

# Market and fortress in England in the reign of Offa

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## Introduction: towards the formulation of a model

It is intended in this paper to discuss in some detail a general model of a particular phase of urban development in Mercian England in the later eighth century, which has been put forward by the writer elsewhere (Haslam 1983; 1984b; 1985). This postulates that in the later eighth century, King Offa of Mercia (died 796 AD) constructed a series of relatively large public burhs (defensive enclosures), as a systematic defence of Greater Mercia against Viking sea-borne attack, which is first documented in this period. These burhs were associated with defensive bridges, and were in general placed at geographically suitable places on the main rivers in Mercia in such a way that burh and bridge blocked access up these rivers to Viking warships. It is further postulated that these burhs were both centres of civil and ecclesiastical administration (either by adoption or creation), and essential elements in a process of market formation. They were either located within already established Roman defences, or were newly built at this period; many of the latter were arguably laid out in a rectilinear or sub-rectilinear form.

As stated, this model is essentially descriptive in a simple narrative and spatial sense. As it is intended to show, however, it is also explanatory of a wide range of archaeological and morphological or landscape data in terms of both spatial organisation and function, as well as historical processes, on national, regional and local levels.

A complementary aspect of this general model relates to the development of marketing and trade systems in the eighth and ninth centuries. Dr Richard Hodges has recently argued for the development of a true regional marketing system in the Carolingian Empire in the decades around 800 AD, while denying the existence of such a system in England before the later ninth century. In Carolingia, this is seen as a 'partially commercialised system' powered by the wealth derived from long-distance trade and controlled by the state regulation of currency, and created as part of a centralised policy of the control of regional production and exchange and the enhancement of his political power and dynastic ambitions (Hodges 1981: 222; 1982: 160; Hodges and Whitehouse 1983: 103–22). This was developed from an earlier 'peripheral marketing' system based on solar central places, in which exchange was effected by the operation of periodic markets and fairs outside royal palaces and abbeys (Hodges 1982: 49, 163 and *passim*). The development of this marketing system by Charlemagne is contrasted with the

apparently less developed systems existing in 'peripheral' areas, of which Anglo-Saxon England up to the later ninth century is an example (ibid: 149) — even though Hodges allows the outside possibility that Offa may have attempted to introduce a similar 'controlled scheme of markets' (ibid: 191).

The fact that the history of the Mercian kingdom, unlike that of Carolingia, is known more from external than internal sources (Wormald 1982: 110–14) should in itself suggest caution in adopting too dismissive an attitude towards Mercian developments. Since Mercian and Carolingian developments in the later eighth century marched in parallel (Brooks 1979; Wormald 1982) — not least in the creation of an advanced system of coinage by both Offa and Charlemagne — there is some reason for at least postulating the hypothesis that Offa sought to implement a similar policy of the creation of a system of regional markets, and that this was linked both spatially and functionally with the system of newly created burhs. Such a hypothesis is expanded in what follows and tested against the historical and archaeological data.

The general model proposed here has essentially two bases in the available evidence — the documentary and the spatial. The latter includes inferences concerning early spatial patterns which can be drawn both from morphological evidence and from the limited archaeological data. This will be discussed further below.

The documentary basis of this model is limited, though specific. The relevant material has been analysed by Professor Nicholas Brooks in what must be for the medieval archaeologist and urban topographer one of the most important — and little utilised — general historical models to have been put forward in recent years. In discussing the imposition by eighth and ninth-century kings of the three common military obligations of army-service, bridge-work and fortress-work, he has concluded (1971: 72) that 'bridge and fortress were a single military unit; together they secured the river crossing for the armies of the kingdom and together they prevented the movement of enemy troops either by land or by river. This feature of English defensive organisation became of paramount importance in the English resistance to the Vikings'. By the late eighth century, the social and political organisation was certainly sufficiently well advanced for the establishment of this system. The probability that king Offa introduced these common obligations to Kent for the first time in 792 as a result of the new threat from sea-borne Viking armies (ibid: 79) implies that he was extending a system of public defence which was by that time already established in Mercia. As Brooks has inferred (ibid), 'the development of royal authority in England [in the eighth and ninth centuries] was directly connected with the successful enforcement of public works and general military obligations so that adequate defence against the Vikings was provided'. Furthermore, if Charlemagne himself was building fortifications against the Vikings on the north coast of Frankia (Sawyer 1982: 78), it is likely that Offa would have applied similar solutions to similar problems at the same time. It would be merely the lack of documentation from Mercia which has hitherto obscured the existence of this system from view (Figure 1).

Even without recourse to archaeological or other data, it is possible to construct a physical model of the character and location of these burhs and bridges by inference from the sources analysed by Brooks. As public defensive works built by and for the population as a whole, these burhs should be relatively large constructions associated



*Figure 1* Location of Mercian burhs. B — Bedford; C — Canterbury; Ca — Cambridge; G — Godmanchester; H — Hereford; Le — Leicester; Li — Lincoln; Lo — London; N — Northampton; No — Norwich; Nt — Nottingham; O — Oxford; S — Stamford; T — Tamworth; W — Winchcombe; Wo — Worcester. Land over 150m OD is stippled.

with a defensive bridge and sited at the lowest convenient bridging point of most if not all of the major rivers in Mercia. They should be royal centres, and most importantly, the central places of dependent regions by means of which the military obligations and services were organised on a territorial basis.

It is a matter of simple observation that all the early medieval shire towns in Mercia are located on major rivers and sited so as to maximise the defensive advantages of a bridge linked with a burh at that location. Given the basic premise that major administrative patterns within a continuously occupied landscape, once established, are unlikely to be subject to drastic changes, it is reasonable to take as an *a priori* assumption that these burhs were located either at, or in a significant relationship to, these shire towns in both western and eastern Mercia. This postulate will be tested against the archaeological and

morphological data below. There are, however, several aspects of later historical developments which are cast in a new light by this postulate.

First, Dr Hart has suggested that as a general pattern, the territories of later shires appear to have formed 'distinct administrative regions in the period of the Mercian supremacy' (1977: 52). He concludes that 'it seems likely that the Danes did not create new administrative boundaries when they settled the territory of the Five Boroughs; instead, each army took over the territory of a pre-existing administrative unit . . .' (ibid). The missing element in Hart's basic premise, which it is suggested is supplied by the arguments put forward in this paper, is the provision of a system of central administrative places which would be needed to underpin this scheme of territorial organisation. Although this theme cannot be developed further here, an example of a pre-Viking 'shire' can possibly be recognised in the upper Thames area, where Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire form a spatially unified grouping of territories with Oxford at its centre. This could well have been the product of Mercian reorganisation after the acquisition of this area as a result of the battle of Bensington in 779 (Stenton 1971: 209), and can be argued as having formed the territory which 'belonged to' Oxford in 911 (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, *sub anno*). The existence of other early shires has been postulated, such as one dependent upon Winchcombe (Bassett 1985: 84), and Rutland (Phythian-Adams 1977; Kilmurray 1980: 153 n. 2).

In the second place, no satisfactory explanation has been put forward to account for the choice of particular sites by the Vikings as army bases in their conquest and settlement in the later ninth century. The view has recently been put forward by Dr Pauline Stafford (1985: 111, 114) that those Viking army bases which are documented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in the early tenth century represent no more than a 'regrouping' of the armies on new sites around or just before 910, against the advances of Edward the Elder and Aethelflaed. However, the ability of Vikings to build new bases when threatened — e.g. at Tempsford in 917 — does not demonstrate, as Stafford has argued (ibid: 114), that every other Viking fortified site was also early tenth century and no earlier. These places may indeed, as she suggests, be secondary to the primary camps established at such places as Torksey and Repton (in 872 and 873 respectively); but the archaeological and topographical data indicating the development of distinctive Viking trading places at several of the major 'secondary' sites in the later ninth century (Williams 1984: 133; Haslam 1985: 25–30) is more in accord with the hypothesis that they became permanent bases very soon after the phase of settlement and political consolidation in the later 870s. As Brooks has already pointed out (1979: 9–11), these places were royal and administrative centres, and were chosen by the Viking armies 'precisely because they already had defences'. If they were already fortified by this time, the head places (albeit possibly defunct by the mid-ninth century) of dependent military regions, this would explain both their choice of site and the apparent ease with which the Viking political domination followed from military conquest. It can be argued that they merely took over an existing system which through disuse and/or political weakness no longer served the purpose for which it was designed.

**The burhs — some data**

It is intended in this section to test the hypothesis of the existence of this series of burhs against some of the archaeological and morphological data, and to formulate an overall model from both the fits and misfits thrown up by this exercise, despite the dangers of becoming trapped within circular arguments as a result of the necessity of selecting the significant attributes. These burhs are shown in Figures 2 and 3 and listed with these attributes in the following table.

*Table 1*

<i>Town</i>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	L	M
Bedford	—	X	X	O	X	—	X	—	X	—	X	X
Cambridge	X		X	O	X	—	X	O	X	X <sup>2</sup>	X	X
Godmanchester	X		?X	O	X	—	X	—	X <sup>1</sup>	X <sup>1</sup>	X <sup>1</sup>	X <sup>1</sup>
Hereford	—	X	X	O	X	—	X	X	—	—	X	X
Leicester	X		X	O	—	—	X	—	X	—	X	?X
Lincoln	X		X	O	—	X	—	—	X	X	X	—
London	X		X	X	X	X	X	—	X	X	X	X
Nottingham	—		?X	O	X	—	X	X	X	?X	X	X
Northampton	—	X	X	X	X	—	X	—	X	X	X	X
Oxford	—		X	O	X	—	—	XO	—	—	X	X
Stamford	—	X	?X	O	X	—	?X	—	X	?X	?X	X
Tamworth	—		?X	X	—	—	—	X	—	—	?X	X
Winchcombe	—	X	X	X	—	—	—	X	—	—	X	?X
Worcester	X		X	O	X	—	—	—	—	—	X	X
(Canterbury	X		X	X	—	X	X	X	—	—	?X	—
Norwich)	—	X	?X	O	X	X	X	—	—	X <sup>3</sup>	X	X

1. Viking site moved to Huntingdon.
2. St Clement's parish to S. of bridge (cf. Haslam 1984b).
3. In St Clement's parish to N. of bridge.

*Significant attributes*

- A — Roman fortified town.  
 B — Focus of pre-Roman/Roman/early Saxon settlement, or early central place (where not a Roman town).  
 C — Early ecclesiastical centre (mother church, pre-Norman cathedral see and/or early monastic establishment).  
 D — Known royal centre: X — site of known royal palace (documentary or archaeological evidence); O — inferred from royal status at Domesday or earlier.  
 E — Sited to command defensible bridging point.  
 F — Site of middle Saxon *wic*.  
 G — Archaeological evidence for early and/or middle Saxon (pre-late ninth century) occupation.  
 H — Archaeological or other evidence for: X) middle Saxon defences; O) middle Saxon or pre-Danish bridge/causeway.  
 J — Viking army base in late ninth/early tenth centuries.  
 K — Viking trading settlement or centre (archaeological evidence or topographical inference).  
 L — Head place of early medieval region or shire.  
 M — Site of burh of Alfred, Aethelflaed or Edward the Elder, early tenth century (documentary, topographical and/or archaeological evidence).

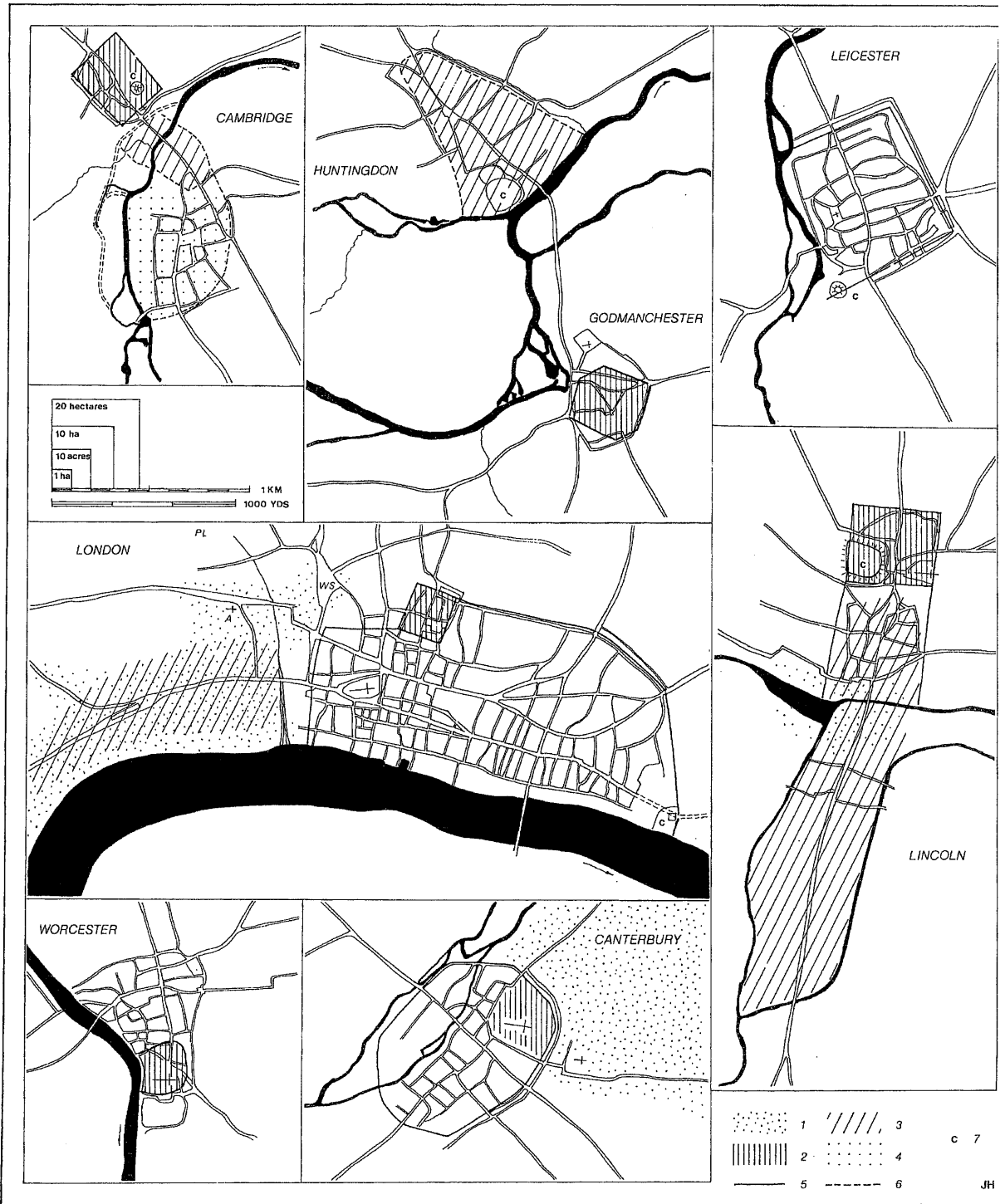
These places fall into two categories: a) re-used Roman sites, and b) new sites, developed as fortresses arguably for the first time as part of the postulated system of burhs in the late eighth century.

A. *Burhs on Roman sites (Cambridge, Godmanchester, Leicester, Lincoln, London, Worcester, ?Canterbury). (Fig. 2.)*

It is probable that the stone defences of these Roman towns (Worcester excepted) would have survived relatively intact into the middle Saxon period, forming ready-made enclosures which would have been utilised in any subsequent process of burh-formation. The survival of Roman bridges into the Saxon period has been postulated at Worcester (Carver 1980: 2, 20–21), London (Tatton-Brown 1986: 23), and with an associated causeway seems likely at Godmanchester/Huntingdon (Green 1977: 9). One existed at Cambridge in 875 (Lobel 1974: 3; Haslam 1984b: 13), though this is likely to have been a post-Roman bridge near to but not on the Roman alignment.

Though there is some archaeological evidence for occupation at all these places in the middle Saxon period, this is insufficiently precise for any inferences to be drawn of either the use or the non-use of the Roman enclosures as burhs in the eighth century. However, some such inferences can be drawn for their use as fortified central administrative places in or before the mid-ninth century by their choice as central army bases by the Vikings in the 870s (see above). The initial use of Godmanchester as a Viking army base, and therefore as an earlier administrative centre, can for instance be inferred from the secondary development of Huntingdon on the opposite bank as a fortified centre — from its size (Figure 2) an urban centre of some importance — before its capture by Edward the Elder in 917 (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle sub anno*). Similar inferences can be made in the case of Cambridge (Haslam 1984b), Lincoln, Leicester and probably London, in the same way that the existence of pre-Viking defended enclosures can be inferred from the presence of the Viking armies at the non-Roman sites discussed below. At Worcester, however, it is not yet possible to define a complete pre-medieval defensive circuit from the scrappy and ambiguous archaeological and topographical data (Carver 1980: 1–5).

It is possible that the smaller places such as Godmanchester, Cambridge and Lincoln (upper Colonia) would have been of a sufficiently manageable size for their defences to have been manned by a Mercian force. The defensive arrangements at Leicester, altogether of a larger size, are however uncertain. The primary focus of Mercian activity seems likely to have been the area in the highest part of the town, which included the Roman Forum, to which the principal post-Roman streets became directed, near which was probably situated the seventh-century cathedral (St Nicholas's church — Martin 1970: 28; Mellor 1976: 12), and which probably acted, as at Canterbury, as the earliest post-Roman secular and royal centre and market area (Everitt 1970: 41; Brooks 1984: 24–5). It is not inconceivable that this area could have been given its own defences inside the Roman walls. The detailed medieval street plan (Figure 2) however, exhibits analogies with that of for instance early tenth-century Gloucester (Heighway 1984: 366–68). At Canterbury, Brooks' suggestion (1978: 495) that the discrete area in the eastern corner around the Cathedral, defined by *burhstreate*, was the middle Saxon burh



*Figure 2* Burhs on Roman sites. 1: approximate area of middle Saxon emporium or *wic*. 2: Mercian burh of late 8th century (in most cases reutilised and redefended in later periods). 3: New Danish burh or approximate area of occupation, late 9th century. 4: New burh of early 10th century. 5: Roman defences. 6: Pre-Conquest defences. 7: Norman castle. (London PL = Portpool; WS = West Smithfield Market; A = St Andrew's Holborn church).

(but later discounted by him — 1984: 26) could perhaps be revived in the light of the overall hypothesis advanced in this paper.

A similar problem of size is shown by London, whose intra-mural area shows little sign of development before the later ninth century (Dyson and Schofield 1984: 294–5, 309). The middle Saxon *wic* known from historical sources is now recognised as having been situated in the Strand and Aldwych area to the west of the Roman walls (Biddle 1984; Vince 1984; Whytehead 1985). There are, however, reasons for suggesting that the Roman fort at Cripplegate was utilised as Offa's burh (Figure 2). Its eastern gate formed the nucleus of the pre-Conquest royal palace of Aldermanbury (Schofield and Dyson 1980: 42; Dyson and Schofield 1984: 306–8); and the church of St Alban Wood Street, which possibly served as its chapel (Grimes 1968: 294), has been argued as being a foundation of Offa (*ibid*: 204–9). Furthermore, it is not too dissimilar in size to some of the other suggested burhs within Roman fortifications (see Figure 2). The walls of the fort are likely to have survived into the Saxon period, as the near survival of the Roman alignment of its main streets suggests (*ibid*: 29, 39, 204). However, the post-Roman blocking of the west gate (*ibid*: 32), the use of the east gate as the royal palace, and the siting of St Alban's church, all point to the use of the main N-S street as the primary element in its layout. Immediately to the south was the folkmoot and the bishop's seat at St Paul's (Biddle and Hudson 1973; Tatton-Brown 1986). To the west lies Smithfield market, which can be inferred from its location at the terminus of an important primary (but non-Roman) routeway system from the north (Grimes 1968: 43–45 and fig. 8) to have been an early feature. This may well have been a planned market area created, conceivably by Offa, as a means whereby trading could be regulated and tolls collected by the king. The suggested burh, possibly the precursor (or even, by the late eighth century, the successor) of the *ealdormannes burh* (Biddle and Hudson 1973: 20), the seat of civic administration, is likely to have functioned as a royal enclave, one element in an extended urban area whose principal functional nodes would have included the ecclesiastical enclave around St Paul's, an early minster church at St Andrew's Holborn, the folkmoot, the undefended trading emporium outside the Roman defences to the west and southwest, possibly the controlled animal market at Smithfield, as well as the town fields at Portpool, immediately north of St Andrew's church.

*B. Burhs on non-Roman sites — Bedford, Hereford, Nottingham, Northampton, Oxford, Stamford, Tamworth, Winchcombe, ?Norwich. (Fig. 3.)*

These places form perhaps a more significant group, in that their existence as fortified sites, and the similarities in their size and geographical location, require a unified explanation. The primary defended enceintes of the majority, in most cases reasonably well established by topographical inference and/or excavation, were rectilinear or sub-rectilinear in form. Those at Bedford, Hereford, Northampton and Oxford were of similar dimensions, although Nottingham and probably Stamford and Winchcombe were smaller. Tamworth, an early and important royal site, was less regular in shape, and may therefore have belonged to an earlier phase of fortification (see below). The defences of several of these places have been established archaeologically as being of middle Saxon origin; these include Hereford (Shoemith 1982: 77), Nottingham (Young 1982), Oxford

(Hassall 1971: 3), Tamworth (Rahtz 1981) and Winchcombe (ex inf. S. Bassett). Those at Hereford have indeed been suggested by both Shoesmith (*ibid*) and Lobel (1969: 2) as belonging to the time of Offa. The earliest defences of the others have not been examined archaeologically. The possible burh at Norwich, suggested tentatively here as forming part of this system, probably occupied the area of the later cathedral precincts, with the market area of Tombland being extra-mural to the west gate. All this evidence could be examined in greater detail, but space permits the discussion of only two important cases where some reinterpretation is necessary.

### *Northampton*

The archaeological evidence is familiar through several reports and papers by John Williams (e.g. 1982; 1984), who has established that the town is the last in a series of significant nodes in a preferred settlement area of some 3 millennia duration. It was the site of an important middle Saxon royal palace and minster church, of extensive middle Saxon settlement, and of a Viking-period urban community which grew considerably in the tenth century. Less satisfactory (though widely accepted by later commentators — e.g. Williams 1982: 28, 39) is the earlier interpretation of the topography of the town by Lee (1953), who has argued for the replacement of an earlier southern bridge and road by one further east leading to the market area outside the eastern gate in the eleventh century. It can, in the writer's view, be more plausibly argued that the site of the present southern bridge was the original, and that this was a primary defensive feature belonging to the Mercian system postulated above. There is no evidence to show that the burh with which both bridges were associated lay anywhere else than on the spur of land around the early royal palace and minster in the area traditionally ascribed to it (Lee 1953: 169–71).

This reassessment has two important implications: first, the original burh is not to be seen as being laid out on a rectilinear module, but to have had a single E-W spinal street, adjacent to which were sited the royal palace and early mother church; second, the primary streets from all directions originally met (as they do in modified form today) not at the centre of the burh itself, but at the extra-mural market area around All Saints' church. The significance of the inference of the primacy of this area will be brought out below.

### *Stamford*

The question of the early development of Stamford is complex, and has been subject to detailed interpretation and reinterpretation. The RCHM have suggested the existence of a 'Danish' burh on the north bank, the successor of a pre-Danish settlement which fitted into the settlement pattern of the area (1977: xxxvi–xxxviii). Kilmurray (1980: 144–7) has also developed the theme of the Viking origin of Stamford. Christine Mahany and others have described some detailed excavated evidence of ninth-century occupation both on the site of the castle (well outside the defended area) and on a number of sites on the eastern side of the so-called Danish burh (Mahany, Burchard and Simpson 1982), and of pre-Conquest defences to the east of St George's Street (Mahany 1978: 10). An extensive iron-working area with underlying occupation of the ninth century, both phases of which are earlier than the High Street, has been taken as indicating a secondary

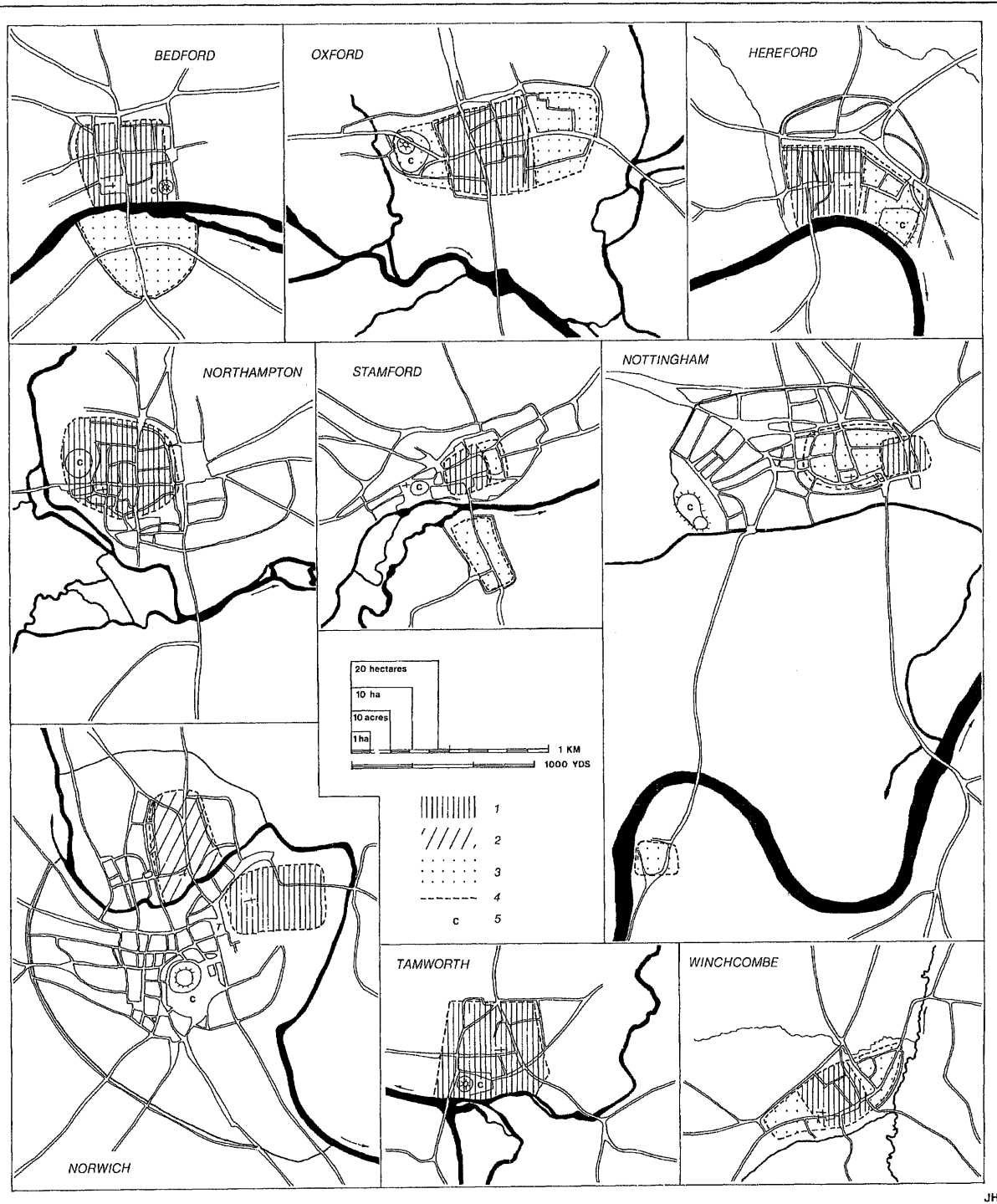


Figure 3 Burhs on non-Roman sites. 1: Mercian burh of late 8th century (reutilised and redefended in later periods). 2: New Danish burh or approximate area of occupation, late 9th century. 3: New burh of early 10th century. 4: Pre-Conquest defences. 5: Norman castle. (Norwich: T = Tombland).

origin for the street system as a whole, and therefore of the burh. It is suggested, however, that this need not indicate the non-existence of a defensive burh (or even other streets) on the north bank earlier than the tenth or early eleventh century, as Mahany assumes. The existence of a burh before 918 AD is explicitly mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (*s.a.* 918). The published evidence for the suggested ninth to early tenth-century date of the eastern defences is brief but equivocal; although it may well be that the palisade and bank are early tenth century in date, this does not rule out the presence of earlier defences along a different line. Furthermore, the road approaching the burh from the east is not aligned with the High Street, from which it could be inferred that the latter could equally well be a secondary element within a primary and possibly smaller defensive enclosure (see Figure 3).

Both the archaeological and topographical evidence is consistent with the following alternative reconstruction of the stages of Stamford's early development: i) — A primary 'urban' or 'proto-urban' settlement (middle Saxon) and a perhaps later royal and ecclesiastical presence around the castle and market area, which was a focus of roads from all directions (see Kilmurray 1980: 147 Fig. 30); ii) — the addition of a new defensive enclosure, built on a spur on the northern bank, associated with a new defensive bridge (arguably late eighth century), with an open 'market' area to its west; iii) — the use of this burh by the Danes as a defended army base, with subsequent occupation and possible 'urban' and industrial development; iv) — the addition to this burh-bridge unit of a new burh built by Edward the Elder on the south side of the river (918); v) — the continuing development of the commercial nucleus around the market area, and the layout of the 'urban' street pattern within the former defended nucleus (tenth and eleventh centuries).

### **Analysis and synthesis**

The paucity of archaeological evidence, and the uncertainty involved in drawing time-related inferences from morphological data alone, make the general inference of common patterns and, more importantly, synchronous processes, somewhat tentative. It is suggested however that this group of places should be regarded as a polythetic group (Clarke 1968: 37–8, 189–90 and *passim*), defined as one in which 'each entity [in this instance a place] possesses a large number of attributes of the group, each attribute is shared by large numbers of entities, and no single attribute is both sufficient and necessary to the group membership' (*ibid*: 37–8). It is important to stress the principle established by this that neither the absence nor the presence of evidence relating to single significant attributes from one place alone can justify its exclusion from (or even its inclusion within) the group as a whole.

There are perhaps two significant interrelated groups of morphological features which most of these sites have in common. First, they show evidence of the association of a defended enceinte — in a significant number of cases shown archaeologically to be of middle Saxon origin — with a river crossing which can only have been effected with a bridge (in some cases with a built causeway over low ground). The only exception is perhaps the inland site at Winchcombe. In a number of cases it can be inferred that a

bridge associated closely with a burh replaced an earlier 'natural' crossing nearby (e.g. Hereford and Stamford). At Oxford the associated causeway has been dated archaeologically to the late eighth century (Durham 1977: 178–79), the very time when the postulated burh system was formed by Offa.

Second, it is clear that in a number of sites the primary nodes in the urban layout, which are shown for instance as natural foci of approach roads or by archaeological evidence, were extra-mural to the postulated defended enceintes. This is particularly noticeable at Bedford, Canterbury, Cambridge, Godmanchester, Hereford, Lincoln (the *wic* at Wigford), London (both the *wic* on the Strand and Smithfield), Northampton, Norwich, Nottingham and Stamford; many of which have large extra-mural market areas (amongst which should be included Smithfield at London). This pattern can for instance be inferred from the archaeological data in the case of Godmanchester, where middle Saxon material is concentrated in an area around the outside of the south-east gate (Green 1977: 24, 26). The existence of a possible pre-Viking market area to the north of Roman and Mercian Cambridge has also been put forward by the writer (1984b). At Nottingham, the existence of an early routeway approaching from the south to cross the Trent at Wilford (Figure 3), the site also of the suggested Mercian bridge, which leads towards a large extra-mural market area, has also been argued elsewhere by the writer (forthcoming a.). This evidence is in some cases combined with the positive archaeological evidence for the paucity or even lack of middle Saxon settlement within the defended enceinte (e.g. at London, Oxford and Stamford). This is a feature which is more apparent in the general pattern than the singular instance — excepting perhaps the case of London itself. If the perception of this pattern is valid, it requires an explanation.

It is generally assumed as an unquestioned paradigm that the formation of a large public burh in late Saxon England also involved the creation of a defended space whose intra-mural area was laid out with planned streets, markets and urban properties or *hagae* to form what was essentially a new urban foundation. In the burhs of Alfred in the late ninth century, this appears to have been the means by which the defences were maintained and garrisoned (Biddle 1976: 125; Brooks 1979: 18–20). This paradigm has arisen from the model first put forward by Biddle and Hill in 1971, which argued for the dual military and commercial origin of the late Saxon burh, and which has gained wide acceptance largely through its ability to explain a considerable range of archaeological and morphological data in functional terms. Important though it is in any consideration of late Saxon Wessex, this model has so coloured the basic assumptions of other writers on Saxon towns in Mercia (for instance those on London, Northampton, Oxford, Stamford and Tamworth discussed above) that the lack in the archaeological record of such distinctively 'urban' features — in particular a regularly planned street system — within the area of the defences before the late ninth century has been almost universally taken as implying the lack of urban or burghal status for a particular place (e.g. Williams 1982: 20; Stafford 1985: 46–7).

It is suggested here, however, that the data discussed above can be rather better interpreted by an alternative model: that in the suggested late eighth-century burhs, the intra-mural space was not necessarily the most important locus for settlement, but that the defended area was but one element in a more loosely defined settlement pattern whose principal focus, in terms of human movement and activity, and perhaps even

settlement, was probably extra-mural. The intra-mural area is likely to have been given over to specialised activities associated with centralised administrative and/or ecclesiastical functions, and/or as a refuge. The similarities between this pattern and the spatial and functional organisation of continental towns of the eighth and ninth centuries such as Hamburg (Lobbedy 1977: 130–4) are highly significant, though cannot be discussed further here.

On the interpretation following from this model, the close organisation of internal spaces by means of newly-laid out streets and properties in the 'typical' Wessex pattern should not be expected, although they might have been present in embryonic form. The apparently near-rectangular layout of the defences which can be inferred in the cases of several of the burhs of non-Roman origin (e.g. Bedford, Hereford, and Oxford) need not imply the existence of any corresponding regularity in internal layout. Indeed, the one internal feature common to all these places appears to have been a *single* central spinal street (or in Tamworth a double street) forming the physical and functional link between the bridge, the burh and the extra-mural market area. In Bedford, Hereford and Oxford, this was the N-S street; in Northampton, it was the E-W street (the main N-S street linking the southern bridge and the extra-mural market area); at Norwich also the E-W street, with the N-S street linking the extra-mural market area (Tombland) and the bridge; and at Tamworth a pair of streets linking the north gate with the two bridges to the SE and SW of the defences. All other streets within these places are likely to be secondary, as has been demonstrated archaeologically for instance in Oxford and Northampton. It is perhaps not insignificant that this pattern also forms the basis of the presumed Alfredian street patterns of London and Winchester and other burhs in Wessex, as well as many other late ninth and early tenth-century burhs in both Mercia and southern England (e.g. Haslam 1984a; forthcoming b.), very few (if any) of which exhibit mirror-image rectilinearity. This module can also be recognised in the Saxon layout of some of the Roman towns described above (e.g. Cambridge, Godmanchester and London/Cripplegate fort).

It is unfortunately not possible from the archaeological evidence alone to determine either the nature or date of the extra-mural activity in these places, and therefore to validate or invalidate the model. This is at least partly due to the general limitation of excavation to intra-mural areas within Anglo-Saxon towns. However, the prevalence of large extra-mural market areas (often associated with churches) in these places can be interpreted on this model as primary features in both functional and processual terms. The same model, and its morphological and functional attributes, is discussed by the writer elsewhere (Haslam, forthcoming b.) in relation to burhs of early tenth century origin in both Wessex and Mercia.

The hypothesis of the existence of this burh system can be viewed in the light of a more general model of the development of marketing and trading in the late eighth century which explains much of this data in functional and processual terms. The late eighth century saw the development by king Offa of a more complex socio-political system than had hitherto been seen in Anglo-Saxon England, which may well have had its roots in his ambitions for political equality with Charlemagne. Some of the overt signs of this process of state formation — for such it appears to be — include the building of Offa's dyke; the expansionist policies of Mercia in relation to neighbouring kingdoms (The Hwicce, East

Anglia, Kent and Wessex); the implementation of a policy of ecclesiastical reform, in particular the move towards ecclesiastical autonomy in the creation of the independent see of Lichfield; the close political and trading links with Carolingia; and last, but certainly not least, the institution of a centralised system of coinage. Brooks for instance has pointed out the connection between the level of state-formation and the requirements for defence at this period (1971: 82–84); and Hodges has similarly pointed out the connection between an increase in central authority and ‘the market which was integral to its operation’ (1982: 192).

It is suggested that the best explanation for these diverse phenomena is a model whose main premise is the existence of causal and functional connections between them. This overall model would therefore represent the burhs as resulting from the implementation of a dual policy of market formation and of defence, both aspects integral to the process of state-formation instigated (or perhaps developed) under Offa. First, they can be seen, with Offa’s Dyke, as part of a national scheme of defence, involving the provision of *volksburgen* against both Vikings and Welsh. It is also suggested that with this scheme went the rearrangement of the ancient tribal units into shires, which were the means by which defence was organised on a territorial basis. They would also have provided security for both new or existing ecclesiastical structures (urban minsters and/or episcopal *sedes*) and royal palaces and/or the houses of royal reeves. The central ecclesiastical role of a number of these places is emphasised by the likelihood that new minsters or subminsters were created in them by Offa himself. This has been argued by the writer in the two cases of Bedford and Cambridge (Haslam 1986; 1984b), and is possible at for instance Oxford, Stamford and London. Already established minsters at other places were also probably enriched or reendowed by Offa, at for instance Hereford (Whitehead 1980: 3) and Winchcombe (Bassett 1985: 85). It can, however, be inferred from the absence of an organised intra-mural layout which can be demonstrated archaeologically in a number of places (e.g. London, Northampton and Oxford), and the likely concentration of activity outside the walls, that the defences were not systematically garrisoned, as was the case with the later burhs of Wessex (Brooks 1979: 18–20).

Second, they would have served as instruments by which new markets (probably extra-mural to the burh gate) could have been both fostered and controlled — through royal protection by means of permanently installed royal reeves, the provision of secure defence in times of emergency, and through the production of a coinage which could facilitate both the collection of tolls and taxes at the bridge or gate, as well as the mechanisms of exchange and trade itself. The development of nearly all these places at or very near sites which had been significant central locations since the Roman or pre-Roman periods implies that before the later eighth century phase of burh-formation they would have acted either as gateway communities (Hodges 1982: 24–25) or as emporia, in which incipient regional market functions had possibly been developing for some time. This is in keeping with the idea that the creation of markets and coinage was to capture rather than create the wealth of the land (e.g. Astill 1985: 221). This idea also accords with Astill’s suggestion (*ibid.*: 228) that a number of inland ports in northern Europe placed in positions similar to the Mercian sites discussed above — at important river crossings and at geographical and political boundaries — acted as ‘a second tier of trading sites for the interior regions’.

This model can be developed further in the light of the discussion in Hodges' useful overview of the subject (1981). He has suggested that the middle of the ninth century marks the division between the period of redistributive economies of central systems focused on emporia and the period of those regional economies focused on central markets (*ibid*: 228). The market burhs of late eighth-century Mercia, however, perhaps represent an intermediate stage in this process, though their development was it seems interrupted by the political crises in both Mercia and Carolingia, and the consequent economic collapse, from the 830s onwards. In this stage the concept of the emporium — and doubtless also the trading function of the emporia themselves (*vide* Hamwic and London) — was adapted to serve the needs of the exchange of more basic low-value agricultural surpluses on a local and regional level. As Hodges points out himself (*ibid*), this mirrors processes occurring in Carolingia at the same time. This process is perhaps reflected morphologically in those places pointed out above where primary routeways meet at large extra-mural market areas. Even though it was perhaps not so obviously accompanied by the agricultural and industrial specialisation observable in the archaeological data from Carolingia, it possibly provides the explanation for both the setting up and the demise of the iron-smelting industry at Ramsbury, Wiltshire, in the late eighth to early ninth century (Haslam 1980), which was possibly a direct consequence of this newly stimulated economic activity and its subsequent collapse. One answer, therefore, to Hodges' question as to why trading activity around the North Sea should have peaked in the later eighth to early ninth centuries (1981: 216) could be that this was generated at least in part by the greater accessibility to the wealth of the rural hinterland of Mercia (in the form of probably wheat and wool and/or wool products, as well as iron) made possible by these new defended markets.

The likely dates for the institution of this scheme for defence and market formation are a matter for debate. Since the reservation of the three common obligations is first mentioned in Mercian charters in the mid-eighth century (Brooks 1971: 76–7), the defences of the early royal site at Tamworth in the Mercian heartland may well belong to this time. The full development of the system is however unlikely to have been established before the battle of Bensington in 779, when Offa's kingdom was extended to include the Thames valley and the future site of Oxford (Stenton 1971: 209). By 792 the scheme of defence (by inference already well established in Mercia) was being (or had been) extended to Kent (Brooks 1971: 79), which had already passed to Offa's control in 785 (Brooks 1984: 113). A date for the implementation of Offa's burghal and market policy in the 780s would therefore best fit with these and other historical circumstances. It remains to be seen whether this was the cause or the consequence of similar developments in the Carolingian empire.

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## **Abstract**

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### **Market and fortress in England in the reign of Offa**

This paper puts forward a dual hypothesis of the formation of a system of public fortifications or burhs in Mercian England by King Offa in the later 8th century, with which were associated a series of new 'urban' markets. These defended enclosures, each linked with a defended bridge, formed a systematic defence of the kingdom by preventing penetration up the major rivers by Viking warships. It is argued that the associated markets were a development from the royally created and controlled emporia or *wics*, and were formed in response to the general increase over Northern Europe of local, regional and international trading in the 8th century. Both burh and market systems can be seen as essential aspects of a wider episode of state formation by King Offa, which parallels developments in Carolingia which are archaeologically and historically rather better evidenced.