Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Overkingships:
a Discussion of Some Shared Historical Problems

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Where do the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingship and overkingship lie? This is a problem, or rather a pair of problems, which has long disturbed students of early English history. One of the principal difficulties attending the subject resides in the very nature of modern historiography. The troubles are of long standing. As the modern study of history developed in Britain in the later nineteenth century, William Stubbs celebrated 'the primaeval German pride of purity of extraction' and famously observed that 'From the Briton and the Roman of the fifth century we have received nothing' (1870/1913, 1 and 3). Frederic Seebohm (1883/1890; 1895/1904; 1902) stood against this Germanicising tide in Britain, while on the Continent Fustel de Coulanges (1891) was also a celebrated opponent. But in British universities the tone had been set.

In some measure the wheel has come full circle, for what the learned but obsessive Welshman argued throughout a long lifetime of being regarded by English scholars as a crank is not so very different from the views of those who now take a minimalist view of the extent and impact of Germanic settlement in sub-Roman Britain. Were he to return, even Seebohm might be surprised by the degree to which received wisdom has changed. In this context, it would be surprising if the possibility of Roman and British contributions to Anglo-Saxon kingship and overkingship, as to other aspects of early English society, were not to be explored. However, workers who are interested and qualified in the study of all these cultures are few indeed and progress has been slight.

The predisposition to view early Germanic culture as essentially a single whole, which was so strong a feature of European scholarship before 1914 and which remained an important force in German historiography thereafter, was progressively attenuated in Britain after World War I. The narrowing of focus then so apparent in British historiography was to some extent compensated for by the development of Anglo-Saxon
archaeology within a strongly Germanic context. However, no sustained reinterpretation of the bases of early English society was attempted until recent years when changes in archaeological thought and the growth of the more physical divisions of historical studies (landscape- and settlement-studies) have encouraged extraordinarily strong emphasis on long-term continuity in the agrarian life of Britain (cf. Finberg 1964, 1–65, and 1972, 385–401; Bonney 1976; Jones 1976; Everitt 1986; Williamson 1986; Hooke and Burnell 1995). These new developments have taken place against an extended background of lack of interest (except among archaeologists) in the integration of study of ancient Germany and Anglo-Saxon England. The overall result has been a drastic general shift towards a presupposition of extensive native survival: all that that might imply for social and political history has been left rather unspecific, however.

Historical studies have not been able effectively to take advantage of the new mood, however. In spite of the enthusiastic, indeed inspirational, but often cranky, work of Nora K. Chadwick (1891–1972) who has been reported as speaking of ‘the Saxon fringe’ (Brooke 1986, viii) of the Celtic world, there are few practising historians whose training equips and whose inclinations spur them to examine the question of Celtic origins of English institutions. There are indeed those, like the present writer, who regard the trend described above as fundamentally wrong-headed. Anglo-Celtic historians (if they may be so designated) of the post-Chadwick generation, of whom David Kirby was perhaps the first, have in general been level-headed on these large questions (cf. Kirby 1967); only one, peculiarly suitably equipped by his training and by the interests of two of his mentors, has taken up issues of this character (see especially Charles-Edwards 1972, an article which shows just how difficult such subjects are). Before the present generation of historians, there had been a half-century’s general lack of integration of work by Anglo-Saxon and Celtic historians, in spite of the title of the Irish historian and jurist D. A. Binchy’s celebrated pamphlet, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship (Binchy 1970; cf. Wormald 1986). This unhappily divided inheritance does, however, provide unusual challenges and opportunities for today’s scholars.

In a context in which scholars have come to view with suspicion the notion of the comprehensive Germanicisation of what came to be England, all aspects of early Anglo-Saxon society need to be measured against a Romano-British background, against a more generally Celtic context, against the culture of powerful neighbours (particularly the Franks), and against what can be deduced of the culture of the Anglo-Saxons’ Continental ancestors. What applies generally must apply also to the specific question of kingship in its various manifestations. Very much will turn on our sense of how, in what circumstances, and when the Anglo-Saxons assumed control in the various parts of Britain. The options involve differing types of sub-Roman government, the assumption of power by Germanic ‘federates’, straightforward hostile takeover, and more complex situations involving marriage-alliances or other forms of treaty. Given all these variables,
not to mention the different backgrounds and experiences of the Germanic incomers themselves, it should be no great surprise to see varying forms of political authority emerging in early Anglo-Saxon England.

Different historians have found no obstacles to variant readings of the evidence, whatever the situation may have been in early Anglo-Saxon England. H. M. Chadwick placed great emphasis on the role of lordship in the Germanic migration and settlement and consequently on the role of 'kingly government' (Chadwick 1905, 1907, 1912). Wendy Davies has argued that there were no kings in some parts of England even in the seventh century (Davies [& Vierck] 1974, 237–8). E. A. Thompson stressed the periodic rejection by Germanic peoples of a full kingly or overlordly structure (1965; 1984, 94–5). The first fact of English royal history is the overkingship of Æthilberht I (ob. 616) of Kent (Bede, Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum I.25 and 32; II.2, 3, 5); we may remember also Bede's notice (II.5) of Æthilberht's two overkingly predecessors, Ælle and Ceawlin. But in the papal correspondence included by Bede in his History (II. 8: see Hunter Blair 1971, 7–8) we may note the existence, in the next generation, of a second king reigning in Kent (presumably, on later analogy, in West Kent). As the seventh century goes on, a wide variety of kingship- and overkingship-arrangements is revealed to us in the various localities. One which seems very reminiscent of Celtic political structures is that revealed for Wessex by an aside of Bede (Historia ecclesiastica IV.12), which may however also provide a parallel to early confederacies on the Continent (cf. James 1989). Likewise, the three-level overlordship revealed (Historia ecclesiastica IV.13) between Wulflæhe of Mercia, Æthilwald of Sussex, and the king of Wight is very reminiscent of Irish constitutional arrangements (cf. Campbell 1986, 91–2).

Variety may be the result of different inheritance or circumstances, of the different perspectives provided by various and fragmentary sources, or of differing paces of development in different areas. Whether we can speak of the growth, or development, of overkingship in early Anglo-Saxon England is an issue which should be pursued. Much turns on whether the petty kingdoms visible in the seventh- and eighth-century record can be deemed the primary units of Anglo-Saxon political organisation (cf. Bassett 1989 for discussion; see further Dumville 1997, Kirby 1991, Yorke 1990). There seems to be no means of demonstrating this beyond cavil. Those of us who think that it probably is so are no doubt influenced by our reading of the history of Celtic kingship-arrangements and by a certain theory of the development of English constitutional history. Overkingships would have developed by competition for resources and status among these primary units: but how the primary kingdoms were treated by those who took their submission or overran them might have varied very greatly from place to place. Nevertheless, here is a broad theory—it can be no more than that—as to how Anglo-Saxon overkingships evolved. It is in the regiones named in charters and mentioned by Bede that we see the petty kingdoms of the seventh and eighth centuries. The principal kings
of the period, named in narrative sources, stand at different points in the hierarchy of overkingship, but that all or almost all of them—from Sussex to the Hwicce to Northumbria to Kent—were overkings seems certain (cf. Chadwick 1905, 249-92). How much development took place between, say, 450 and 550 is unknowable; but the dynasties first visible in the historical period are perhaps merely the last of many prehistoric overkings. If so, developments had been rather fast. Visible or reconstructable overkingships date from ca 550; the known dynasties took their origin scarcely later than that (except perhaps in Kent).

All these remarks pertain to the relationship between kings, land, and the inhabitants, in respect of political power and its growth. The king in his primary relationship to his people was also an element in local and low-level social arrangements. In the 1920s and '30s, it was the work of J. E. A. Jolliffe to worry away at these problems (Jolliffe 1926, 1929, 1930, 1933a, 1933b, 1934, 1935a, 1935b, 1935-7, 1937/1961; cf. Lapsley 1938), but in more recent times Glanville Jones (1981/2, for example) and Geoffrey Barrow (1973, 7-68) have taken up the challenge, combining their Celtic and late mediaeval English interests to research the history of estates, of shires, and of royal dues, concluding that in at least parts of England similarities of institutional structures and agrarian customs strongly suggest a significant British input into English social and constitutional practice.

Whether at the higher political level or at the tax-gathering level, there is a good deal in what has been found and deduced in the course of comparison of institutions which sounds familiar to the Celtic historian. A vast field for research has opened up, but it is important (it seems to me) not to jump to conclusions, for criteria have still not been satisfactorily established by which similarities of institution or practice in these different societies may be attributed to borrowing from one another or to a distant, ancient, common inheritance or to similar and independent reactions to similar conditions. Thomas Charles-Edwards (1989) has made an investigation of aspects of kingship in the several regions of the British Isles: he has counselled caution about deducing genetic rather than environmental reasons for observed similarities but has also stressed the differences which manifest themselves between the history of kingship and overkingship in, for example, England and Ireland (1989, 39).

The principal differences between Ireland and England in the area of royal dues [in the seventh and eighth centuries] appear to be, first, that in Ireland hospitality dues were relatively more important than in England. This affected [Irish] overkings, for they demanded hospitality from their client kingdoms. The difference is associated with the structure of their dynasties, since hospitality predominated among client kingdoms ruled by collateral kinsmen of the overking. A highly segmented dynasty in which several branches retained royal status thus favoured hospitality dues at the expense of food renders. . . . Secondly, there is no evidence of a network of local
royal centres to which food renders were delivered. On this score England and Wales agree in having such centres as against Ireland.

There are many problems here needing to be pursued further, some of them being made worse by absence of evidence from all areas at all times. Whether we can be certain that there were *uillae regales* all over England in the seventh and eighth centuries must remain a matter for debate (cf. Sawyer 1983). I do not see, given the absence of evidence, how that point can be established for Wales at the same period. And if, as has sometimes been asserted, the *subreguli* of seventh- (and eighth-?) century Wessex were all claiming shared descent, should not their arrangements for dues have favoured hospitality rather than food-renders?

Whatever the answers to these questions may be, it is clearly necessary that at least Insular Celtic kingship and overkingship be studied alongside their Anglo-Saxon equivalents. And the origins and nature of neo-Brittonic kingship (the bulk of the evidence for which is Welsh, although suggestive material is derivable from Brittany and Cornwall and, in rather different ways, from Strathclyde and other once Brittonic-speaking areas of the North) must be thought about. In some areas (the South-west, Wales, the Pennine region, Scotland between the walls) these can perhaps be traced to a remote antiquity (for the practices of the first-century Brigantes, see Charles-Edwards 1974); in others, they must be sought in sub-Roman Britain (cf. Dumville 1994), in no doubt varied and often confused circumstances, where we must consider the importance of the Roman inheritance (cf. Stevens 1947, Dark 1994). Converging evidence from a number of sources has convinced some scholars (for example, David Kirby, Thomas Charles-Edwards, and me) that a familiar early mediaeval Welsh pattern is of an institutionally stable overkingship with petty kings associative with what at least later were called *cantrefi* ('hundreds') and overkings with long established tribal (Dyfed) or territorial (Ceredigion, Glywywing) units. A third level of kingship was unstable, arising from competition between overkings. Whether there was a level of kingship below the *cantref* is, I think, unknown: it might be a matter of dispute whether it is a necessary adjunct of the system described. The evidence for this system is part legal (Charles-Edwards 1970–2), part genealogical (Dumville 1977a, 1977b, 1984), and part comparative (Charles-Edwards 1974). It has not, however, satisfied every historian (Davies 1990, 1993). In Wales, this system came to an effective end in the ninth century, extirpated by the Second Dynasty of Gwynedd in the three quarters of Wales which came under its rule. But this was not the end of overkingship, for competition resumed between kings, first of this dynasty as it segmented and then between its lineages and other kings of various origins in the late tenth and later centuries (cf. Davies 1990, Maund 1991). It should be added that the history of mediaeval Welsh kingship-terminology is very difficult and potentially confusing: it has been well discussed (Charles-Edwards 1971, 1974, 1993).
but still requires a great deal of work.

The comparative Irish evidence is of uncertain relevance. Early mediaeval Irish kingship has been very clearly expounded by modern scholarship (cf. Binchy 1941, 1962/1975, 1970; Byrne 1971, 128–35) but such exposition bears an uncertain relationship to the evidence, both in various particulars and in its diachronic dimension. The antiquity (indeed, the Indo-European origins) of Irish petty kingship has been argued largely from comparative philological evidence, and this carries with it an inherent determinism. Archaeological evidence would perhaps offer grounds for dissent from this prehistory if the two disciplines could be brought into juxtaposition with one another for the purpose. Nevertheless, it is clear from the abundant annalistic, genealogical, and legal literature of early mediaeval Ireland that an institutionally fairly stable three-level kingship-system of petty kings, mesne (over)kings, and supreme (over)kings of the several provinces of Ireland existed in the early middle ages. Above the provincial levels, struggles of decreasing infrequency produced claims to overkingship of larger areas and even to kingship of the whole island. To that we shall return.

The antiquity claimed for Irish kingship and, beyond it in prehistory, for Celtic kingship raises another important and troubled question. Celtic and Germanic peoples lived alongside one another for centuries on the Continent, with many opportunities for mutual influence. Comparative philologists long ago detected that Germanic words for kings and kingship, related to Latin *rex* and *regnum* and Old Irish *ri* and *rige*, for example, were probably not cognate with their Indo-European congeners and therefore not inherited. The alternative hypothesis which presented itself was that they (and *rix*, 'king', in particular) were borrowed from Celtic (cf. Evans 1967, 243–9). While it is next to impossible to find a philologist who will affirm vigorously either the borrowed or the inherited status of this section of the Germanic kingship-lexicon, the scholarly literature shows a muted agreement on a Celtic contribution. If we switch to the evidence of written sources, we find that Germanic kingship (or at any rate some aspects of it: cf. James 1989) had a decidedly uncertain, indeed discontinuous, history. It can be argued that the periodic crises which can be seen in ancient Germanic society and government were what produced discontinuous kingship, but that neither in the first century nor until the period of major Germanic settlements in the Roman empire was kingship a normal political form among the Germanic peoples.

In as much as Insular primary kingship is arguably associable with the hundred or *cantref* (whose underlying unit is the hide or *tref*, the land associable with one family, and it has been argued [Charles-Edwards 1972] that these have a history which can be traced back to a Continental Celto-Germanic past), the question must be put whether we might see a comparable prehistory for English kingship and overkingship which would explain their similarities with their Celtic counterparts. But before we step down that road we must realise that the Germanic antiquity of the hundred has been very much

We have also to remember who the Germanic settlers of Britain appear to have been. Although their origins were clearly very various in detail (see Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* V.9: Myres 1970, 151, for comment; for place-name evidence see Ekwall 1936 and 1953), there does not seem to be any reason to doubt that the bulk of them were indeed from Norway (Hines 1984 and 1992), Denmark, North Germany, and Frisia and that these might not have been the parts or the peoples of the Germanic world most affected by contact with Celts.

The nature and indeed existence of kingship among these peoples on the Continent, before and after the migration to Britain, have sometimes seemed secure by linking Tacitus's famous remarks with those of Bede on the Old Saxons of his own day (*Historia ecclesiastica* V.10; cf. Thompson 1965 and 1984, 94-5), and sometimes less so when the uncertain application of Latin terminology to outer Germanic circumstances is remembered. There is at least a question-mark attached to the proposition that Germanic settlers arriving in Britain would usually have done so under the leadership of kings *ex nobilitate*, tribal rulers wielding inherited powers of leadership, as H. M. Chadwick (1907) seems to have thought that they did. What Chadwick considered, however, and indeed commissioned one of his pupils to work on (cf. Phillpotts 1913, 245-76), was the possible effect of sea-migration on the institutions of those Germanic groups who settled in Britain. As far as I am aware, this rather important question has not since been attended to, although a good deal of comparative evidence must be available. The time has perhaps also come to reconsider whether we should resurrect long-rejected comparisons between the English assault on fifth-century Britain and that of the vikings in the ninth century, particularly in view of our improved understanding of the nature of viking-forces (cf. Lund 1986).

We should perhaps take together with the foregoing observations what may be characterised as the dynamic nature of early Anglo-Saxon kingship and overkingship. The very growth of overkingship as a successful political reality on English soil may seem eloquent. That kingship and overkingship proved appropriate to the invaders' needs in Britain certainly does not establish that they were institutions originating in Britain; but this fact does nothing to help an argument that the Anglo-Saxons transplanted kingship of Celto-Germanic origin from their Continental homes. We should perhaps start by looking for the roots of English government in fifth- and sixth-century Britain, as well as by attempting to determine the nature of structures of authority in the immigrants' homelands. Given the observed similarities between manifestations of British and English king-
ship in the early middle ages, it would in principle be possible to argue that English
kingship-structures derived from British prototypes (for the role of dux bellorum in both
cultures, see Charles-Edwards 1991, 21-5 and 28). This would, however, bring with it
all manner of assumptions which we might not, on reflection, care to make. It would
imply first that the sub-Roman polities of much of lowland Britain were thoroughly Celtic
in character. It would imply further that Germanic leaders stepped straight into the shoes
of British predecessors and governed in institutional continuity. While some might wish
to embrace the latter proposition, for the purposes of this argument it is the former which
would have to be accepted as a precondition.

It has been argued by Eric John (1966, 11-13, with reference to Erdmann 1951, 9-10)
that the origin of the idea of an overking of the Southumbrian English, particularly
if he were then awarded the title 'king of Britain', began with a British political institution of
which he has thought to find a trace in the early ninth-century Cambro-Latin text known
as Historia Brittonum (ed. Faral 1929, III.19-21: §§27-28). If the evidence of that text
were taken literally, however, we should have to acknowledge that its author spoke of
Roman rulers in Britain: the connexion of this History's information with that of Bede
and other sources for the Southumbrian overkingship requires a mighty leap, however, and
such exertion must be deemed unnecessary.

If we need evidence for great confederacies in pre-English southern Britain, it is in
the nature of the sub-Roman situation that we are unlikely to be able to discover testimony
(for a possibility in northern Britain see Dark 1992 and Dark & Dark 1996). What we
can do, on the other hand, is to remind ourselves of the many Germanic confederacies
which seem to have been created on the Continent throughout the first half-millennium
A.D. (cf. Schütte 1929-33, Hedeager 1992); do these provide a useful parallel for
southern English developments of the early middle ages?

The lengthy observable history of authority-structures and of ethnic identification
among Celtic-speaking peoples includes evidence both for large federations of peoples and
for major overkingships (see, for example, Cunliffe 1974, Nash 1978, Collis 1984, Cunliffe
1993; scholars discussing the ancient world have been content to write—without adequate
definition—of 'tribes', while mediaevalists have been altogether uneasy about that concept
as the discussion by Byrne 1971 and Scott 1970–3 has shown). But Caesar's account
(De bello Gallico I.1) of the place of Chartres, as the navel of the land, in the political
life of Gaul in the first century B.C. can be paralleled in mediaeval accounts of the
quondam role of Uisnech in the Irish polity (Byrne 1973, 58, 64–5, 87, 92, 93; cf. Binchy
1958). Much is to be seen as shared Celtic inheritance and this allows us to hypothe-
sise, if no more, that such shared features of social life might once have been manifest in
Britain too. However, given the history of southern Britain in the Roman period, that
might not be the best place to expect to find important survivals of Celtic overkingship-
practice and ideology.
It has occasionally been pointed out in recent years that there are significant parallels between late seventh-century Gaelic hagiographers' accounts of supreme overkingship in Ireland and Britain (John 1966, 1–35; Byrne 1969, 5–7). What Adomnán of Iona had to say of Oswald of Northumbria is paralleled by the ways in which he and Muirchu described the power of Uí Néill kings of Tara, although Eric John has pointed to some interesting discrepancies (John 1966, 9–11 and 27–31). Francis John Byrne has supposed that 'the ruler of Britain' had 'more than local power, preferably combined with ... having won the submission ... of some of the non-English inhabitants of the Island of Britain' (Byrne 1969, 7).

The basic observation of the relationship of the two notions of island-kingship is undoubtedly correct. It seems to me, however, that the point can be sharpened to much greater effect. We may begin by enquiring after the kingship of all Ireland. In terms of datable records we meet the concept first in the seventh century. An annal-entry attributable to the lost 'Chronicle of Ireland' (a text originally of eighth- or ninth-century origin which drew on contemporary records extending back to a disputed date between ca 550 and ca 680) tells us under the year 642 of 'The death of Domnall son of Aed, king of Ireland, at the end of January' ('Mors Domnaill m. Aedo regis Hibernie in fine Ianuari') (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, 122–3, s. a. 642.1). While subsequent revision of the Chronicle's notices of secular events, in the service of political bias towards Uí Néill, has been alleged (but not demonstrated) (Kelleher 1963) and has found some acceptance among Irish historians, it is not clear that such bias was missing in the seventh century—indeed, there is no reason to think that it was! The political approach (cf. Ó Cuív 1963, 242) in any case soon finds confirmation in the writing of two Hiberno-Latin hagiographers of the second half of the century. Muirchu, in his Life of St Patrick, referred to Loeguire mac Néill as 'a great king, a fierce pagan, an emperor of barbarians, with his royal seat at Tara which was then the capital of the realm of the Irish, ... a scion of the royal family of almost the entire island' ('rex quidam magnus, ferox gentilisque, imperator barbarorum regnans in Temoria quae tunc erat caput regni Scotorum, Loiguire nomine filius Neill, origo stirpis regiae huius pene insolae') (Bieler & Kelly 1979, 74; I have revised Bieler's translation at this point but some difficulties still remain). Adomnán of Iona, himself a member of Uí Néill, wrote even more forcefully and without qualification: Diarmait mac Cerbaill (king 544–565), seen by some later sources (cf. Binchy 1958 and 1982) as the last pagan king of Tara, he described as 'totius Scotiae regnatorem a Deo auctore ordinatum' and again as totius regem Scotiae (Anderson & Anderson 1991, 64–7: I.36). Of the station of Diarmaid's son, Aed Sláine, he wrote 'The prerogative, fore-ordained to you by God, of the monarchy of the kingdom of all Ireland' ('tibi a Deo totius Everniae regni praerogatiuam monarchiae praedistinatam') (Anderson & Anderson 1991, 38/9: I.14).

For these writers, then, Uí Néill were providing in their own times (and, as
Adomnan cared to think, already in the mid-sixth century, almost a century and a half previously) kings of Ireland. For Muirchú, who hesitated to put matters quite so bluntly, Tara was nevertheless *caput regni Scotorum* and the king who reigned there was of Úi Néill and might be described as *imperator*: although he wrote ostensibly with reference to the fifth century, it is hard to doubt that Muirchú saw the description as applicable to his own time.

The sad but interesting fact is that this was fantasy. While for a good part of the early middle ages the descendants of Niall taken as a single group were the most powerful political force in the island, they were not (until the middle of the ninth century) in a position to attempt to dominate it as a whole. They never succeeded in holding any long-term supremacy of the island of Ireland. What they did do, however, was collectively to maintain a barrage of propaganda asserting their own superiority and their unique claim to power—past, present, and future. This approach was built on their absolute control, from the mid-seventh century to the late tenth, of the royal dignity of Tara.

The 'kingship of Tara' (Binchy 1958; Byrne 1973, 48–69; Charles-Edwards & Kelly 1983, 123–31; Bhreathnach 1996) was a dignity whose history deserves a full study of its own. It seems likely to have been an institution originating in the pagan past, in circumstances long since lost to memory. In as much as the visible contestants for this honour in the years before 637 were kings of Leinster, Ulster, and Úi Néill (to whom the kings of Connaught in the period stood in an uncertain political and biological relationship), it has been reasonably conjectured that the kingship of Tara was an overlordship of the northern half of Ireland, that is, Ireland without Munster. Since there is some evidence that each of these two parts of Ireland viewed the other as belonging to an *alius orbis* (Byrne 1973, 165–229), the kingship of Tara may have seemed the head of a unit complete in itself. Be that as it may, it is at the very least a striking coincidence that the first potentially contemporary reference to a 'king of Ireland' *tout court* occurs precisely in application to Domnall mac Aedo, from whose time Úi Néill monopolised the kingship of Tara. Finally, one must add the complication that it is not clear that Tara ever had been the seat of kings (cf. Wailes 1982). What is more, there is certainly an early mediaeval ecclesiastical literary tradition that its state of desertion at that time fittingly rewarded its earlier pagan associations (for all the literature, see Petrie 1839; cf. Bhreathnach 1995). It is possible that Tara was once an inauguration-site, but that, after the leading dynasties of the North accepted christianity, the title alone provided the connexion with the site. For more progress on the matter, we must rely on archaeology; as yet, only a fraction of this large and complex site has been excavated (Newman et al. 1997).

The propagandists for Úi Néill steadily built up a pseudohistory of the dynasty's exclusive right to and eternal control of a kingship of all Ireland (cf. Binchy 1970, 32–8;
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Byrne 1973, 87-105). This ideology had already been put in place before the end of the seventh century. Abbot Adomnán's reference to a 'prerogative, fore-ordained by God, to the monarchy of the whole kingdom of Ireland' indicates the tone of this assertion of right (for an apparently contemporary king-list in the same vein, see Murphy 1952, 145-51).

It is against this background that we must consider Adomnán's reference, in similar terms, to Oswald of Northumbria: 'totius Britanniae imperator a Deo ordinatus', 'ordained by God as emperor of all Britain' (Anderson & Anderson 1991, 14-17: I.1). The role of divine ordination was important to Adomnán: he wrote of it again in reference to a royal succession in Dál Riata, the Gaelic province in which the church of Iona was situated (Anderson & Anderson 1991, 188/9: III.5). His attitude and language have been much discussed (cf. Enright 1989), particularly in connexion with the question of the origins and early development of European royal ordination-ritual. For our purpose what is important is that Oswald, already culted as a martyr-saint in Northumbria in Adomnán's day, was a king undoubtedly greatly approved by the community of St Columba: he had been converted to Christianity under the auspices of the 'Columban Church' when an exile in north Britain in the years 616-633 and he had subsequently invited the heirs of St Columba to send missionaries to evangelise his people (cf. Dumville 1998). When Adomnán wrote his Life of St Columba another much-approved member of Oswald's dynasty, a former exile in the Gaelic world, Aldfrith (cf. Dumville 1990b, 149-52), was king of Northumbria (686-705). Oswald himself, and his brother and successor Oswiu (642-670), had achieved remarkable supremacies in Britain, although at the Council of Whitby Oswiu had taken action which damaged the interests of the Church of St Columba. It may have seemed to Adomnán that in this Bernician dynasty resided an equivalent in Britain to the Irish dynasty, Uí Néill, of which he himself was a member. It is very possible, indeed, that this idea had already occurred to an Iona churchman in the period 634-664 during which such close links existed between a successful Bernician dynasty and the equally—or more—spectacularly successful church of St Columba. The idea of totius Britanniae imperator must at times have seemed very close to realisation in the successive reigns of Oswald and Oswiu, and in as much as these kings were new Christians the notion that this new status was a Deo ordinatus might have been very attractive.

These same kings were celebrated by Bede (Historia ecclesiastica II.5 and V. 23) among those who held imperium over all the Southumbrian peoples. Scholars who have considered Adomnán's evidence about Oswald as totius Britanniae imperator have thought that it should be brought into association with Bede's list. Historians have also been agreed that we should similarly incorporate in the discussion the description of Æthelbald of Mercia (king, 716-757) in one of his charters as rex Suutanglorum and rex Britanniae (Sawyer 1968, no. 89). Æthelbald was admitted by Bede as one of his Southumbrian overkings (V. 23). We also find him engaged in pan-British strategic al-
liance with Onuist, king of Picts 729–761, against the kings of Northumbria and Wessex, the latter of whom ‘rose against’ (surrexit contra) Æthelbald and Onuist in 750 (Continuatio Bedae, s. a. 750; edd. & transl. Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 574/5).

Difficult questions and choices follow. Was a seventh-century Gaelic churchman able to see Oswald as totius Brittanniae imperator because he was able to combine rule of Northumbria and some measure of overkingship in the Celtic North with the overkingship of the southern English, thus coming very close to pan-British rule (Bede, Historia ecclesiastica III.6, estimated Oswald’s power as greater than he allowed in II.5)? Or was his status in the churchman’s eyes simply recognition (albeit incorporating political approval) of Oswald’s tenure of overkingship of the Southumbrians? Or did that churchman’s description of Oswald derive wholly from the application of Gaelic political thought to a British context in which his ecclesiastical organisation had an important interest?

Nor have we reached the end of the questions. Perhaps the most important concern is the issue of Gaelic input into the concept of Southumbrian overkingship. Is it possible that the whole idea of such overkingship derives from a Gaelic model? If so, it would be probable that it was introduced directly by Gaelic churchmen, whether in northern or southern England (although we should remember that secular contacts did exist between the Gaels and the pre-Christian English: cf. Moisl 1983 and Dumville 1996). Or was the Gaelic input to equate Southumbrian overkingship with kingship of Britain?

First, we must attempt to determine whether there is any likelihood that we are dealing with a native English, a native British, or an imported concept of such a territorially and racially defined overkingship. One approach must rely on an estimation of the likely existence of such an overkingship before the chance of Gaelic influence on English political thought might be deemed probable. That overkingship is doubly attested in the 730s, in Bede’s History and Æthelbald’s Ismere charter. In the years 709 × 731, Stephanus in his Life of St Wilfrid (920: Colgrave 1927, 42/3) referred to Wulfhere of Mercia (658–675) as leader of all the southern English peoples. Beyond this we cannot go, save via the pages of Bede himself, a circular procedure. The cause is not thereby advanced, and we must admit the possibility of a native English concept of major overkingship which eventually achieved a northern boundary at the River Humber. Certainly we must allow that in the eighth and pre-viking ninth centuries Northumbria and Southumbria came to seem as if they were two separate worlds (cf. Hunter Blair 1984, IV, and Stenton 1971, 32–3, 95), much as Munster and the Northern Half of Ireland had appeared to be before 800.

The question has ever been put whether it is credible that Ælle of Sussex and Ceawlin of Wessex could have occupied the role defined for them by Bede. Two approaches may be allowed. While it is perhaps unlikely that either—assuming for the moment that both are historical figures—was able to receive the submission of all the peoples, or all the
English peoples, of what would become English Southumbria, it is not inconceivable that their hypothetically impressive overkingships could later have been seen as stages on the road to such an imperium (cf. Dumville 1985). What should perhaps be asked, however, is whether Bede had any (probably biblical) model for his formulation that Æthelberht was the third king to hold this imperium but the first to enter the kingdom of heaven. If an analogy to Bede's opening formulation could be found, it would be potentially damaging to the place, or the exclusive place, of the first two overkings in his list (for a suggestive probe in that direction see Mayr-Harting 1994).

Similarly, two approaches may be attempted to the issue of native British precedent for the Southumbrian overkingship. If such an antecedent existed, we should have to place its origins in the fifth or earlier sixth century, for it is hard to imagine a pre-Roman arrangement making such an impact after so many centuries' abeyance; we should then perhaps think of such an arrangement as a successor of sorts to the division between the civilian and military zones of Roman Britain. However, we have no evidence to encourage us to admit the existence of a sub-Roman development of that sort. The other approach is inextricably bound with the problem of Irish influence. If the idea of Southumbrian overkingship as kingship of Britain is primary, and if the parallel notion of kingship of Tara as kingship of Ireland belongs to prehistory rather than the seventh century, then it would be possible to hypothesise that this British imperium is a Celtic institution cognate with its Irish counterpart and derived from a shared Celtic inheritance. In this formulation there are too many conditions for it to be sustainable, however.

What is so striking about the Southumbrian overking being called 'king of Britain' and the king of Tara being called 'king of Ireland' is that in neither case can the equation have been literally true at the time of first attestation. In the Irish instance, our problem (effectively insoluble because it transports us into prehistory) is to establish either that at no time in the past was the equation true or else that it was invented at the point of first attestation. For my part I see no evidence that the kingship of Tara was regarded as a kingship of Ireland before Uí Néill propagandists got to work; but that is a heavily qualified conclusion.

In as much as the ideological element in the presentation of both kingships is their most striking characteristic, and that element is effectively identical (overkingship of a part of the island = overkingship of the whole), it is natural to see a connexion between the two. Saving the outside possibility of a shared Celtic inheritance, it would be simplest to suppose the ideological element to have been created in Ireland, both because it is first attested there and because of the direction of the flow of ideas in this period. But if that is correct, we have to wonder why the English ideology was not made an exact replica of the Irish, that the overkingship of the Northerners amounted to the overkingship of the island. The answer may reside in the very history of Southumbrian overkingship and thus validate the historicity of the institution before overkingship of the South was
achieved by Northumbrians.

If the direction of the growth of royal power and regional wealth in southern England in the later sixth and seventh centuries has been correctly perceived, the succession of Bede’s Southumbrian overkings does not on other grounds seem implausible. Whatever Ceawlin’s now shadowy role may have been, Æthilberht of Kent and Rædwald of East Anglia do not look incredible as the embodiments of the political developments of their age. In other words, the picture of a Southern imperium built up to the point where its leader could in 616 successfully challenge a powerful Northern ruler, shows no sign of needing to be a construct made to satisfy an Anglo-Saxon historian. Admittedly, Æthelfrith of Northumbria is the first Northern ruler of any known significance, but the general point is not invalidated thus. If the achievement of three successive Northumbrian potentates in the middle quarters of the seventh century (from the death of Rædwald in the 620s to Wulfhere’s accession to Mercia in 658) was to join their new Northumbrian overkingship to that which had already been achieved in the South, their Irish ecclesiastical mentors could accordingly have perceived the Southumbrian overkingship as the essential key to domination of the whole.

Alternatively, we may choose to suppose that the Iona churchmen did indeed replicate Irish political ideology in Britain and that Adomnan’s description of Oswald is the sole surviving direct trace of that replication. But, once political dominance passed decisively from Northumbria and back to Southumbria, the Southerners appropriated the ideology for themselves.

I have tried to lay out the many possibilities of interpretation of the frustratingly limited quantity of evidence. The central point is that the peculiar claim that the overkingship of the Southumbrians was a kingship of Britain is directly paralleled in the history of the kingship of Tara. The simplest explanation of this equivalence is to assume that Irish churchmen transplanted understanding of their domestic political situation to the English polity. The English Church rapidly followed suit (on this last point, see Charles-Edwards, forthcoming).

Whether an English ideology of British kingship outlasted the reign of Æthelbald of Mercia (716–757) I do not know. Certainly it was revived in the reign of Æthelstan (924–939, first king of England 927–939: Dumville 1992, 141–71). On Bede’s criteria Æcgberht (802–839) and Edward (899–924) of Wessex would have qualified as distant successors to Æthelbald in this discontinuous sequence of overkings. But with the decline of Mercian power after the death of Æthelbald, the concept may have withered: we do not know. What did not wither, of course, was the effect of original sin in its political manifestation!—rulers continued to try to dominate as many of their neighbours as they could, a phenomenon neither peculiarly Celtic nor peculiarly English.
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