

The Hegemony of Offa of Mercia 750-796 A.D.

750-52 To tighten his rule in Northumbria, King Eadberht imprisons rivals and rebuilds his army. The death of King Teudebur of Strathclyde affords an opportunity to take the district of Kyle from King Dumnagal, son of Teudebur, and drive the British back to Dumbarton.

752-57 In the south, King Cuthred of Wessex finally feels himself strong enough to defy King Aethelbald of Mercia. They meet in battle at Burford in the Cotswolds, where Cuthred wins a hard victory and re-occupies the Berkshire Downs. But Cuthred's death four years later, followed by a dynastic struggle, will again weaken Wessex' hand. Only because Aethelbald too dies in a coup does Mercia not pounce.

756 Eadberht of Northumbria strikes a bargain of convenience with King Angus I of the Picts to attack Strathclyde. They pen up Dumnagal at Dumbarton and take the place by storm.

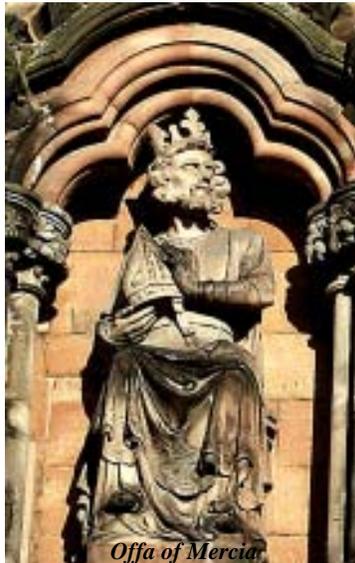
756-59 However, Eadberht's preoccupation with conquest has left his kingdom vulnerable to British raids from the west. When he hastens down to Newburgh-upon-Tyne to confront the enemy, he is surprised and badly defeated. He subsequently abdicates in favor of his son Oswulf and retires to a monastery at York. However, Oswulf is soon murdered at the command of Aethelwald Moll, a Deiran noble, who rules Northumbria and suppresses periodic uprisings of other claimants to the throne.

760 King Offa of Mercia, son of Aethelbald's cousin, strikes west across the Severn River against King Nowy Hen of Brycheiniog, both to suppress British raids on his frontier and to prevent the Britons from making alliance with Wessex. He defeats the enemy at Hereford but cannot advance any further.

762-72 King Aethelbert II of Kent dies. When the kingdom is split between his nephew Eadberht II in the west and Sigered and Eanmund, nobles of lesser lineage, in the east, a period of civil strife follows. Offa of Mercia suddenly sweeps in with an army to place Eadberht's cousin Heaberht on the throne as a Mercian puppet. However Heaberht's brother Ecgberht II soon claims a share of the power and survives several years under Offa's. Meanwhile, Offa moves on to occupy neighboring

Sussex. Eventually, he extends his control southward toward the English Channel.

765-74 Northumbrian nobles rebel against the repressive rule of Aethelwald Moll and force him to enter a monastery. The throne is taken by Ealchred, a distant cousin of Oswulf's, who soon marries Oswulf's sister Osgifu and looks abroad to northern Europe for potential allies, including King Charlemagne of the Franks, to balance the growing might of Mercia. But Ealchred upsets many churchmen with his dictates. Forced to flee from York, he takes refuge in Bamburgh. Besieged then by the supporters of Aethelred I, young son of the late King Aethelwald Moll, he sails into exile with the Picts. Aethelred and his successors and their rivals struggle to control a fractured kingdom.



Offa of Mercia

772-79 Ousted by Offa from his throne, Ecgberht II of Kent bides his time before rising up in rebellion and defeating a Mercian army at Otford. For three more years he rules the kingdom before Offa puts an end to an independent Kent, then takes London and begins to enhance the city's importance as a trading center and royal residence.

779 King Cynewulf of Wessex thinks he sees an opportunity to strike at the heart of Mercia while Offa is pre-occupied with Wessex. But Offa reacts quickly to the invasion and smashes Cynewulf's forces at Bensington. He then turns west to invade again the Berkshire Downs. With no other powerful force opposing him in Britain, he styles himself King of All England.

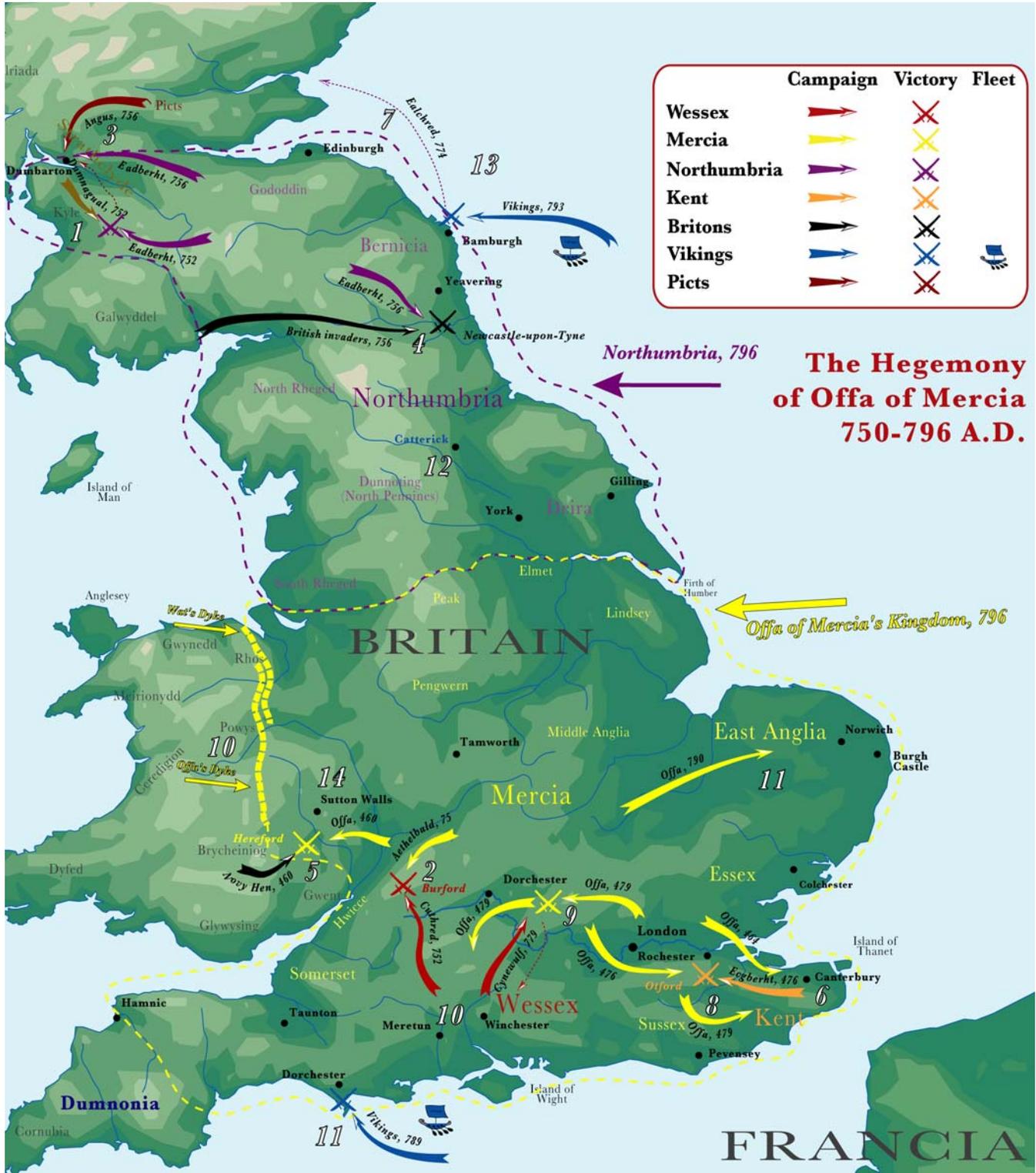
784 Offa now orders construction of a second defensive barrier on his western border with British lands. Together with the earlier Wat's Dyke, Offa's Dyke will form a more permanent boundary between England and what comes to be called Wales.

786-87 The murder at Meretun of Cynewulf of Wessex by Cyneheard, brother of the late King Sigeberht, and then the execution of Cyneheard by Wessex nobles, opens the door for Offa to place Beorhtric, soon to be his son-in-law, on the throne as sub-king. He forces Egbert, son of Ealmund (who as husband of a sister of the late King Ecgbert II briefly tried and failed to revive Kentish independence), into exile with King

Charlemagne of the Franks. Offa then strengthen's Mercian control of by southern England winning Papal approval to elevate Bishop Hygeberht to status as Archbishop of Mercia, a diocese stretching to Essex and the North Sea, and having Hygeberht crown his son Ecgfrith as co-King of Mercia. The

Archbishop of Canterbury Jaenberht scowls at this Mercian challenge to his pre-eminence.

789 Suddenly, 150 Viking raiders in three ships from across the North Sea land on the southern coast of Wessex at Port-



land and plunder the surrounding countryside. They disappear as quickly as they come, but Offa begins to establish coastal strong points.

790-92 King Aethelberht of East Anglia is powerless to prevent King Offa of Mercia from invading and occupying his kingdom. He does continue to assert his sovereignty verbally in the hope that Northumbria, still in chaotic condition, will revive sufficiently to serve as a counterweight to Mercian power. However, King Aethelred I of Northumbria agrees to marry Aelflaed, daughter of Offa of Mercia, at Catterick to prevent Offa from supporting rivals for his throne. One such pretender is his exiled predecessor Osred II, son of Ealchred, who returns from the Isle of Man only to be killed when his backers desert him.

793 The Northumbrian-Mercian alliance does not impress the Vikings. They raid the monastery on Lindisfarne Island and sail away with plunder.

794 Aethelberht of East Anglia comes to one of Offa's royal courts at Sutton Walls near Hereford in the hope of marrying Offa's daughter Elfhtryth and winning more autonomy for his kingdom. But Offa uses a pretext of Aethelberht making advances toward his wife Cynethryth to execute Aethelberht and incorporate East Anglia directly into Mercia.

795-96 Offa has grown so great now in England that King Charlemagne of the Franks, in a few years to be crowned Holy Roman Emperor, sends gifts, makes a commercial treaty. But Offa suddenly dies and is succeeded in quick succession by his son Ecgfrith, and then by a far distant relative named Coenwulf who will attempt to push Mercian power westward at the expense of the British of Wales. The extent of the danger posed by Viking raiders from Norseland will not at first be realized.