Chapter 4

Oxfordshire, Wessex, and Mercia in the Age of Alfred the Great

Ryan Lavelle

INTRODUCTION

There was a sea-change in the nature of the Thames Valley and the definition of the Wessex-Mercian frontier after 878, and it is important to consider the Watlington Hoard and its findspot within the context of the events of this decade preceding its deposition, and the control of territory of the region in the 880s and 890s. The sense of a historical frontier landscape defined by historical memory is an important issue to consider and one which the Watlington Hoard can steer us to.

This chapter discusses the connection between the landscape and contemporaneous texts, which shed light on the significance of Watlington and relations between the West Saxon and Mercian kingdoms in the 9th century. I first present the connections of King Alfred with the Anglo-Saxon shires of Berkshire and Oxfordshire; the next section explores the sense of meaning of the Thames Valley in the 9th century, and it leads on to a consideration of the Wallingford and Watlington area within that region. The perceptions of Alfred, Ceolwulf II and political events, and how these may be echoed and memorialised in the Anglo-Saxon landscape are also reflected upon. Finally, the chapter finishes with the implications of the regional dimension for the Alfredian ‘Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’ which was emerging in the 880s.

OXFORDSHIRE, BERKSHIRE AND ALFRED

The findspot of the Watlington Hoard, at the intersection of the two Anglo-Saxon shires of Berkshire and Oxfordshire, may tell us something about the relations between the West Saxon and Mercian kingdoms at the end of the 9th century. It is likely that neither of these shires existed in anything resembling even their pre-1974 forms (let alone their current forms) when the Watlington Hoard was deposited. There are no topographical boundaries to ‘Oxfordshire’ when it first appears in the written record in the 11th century (Blair 1994: 1), and its geographical artificiality may suggest that it was organised as a shire comparatively late in the Anglo-Saxon period. Berkshire may also have been subject to reorganisation at the time but was somewhat more senior. There is an added complication in the layer of artificiality provided by the 1974 reorganisation of counties. As an example, the important places of Wantage and Wallingford (discussed below) were in the Anglo-Saxon shire of Berkshire, but now fall within Oxfordshire’s boundaries, in an area which some locals refer to as ‘Occupied North Berkshire’. In some ways the 1974 reorganisation has made the archaeology of the region a little simpler because it gave formal designation to an area of great archaeological importance in a cultural zone of high archaeological activity. Although this chapter follows current archaeological convention
in terms of referring to ‘Oxfordshire’ in terms of post-1974 county administration, it is worth stressing here the liminality of the Thames frontier for the West Saxon kingdom (Baker and Brookes 2011; 2013: 269–333).

There is some irony in considering Oxfordshire at the time of King Alfred as, despite distinctly dubious late medieval traditions of Alfred’s University of Oxford connections (Keynes 1999), the earliest reference to the shire is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s CDE versions, from over a century after the king’s death. It records a Viking force rampaging through the then-unified English kingdom of Alfred’s great-great-grandson, Æthelred II ‘the Unready’, in 1010:

and [they] burnt throughout the fens and they burnt Thetford [Norfolk] and Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] and afterwards they turned southwards into the Thames [valley] and the mounted men rode toward the ships. And afterwards they quickly then turned west into Oxfordshire, and from there into Buckinghamshire, and so along the Ouse until they reached Bedford, and so forth to Tempford [Bedfordshire].

\[
\text{bærndon geond þa fennas, bæðfords hi forþærndon þa Grantabricge, syððan wendon eft suðwerð into Temese, ridan þa gehorsedan men ongean þa scipo. syððan eft hrædlice wendon westweard on Oxenafordscire, þan on Buccingahamscrie, swa andlang Usan oð hi comon to Bedeforda, swa forð of Temesan ford [...] (ASC CDE 1010; Plummer 1892–99: 1:140; trans. adapted from Whitelock et al. 1965: 90).}
\]

As Scott Thompson Smith noted (Smith 2010), the Chronicle uses verbal formulae which are remarkably similar to charter bounds: their textual placement here suggests that notions of geography were embedded in the landscape and could be drawn upon. The movement of the Viking army is presented as rapid and confused, suggesting different elements of an army, but the text presents a strong geographical sense of place. The entry is significant here not only because it evokes the movement of hostile armies, members of which presumably deposited hoards of precious metal in the landscape (see Naylor, Chapter 9, below), but because the Chronicler of Æthelred’s reign drew on Alfred’s reign to construct his narrative. These deliberate textual echoes show that the points in the landscape continued to mean something to the contemporary audience (Lavelle 2010a; Konshuh 2014: 183). We might at least note that for our purposes the Chronicler drew on places in the landscape which would be familiar to his audience. Even if this is not prima faciae evidence of Oxfordshire’s existence, let alone its importance a hundred years before the 1010 entry in the Chronicle, it does at least show that the Thames valley and Oxfordshire were established and recognised areas in the landscape.

The area of Berkshire, now within the south-western corner of Oxfordshire, was a significant place for King Alfred, being the recorded location of his birth and where he was later depicted as displaying idealised, royal virtues during battle with the Vikings. In the late 9th-century text of Asser (the Welsh monk and biographer of Alfred later appointed to the bishopric of Sherborne) tells his audience that Alfred king of the Anglo-Saxons ‘was born at the villa regia called Wantage in that district known as Berkshire.’ (Asser, ch. 1, ed. Stevenson 1904; 1; trans. Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 66–67). Asser uses a title resonant with kingship beyond the boundaries of Wessex; Alfred is introduced explicitly as ‘King of the Anglo-Saxons’ (Angul
The moment of transition to kingship, from being a prince second-in-line to the throne, came in 871 following the battle along the line of the Ashdown hills (the Battle of Æscesdun; the Ashdown Hills are commonly referred to as the Berkshire Downs). This is an encounter recorded by Asser with an unusually high level of forensic detail (Lavelle 2010b; Lavelle 2020; Abels 2015: 50–51; for comparison Halsall 2003: 1–2). Asser notes the presence of two divisions of the Viking army drawn up at the hill and the subsequent division of the West Saxon force facing them. Unusually for Asser, who tends to emphasise Alfred’s piety, it is the presence of Æthelred in a tent receiving mass which contrasts with the young prince Alfred’s impetuous attack on one part of the Viking force before his brother had finished mass. The importance of that battle may be overplayed in the light of the extent of Asser’s evidence; it may have been only one of a number of encounters with Vikings — some big, some small — which took place during the year of late 870–71. Nevertheless, the historical sources suggest that the military encounters of 871 moved back and forth along the region of the Thames Valley and into Wessex in that year (Lavelle 2020), highlighting again the significant action taking place in the Thames Valley.

It is the rest of that decade which defines our perception of King Alfred and the West Saxon kingdom, a narrative which continues to engage modern audiences. Although for some of that period the sense of ‘Wessex stands alone’ portrayed by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides something of a smokescreen, as what must have been large payments of money were made to ‘Danish’ forces, and Mercians participated in an alliance with the West Saxons (Abels 2003; Nelson 1986: 59; for the nature of ‘Danishness’ in the 9th century, see Roffey and Lavelle 2016: 8–13). The aftermath of the Battle of Ethandun, fought in 878 somewhere near Edington (Wiltshire), famously saw a peace treaty made between Alfred and the newly-converted Viking leader Guthrum, leading to division of English territory between Wessex and part of Mercia on the one hand, and an ‘East Anglian’ kingdom of Guthrum on the other (Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 171–72). As we shall see, the reality is likely to have been far less binary and somewhat more messy, but that moment seems to have given Alfred breathing space for administrative reorganisation and indeed the development of a programme of cultural reform drawing on talent recruited from among Insular and Continental European scholars (Pratt 2007; Keynes 2015: 26–33).

**The Thames Valley and Its 9th-Century Significance**

A consideration of the Thames Valley region in the late 9th century needs to look to earlier points, to when the West Saxon dynasty, originally known as the Gewisse, determined its control of the region during the course of the 7th century. This was intrinsically linked to the 9th century by the remembrance of that past. Indeed, perhaps reflecting Bede, we should note Asser’s use of the term Gewisse in his description of the West Saxon kingdom when making reference to this region. Beyond Asser’s text, the placenames of the region provide evidence of the historical significance of the past in the landscape as the names given to barrows recall
Figure 4.1. The territory of the Gewisse in the early Anglo-Saxon period (after Blair 1994: 36).
names, in part or whole, of those of members of the early West Saxon dynasty: Cuthwine (a late 6th-century son of King Cealwin to whom he may have served as a sub-ruler) in the case of the Cuth- element in Cuttesloue and Cuddesden, and Cwichelm, with two barrows known by the name of Cwicelmeshlaw (one at Ashdown and another further north near Ardley; all now in Oxfordshire) (Blair 1994: 39; see Figure 4.1). The southern Cwicelmeshlaw is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry for 1006, and is located adjacent to the Ridgeway close to the former boundary of Oxfordshire and Berkshire — it is a Bronze Age barrow which was the meeting point of the shire of Berkshire in the late 10th century (now known as Scutchamer Knob (Oxfordshire), an alias for Cuckhamsley Knob or Hill, see Figure 4.2) (Baker and Brookes 2015: fn. 113; S 1454).

The landscape of Ashdown may be at the heart of a territory of the Gewisse which continued to be important even though West Saxon interests had been carved out further south around Winchester (Hampshire). The Cwicelmeshlaw barrows were named after Cwichelm who was, according to Bede, the West Saxon king who despatched an assassin to kill the Christian figure of Edwin (Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica II.9, ed. Colgrave and Mynors 1969: 165), and memorialised Cwichelm and his authority. The barrow makes another appearance in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s 1006 entry on the Viking army’s escapade as it travelled through Wessex to Cwicelmeshlaw — a continuation of its importance in the landscape that harked back to an earlier time and royal ancestor (Williams 2015; Parker 2018: 93–97). Cwichelm’s son, Cuthred, is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the recipient of ‘three thousand [hides] of land’ at Ashdown from his uncle Cenwalh, the founder of the Old Minster at Winchester (ASC 648; Plummer 1892–99: 28; trans. Whitelock et al. 1965: 19). That this dynastic history, perhaps reflecting the devolution of this West Saxon frontier territory to a sub-king, was seen as important enough to be recorded in the Chronicle in the 9th century, and was still significant in 1006, indicates that this was a landscape that evidently mattered to the memory of the Gewisse.

While the West Saxon dynasty seems to have had a gravitational focus on the south of the kingdom with particular interests in Winchester by the later 9th century, what may have been a northern frontier in the Thames Valley hardly paled into insignificance. Looking at the hundreds along the Ashdown hills (Figure 4.2), the Battle of Ashdown and the memory of the battlefield is linked to the easternmost arm of the hills, where one can find Nakedthorn Hundred, perhaps sharing its name and historical memory with Asser’s battlefield description of a ‘solitary thorn tree’, which Asser claimed he had seen with his own eyes (Asser, ch. 39; ed. Stevenson 1904: 30; trans. Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 79; Burne 1953; Lavelle 2020). It may have been a tenuous link by the 11th century, when Nakedthorn Hundred was recorded in the Domesday survey, but evidently some sense of historical memory had been created.

Within the Valley’s wider landscape there is further association of the West Saxon dynasty. The royal estate at Wantage was where Alfred was born, according to Asser, but it also had other important, later family links. Wantage was bequeathed by Alfred to his Mercian wife along with the estate at nearby Lambourn (now in West Berkshire) and the 878 battle site at Edington, which might be suggestive of some emotional memory associated with these places (S 1507; for Wantage and Lambourn see Lavelle 2007: 99). Another place in the landscape embedded with memory and myth is nearby Wayland’s Smithy (Oxfordshire), a Neolithic long
Figure 4.2. The hundreds of Berkshire along the Ashdown hills.
Oxfordshire, Wessex, and Mercia in the Age of Alfred the Great

barrow, associated with Weland the legendary smith, held captive in a royal court because of the fine metalwork he could produce. Barbara Yorke (Yorke 2017) has observed that Wayland’s Smithy, noted in a mid-10th-century charter bound (S 564), shows an insight into the ways in which the Alfredian translation of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* highlights the memory of the bones of Weland; the human reflection of the Christian experience has a direct link with the superhero figure of Germanic legend. An Alfredian interest in the Weland legend reminds us that the production of treasure was intrinsically linked to the status of a ruler. Asser refers to royal officers, including the great goldsmiths, working with the Alfredian court in the 9th century (Asser, ch. 91, ed. Stevenson 1904: 77; Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 101). A small, late Saxon gold ingot found at East Hendred in 2014 (PAS BERK-842965) may indicate a smithing site located at or near the royal estate of East Hendred, not too far from the mythical smith’s resting place, and perhaps comparable with the putative late 10th-century goldsmithing on the outskirts of the royal estate of Broughton (Hampshire) (Rumble 2008: 249–51).

We might also note here a link with the minster at Abingdon (Oxfordshire). Abingdon held a liminal position between Mercia and the West Saxons (Lavelle 2020). Like the community of Durham (Co. Durham) in the 12th century, the monks of Abingdon would have had to deal with political powers to their north and to their south, ensuring that they were in reasonable standing with both. Abingdon seems to have had 7th-century West Saxon origins and the house remained important to the southern dynasty despite Mercian supremacy that seems to have been implicit in Abingdon’s receipt of property for much of the period from the 7th to 9th centuries (Stenton 1913: 19–30). It is Abingdon whence the most critical historical memory of Alfred comes (before the 20th century at least); the *Historia Ecclesie Abbendonensis*, compiled in the 12th century, notes Alfred’s appropriation of that church’s land at Abingdon and equates him with Judas (Hudson 2002–07: 1:32–33 and 272–75). A document in the Abingdon cartulary noted in the *Historia* — a charter recording an exchange of land at Horn Down, East Hendred, for land at nearby Appleford (both Oxfordshire) — saw Alfred receiving unhidated land at Horn Down from his *cellararius*, a man with important connections (S 355; Whitelock 1979). That charter reveals something of Abingdon’s liminal position in that it owes as much to Mercian diplomacy as it does to West Saxon (Whitelock 1979; Lavelle 2020) but it may also relate to the abbey’s later condemnation of Alfred as Judas. If one of the estates had once been Abingdon property, as the charter’s presence in its cartulary may indicate, the low opinion of Alfred could be rooted in what may have been the estate’s cavalier treatment by a ruler who saw his familial interests in this region.

The substance of the exchange may be related to a sense of service rewarded by the provision of bookland (land granted by charter), expressed in the preface of a translation, attributed to the king, of another patristic text, the *Soliloquies* of St Augustine (Carnicelli 1969: 48; trans. Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 139). A whiff of the possible continuity of service in return for land may be seen in Domesday’s record for East Hendred, where the sheriff’s wife is said to have kennelled the king’s dogs in exchange for tenure of an estate (*Great Domesday Book* fol. 57r, ed. Morgan 1979: 1:38; see Lavelle 2014 for 2011: 38–39). There is not much of a leap from the keeper of food and drink to the keeping of royal dogs. This notion of the reward for service was a significant issue in the later 9th century.
Wallingford and Watlington in the 9th century

East of the Ashdown hills are Wallingford and Watlington, the former on the edge of the historical county of Berkshire and the latter within historical Oxfordshire. Wallingford is the key to the Thames frontier. David Roffe’s important work on tenure makes sense of the Berkshire entries in Oxfordshire Domesday, providing consideration of the links between Domesday vills and the records of houses in the town of Wallingford, which may reflect some continuity of service in the maintenance of the burh (Great Domesday Book fol. 56r, ed. Morgan 1979: B9; Roffe 2009). The key to this is the document associated with Alfredian memory known as the Burghal Hidage, which seems to go beyond shire boundaries where necessary, and perhaps reflects a flexible attitude to the administration of land for defensive purposes and a readiness to reorganise in a manner which went beyond existing boundaries if the occasion arose. I wonder if, had Berkshire not become so embedded in the historical memory before the late 9th century (perhaps even as far back as the 7th century, if the ASC 648 entry is anything to go by), we might otherwise have seen the emergence of Wallingfordshire alongside Oxfordshire by the 10th century.

A very relevant piece of evidence for the historical landscape which relates to Watlington is a Worcester charter of the 880s (probably of 887). It records that Æthelred ‘by gift of the abundant grace of the Lord dux and patricius of the Mercian people, granted with licentia and inpositione manus of Alfred, king’ (S 217) land to the bishopric of Worcester, which included eight hides at Watlington. This charter does not seem to relate in any way to the maintenance of the burh of Wallingford but this is evidence of Mercian royal territory used for purposes of the emergent (though by no means inevitable) ‘Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons’. This was a kingdom which had, from both an Alfredian and Æthelredian perspective, close connections to Worcester. The very careful language of the charter is indicative of the diplomacy which the Mercian kingdom may have found it necessary to employ, something commensurate with what Charles Insley, in a recent article on 10th-century Mercia, has noted was a negotiated position (Insley 2016). In the charter, Æthelred is the dux and patricius of the ‘Mercian people’, at once both emphasising his status but in no way overstepping his position towards one of kingship; here it is worth noting that Æthelred owes his position to God’s authority. Alfred, by contrast, is simply REX, a term which acknowledges his superiority but does not admit to any suzerainty by him over the territory of the Mercians.

There are other phrases within the Worcester charter which are diagnostic of the power relationship between Wessex and Mercia. ‘Cum licentia’ occurs in Mercian and Kentish charters, and occasional 10th-century charters relating to this Thames Valley region rather than West Saxon charters per se. Mercian influence was an important issue in 9th-century Wessex (Whitelock 1979), but the idea of ‘licentia’ seems important and an indication of the projection of the power relationship within this zone. ‘Inpositione manus’, translated by Keynes (1998: 27) as ‘sign manual’, appears to be unique in the charter corpus, but it seems to indicate the subordinate position of Æthelred in the charter. Given the ceremonial demonstration of subordination prevalent in the Carolingian world, it may not be too far-fetched to consider the reference to hands in inpositione manus in ‘feudal’ terms — as an early reference to a ceremony involving the placement of a lord’s hands around those of a subordinate.
The eight hides of land at Watlington recorded in S 217, along with six hides at Brightwell Baldwin and six men ‘and their progeny’ at Benson were said to belong to the church of Pyrton (all Oxfordshire), referred to as the Readanoran (the ‘Red Ora’) in the charter (referring to a specific type of hill until the late 10th century; Gelling and Cole 2000: 203–10); ultimately the land was intended for the church of Worcester, although it had somehow come into the hands of Archbishop Stigand by 1066 (Great Domesday Book fol. 157r, ed. Morris 1978: 15:2). That the charter refers to the ‘progeny’ of the men at Benson is an indication of an Alfredian sense of the future for the holding of the land, a phrase which echoes the peace agreement made between Alfred and Guthrum which was ‘for the living and the unborn’ (trans. Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 171; see below, this chapter). In his study of Anglo-Saxon slavery, David Pelteret observed that these men were not slaves (Pelteret 1995: 168), so perhaps it is better to consider them as tied to the land in the form of geburas, suggesting that the ‘six men’ were an equivalent of six hides of land, given that ‘hide’ was simply a term used as a synonym for household, familia. Here this was perhaps simply just a different way of referring to the conditions of the holding of the actual land, and thus a reference to the productive capacity of the land which was granted.

What’s in a name? Ceolwulf and ‘Hostage’s Back’

Consideration of the relationship between Ceolwulf II of Mercia and Alfred provides the opportunity to reassess a text which does not normally leap to mind in views of the 9th century. The words of Geoffrey Gaimar, in his Anglo-Norman vernacular Estoire des Engleis written in the 12th century, remark on those who came to see King Alfred in 878, ‘Ceolmer came to him and Chude / with the baruns of Somerset / Of Wiltshire and of Dorset / From Hampshire came Chilman / Who had summoned the nobles by ban.’ (Gaimar lines 3162–3166; ed. Short 2009: 174–77; trans. here from Lavelle 2010b: 180).

Although 12th-century sources of Anglo-Saxon history are notoriously problematic, and Gaimar’s intentions were more complex than providing historians with a reliable stock of hitherto-untapped sources (Freeman 1996), it is surely significant that these are alliterative Anglo-Saxon names, unrecorded in this context elsewhere. Gaimar made reference to a ‘chained’ copy of a chronicle which he had seen in Winchester (Campbell 2001: 15–16). This is sometimes thought to have simply been the A manuscript of the Chronicle but it may have been a version of the ‘Common Stock’ of the Chronicle used by the West Saxon royal house at the end of the 9th century. When considering these names a few years ago, I thought of them in terms of West Saxon name stock (Lavelle 2010b: 180–82). In the light that the number of examples of the Two Emperors type coins from the Watlington Hoard shines on the Ceolwulf II–Alfred relationship, a close relationship which may have been invoked by the symbolism of two rulers, I am now struck by the absence of Ceolwulf from a set of names, two of which had the element Ceol–, which could easily have included him. What if Ceolwulf and the thegns of Berkshire had originally been included among the list of the loyal supporters in a version of the Chronicle which pre-dated that seen by Gaimar? This is not altogether fanciful. Ealdorman Æthelweard is thought to have had access to a south-western version of an Old English chronicle related — but not exactly the same as — the ‘Common Stock’ annals while writing his 10th-century Latin chronicle (Barker 1967; Ashley 2007). Æthelweard reveals that the body of the ealdorman Æthelwulf who died at Reading in 871 was taken to ‘Northworthy’ (i.e. Derby, Derbyshire),
suggesting that even if he had responsibilities to Wessex he was of Mercian origin (Stenton 1913: 26–27). This is a detail typical of Æthelweard’s interests in the work and lives of his fellow ealdormen which are edited out of the ‘official’ version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Lavelle 2016). The detail of Æthelwulf’s Mercian connection, evidently seen as unwanted in a West Saxon narrative of the late 9th century, may indicate that this was a zone of joint control.

Based on a tentative dating of the Two Emperors type coin issue, Jinty Nelson suggested that this type of coin may have been a joint commemoration of Ceolwulf II’s participation in the Battle of Edington (Nelson 1986: 60). The scale of the issue of this coin type is obviously now known to be larger than it appeared in the 1980s, suggesting that it was more than a mere token of commemoration. Nonetheless, this type of coin, as well as cooperation on the production of the Cross-and-Lozenge type, is strongly suggestive of a link between Alfred and Ceolwulf (see Naylor, Chapters 5 and 6, below). If the coin design reflects that the alliance stretched to mutual military aid, Gaimar’s record may be a reading of the participants in the battle, reflecting the West Saxons’ post-879 editing-out of Ceolwulf’s name from a list that would otherwise be likely to include him. We are given a clue that the reputation of Ceolwulf was tarnished retrospectively by the time of the composition of the c.892 ‘Common Stock’ of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which placed such a negative reading on the submission of Ceolwulf to the Vikings after the departure of Burgred:

And in the same year they gave the kingdom of the Mercians to be held by Ceolwulf, a foolish king’s thegn; and he swore oaths to them and gave hostages that it should be ready for them on whatever day they wished to have it, and he would be ready, himself and all who would follow him, at the enemy’s service [7 he gearo were mid him selfum, 7 on allum þam þe him læstan woldon to þæs heres þearfe]


We can be reasonably certain that the relationship between Alfred and Ceolwulf II indicated by the jointly-issued Two Emperors type coinage around the later 870s was somewhat better than the opinion evidently expressed in the Chronicle’s entry for 874.

The difference between that ‘official’ narrative of the West Saxon kingdom and any earlier historical record is brought into relief by Æthelweard’s laconic reading of the position of Ceolwulf. Æthelweard notes that ‘[a]t that time [i.e. 874] Ceolwulf held the kingdom of the Mercians’ (Æthelweard, s.a. 874, ed. Campbell 1962: 41). Given that the record of Ceolwulf here is in the same place as the criticism of him in the ‘Common Stock’ Annals, Æthelweard’s text feels like it is a reflection of the original record of Ceolwulf’s position in Mercia, prior to it being spun for a post-878/79 West Saxon audience.

I wonder if the retelling of the narrative was also going on through the landscape. The S 217 charter may reveal this and further highlight the relations between West Saxons and Mercians in the late 9th century. Among a number of locations in the charter’s bounds which reference personal names, there are two specific points at the land at Brightwell Baldwin which merit comment: ceolulfes treowe (‘Ceolwulf’s Tree’) and Gisles Bæce (Figure 4.3). Ceolulfes treowe is a boundary marker, and Stephen Milesen and Stuart Brookes have suggested a link with a
Figure 4.3. ‘Ceolwulf’s Tree’ and ‘Hostage’s Bæce’ recorded in the bounds of the charter S 217 relating to land at Brightwell Baldwin (to the west of Watlington; see Figure 3.1, above).
historical Ceolwulf as a possible explanation (Mileson and Brookes 2014). To the east is Gisles Bæce which may be read as ‘Hostage’s Back’. Prior to the discovery of the Watlington Hoard, in a work about the theatre of hostage-giving, I noted the possibility of Gisles Bæce as one of a number of places where a formal submission of hostages might have taken place, rather like the ‘hostage mounds’ known from early Irish traditions (Lavelle 2017: 46–49). Despite my original hopes when investigating them, many of the Gisl place-names are likely to be personal names, but Gisles Bæce seems to be specifically a reference to a hostage (see Lavelle 2017: 47–49). Moreover, although bæce is used in a few charters to refer to a stream, here it is not used as such, and may be read as bæc, as in a ‘back’ or ridge. It may be identifiable in the landscape as a pronounced hill in the south-east corner of the parish (Mileson and Brookes 2014; forthcoming; for this type of hill see Gelling and Cole 2000: 144).

The connections may be speculative — indeed there are fifteen instances of the personal name ‘Ceolwulf’ in the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England corpus (PASE s.v.) and a 6th-century West Saxon king of that name (ASC 597, ed. Plummer 1892–99: 1:20; trans. Whitelock et al. 1965: 14;) — but it is too important to pass up lightly the possibility that there was at least an association with Ceolwulf II of Mercia. Here the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s 874 entry, noting that King Ceolwulf had given hostages for the holding of his kingdom is relevant to a zone where West Saxon control met Mercian control, and where Vikings had attempted to assert their own control of this landscape in the early 870s.

And although it must be stressed that this was not the Watlington Hoard’s findspot, a connection between text and landscape warrants comment. Not only is Ceolwulf II said to have given hostages to Vikings in 874 but the text of Alfred’s treaty with Guthrum refers to hostages given from one side to the other when moving between territories, so that a ‘clean back’ can be seen. Writing about the treaty, Paul Kershaw made a logical link with cleanliness and religious purity (Kershaw 2000: 54) but the ‘back’ of a pronounced hill is a detail which warrants notice here. Given that the whole relationship between Wessex and Mercia is directly linked to the control of territory at this point in the landscape, and, moreover, the territorial control of the zones delineated between Danish-held Mercia and English-held Wessex became defined around the early 880s in this region, the ‘hostage’s back’ would have had some deeper meaning.

**Towards a redefinition of the frontier of Wessex**

This is thus a landscape where royal connections may be seen in the written evidence related to it: the duty of kennelling dogs in Domesday Book may take us to Alfred’s Horn Down exchange at East Hendred, and indeed Asser’s reference to Alfred and hunting dogs (Lavelle 2020). These clues are there as a memory in the landscape — part of its story. This does not mean that this was the Ceolwulf or the place where hostages were exchanged before cross-border transactions could take place by the conditions of the Alfred-Guthrum treaty; but in the circumstances of the late 880s creation of a charter for Alfred’s man in Mercia, they could have become part of the story embedded in the landscape (cf. Mileson and Brookes 2021: 92–94). Ceolwulf became the ‘foolish king’s thegn’ only after a point where the new Wessex-linked ealdorman of the Mercians was active in the area of the Thames Valley. In 878, the West Saxon
kingdom had moved from having a Mercian ealdorman working as its man in Berkshire, to a Mercian ealdorman married to the king’s daughter Æthelflæd. Any buffer-zone provided by Mercian territory between Wessex and ‘the army that is in East Anglia’ was very narrow indeed in this region.

To that end, Wallingford (mentioned as being a key strategic point in the late 9th-century/early 10th-century Old English Orosius (ed. Godden 2016: 334–35)) may have played a role in determining the frontier of these two territories, joining them together. Here Baker and Brookes’s (2013: 325) consideration of Oxford as ‘something of a misfit’ in a network of fortifications may be instructive in highlighting its Mercian origins.

In line with Scott Thompson Smith’s reading of parts of the text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as a boundary (Smith 2010), it is worth considering that text’s link with the Alfred-Guthrum frontier established in the agreement of the two rulers. The frontier line of this treaty represents an adjustment, perhaps even the creation of a frontier in the early or mid-880s when West Saxon dominance over or possession of London became such a significant issue (Naismith 2018). London is normally considered as the defining issue in the text of the frontier but the significance of this can be seen further west: in 878 there was no need for a defined frontier between the West Saxons and the Viking army because an independent Mercian kingdom was in existence; there would simply be no point in creating a treaty boundary in 878. Later, Ceolwulf was off the scene as a political player — a figure to be relegated — so there was far more sense in constructing a new frontier. Therefore, we may have a reflection of the reconstruction of West Saxon territorial interests, perhaps in line with the ways in which the fortified northern frontier of the kingdom was developing in the late 9th century (Baker and Brookes 2011; for the Alfred-Guthrum treaty delineation see Marriott and Ashby 2020).

We might be able to see a reflection of these interests in the way in which the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’s ‘Common Stock’ was constructed, perhaps in the late 880s or early 890s. Although the Chronicle may record genuine early annals of the West Saxon kingdom, the choices of the selection of these annals show the way in which the identity of the kingdom was being constructed in the late 9th century (Yorke 1993; Konshuh 2020). Along the Thames frontier, the selection of annals may extend to reference the places that the West Saxon ancestors were considered as contesting and controlling in the 6th century (Figure 4.4). Although the traditional narrative of West Saxon history has these as conflicts with Britons (and indeed they probably were), the territorial interests with which the sites of conflict were frequently concerned, often relate to the western reaches of the Thames Valley in territory bordering and even encroaching on that of the Mercian kingdom. Indeed there is a clutch of places to the north of the Lower Thames Valley, up into what is now Oxfordshire and indeed beyond, which included the record of the ‘571’ Battle of Limbury and would have been of great importance to a late 9th-century West Saxon audience. Limbury (Bedfordshire, now incorporated into Luton) is at the very source of the River Lea, a location which is mentioned as a key boundary point in the text of the Alfred-Guthrum treaty (ASC 571, ed. Plummer 1892–99: 1:18; trans. Whitelock et al. 1965: 13; Keynes and Lapidge 1983: 171).
Figure 4.4. Sites named in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle associated with the early West Saxon dynasty (with annal year), along with other significant places and the line of the treaty dividing territory between King Alfred and Guthrum.
Thus, earlier West Saxon rulers, figures linked to the genealogy of Alfred — many of whom were recorded by both the Common Stock of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the text of Asser — are linked to a textual construction, a philosophical construction even, of a kingdom which is written in the text and in the treatment of the landscape. To that end, it is entirely fitting that in the early 880s a cache which included coins whose very design reflects the close link between Mercia and Wessex should have been deposited close to a location where the interstices of that relationship could be most visible in the landscape. It is yet more fitting that it should have been at a time when the relationship itself was going through such a fundamental transformation.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to record my thanks to the editors for inviting me to speak at the Watlington Hoard conference and for their helpful suggestions in the preparation of this chapter. I am also grateful to Stuart Brookes and Gareth Williams for their discussion of aspects of this paper, and to this volume’s anonymous referees for their comments.