made to one of his minster-churches in about 770, partly in atonement for 'certain harsh treatment of our enemies, the race of the Cornish' (*pro aliqua vexatione inimicorum nostrorum Cornubiorum gentis*: Sawyer no. 262). Since the choice of name implies people living west of the River Tamar, his regret may give a clue to the start of the process which caused the thorough replacement of Cornish-language place-names by English ones in these two areas of east Cornwall; the implication may also be that much of Devon was by that date under the control of Wessex.

In the ninth century there is fuller information concerning the more northerly of the two areas. Ecgbert, king of Wessex a century before Æthelstan, granted the estate of Kilkhampton there to Sherborne at some date during his reign (802–839), and when Æthelstan's grandfather Alfred drew up his will probably in the 880s, his properties included the nearby estate of Stratton, the administrative centre of the area (see below, and Figure 4). These two facts make it likely that in this area, at least, the anglicisation shown in the place-names was in progress before the end of the ninth century, though Cynewulf's reign may provide an even earlier context for its start.

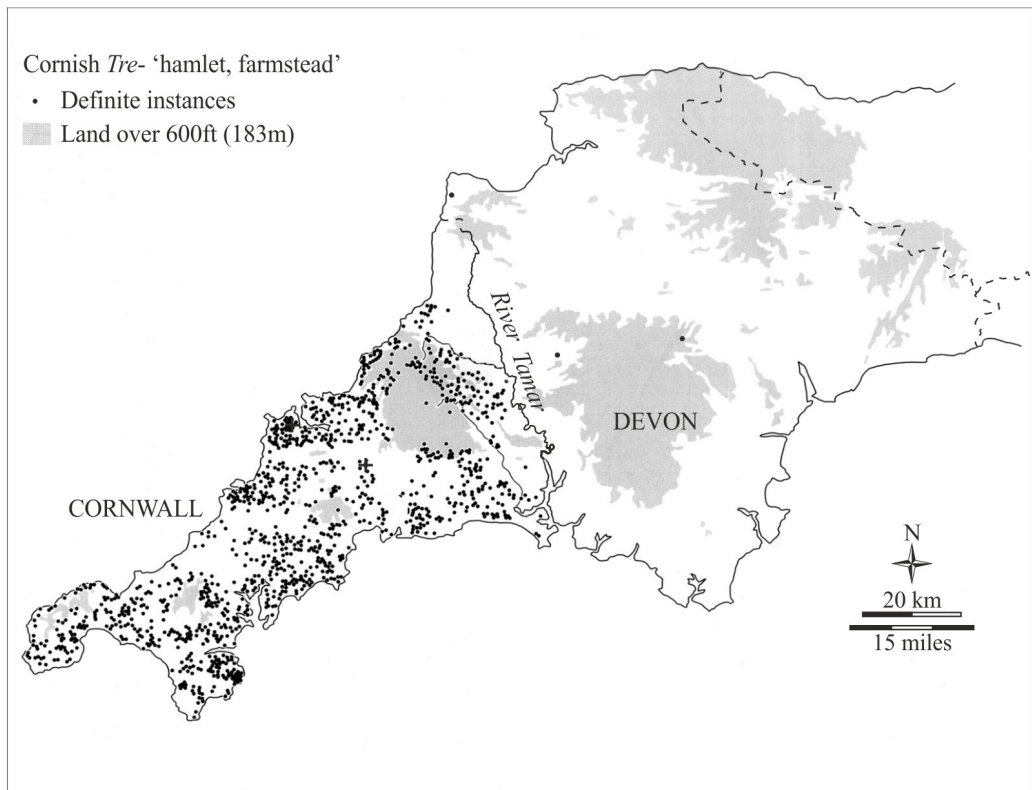


Figure 3: Cornish *Tre-* in place-names in Cornwall and Devon, from Padel 2007: 216

The third background point is the question of when Cornwall itself came under the rule of Wessex. Cornwall's first known appearance is as *Cornubia* alongside *Domnonia* in a poem of Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, written around the year 700 (Lapidge *et al.* 2010). At about the same time Aldhelm also wrote a letter to Gerent as king of *Dumnonia* urging him to bring the Church in his kingdom into line with standard Roman practice (Probert 2010, and references). After that date the disappearance of *Dumnonia* and appearance of Cornwall in the historical record are symptoms of Devon's increasing incorporation into the English kingdom of Wessex, which left Cornwall as the remaining non-English region in the south-west. Reading between the lines of Aldhelm's 'Letter to Gerent', as Duncan Probert has done, shows that *Dumnonia* (including Cornwall) was already subject at least to pressure from Wessex: Gerent as its king was treated politely but with perhaps veiled threats of consequences if he did not ensure that the Church in his kingdom conformed to standard practices (Probert 2010: 115–119).

With the absorption of *Dumnonia* into Wessex in the eighth century, as shown in the reigns of Æthelheard and Cynewulf (above), Cornwall thus had a brief separate existence, until it too was brought under the rule of Wessex a hundred years later by Ecgbert

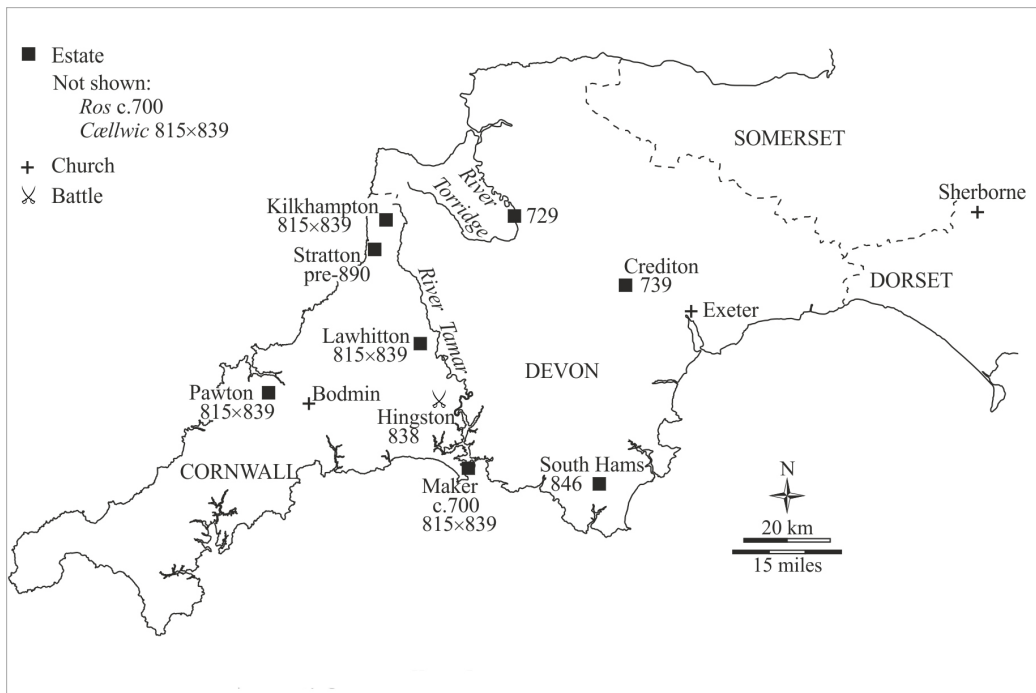


Figure 4: Cornwall and Devon: eighth and ninth centuries

king of Wessex (802–839), Æthelstan’s great-great-grandfather, in a series of conflicts recorded in the Chronicle in 815 and 825 and culminating in the battle of Hingston in 838 (Bately 1986: 41 under the years ‘813’ and ‘823’, and 42–43 under the year ‘835’). Four strands of evidence make it likely that this last known battle between Wessex and Cornwall marks the date from which Cornwall was increasingly under the overall rule of Wessex. First, before his death in 839 King Egbert was able to grant or confirm to Sherborne minster several estates in Cornwall, mostly near to its eastern edge, but also one in the middle of the county (Figure 4: Pawton; also Lawhitton, Kilkhampton and Maker). Second, at some time in the mid-century a Cornish bishop acknowledged to Ceolnoth, archbishop of Canterbury, his supremacy in ecclesiastical matters (Birch 1885–99, vol. 2: no. 527; less accurately, Richter 1973, no. 27). This submission can be dated only by Ceolnoth’s own long archiepiscopacy (833–870), so it may have occurred around the time of the battle of Hingston or up to a generation later, but anyway before Alfred succeeded to the throne of Wessex in 871.

Third, several events during Alfred’s own lifetime suggest a region increasingly under the control of Wessex: his visit to Cornwall during the 860s while still in his teens for the purpose of hunting; his gift to Asser before about 890 of the church of Exeter ‘with all the territory which belonged to it in *Saxonia* [= Devon] and *Cornubia*’; the three Irish pilgrims who drifted ashore on the Cornish coast in 891 ‘and then went straight away to King Alfred’; and his bequest of private estates in Cornwall in his own will (Keynes and



Lapidge 1983: 89 and 254–255, hunting in Cornwall; 97 and 254–255, Exeter; 113–114 and 282, Irish pilgrims; and 175, 317 and 321, Alfred's will; and Padel 2011, Exeter). These events all suggest a degree of overlordship by Wessex over Cornwall.

Fourth, the subdivision of the see of Sherborne early in the tenth century (about 909) shows an appreciation of the need for greater episcopal provision by Wessex for both Devon and Cornwall, implying the ecclesiastical incorporation of Cornwall which had taken place by that date (Robinson 1918: chapter 2, 'The subdivision of the Wessex dioceses'; Sawyer no. 1451a; Keynes 1991: no. 9). The cumulative evidence is thus that when *Dungarth*, the last (indeed the only known) king 'of Cornwall', died in 875–876 (Dumville 2002: 12), his role was that of a sub-king to Wessex; so the Cornish bishop's submission to Archbishop Ceolnoth occurred either during *Dungarth*'s reign or earlier. Some degree of dominance had been hinted at 175 years earlier in Aldhelm's letter to Gerent of *Dumnonia* and was evidently thoroughly established after the battle of Hingston in 838. Some 60 years later even the Welsh kings were to become subject (if only nominally) to Æthelstan (compare Charles-Edwards 2013: 431 and 494).

But although Cornwall was under the rule of Wessex from the mid-ninth century, it was probably administered in what we might consider a 'colonial' manner initially. Its full administrative assimilation is visible in the reign of Edgar (960–969), when clauses within his charters granting lands in Cornwall imply that normal administrative structures were in place by that date (Sawyer nos 684, 755 and 770). These clauses comprise both exemptions from worldly burdens on the land (implying that those burdens would be in place unless exempted), and also the standard three exceptions to those exemptions (military service and construction of fortifications and bridges). AD 960 is therefore the date by which English county administration, needed to impose these burdens (both exempted and retained) upon lands, was in operation even in the far west of Cornwall. It may have been operating earlier too, but we have no information, because of the lack of surviving charters.

The creation in about 909 of the see at Crediton, serving both counties of Devon and Cornwall, was itself over-ambitious, for the diocese was still impracticably large. That difficulty was to be remedied by Æthelstan less than a generation later. A narrative of this subdivision, written later in the tenth century, claimed that unorthodox practices were still being followed in Cornwall as late as that date: ... *ad exprimendos eorum errores. Nam antea in quantum potuerunt ueritati resistebant et non decretis apostolicis oboediebant* ('... to eradicate their erroneous practices; for hitherto as much as they could they resisted the truth and failed to obey papal decrees') (Robinson 1918: 22–23). The truth of this assertion, or the extent of the errors, may be doubted: it may be that a situation which had obtained much earlier (in the eighth century?) was wrongly extrapolated into the early tenth century in this historical narrative. If there was any truth in the statement then full conformance with standard practices will have come at latest by the time of Æthelstan's creation of a separate bishopric.

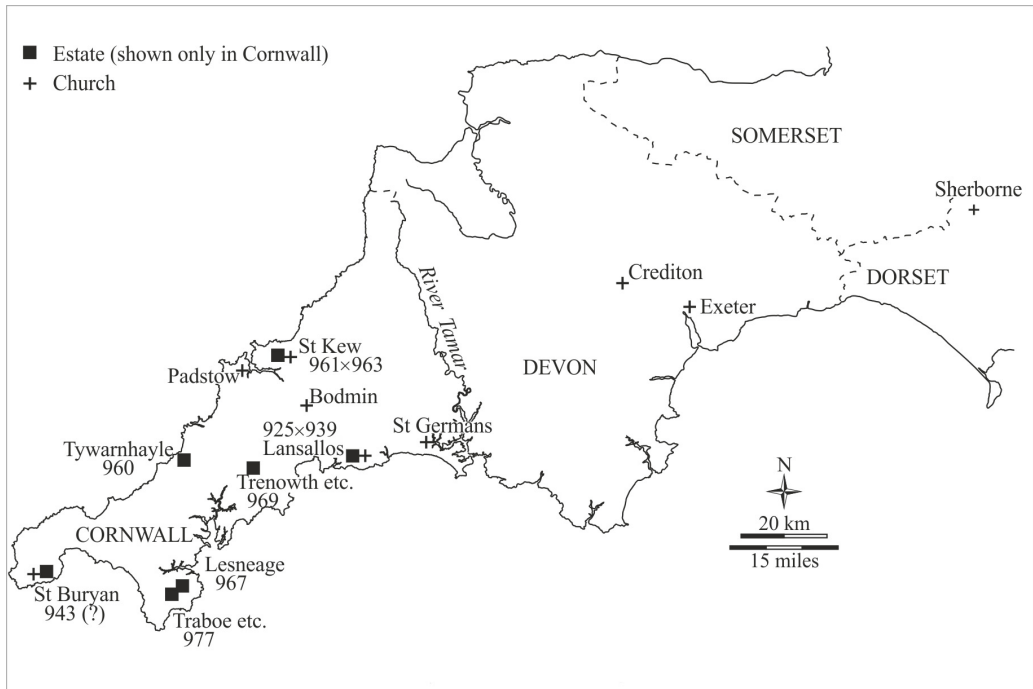


Figure 5: Cornwall and Devon: tenth century

Æthelstan's reign, compared with that of his grandfather Alfred, is less well documented as regards Cornwall: a symptom partly of the value of Asser's *Life* in giving us a glimpse of the process during Alfred's reign, and through Welsh eyes at that, but also a symptom of how much the influence of Wessex increased in Cornwall at that period. During Æthelstan's reign there are only two Cornish events of which we have definite documentation, one major and one minor; there are also two other events with less-secure documentation. Of the two certain events, the major one has just been mentioned, namely the reinstatement of a Cornish bishopric, located now at St Germans (see Figure 5.). This occurred officially in 936, though the bishop who was then confirmed in place had been witnessing charters at Æthelstan's court since 931, so the grant of privileges in 936 was presumably an affirmation rather than an installation (Padel 1978; compare Insley 2005: 21).

The name of Æthelstan's bishop, Conan, shows him to be either a Cornishman or a Breton, which is itself notable for the time. We need not suppose that Æthelstan created this see, and made this appointment, out of tenth-century political correctness. There were probably practical reasons which made it advisable. These could have included the unwieldy size of the new diocese of Crediton created by Æthelstan's father, even though it was only a portion of the former diocese of Sherborne; and its cultural diversity, a complication that was to recur in the fourteenth century, long after the two sees had been merged again (Padel 2002: 338–339); and possibly a recognition of Cornish cultural distinctiveness, perhaps in exchange for greater conformity of practice: any or all of these factors are possible motives. At any rate the net result was that for the

next hundred years Cornwall had its own diocese again, thanks to Æthelstan. After the sees were re-merged at some date shortly before 1027 in the person of Lyfing, bishop of both Cornwall and Crediton, and then officially merged and moved to Exeter in 1050, Cornwall did not regain its separate ecclesiastical identity until 1877.

The minor event that belongs securely in Æthelstan's reign also involves a charter and a church. It is a grant by a layman, Maenchi *comes* son of Drehguoret, giving nearby land to a local Cornish saint, *Heldenus* (later *Hyldren*), whose body is later known to have lain at Lansallos, a minor church in mid-south Cornwall (Figure 5; Padel 2005; also Padel 1978). The text states that he made this grant at the monastery of Athelney, in Somerset, during the reign of Æthelstan. The implication of the wording within the grant itself and of its preservation at Athelney is that Maenchi made it with the approval of the Anglo-Saxon authorities. He was either a Cornish nobleman, or possibly one of the Breton exiles who were in England during Æthelstan's reign (Brett 1991: 45–48): such a man might have been granted land in Cornwall because of the cultural and linguistic links of his homeland with that part of Æthelstan's realm. Maenchi's title *comes* would normally in Anglo-Saxon England mean 'ealdorman', but no such person is otherwise known. Some 25 years later, in 958–960, a Breton called *Menki*, styled *vicecomes*, witnessed a charter in eastern Brittany (de Courson 1863: no. 305; Tanguy 2004: 99b). It would be conceivable for this to be the same man (if so, using a lesser title in Brittany than in England); but it was not a rare Breton name. The name of the father of the Cornish grantor, *Drehguoret*, also appears in Brittany as *Dreuuoret*, but in the previous century, in 848–875 (de Courson 1863: nos 78, 99, III; also as *Treuuoret*, no. 243; Tanguy 2004: 78a).

The important point about the grant for present purposes is that it demonstrates the use of Æthelstan's authority to endorse an essentially Cornish transaction of a minor kind, namely the granting of Cornish land to a very local, typically Cornish, church and its saint. It also suggests that such approval was necessary or at least desirable for the grant, indicating the extent to which Cornwall was now administratively part of the English kingdom. (However, Æthelstan is not stated to have confirmed Maenchi's charter, as has been claimed: Insley 2005: 20 and 27; his name was used only to locate the grant, territorially and chronologically.) But the fact that Maenchi, in his charter, used some words and phrases which are typical of Welsh and Breton charters, and of a few other Cornish ones including that of Æthelstan to St Germans, but not of Anglo-Saxon charters (Davies 1981: 260, 270 note 41, and 272; Padel 1978), indicates that Maenchi also followed Cornish or Breton cultural practices, albeit under Saxon auspices. Presumably a representative of the community at Lansallos church would also have been present at Athelney, to receive the donation.

The two events of Æthelstan's reign that are securely documented thus provide a consistent and positive picture of the attitude of Anglo-Saxon governance at that period to the Cornish church, on both a local and a county-wide scale. The church would also have been the sole repository of written learning in the Cornish language

at this time; so such remains of the Cornish language as survive from this period may be owed partly to Æthelstan's encouragement of these institutions. The evidence, as far as it goes, suggests that St Germans, a house favoured by Æthelstan, was more of a Cornish-language cultural centre than Padstow, which we do not know to have been so favoured by him, and where the learning was more anglicised by the mid-tenth century (Padel 2009; Padel forthcoming). Later, perhaps in the mid-twelfth century, it seems likely that St Kew, a third monastic house in east Cornwall, was responsible for the Old Cornish Vocabulary, which was written under English cultural influence and which by that date unsurprisingly shows numerous English loan-words into Cornish (Lewis 2017; Padel 2014a).

Before turning to less-certain pieces of evidence, it is useful to mention the cult of King Æthelstan, which seems not to have received significant scholarly attention in its own right (though see Foot 2011: 228–234 and 243–245). By 'cult' I do not mean a coherent narrative, but rather that it became commonplace, in the south-west and elsewhere, to credit Æthelstan with the foundation of churches and other benefactions. William of Malmesbury claimed in the 1120s, *uix aliquod in tota Anglia uetustum [scil. monasterium] fuerit quod non uel ediftiis uel ornamentis aut libris aut prediis decorauit* ('there was scarcely any ancient house in all England that he did not adorn with buildings or ornaments, books or estates') (Mynors *et al.* 1998–99, vol. 1: 206–207). Beverley Minster, in Yorkshire, made such a claim in the fourteenth century with a remarkable forged charter, and Bodmin, Padstow and (truthfully) St Germans all made such a claim at later dates. Exeter seems to have been one of the strongest and earliest centres of this practice, and by the mid-eleventh century, soon after the merged see of Crediton and Cornwall was moved there, the king was already a favoured person claimed as founder or benefactor. Some such claims were true, but some of them were blatant lies, in particular the five Exeter charters, Sawyer nos 386, 387, 388, 389 and 433, all written in the middle or second half of the eleventh century, four of them in the same hand. The fifth (Sawyer no. 388) portrays a grant in favour of St Petrock's minster at Newton St Petrock (Devon), while the other four are all in favour of the church which had become Exeter cathedral by the date of writing. All five grants are ascribed to Æthelstan but are dated AD 670! In the mid-eleventh century that date was evidently considered important in the history of the church in Devon, but Æthelstan's name by then carried sufficient aura to override the anachronism of ascribing to him so early a grant.

The first piece of evidence for Cornwall uncertainly ascribed to Æthelstan's time may partly represent a legendary claim of that kind. The church of St Buryan, in the far west of Cornwall (Figure 5), its parish including Land's End itself, was one of Cornwall's distinctive small geld-free monastic churches appearing in Domesday Book. In the thirteenth century the then bishop of Exeter, William Briwer, rededicated the church and confirmed its privileged sanctuary, which by that date had become one of the four distinctive chartered sanctuaries attached to churches in Cornwall, two of which claimed Æthelstan as benefactor (Olson 1989: 72, 79 and 107). In the process of

rededication, the text of the Anglo-Saxon charter granted to the church was copied and so preserved. This charter, which is shown by some of its name-forms to contain local pre-Conquest material, presumably of the tenth century, purports to be a grant made by King Æthelstan to the church; but unfortunately it is dated, by detailed clauses, to 943, four years after the king's death (Sawyer no. 450; Hingeston-Randolph 1894–99, vol. 1: 84–85). Given the claims already attached to his name in Exeter diocese, it is more likely that Æthelstan's name had been inserted into a charter genuinely dated 943, than that the date 943 had been inserted into a charter of Æthelstan; this donation may have been made by his successor and younger half-brother, Edmund, rather than by Æthelstan himself. In its present form the charter is a witness to the continuing strength of Æthelstan's legend in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, at Exeter or in west Cornwall or both. Since the charter was in favour of a local Cornish saint, if it was actually granted by King Edmund in 943, he may have been following the example set by his older brother in recognising distinctive attributes of the church in Cornwall.

The likely date of 943 fits well with other evidence showing that it was in the mid-tenth century that the English kings had sufficient control over all of Cornwall to make grants of lands in its westernmost reaches. This charter to St Buryan, if accepted, would be the earliest such known, though not by many years. It is followed by five grants of 960–977, all but one of lands in the western half of the county (Sawyer nos 684, 755, 770, 810 and 832; and Padel 2014b for no. 684).

The second piece of doubtful evidence for Cornwall during Æthelstan's reign is of later date and is also the best known: the narrative given by William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1120s, as part of his biography of the king which takes up eleven pages of his *Gesta Regum*. The sources and reliability of this biography have been much discussed, especially so since it contains a considerable amount of information not found in earlier sources. William used a copy of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but also oral tradition, both at Exeter (as he specifically states) and from elsewhere, including no doubt his home town of Malmesbury where Æthelstan lay buried; and he also used a written encomium in rhyming hexameters, from which he quotes. This poem is now thought to date from the early twelfth century, only slightly earlier than William himself (Lapidge 1993). The reliability of all this material is unclear, so everything said about it is prefaced by a caveat, 'If William's account is to be trusted'.

William's description of Æthelstan's treatment of the Cornish follows his account of the king's aggressive policy towards the Vikings of York, the Welsh and the Scots (Mynors *et al.* 1998–99, vol. 1: 206–207), telling how he had expelled the Vikings by means of pitched battles; and it comes straight after his narrative of how Æthelstan subjected the Welsh to pay tribute (Mynors *et al.* 1998–99, vol. 1: 216–219), the situation which *Armes Prydein* has sometimes been considered to reflect from the point of view of those Welsh who disliked Hywel Dda's policy of cooperation at this period (Charles-Edwards 2013: 519–535; Dumville 1983).

*Inde digressus in Occidentales Britones se conuertit, qui Cornwalenses uocantur quod in occidente Britanniae siti cornu Galliae ex obliquo respitiant. Illos quoque impigre adorsus, ab Execestra, quam ad id temporis aequo cum Anglis iure inhabitabant, cedere compulit, terminum prouintiae suae citra Tambram fluiuum constituens, sicut Aquilonalibus Britannis amnem Waiam limitem posuerat. Urbem igitur illam, quam contaminatae gentis repurgio defecauerat, turribus muniuit, muro ex quadratis lapidibus cinxit. Et licet solum illud icinum et squalidum uix sterile aenas et plerumque folliculum inanem sine grano producat, tamen pro ciuitatis magnificentia et incolarum opulentia, tum etiam conuenarum frequentia, omne ibi adeo habundat mercimonium, ut nichil frustra desideres quod humano usui conducibile existimes. Plurima eius insignia tam in urbe illa quam in finitima regione uisuntur, quae melius indigenarum ore quam nostro stilo pinguntur.*

Setting forth from there [*scil.* Hereford] he addressed himself against the West Welsh, called *Corn-Welsh* because, living in western Britain, they look sideways towards the horn of Gaul. Having attacked them vigorously, he forced them to leave Exeter, where until then they had dwelt under equal law with the English, setting the boundary of their territory on this side of the River Tamar, just as he had fixed the River Wye as a boundary for the Welsh. Having thus cleansed that city by the removal of the filthy race, he fortified it with towers and surrounded it with a wall of squared stones. And although the soil there is thin and stony, scarcely producing barren oats and mostly empty ears lacking grain, yet judging by the splendour of the city, the wealth of the inhabitants, and also the throng of strangers, every merchandise is so plentiful there that you would request nothing in vain that you might think suitable for human convenience. Very many reminders of him are seen both in the city and in the surrounding region; they are portrayed better by the speech of the locals than by my pen. (Mynors *et al.* 1998–99, vol. I: 216–217; translation adapted)

William's detailed discussion of Æthelstan's supposed treatment of Cornwall and the Cornish thus forms part of his account of what the king did for the city of Exeter, virtually a foundation-legend of the city, since it has little recorded history before his time. William's account of Exeter here contains four elements for our purposes: first, that he expelled the 'filthy race' of Cornish from the town, 'which hitherto they had inhabited under equal law with the English'; second, that he established the boundary of Cornwall at the River Tamar, on the Devonshire side (implicitly allowing Cornwall rights over the river itself); third, that he fortified the town by means of a building-programme; and fourth, the result in William's day was that Exeter was a prosperous mercantile centre. As can be seen, William specifically refers to oral tradition in the area in relation to his account (*melius indigenarum ore quam nostro stilo* 'better by the speech of the locals than by my pen'). The third and fourth elements of this account do not concern us closely, being about Exeter alone; but they provide the context for the first and second elements, and perhaps hint at the source of at least the first one.

The unpleasant wording of the first element speaks of attitudes in William's day, the 1120s, and in Exeter itself, rather than ones in the tenth century or at Æthelstan's court. Æthelstan himself will have been well aware of the close kinship between the Cornish within his own kingdom and the Bretons to whom he was so welcoming as they dispersed in the face of Viking attacks on their homeland (Brett 1991; Brett 2022: 182–86 and 278–79). By contrast, the racial tension which William's wording seems to imply at Exeter may well have played a part in shaping the oral account which he obtained from townspeople in the city.

There is much uncertainty how far the narrative given by William can be trusted for events 200 years before his time. But it is worth considering what the account means if we do choose, for the sake of discussion, to credit it, taking the elements in turn. Whom did William intend to be understood by Cornish people living in Exeter 'under equal law with the English'? Obviously not native Devonian British, since they would not have been called 'Cornish'. William seems precise in his terms, and in his Latin he followed Old English usage: he called the Welsh themselves *Britones Aquilonales* or *Northwalenses* (Old English *Norðwealas*), also *Britones* simply, a term which he could also have used for the Cornish or for native Dumnonians had he wished to be imprecise. Since he used here the more precise terms *Occidentales Britones* (translating Old English *Westwealas*) and *Cornwalenses* (Old English *Cornwealas*), he evidently meant specifically the Cornish, that is the people of the region west of the River Tamar. Both of William's terms were restricted in Old English to the Cornish themselves: *Westwealas* in the Chronicle is used of the Cornish, not of Devonian British, except that the northern 'D' version of the Chronicle used the term once, in error, of the South Welsh ruled by Hywel Dda, *Huwal Westwala cyning* (Keynes 2014: 79; Cubbin 1996: 41). William's terminology is unequivocal that, if we trust the passage at all, or even if we ask only whom William in the 1120s intended by these words, these 'Cornish' in Exeter were people from west of the River Tamar, who had come to dwell in their nearest large mercantile centre, presumably as tradesmen or for other kinds of work.

There are further reasons why we cannot think of these people as native Devonian British. First, the fact that they were said to be living *aequo iure* 'under equal law' with the English. The law-code of King Ine, two hundred years before Æthelstan, had specified that the surviving British of Wessex were not equal under the law to the English, and that code was, in principle, still valid in the tenth century in Wessex (Charles-Edwards 2013: 422). So the phenomenon that William describes was evidently something different, presumably a more recent occurrence which the earlier laws were not constructed to cope with. In addition, Exeter as a town, not counting its church and monastery, may not have been a great deal older than Æthelstan's time. The town is first documented in the 870s, and in the 890s it gained a mint and is attested as a *burh* (Carroll and Parsons 2007: 134–139). It rather looks as if the growth and prosperity of Exeter were a comparatively recent phenomenon in Æthelstan's day, which would explain why the status of immigrant Cornish tradespeople might not have been settled. Second, the linguistic situation

which had existed in Devon for long before Æthelstan's time meant that there was not much likelihood of native Devonian British being identifiable in Exeter by his day, two and a half centuries after the Anglo-Saxon settlement of the area. The boundary-clause of the South Hams charter (Sawyer no. 298, dated 26 December '847' meaning 846; Hooke 1994: 105–112) delineates a large extent of land in mid-western south Devon. The names of its detailed boundary-points are entirely in Old English except for one river-name (*on Afene* 'Avon'; for the boundary-point *odencolc*, formerly thought to be Brittonic but now considered Old English, 'threshing-floor hollow', see Padel 2013: 95 and notes 72–74). This boundary-clause shows a landscape which had already been populated and farmed by English-speakers for long enough to have implanted upon it their own oral history, as well as their own personalities and their observations of the wildlife. It is not one perceived by administrators grabbing an alien territory, but one described through the eyes and mouths of people occupying and farming it. English-speaking settlement at the peasant level had evidently preceded the administrative act of 846 by some years. The very different linguistic situation portrayed in the boundaries of the tenth-century charters of west Cornwall, and to a lesser extent by the eleventh-century ones of east Cornwall, serves to emphasise the difference in this Devon charter (Hooke 1994: 22–52 and 55–64). The implication of this charter-boundary is that this part of south-western Devon not only was thoroughly English-speaking by the mid-ninth century, but had been so for at least a generation, probably rather longer.

For a variety of reasons, if we trust William's account at all, then the Cornish whom Æthelstan expelled were people who had crossed the Tamar and come to live in this economic centre, presumably to trade, and who were perhaps resented by the Anglo-Saxons there — like some economic migrants today, though they would hardly have thought of themselves in those terms. In the following century there is evidence of Cornish-speaking in the city again, for a man appears there with the delightful name *Ælfric maphappes*, 'Ælfric son of Chance', containing Cornish *map* 'boy, son' and Middle English *hap* 'luck, chance' (Warren 1883: 1a; Orchard 2002, vol. 2: 1, no. 4). Overlooking his doubtful parentage, this man not only provides the sole instance, anywhere, of a Cornish patronymic name formed with *map*, 'son' (for the Bodmin Manumissions do not offer any, nor do later records within Cornwall), but he also suggests that migrants from Cornwall continued to come to Exeter after Æthelstan's putative expulsion in the 920s or 930s. Such activity continued in the post-Conquest period. In the thirteenth century and later Cornishmen, sometimes revealed as such by their toponymic surnames, continued coming to Exeter, now their diocesan centre, for economic or career reasons. So if William's account can be trusted, that activity provides a natural explanation for any Cornishmen who may have been resident in Exeter in Æthelstan's reign, and the only one that fits with his actual wording.

But we have no means of telling whether it can be trusted. Since William had oral information from inhabitants of Exeter, and since the assertion comes in the context of other claims of what Æthelstan did for the city, it is doubtful whether much historical faith can be placed in it. As seen earlier, Exeter was already making false claims about



benefits derived from Æthelstan in at least the mid-eleventh century, some seventy years before William wrote his account. Given that Cornishmen were coming to reside in Exeter in the eleventh century and later, there may well have been racial or linguistic tensions at that period; so it would not be surprising if one of the claims made in the 1120s for Æthelstan, alongside the assertion that he fortified the city and set it on its road to prosperity, was also an attempt by him to solve any racial tensions (even if it was evident, in William's day, that the situation had returned). Crediting the claimed benefactor with the foresight to envisage and forestall a present-day problem would be a plausible origin of the assertion reported by William of his 'cleansing' of the city.

The second element of William's narrative, that Æthelstan set the River Tamar as the boundary of Cornwall, carries more conviction. In creating a diocese for Cornwall within the English church system, as he certainly did, Æthelstan would necessarily also have had to define its ecclesiastical boundary, if that had not already been done for secular-administrative purposes. George Molyneux has pointed out that Cornwall would thus have fitted into a pattern of linkage in Wessex between the areas covered by ecclesiastical dioceses and secular shires (Molyneux 2015: 163–164). By the time of King Edgar, 959–975, Cornwall was fully incorporated as a county, as noted above from the evidence of his charters; but its hundredal divisions, seen in Domesday Book and later, remained anomalously large by normal English standards, because they perpetuated pre-English administrative areas (Padel 2010). It may also have been Edgar rather than Æthelstan who standardised the county administration in England generally, as argued by Molyneux, particularly in extending the southern system of shires and hundreds into northern regions; but Wessex itself had shires (whatever their functions) at an earlier date, and his point concerning the linkage between shires and dioceses in Wessex allows for the establishment of Cornwall as a shire within Wessex already in Æthelstan's time, if not earlier.

William of Malmesbury also mentions, as a parallel process, Æthelstan's supposed establishment of the River Wye as a boundary for the Welsh. The use of that river seems partly to follow the limit of Saxon settlement in the southern Welsh marches, and there is no suggestion that it was making encroachments onto Welsh-speaking territory at the time; rather it was formalising what was already established. We may safely assume that that is what Æthelstan did for Cornwall, or someone else at about that time; but at its eastern fringe there was an important ethnic anomaly.

In terms of its ethnic make-up by the tenth century the northernmost part of Cornwall, the area around Bude and Stratton, would more naturally have been included in Devon. As already seen, it is thoroughly English in its toponymy (Figures 1–3), and it is likely that the change took place, or at least was under way, before the end of the ninth century, having started perhaps as early as the mid-eighth (above). But although the population of that area of north Cornwall is likely to have been thoroughly Devonian in character by Æthelstan's time, administratively it had intrinsic and ancient links with the area

to its west. Historically and geographically it was unequivocally in Cornwall. It had formed the northernmost third of the administrative district later called *Trigerschir* or *Tryger*, within which King Alfred's manor of Stratton lay. The very name of that district implies that it was a 'threefold region'. In Domesday Book (1086) this large region, a sixth of the county, was still treated as a single administrative hundred, named from its chief manor of Stratton, although it must already have had unseen subdivisions. Its threefold unity reappears as late as the thirteenth century, when its middle subdivision was referred to as 'Middle *Trygershire*'; but thereafter its three sections are found as entirely separate hundreds, called Trigg, Lesnewth, and Stratton. This region is mentioned not only in King Alfred's will (*Strætneat on Trico[n]scire*, Birch 1885–99, vol. 2: no. 553), but even earlier in the First Life of St Samson of Dol (c. 700), as *quendam pagum quem Tricurium uocant* 'a certain region which they call *Tricurius*' (Flobert 1997, 216–217; Olson 2017, especially 15–16 for the date). Its name shows it to be an extremely ancient administrative unit: it means 'the triple tribe or army', and its closest onomastic parallel is with the Gaulish tribe of the *Petrucorii* ('fourfold tribe or army'), who gave name to the Périgord region of France (Padel 1985: 64–65). Since the name is obviously pre-English, and is unlikely to have been created during the Roman period or the immediately post-Roman centuries, there is every reason to think it was a pre-Roman tribal name and district. The unity and persistence within Cornwall of this administrative area provide, incidentally, an additional argument for seeing its eastern limit, the River Tamar, as the ancient boundary of Cornwall itself (Padel 2010).

That being so, there were historical and administrative reasons why it probably seemed right to include this northernmost portion of *Trygershire* within Cornwall when the counties and hundreds were fixed, even though its population was by then probably Devonian-English in character, in contrast with the rest of the county. But it would have been this anomaly which made it a necessity for the border to be defined, since it was an area in which historical and ethnic allegiances pulled in conflicting directions. So whoever it was in the tenth century, Æthelstan or another king, who confirmed the Tamar as the county boundary, he followed an ancient, pre-Roman line, acknowledging the force of history and perhaps of Cornish sentiment. Although in ethnic terms it was by that date an act of generosity to the county, it was doubtless done for pragmatic reasons. On the one hand it ensured that Cornwall, having already been part of the kingdom of Wessex for a century, became fully incorporated into the English administrative system, in ways which it had not yet been by Æthelstan's father, Edward the Elder, in drawing up the Burghal Hidage, which covered Devon but not Cornwall; and the specific context of making a recognised boundary will have served to provide a secular administrative structure of shire and hundreds, alongside the ecclesiastical structure which we know Æthelstan created. But on the other hand, the choice served to retain the distinctive and historical identity provided by the clear and ancient boundary, even though that meant including within Cornwall a region which now looked naturally to Devon, as it still does today.

Is that true, and was it Æthelstan who confirmed the boundary in that way? Again, we cannot say; but this part of William's narrative is more likely to be historically true than the expulsion from Exeter. For one thing, it is less likely to have come from oral tradition in the city since it has little to do with Exeter itself. Second, the fact that William, in the same breath, also mentions the fixing of the Wye as the border of Wales suggests a different source for these assertions: a claim about the king's national administrative achievements. Third, it fits with his known establishment of a diocese for the county, and the resulting need to clarify the boundary. For several reasons it is easier to credit the assertion that Æthelstan formally established the county boundary than his supposed expulsion of Cornish tradesmen from Exeter.

There may also have been another consequence of this administrative absorption. The situation shown in Figures 1–3 implies a further question. The linguistic boundary which they show implies that the absorption of Devon into Wessex was of a different kind from the later absorption of Cornwall. Whatever process had caused the Brittonic place-names which must formerly have existed all over Devon to be so thoroughly replaced, it evidently stopped at the River Tamar, such that the native place-names have survived to this day throughout most of Cornwall. The replacement in Devon seems to have been remarkably rapid, since the charter evidence suggests that the linguistic replacement was complete by the mid-ninth century, at least in the South Hams. Such detailed evidence from the ninth century is lacking elsewhere in Devon, but in the tenth century the same is true everywhere else in the county too (Hooke 1994: 117–184.) If, as the evidence seems to require, there was a considerable influx of Anglo-Saxon farming settlers, who either replaced or assimilated (or both) the native British in Devon, it is reasonable to deduce that this was the process which stopped at the River Tamar, except in those two areas of east Cornwall where the toponymic replacement was as thorough as it had been throughout Devon. Depending upon the date that we ascribe to that replacement, it would be reasonable to wonder whether it was Cornwall's administrative incorporation into the kingdom in the tenth century, and hence the regularisation of land-tenure, which prevented that movement of farming settlers from proceeding further. If so, then it may have been the legal and administrative incorporation of Cornwall into England which thus saved the Cornish language from dying out westwards at that early period, as thoroughly as it had done in Devon.

However, there was another aspect to this territorial generosity. The Cornish situation was unlike that of King Ine 200 years earlier, who had, in his law-code, made surviving Britons in Somerset and Devon into second-class citizens; and unlike Wales 350 years after Æthelstan, where a kind of apartheid was created after the conquest in 1282, with Welsh and English living side-by-side under different legal systems, albeit with the provision for a Welshman to change his status and become 'English' for legal purposes; and unlike Scotland in 1707, where the Scottish legal system has remained in place to this day. Contrary to those earlier and later attempts to merge two ethnic identities, in the tenth-century law-codes there is no hint of a separate legal status, let alone a

separate legal system, for the Cornish. It would be unrealistic to suppose that they had previously had a fully-codified legal system equivalent to that created by Hywel Dda, assuming that it was he who codified Welsh law in the tenth century.

But if the Cornish in Exeter in Æthelstan's day were living *aequo iure* with the English, as asserted by William of Malmesbury 200 years later, then either the provisions which made native Britons second-class citizens were being ignored by that date, or the Cornish were treated differently from any native Britons who were still identifiable as late as that. In fact, both may be true, since it is likely that the native British population of Devon and areas further east had by the tenth century become assimilated, so those provisions of Ine's laws may well have fallen into desuetude. Within ten years of Æthelstan's death in 939, we find the Cornish being treated on an equal footing to the English in the Bodmin Manumissions. So we may suppose that fixing the county boundary of Cornwall also marked the full incorporation of the Cornish as equal citizens of England. This worked both ways: they did not have their own separate legal status, but neither were they second-class citizens, as their Dumnonian cousins had earlier been. By the mid-tenth century, then, soon after Æthelstan's death, the Bodmin Manumissions show us Cornwall and the Cornish fully incorporated into the kingdom of England – administratively, legally and economically – albeit with their own historical and linguistic identity within it; and that is what the establishment of a recognised boundary, whether by Æthelstan or another ruler in the tenth century, really signified.

To sum up Æthelstan's relations with the Cornish, as far as the evidence goes: he inherited a situation where Cornwall had been under English rule for about a century, but its position within the kingdom had not been formalised. My own understanding of its condition during that intermediate period would be that it was something akin to what we might recognise as colonial rule at a much later period. He was supportive towards the church, which had already come under the authority of the archbishops of Canterbury some sixty to eighty years earlier. This support may also have entailed the church in Cornwall losing any remaining vestiges of non-Roman practices (if they survived at all at that late date) and accommodating itself to standard English ones. His approach will have helped the preservation of a Cornish identity within the English kingdom, and also may have encouraged Cornish-language written activity. The supposed expulsion of the immigrant Cornish from Exeter may well be a later legend, but, even if it happened, it did not have a long-lasting effect. And if it was also he who confirmed the boundary in its ancient, but by then anomalous, course, he was generously acknowledging the force of history and Cornish sentiment, while at the same time ensuring that Cornwall became, in administrative terms, a regular part of the kingdom of England.

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