

VI.—THE NORTHUMBRIANS AND THEIR SOUTHERN FRONTIER.

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I. *Norðanhymbre.*

The Germanic invaders of Britain, wrote Bede in a much-quoted passage in the *Ecclesiastical History*, came from three continental tribes, the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes. The people of Kent and the Isle of Wight were of Jutish origin, from the Saxons came the East Saxons, the South Saxons and the West Saxons, and from the Angles came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians and all the Northumbrians.¹ However great or small may have been the reality of this threefold ethnological division on the European mainland before the invasion of Britain, the testimony alike of Bede himself in other passages of his *History*, as of other early writers, of language and of social customs, suggests rather a twofold division in England, between Jutes on the one hand and a mixed Anglo-Saxon population on the other.² Apart from this one passage in Bede's *History*, there is no good evidence for thinking that the so-called Anglian kingdom of Northumbria was ethnologically distinct from the so-called Saxon kingdom of Wessex and we should perhaps be wiser to call them both by the name which they themselves used for the language which they spoke, namely English.³

¹ HE I, 15.

² See H. M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation*, 51-84, where the problem is fully discussed.

³ The term "Anglian" may properly be used of the dialect spoken by the Northumbrians.

When Bede wished to designate one or other of the various English kingdoms by name, he almost invariably did so by referring rather to the people of whom it was composed than to the area of land which its inhabitants occupied. Essex he normally called *provincia Orientalium Saxonum*, but he had no distinct term for Essex itself conceived as a geographical unit. So also with Wessex (*provincia Occidentalium Saxonum*), East Anglia (*provincia Orientalium Anglorum*) and the rest. The only exception to this practice was Kent which he commonly called *Cantia*, though he also used *provincia Cantuariorum*, and the exception here was no doubt due to the adoption by the English of a name which had been current in Roman Britain. In this practice Bede was in keeping with the usage of his age and it was not until a later time that the conception of groups of people regularly gave way to that of defined areas of land. For Northumbria Bede, almost without exception in the *History*, used the term *Nordanhymbri* or *Northanhymbri* usually in the genitive plural dependent on some such word as *provincia*, *regnum* or *gens*. It is not without interest, however, to note that on several occasions when he used the term, he added an explanatory gloss, as though to make his meaning plain to those who might not otherwise have understood him. Thus he writes *tota Nordanhymbrorum progenies, id est illarum gentium, quae ad Boream Humbri fluminis inhabitant*,⁴ and later, *Aeduini rex Nordanhymbrorum gentis, id est eius, quae ad Borealem Humbrae fluminis inhabitat*,⁵ and again, *gens Nordanhymbrorum, hoc est ea natio Anglorum, quae ad Aquilonalem Humbre fluminis plagam habitabat*.⁶

A generation whose ears have recently become attuned to a very large number of foreign place-names in a considerable variety of forms can the more readily appreciate

⁴ HE I, 15.

⁵ *ib.* II, 5.

⁶ *ib.* II, 9.

the difficulty of the problem which must face any author who is writing in a language other than his own, namely how to incorporate vernacular names in his text in such a way as to make both their meaning and their locality plain. The problem was all the greater for Bede because the Latin in which he wrote was the universal literary language of western Europe and it was therefore important that he should make his meaning clear not only to those whose spoken language was English, but also to those who spoke the contemporary languages of, for example, France or the Rhineland. There were some vernacular names, each as *East Seaxe* and *East Engle* which lent themselves readily to translation, without possibility of misunderstanding, by *Orientalis Saxones* and *Orientalis Angli*, but the vernacular name of his own people which he had to use a great many times, was less easily translated, as the cumbersome length of his own glosses shows. He therefore adopted the course of using the vernacular itself, *Norðanhymbre*, thinly disguised by Latin case endings, but in so doing he seems to have been conscious that there were two points which called for explanation to a reader who might not be familiar with Old English, first the meaning of *norð*, in place of *borealis* or *aquilonalis*, and second the mutation of the root vowel of the river-name Humber owing to the operation of Old English sound laws. There is evidence in other works of Bede that it was only after a period of experiment with other forms that he finally adopted the Latinized vernacular form. In the *History of the Abbots* for example, which was written some fifteen years before the *Ecclesiastical History*, he refers to Northumbria as *Transhumbrana regio*,⁷ and again in the chronicle attached to the *De Temporibus Ratione* which was written in 725, he writes *Transhumbranae gentis ad aquilonem*.⁸ An echo of this earlier usage occurs in the *Ecclesiastical History* in a passage in which he describes Bernicia as *ceteram Transhumbranae*

⁷ § 4.

⁸ ed. Mommsen, M.G.H. XIII, 311.

*gentis partem ab Aquilone.*⁹ In this passage *Transhumbranae gentis . . . ab Aquilone* is patently a translation of *Norðanhymbre*. It is not to be doubted that Bede himself was well aware of the ambiguity of such phrases as *Transhumbrana regio* or *Transhumbrana gens* which would leave a reader not familiar with the geography of northern England in doubt which side of the Humber was meant. This disadvantage would be particularly evident to Bede whose home lay north of the Humber, because from his point of view the district which lay across the Humber was Mercia, not Northumbria.

These difficulties were not, of course, peculiar to Bede alone. In the earliest of all the Northumbrian historical works which relate to the English, the *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert*, the record of events and personalities which form its content is exclusively concerned with Northumbria, and since no occasion for differentiation arose, neither the kingdom nor its people are once mentioned by name. On the other hand, Eddius, whose *Life of Wilfrid* was written some ten or fifteen years before Bede's *History*, had frequent occasion to mention the Northumbrians. On one occasion he calls a king of Northumbria *regem Aquilonalium*¹⁰ and on another *regem . . . Aquilonensium*,¹¹ but his normal term for the Northumbrians is *Ultrahumbrenses*, prefixed sometimes by *regio* or *gens*. It can scarcely be doubted that *Ultrahumbrenses*, like Bede's *Transhumbrana gens*, is a translation of *Norðanhymbre*. *Ultrahumbrenses* would have been less obviously ambiguous to Eddius than it would have been to Bede, because, despite his long association with Northumbria, Eddius was a Kentishman by birth and "beyond the Humber" could never have meant anything to him but "north of the Humber." Notice should certainly be taken of another name which is apparently used of the Northumbrians, in

⁹ HE III, 14.

¹⁰ Ch. 43.

¹¹ Ch. 51.

the *Historia Brittonum*, that is *Saxones Ambronum*¹² or *genus Ambronum*,¹³ but it is doubtful whether a great deal of importance can be attached to this form of the name in the context of this particular work. The date of the passages in which it occurs is uncertain and many of the names in other parts of the same work are extremely corrupt. It is at all events much easier to believe that *Ambronum* is a corrupt form deriving ultimately from the river-name Humber than it is to believe that it has any connection with the name of the Frisian island Amrum.¹⁴ That different writers should have reached different solutions to the difficult problem of arraying the vernacular *Norðanhymbre* in a Latin dress is no more than we should have expected. It would indeed have been matter for surprise if they had done otherwise, but it must be remembered that such translations were no more than literary conventions.

Although such terms as *Transhumbrana regio* and *Ultrahumbrenses* are chronologically earlier than Bede's *Nordanhymbri*, there is no evidence for thinking that there was any corresponding change in the vernacular usage. On the contrary *Ultrahumbrenses* represents *Norðanhymbre* as certainly as does Bede's *Nordanhymbri*, and the difference between the two reflects no more than the personal preference of the authors concerned. At the same time there are certain passages, all of them representing works earlier than Bede's *History*, in which the name *Humbrenses*, or something similar, is found. In the letter which was issued by Theodore after the synod of Hatfield in 680 and which, though not preserved independently, is quoted at length by Bede, seemingly from an original document, there is the phrase *Ecgfrido rege Hymbronensium*.¹⁵

¹² § 57.

¹³ § 63.

¹⁴ See Collingwood and Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, 412, note 1. The terms used for "Northumbria" by different writers of the seventh and eighth centuries have been collected by J. N. L. Myres, *The Teutonic Settlement of Northern England, History*, n.s., 20, 1935-6, 250 and ff., but while I have made use of his material I do not find it easy to accept his conclusions.

¹⁵ HE IV, 15 (17).

Secondly, a *discipulus Umbrensis* is mentioned in the heading of Theodore's *Penitential*.¹⁶ And thirdly, in the early *Life of Gregory* which was written by a monk of Whitby, the author refers to his own part of the country as *in gente nostra que dicitur Humbrensiūm*.¹⁷ At first sight these three passages seem to suggest a state of affairs in which the people who lived on either side of the Humber could be described by the single name *Humbrenses*. Such a name might indeed represent a vernacular formation such as *Hymbresætan*, parallel with such formations as *Tomsætan*, *Wilsætan*, *Pecsætan* and *Wreocensætan*.¹⁸ But if such a name was ever widely current it is perhaps odd that we should have no trace of it. There are, however, some grounds for doubting whether the three passages concerned are capable of supporting the conclusions which have been drawn from them. Two of them are connected with Theodore who, so far from being a Northumbrian, was not even an Englishman, and even if we allow that they may not have been written either by Theodore himself or by some foreign clerk in his service, they remain, none the less, Canterbury documents and are therefore not the best evidence for northern English usage. Furthermore, at the time of the synod of Hatfield Ecgfrith was in fact king only of the English north of the Humber. Only two years before he had lost at the battle of the Trent that hegemony over the southern English which had been enjoyed by his three predecessors, Edwin, Oswald and Osuiu, and perhaps for a short time by himself also. Theodore must have been well aware of this defeat, and we should therefore have to convict him of a grave error if he intended *Hymbronenses* to mean "the men of the Humber" rather than the "Northumbrians." But perhaps the most serious doubt, and one which applies also to the passage in the *Life of Gregory*, is the one which arises from the whole course of

¹⁶ Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, III, 173.

¹⁷ ed. F. A. Gasquet, ch. 12.

¹⁸ Meaning the men of Tame, Wylve, Peak and Wrekin respectively.

English history in the first seventy years of the seventh century. The conflict between the Northumbrians and the southern English is the one theme which constantly recurs throughout this period, and the history of this conflict can leave us in no doubt that the boundary between the two was already in process of formation as early as the time of Aethelfrith. Are we to suppose that the monk of Whitby was ignoring the fact that this boundary had existed for almost a century before he wrote or shall we believe that the *Humbrenses* were the people who lived where he himself lived, *be norðan Humbre*?

Just as Bede set a fashion which came to be universally adopted in the western world in his reckoning of the passage of years by the use of the dominical system, so also he set a fashion by the adoption in his own writings of the folk-name *Norðanhymbre*. We may indeed say that the place-name Northumberland owes its existence to-day entirely to Bede. *Norðanhymbre* must have been current as a folk-name in the seventh century, but in this form it was in all probability an elliptical version of some such phrase as *seo ðeod ðe be norðan Humbre eardað* (the people who live to the north of the Humber). The use of a river-name or of the name of some other natural feature as a means of indicating a boundary line is by no means uncommon in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. A striking instance of this usage occurs in the entry for 894 A: *of aelcre byrig be eastan Pedredan ge be westan Sealwuda ge be eastan, ge eac be norþan Temese, 7 be westan Saefern* (from every town to the east of the Parret, and as well to the west as to the east of Selwood, and also to the north of the Thames and to the west of the Severn). Another instance is provided by the entry for 709 A where it is said of Aldhelm, *se wæs be westan Wuda bisc.* (he was bishop to the west of the forest, i.e. Selwood), where the phrase *be westan wuda* is used to designate the diocese of Sherborne. Again, we may note the phrase *al þæt be suþan Humbre wæs* under 827 A where the usage is applied to the Humber itself.

II. *Suðanhymbre*.

It would perhaps be legitimate to infer from the name *Norðanhymbre* the existence of its counterpart, *Suðanhymbre*, but fortunately we are in a position to demonstrate the use of the latter without having to resort to inferences of this kind. The name is recorded four times in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Under 449 E, which is derived from Bede, the latter's words *Uoden, de cuius stirpe multarum prouinciarum regium genus orginem duxit*¹⁹ are paraphrased *fram þan Wodne awoc eall ure cynecynn 7 Suðanhymbra eac*. Under 641 E the descriptive epithet *Suðhymbrom* is applied to Penda of Mercia. Similarly under 697 E, the Mercians are styled *Suðanhumbre*, and under 702 D their kingdom is called *Suþanhymbra rice* (E, *Suðhumbra rice*; F, *Suðhymbra rice*) in pointed contrast with *Aldfrið Norþanhymbra cyning* under 705 D. Elsewhere, *Suthymbria* occurs twice in Symeon of Durham's *History of the Kings* in connection with events relating to 1069 and 1122 respectively.²⁰ It is of interest to note that *Suðanhymbre* occurs only in those MSS. of the *Chronicle* which are descended ultimately from a northern version. Are we to suppose that it represents the usage of the age to which the MSS. themselves belong, namely the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or does it preserve the usage of the years under which it is mentioned, namely the seventh and eighth?

The first step towards answering this question is to summarize as briefly as possible the relations towards one another of the seven texts which are known jointly as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.²¹ Text A¹ represents a West-Saxon chronicle which, whatever its date and place of origin, was at Winchester in the tenth century and at Canterbury in the

¹⁹ HE I, 15.

²⁰ Rolls Ed. II, 187, 267. See also HE, ed. Plummer, II, 29-30.

²¹ The summary which follows is based on A. H. Smith, *The Parker Chronicle*, 3 and ff. In order to save space I have over-simplified the relationships of the various texts to one another.

eleventh. Text A², which was almost totally destroyed in the great fire of 1731, was an eleventh century transcript of A¹. A chronicle which was closely related to A¹ was at some stage sent, it is thought, to Abingdon, where it received various additions. Texts B and C, though they are not identical, may for present purposes be regarded as copies of this now lost Abingdon chronicle. Another copy of the West Saxon original was sent to some northern centre at which various materials were incorporated in it. The original of this northern chronicle has not been preserved, but it is represented by D, a copy of it made probably at Worcester in the eleventh century, and also by E which was compiled at Peterborough in the twelfth century. Although both D and E are of northern ancestry, they do not descend from a common original. F is a post-Conquest bilingual epitome closely related to E's immediate ancestor. It is well known that, covering a period of some seventy years after the point at which Bede's *History* ends (731), the northern ancestors of D and E contained an important series of entries which relate mainly to Northumbrian history and which seem to have the value of almost contemporary record. Did the original northern ancestor, for the period before 731, derive all its material relating to Northumbria from Bede or had it some other source of information upon which to draw? Upon the answer to this question must depend our answer to the other problem, whether *Suðanhymbre* belongs to the age of Symeon or whether Symeon was reviving a usage which belonged to a much earlier period.

Among the entries in the northern version of the *Chronicle* which relate to the early part of the seventh century, there are three which contain additions to or variations from the evidence of Bede. The entry which records the victory of Aethelfrith over Aedan (603 E) is in the main derived from Bede, but it adds that the Scottish army was led to the scene of battle by Hering, son of Husa, an item which is not recorded in any other source, but

which, as commemorating an act of outstanding treachery, might well have been long preserved in folk-memory. Aethelfrith's victory at Chester is recorded by E under 605, some eleven or twelve years too early, but this is no evidence for the use of an independent source, any more than is the figure of 200 as the number of monks slain, against Bede's 1200.²² Variations of this kind might very easily have occurred in the course of copying. Thirdly, the long entry under 626 E is derived mainly from Bede, except for the remark that, in the course of an expedition against Wessex, Edwin slew five West Saxon kings. This, if it were true, is an item which might well have been suppressed in the southern version of the *Chronicle*, and again tradition seems the likely source. But as we approach the end of the seventh century, there is a notable change in the entries which relate to Northumbria. It will be convenient to extract the entries in question, taking the readings from text E, and compare their information with that supplied by Bede.

685 E. *ðy ilcan geare man ofsloh Ecgferð cining be norðan sæ 7 mycelne here mid him on xiii kl. Iunii.*

In the same year king Ecgfrith was slain to the north of the sea and a great army with him on 20 May.

The entry refers of course to the battle of Nechtanesmere. The day of the month agrees with that given by Bede,²³ whose only indication of the site of the battle is that it was fought in a Pictish province *in angustias inaccessorum montium*. The phrase *be norðan sæ* which must be interpreted as referring to the Firth of Forth, is most striking, partly because of its contrast with Bede's words, suggesting that the author of the entry was not here drawing upon

²² HE II, 2.

²³ *ib.* IV, 24 (26).

Bede, partly because it demonstrates a northern origin for the entry and partly because it indicates an early date for its composition. The name of the place at which the battle was fought is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster* as *Duin Nechtain*,²⁴ in the *Historia Brittonum* as *Linn Garan*²⁵ and in Symeon of Durham as *Nechtanemesere*.²⁶ If this entry had been a late composition, we would surely have expected its author to have used one or other of these names. That he did not do so suggests that he lived at a time when the English, Bede among them, thought of this battle as the battle in which Ecgfrith was killed rather than as the battle of Nechtanesmere.

697 E *Her Suðanhymbre ofslogon Ostryðe Æðelredes cwen. Ecgfrīðes swuster.*

In this year the people to the south of the Humber slew Osthyrth who was Ethelred's queen and Ecgfrith's sister.

Bede records this event in the following words: *Osthyrd regina a suis, id est Merciorum, primatibus interemta*.²⁷ In another connection Bede mentions that Osthyrth was the wife of Ethelred and sister of Ecgfrith,²⁸ but it is of interest to note that he does not mention the death of Osthyrth in the body of his *History*. His reference to this latter event is confined to the chronological epitome where it forms one of a small group of annals which have in common that their subject matter is not mentioned in the *History* proper. Plummer thought that Bede's epitome was the source of this entry in the *Chronicle*,²⁹ but the contrast between *Mercii* and *Suðanhymbre* suggests otherwise. Bede never uses *Suðanhymbre* and we cannot explain the two names as

²⁴ s.a. 685.

²⁵ § 57.

²⁶ *Rolls Ed.* I, 32.

²⁷ *HE* v, 24.

²⁸ *ib.* iv, 19 (21).

²⁹ Earle and Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, 2, lxi, note 2.

translations of one another, because both are English words, despite the Latin termination of *Mercii*, and although they refer to the same people, their respective meanings are quite different.

699 E *Her Pyhtas slogon Berht ealdorman.*

In this year the Picts slew the ealdorman Berht.

Bede's reference to this event is again confined to his chronological epitome. His account varies from the *Chronicle* version in the name of the ealdorman, which he gives as *Berctred*, and in the date, which he gives as 698.³⁰ These variations would be consistent with independent origins for the two versions, but they are not proof.

705 E *Her Aldfrið Norþanhymbra cining forðferde on xix K Janr. on Driffelda. þa feng Osred his sunu to rice.*

In this year Aldfrith, king of the Northumbrians, died in Driffield on 14 December. Then Osred his son succeeded to the kingdom.

Bede refers to the death of Aldfrith and to the accession of Osred,³¹ but in so doing he mentions neither the place nor the day of Aldfrith's death.

710 E *þam ilcan geare feoht Beorhtfrið ealdorman wið Pyhtas betwix Hæfe 7 Cære.*

In the same year the ealdorman Beorhtfrith fought with the Picts between Avon (?) and Carron (?).

Bede refers to this event, but again only in the chronological epitome under 711, and not in the body of the *History*, in the following terms: *Berctfrid praefectus cum*

³⁰ HE v, 24.

³¹ *ib.* v, 18.

*Pictis pugnavit.*³² It will be noted that he gives no indication of the locality of the battle. The Irish annals place it in *campo Manonn*,³³ by which the old kingdom of Manau is evidently meant, a locality which is in accord with Skene's suggestion of the rivers Avon and Carron for *Hæfe* and *Cære*.³⁴

716 E *Her Osred Norðanhymbra cininga waerð ofslagen be suðan gemære.*

In this year Osred king of the Northumbrians was slain to the south of the border.

Bede refers to the death of Osred,³⁵ but he gives no indication of where it befell. The most notable point about this entry is the use of the phrase *be suðan gemære*. Unfortunately there is not evidence enough to show whether the northern or southern boundary of Northumbria is meant,³⁶ but in this very ambiguity lies the strongest ground for thinking that this is a contemporary annal. The use of the simple, unqualified *be suðan gemære* suggests the work of an author who lived so close to the event that the possibility of his record appearing ambiguous to later generations had not occurred to him.

721 E *Her forðferde se halga biscof Iohs. se was biscof XXXIII geara 7 viii monðas 7 xiii dagas 7 his lic restað in Beoferlic.*

In this year the holy bishop John died, he was bishop 33 years and 8 months and 13 days and his body rests at Beverley.

Bede states only that John was bishop for 33 years, without

³² *ib.* v, 24.

³³ *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 710.

³⁴ W. F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, I, 270.

³⁵ HE v, 22.

³⁶ See HE, ed. Plummer, II, 336.

the additional details about months and days. He does not mention Beverley, but says that John was buried in his monastery *quod dicitur In Silua Derorum*.³⁷ But these variations do not necessarily indicate an early date for the *Chronicle* entry. Whatever may have been the origin of the place-name, the form it takes in this passage is not early. Furthermore the exact details about the length of John's episcopate are such as might have been found in a list of bishops by an author writing long after the event.

The results of this analysis may now be summarized. We have discussed the contents of ten entries relating to the seventh and early eighth centuries in text E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. They all relate to events closely connected with Northumbrian history and they all contain material either additional to or in variation from the information supplied by Bede. Three of them (603, 605, 626) relate to the early part of the seventh century, but none of these three contains information such as might suggest the keeping of a chronicle in Northumbria at the time to which the entries themselves refer. The remaining seven cover the period 685-721. They contain a number of place-names (*Hæfe*, *Cære*, *Driffelda* and *Beoferlic*) which are not mentioned by Bede in his account of the events connected with them. Such names might have been borrowed by a later writer from some other source, but two of them *Hæfe* and *Cære* are not recorded elsewhere, and we may recall that in his prose *Life of Cuthbert* Bede not uncommonly omitted place-names which existed in the *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* on which this work was based. In particular there are two phrases, *be norðan sæ* and *be suðan gemære*, which carry with them a strong suggestion of contemporary usage. Three of the seven entries (697, 699, 710) record events which are not mentioned by Bede in the body of his *History*, but only in the chronological epitome where they appear in the form of annals recorded under their respective years. The wording of these three entries in the *Chronicle*

³⁷ HE v, 6.

differs sufficiently from the wording in Bede's epitome to suggest that they are not directly dependent on one another.

It is of interest to note that there are, in all, seven entries in Bede's chronological epitome to which he makes no reference in the *History* proper. Three of these seven refer respectively to eclipses of the sun in 538 and 540 and to the accession of Ida in 547. The items relating to the eclipses are such as could have been calculated retrospectively or borrowed from other, not necessarily English, sources. The date of Ida's accession was calculated retrospectively from a list of the Bernician kings. The remaining four entries cover the period 675-725. All of these entries, apart from those which refer to the eclipses, are concerned with events bearing directly on Northumbrian history. The inference seems to be that towards the end of the seventh century an annalistic chronicle, perhaps in the form of entries in Easter tables, was being kept at some Northumbrian centre, perhaps in Jarrow, and that this chronicle was the source of the northern additions to that version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from which texts D and E are descended. This chronicle did not terminate with the death of Bede, but was continued, though perhaps with breaks, throughout the eighth century. In the light of this evidence we may feel no small confidence that the name *Suðanhymbre* in the *Chronicle* entries for 641, 697 and 702 represents the usage of the second half of the seventh and the early part of the eighth centuries, and that the people who lived north and south of the Humber were then known respectively as the *Norðanhymbre* and the *Suðanhymbre*. Why did *Suðanhymbre* give way to *Mierce* or, in Bede's Latinized form, *Mercii*?

III. *Mierce*.

The territorial name "Mercia" is formed from an Old English folk-name *Mierce*, which in its turn is a plural

formation related to an Old English *mearc*,³⁸ meaning "boundary" or, as the word has descended into modern English, "march." The name *Mierce* therefore means "the border folk" or "the people of the Marches." Both Eddius and Bede consistently apply a Latinized form of this name, *Mercii*, to the people who lived south of Northumbria and west of Lindsey. The name presupposes the existence of a border whose nature was perhaps not unlike those more famous borders of the later middle ages, the Welsh and Scottish Marches, a border, that is, which formed the dividing line between two hostile groups of people, rather than one formed by natural geographical features alone. It is generally supposed that the border in question was the one which separated the English of the midlands from the Celts of the Welsh kingdoms. We must assume that in the course of their advance westwards across the midlands from the late fifth century onwards, the Mercians would come repeatedly into conflict with Celtic peoples, even though we have no detailed record of such conflict. But it may be questioned whether mere contact with the Welsh would produce conditions in which the name *Mierce* would be likely to arise. If it were so, the name might equally have been used of the West Saxons who were in contact with the Welsh throughout the sixth and seventh centuries as they drove west to Dorset and Devon, and perhaps even more appropriately of the Northumbrians who encountered far more formidable opposition from the Welsh, both of the north and the west, than did either the Mercians or the West Saxons and who in addition came to be near neighbours of both Picts and Scots.

³⁸ WS *mearc* arises from WG * *mark-* by fronting WG *a* and subsequent fracture before *r*+consonant. *Mierce* seems to arise from a locative form in *-i* with mutated vowel and palatal *c*, see Ekwall. *Dictionary*, s.n. March, also E.P.N.S. *Cambs*, 253. Büllbring, *Altengl. Element*. §§ 193, 206, and Girvan, *Angelsaksisch Handboek* § 92 suppose that in Anglian the diphthong arising from fracture has been smoothed and then raised to *e*, thus *mearc* > *mærc* > *merc*. Bede, Moore MS., consistently has *merc-*. On the other hand the fracture of *æ* before *r*+consonant was not carried through consistently in the earliest Northumbrian texts.

Mierce, and the *mearc* to which it is related, seems, however, to imply something more than mere contact. It surely implies the existence of a border which had become more or less stabilized by at least the latter part of the seventh century, and which had been the scene of repeated conflicts between the peoples living on either side of it. It seems, furthermore, to demand a state of affairs in which the people who took their name from it were well known by others than themselves to have been engaged in such conflict. It is, however, a fact that very little is known about the formation of the boundary between the Welsh and the English of the midlands during the seventh century,³⁹ and such information as there is concerns conflicts between the Welsh and the Northumbrians, rather than between the Welsh and the Mercians. Aethelfrith defeated the Welsh at Chester near the beginning of the century and his successor Edwin conducted campaigns against Gwynedd and Anglesey shortly after. Later, Oswald won a great victory in a battle which was fought, if the identification of *Maserfelth* with Oswestry is correct, not far from the Welsh border, but it was a victory over the Mercians, not over the Welsh. It must be remembered, however, that the evidence for all these engagements comes from Bede and the record of similar struggles between Welsh and Mercians may have been lost simply because there was no Mercian historian to preserve it. We might expect such struggles to have taken place during the reign of Penda, the most powerful of Mercia's rulers in the seventh century, but this the evidence will hardly allow us to do. It was against Northumbria that Penda's efforts were primarily directed, and it was in alliance with the Welshman, Cadwallon, that he came near to victory. The Welsh took part in three major conflicts against the English in the middle part of the seventh century—in Hatfield Chase *c.* 632, at Heavenfield *c.* 634 and at *Winwaed c.* 654—and on each of these three occasions they fought as allies of Penda against the Northumbrians.

³⁹ Sir John Lloyd, *A History of Wales*, 3rd ed., I, 195.

These are scarcely the conditions in which a boundary between Welsh and Mercians of the kind implied by the term *mearc* can have come into existence. On the other hand there is no evidence to suggest that the alliance between the Welsh and the Mercians continued after Penda's death, and material of another kind⁴⁰ indicates that the dividing line between English and Welsh at the end of the seventh century followed much the same course as it did at the end of the eighth. But the real beginning of the Welsh Marches is marked by the construction of Offa's great defensive boundary at the end of the eighth century, that is to say more than a hundred years after the term *Mierce* had come into common use. In the light of this evidence we may perhaps be permitted to wonder whether modern writers have been unconsciously influenced by the later history of the Welsh Marches in accepting without question that this was the border from which the Mercians took their name.

Was there any other boundary from which the Mercians might have been called? Professor Stenton writes :

"The most important fact in the history of the earliest English kingdoms is the clear distinction which was maintained for more than two centuries between the peoples established respectively north and south of the Humber."⁴¹ Among the many passages which might be adduced in support of this statement, there are in particular three in the pages of Bede's *History*. In the first he writes of Aethelbert of Kent that he enlarged his dominions *ad confinium usque Humbrae fluminis maximi, quo meridiani et septentrionales Anglorum populi dirimuntur*.⁴² A later passage, in which reference is made to the previous remark on the same subject, describes Aethelbert as lord over all the English races *usque ad terminum Humbrae fluminis*.⁴³ And finally in a passage which contains a list of those kings who

⁴⁰ *ib.* I, 195-7.

⁴¹ *Anglo-Saxon England*, 32.

⁴² HE I, 25.

⁴³ HE II, 3.

held what Bede termed *imperium*, Aethelbert is said to have had authority over *cunctis . . . provinciis quae Humbrae fluuio et contiguis ei terminis sequestrantur a borealibus*.⁴⁴ It will not escape notice that in each of these three passages Bede plainly indicates that the Humber and "the boundaries contiguous to it" marked a dividing line of much greater importance than a mere provincial boundary as between Northumbria on the one hand and Mercia and Lindsey on the other. Lest it might be thought that these three passages, in so far as they relate to the same man, do not in reality reinforce one another, it is perhaps well to remark that other evidence which is both early in date and independent of Bede, confirms Bede's evidence that there was a real distinction between the northern and the southern English in the seventh century.⁴⁵ But what did Bede mean by the phrase *contiguis ei terminis*?

Nowadays the name Humber is applied only to the wide estuary below the confluence of the Trent and the Ouse, but there is some evidence which suggests that in earlier times the name was applied to an area which extended a considerable distance to the west of this point. We may note, for example, that Asser could describe York as lying on the north bank of the Humber,⁴⁶ though we should perhaps be unwise to attach over much weight to his evidence because there are many rivers in this area, and Asser may not have been very well informed about its geography. More significant is the occurrence in a fourteenth century assize roll of the name *Humbreheued*.⁴⁷ The name is now lost, but the place to which it belonged lay within the wapentake of Strafford which embraced the whole of the Don valley. The width of the Humber estuary would combine with its swift-flowing tides to form an effective barrier, once the days of invasion were past, against the movement of hostile armies into northern England by way of Ermine

⁴⁴ HE II, 5.

⁴⁵ F. M. Stenton, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁶ HE, ed. Plummer, II, 30.

⁴⁷ E. Ekwall, *English River-Names*, 201.

Street. It is of importance to note that in this way one of the three main routes which had linked north with south in Romano-British times was cut. In the conditions of warfare such as we know them to have been in the seventh century no army could have forced the passage of the Humber to Brough in the face of even moderate opposition.

Westwards from the upper end of the estuary and extending for a considerable distance both north and south of it, there lay a wide expanse of flat marshy land which even now is subject to frequent flooding and which in the seventh century would prove a barrier hardly less effective than the estuary itself. There would be no need to reinforce this natural obstacle with artificial defences. Skirting the southern and western fringe of this tract of marshland, there ran the second of the main Roman roads to the north, the road which branches from Ermine Street a short way to the north of Lincoln and crosses the Trent at Littleborough, the Idle near Austerfield, the Don at Doncaster and the Aire at Castleford. Thence it runs north to a point near Tadcaster where it divides into three branches of which one runs west across the Pennines by Ilkley, a second north to Aldborough and a third north-east to York. Although this road crossed a number of rivers in its course, no one of them would offer an obstacle comparable with the Humber estuary.

The wars between the Northumbrians and the southern English in the seventh century bear ample testimony to the great importance of this road for the security of both sides. The first great trial of strength came c. 616 when Raedwald, king of East Anglia and overlord of the southern English, destroyed Aethelfrith and his army in a battle which was fought *in finibus gentis Merciorum ad orientalem plagam amnis qui uocatur Idlae*.⁴⁸ Bede does not name the exact site of the battle, but we can scarcely be mistaken either in supposing that it was fought near the point at

⁴⁸ HE II, 12.

which the Roman road crosses the Idle or in believing that the opposing armies had made use of the road as a means of gaining contact. The second great conflict took place seventeen years later, *c.* 633, when Edwin was killed in a battle which was fought *in campo qui uocatur Haethfelth*, that is in Hatfield Chase to the north-east of Doncaster. And again in 655, in another of the great struggles for supremacy between north and south, the Northumbrians defeated Penda at the head of a coalition of the southern English. It is unfortunate that we cannot identify the river *Winwaed* by which the battle was fought, but the indications are that it lay at no great distance from Leeds, and it is therefore probable that the river was one of those which drain into the Humber. To suppose that these battles were no more than struggles for local supremacy would be an error. Raedwald and Edwin occur fourth and fifth in Bede's list of those who held the *imperium*. Penda is stated to have led thirty "legions" to the *Winwaed*, and among the many *duces regii* who fell on his side was Aethilheri, king of East Anglia.⁴⁹ The issue at stake was whether a king of the northern English or of the southern English was to enjoy the position conferred upon its holder by the *imperium* and, as we should expect, it was on the borderland between the two that the struggle was waged. But it was not only in time of war that the Lincoln-Castleford road played its part in early English history. The road crosses the Trent at Littleborough (*Sægelocum*), known to the English as *Tiouulfingacæstir*, and it was here that large numbers of the people of Lindsey were baptized by Paulinus in the presence of Edwin of Northumbria.⁵⁰ A few miles to the north-east the road crosses the Idle close by Austerfield, the scene of a synod which met in 702 to discuss the case of Wilfrid and was attended by Aldfrith of Northumbria, by Wilfrid himself who was then administering the Mercian diocese and was in opposition to Aldfrith, by the

⁴⁹ HE III, 24.

⁵⁰ HE II, 16.

archbishop of Canterbury and by most of the bishops in the province of Canterbury.⁵¹

Between the western edge of the marshland, skirted by the Lincoln-Castleford road, and the eastern edge of the Pennines there is a stretch, rather more than fifteen miles wide, of comparatively open country. At its narrowest point it is traversed by the valley of the Don which, after dropping steeply from the hills in a south-westerly direction, turns through a right angle at Sheffield and crosses the open country in a north-easterly direction to Doncaster where it is crossed by the Roman road. A glance at a map will make it plain that this stretch of open country was the one area between the North Sea and the Peak which gave ready access not only northwards to York, but also north-westwards to the Aire Gap which in its turn provided an easy route across the Pennines to north Lancashire and Westmorland. The only natural barrier across it was the Don itself, not a very formidable obstacle at this stage of its course. It is therefore of no small interest to note the existence of a series of defensive works which cross about eleven miles of this open country from a point above the right bank of the Dearne, a little way upstream from its confluence with the Don, to a point above the left bank of the Don north of Sheffield.⁵² The works, commonly known as the Roman Ridge or Rig, consist of a bank of loose earth and stones about eight feet high and a ditch some thirty feet wide on its southern side. They are not continuous throughout their length, though from the evidence at present available we cannot say whether this was originally so or not, and over much of their length they are duplicated.⁵³ To judge from their present state of preservation they must at one time have been a formidable obstacle. We may be certain from the method of construction that, despite its name, this fortification is not Roman, and

⁵¹ Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, ch. 46.

⁵² See O.S. map *Britain in the Dark Ages*, southern sheet.

⁵³ V.C.H. *York* II, 55.

although proof can only be supplied by the spade, it is generally held by archaeologists to be post-Roman in date. Was it part of the boundaries contiguous to the Humber to which Bede refers? We may note that it runs parallel to the Don and that along the other side of the Don valley runs the lateral Roman road from Doncaster to Templeborough and thence through the Pennines to Brough and Buxton where it joins the road from Littlechester to Manchester. We can see that such a defence work, if it were adequately manned, would have controlled the use of this road and would furthermore have confined a hostile force approaching from the south to the main road north from Doncaster to Castleford and would have prevented any movement towards the Aire Gap except by way of this main road.

From the first half of the tenth century there comes some evidence which suggests that what was believed to be the ancient boundary of Mercia followed a course which, in part at least, did not differ greatly from the existing boundary between Derbyshire and Yorkshire. The brief poem which is recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 942 and which was written in celebration of the redemption of the Five Boroughs by Edmund, describes the boundary of Mercia as being marked by Humber, *Dor* and *Hwitan wylls geat*. The two latter names are now represented by the villages of Dore and Whitwell,⁵⁴ both of which lie in Derbyshire but close to the border with Yorkshire. Both names are purely English formations. At the time of the event celebrated by the poet, Derbyshire was, and had been for a considerable time, part of a Danish confederation, but the spirit of triumphant patriotism by which the poet was evidently inspired would hardly have been justified if the occasion had marked no more than the recovery of boundary marks of comparatively recent formation. The significance of the redemption of the Five Boroughs lay partly in the liberation of a large area of Danish, but Chris-

⁵⁴ E. Ekwall, *Dictionary of English Place-Names*, s.n.

tian, territory, from the domination of the heathen Norse rulers of York, but surely it lay also, as the poet himself says, in the recovery of the boundary of Mercia, the boundary which had once separated the southern from the northern English. What other reason could there have been for mentioning Dore and Whitwell so prominently when, so far as we know, they were of importance only in so far as they were boundary marks? The names themselves might be thought to convey the suggestion of a frontier, but we must resist the temptation to interpret *dor* and *geat* ("door" and "gate") as meaning any more than "a pass." They bear this meaning too often in place-names to allow us to suppose that they indicate artificial gateways. When it is observed that Dore lies across the Don, only some six miles beyond the western end of the Roman Ridge, the suggestion that this latter work, at some stage in its history, formed part of Northumbria's southern boundary, becomes a hypothesis which is at least worthy of being put to the proof by the archæologist.

Before turning to consider the course of the boundary between the western edge of the Pennines and the Irish Sea, we may take note of another earthwork which is commonly known as the Grey Ditch and which consists of five stretches of ditch and bank running for some five miles from Mam Tor in north Derbyshire in an east-south-easterly direction towards Bradwell. Unlike the Roman Ridge, its ditch lies on the northern side. A recent detailed survey of this work⁵⁵ has yielded circumstantial evidence which comes very near to proof that it is of post-Roman date and has, furthermore, disclosed the existence of a series of trackways which seem to converge on one point as though to suggest a recognized passage through a barrier. Between two of the gaps runs Bathan Gate, the Roman road from Brough to Buxton, that is, a more westerly section of that same road which is overlooked by

⁵⁵ *Antiquity*, 1945, XIX, 11-19, B.H.St.J. O'Neil, *Grey Ditch, Bradwell, Derbyshire*.

the Roman Ridge. The Grey Ditch does not cut Bathan Gate but yet flanks it on either side in such a way that the road itself could easily have been cut in time of need. There can be little doubt that this road was the *raison d'être* of the Grey Ditch which lies in upland country of a kind in which defensive works would not have been required unless there had been some recognized passage through it such as a Roman road would supply. Whether or not this too represents part of the boundary between Mercia and Northumbria we cannot say, but its nearest point lies only eight miles from Dore and it seems to belong to a time when the Roman-British communications between north and south were cut, since Bathan Gate, though itself part of a cross-country route, had formerly served as a connecting link between the main eastern and western routes to the north.

It is by no means easy to determine the course which the Northumbrian boundary followed across the plain which separates the western slopes of the Pennines from the Irish Sea. The evidence indeed seems to suggest that it may have fluctuated and that it was never so clearly marked as on the east. Northumbrian influence made itself felt south of the Mersey early in the seventh century with Aethelfrith's victory at Chester between 613 and 616, but Aethelfrith himself was killed soon afterwards near the eastern end of the frontier and we should perhaps be wiser to regard his exploit rather as a successful raid into Welsh territory than as a war of conquest which resulted in the addition of any substantial lands to Northumbria. The easiest route across the Pennines from York, Edwin's capital in Deira, would be through the Aire Gap and the conquest of Elmet which seems to have lain across the entrance to the gap, certainly suggests that the English were exercising pressure in this direction during Edwin's reign. There is, however, an important passage in Eddius' *Life of Wilfrid*⁵⁶ whose implications seem to have been

⁵⁶ Ch. 17.

overlooked by writers on this topic and which suggests that, apart from sporadic raids into Welsh territory, the effective crossing of the Pennines through the Aire Gap may not have been achieved until a considerable time after Edwin's death. The passage occurs in connection with ceremonies attending the dedication of Wilfrid's new church at Ripon between 671 and 678. Standing in front of the altar, Wilfrid read out to the assembled company "a list of the lands which the kings . . . had previously, and on that very day as well, presented to him, with the agreement and over the signatures of the bishops and all the chief men, and also a list of the consecrated places in various parts which the British clergy had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation."⁵⁷ The passage continues: *et haec sunt nomina regionum: iuxta Rippel et Ingaedyne et in regione Dunutinga et Incaetlaevum in caeterisque locis*. It is not clear from this account which were the lands presented on the day of dedication and which were earlier gifts, but none of them can have been made before c. 660, the date at which the first monastery at Ripon was built. Of the places which are mentioned by name, *Rippel* is certainly the Ribble, and the identifications which have been suggested⁵⁸ for the others are Yeadon, in the west Riding not far from Otley, Dent, near the point at which the boundaries of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Westmorland meet, and Catlow in the parish of Whalley on the Lancashire side of the border with the west Riding. In passing it may be noted that Whalley itself is mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under 792 E where it is described as being in Northumbria. Setting aside the other names whose identification cannot be regarded as certain, the reference to *regiones* which lay *iuxta Rippel* suggests that a considerable part of northern Lancashire, but excluding Lancashire north-of-the-sands, passed under the control of Wilfrid at this time. The

⁵⁷ B. Colgrave's translation.

⁵⁸ Colgrave, *op. cit.* 164.

words used by Eddius leave no doubt that the gifts were very extensive and that it was from formal charters confirming the gifts that Wilfrid read out the list of places. We are not likely to be mistaken in seeing here the origin of that process whereby the Ribble became an ecclesiastical frontier separating north Lancashire which owed obedience to York, from south Lancashire which formed part of the Mercian diocese of Lichfield, a frontier which survived till the end of the middle ages and the creation of a new see at Chester by Henry VIII.⁵⁹ But the particular interest of the words used by Eddius in describing the occasion lies in their implication that the authority of at least the British church survived in the Ribble area until it yielded before an English invasion which cannot have taken place long before the dedication of the church at Ripon, that is to say, not long before 670. If this is a correct inference, we must suppose that the western boundary of Deira lay on the eastern side of the Pennines until after the middle of the seventh century. The Ribble, however, marks something more than an ecclesiastical boundary. The evidence of place-names shows that it also marks the approximate linguistic boundary between the west midland and Northumbrian dialects of Old English.⁶⁰ It may be that the lands between Ribble and Mersey fluctuated between Mercia and Northumbria according as the one or the other was dominant. Certainly Manchester is described as being in Northumbria in what seems to be a contemporary annal in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under 923 A, but there are no earlier references to Manchester in English sources, and by this date the Scandinavian invasions may have caused alterations to the boundaries of earlier times.

⁵⁹ V.C.H. *Lancaster* II, 4-5, but the view expressed there that the land between the Ribble and the Mersey did not become attached to Lichfield until the tenth century is open to question.

⁶⁰ E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire*, 228 and ff. It is not easy to reconcile Ekwall's belief, *op. cit.* 232, that Lancashire north of the Ribble was probably conquered by the Northumbrians in the sixth century with the passage quoted above from Eddius.

The evidence which we have considered suggests these conclusions. Literary sources of the late seventh and early eighth centuries contain no evidence which can be interpreted as indicating that at some earlier period of English history the Humber served to unite rather than to divide the people who lived on its opposite sides. On two of the three occasions when the name *Humbrenses*, or something similar is used, it refers to people who in fact lived north of the Humber. But even if this name was more widely used in documents which have not survived, it can never have been more than a literary convention, translating some term such as *Hymbresætan* of which there is no recorded trace. The people who lived north and south of the Humber knew themselves as *Norðanhymbre* and *Suðanhymbre* respectively. Both of these names were in use in the latter part of the seventh century and probably earlier, but only *Norðanhymbre* has survived, and it owes its survival to its adoption by Bede in his *History* after he, and others, had made unsuccessful attempts to translate it into Latin. *Suðanhymbre*, on the other hand, gave way, again largely under the influence of Bede, to *Mierce*, "the people of the Marches." The most potent of several arguments which suggest that modern writers may have been influenced by the later history of the Welsh March in assuming without question that the Mercians took their name from this March, lies in the fact that in three of the great battles of the seventh century the Welsh were fighting in alliance with the Mercians against the Northumbrians. Although allowance must be made for the lack of Mercian records of the seventh century, all the surviving evidence indicates that the border which separated the southern English from the Northumbrians was of much greater importance in the seventh century than the border between the Mercians and the Welsh. Over much of its course the Northumbrian border was marked by natural features, particularly by the Humber estuary and by the belt of marshland to the west of it. Between the marshland and

the Pennines there lay a stretch of open country which, particularly in that it was traversed from north to south by a Roman road, was a source of danger to either side. It was in this zone that the great battles between the northern and southern English were fought. There is some ground for thinking that three of them—Idle, Hatfield Chase and *Winwaed*—came to be enshrined in popular memory by their inclusion in a vernacular poem which dealt with the famous battles of early English history,⁶¹ an anticipation almost of the ballads of Otterburn and Chevy Chase. It may be that this stretch of the frontier was fortified and that the remains of its fortifications are represented by the Roman Ridge. The course which the frontier had followed through the Pennines by Dore and Whitwell was still remembered in the tenth century despite the destruction caused by the Scandinavian invasions. Bede seems to indicate that the boundary was already largely defined by the time of Aethelberht of Kent in the early seventh century, though we ought not to suppose that its course would remain unaffected by the varying fortunes of the opposing sides. On the western side of the Pennines the border was not, so far as our evidence goes, the scene of major conflicts. The Northumbrians made sporadic attacks across the Pennines early in the seventh century, but they seem not to have effected the permanent penetration of the Aire Gap until about 650-670. The evidence of both linguistic and diocesan boundaries suggests that the frontier between the Mercians and the Northumbrians west of the Pennines lay on the Ribble in the latter part of the seventh century. Only a plain statement by an early authority would enable us to say with certainty which of these two borders it was, the Welsh or the Northumbrian, which gave its name to the Mercians, but this at least we may say, that to assume that it was the Welsh is to neglect much evidence to the contrary.

⁶¹ C. E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England*, 32, referring to a suggestion advanced by R. M. Wilson.