

SOCIAL IDENTITIES ON THE MACRO SCALE: A MAXIMUM VIEW OF WANSDYKE

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Introduction

This contribution considers how medieval populations defined and reacted to a major political division in the landscape of southern England. We offer a new look at an old problem: the nature, chronology and context of one of England's most substantial yet enigmatic field monuments, its relationship to settlement patterns and social identity. A middle Anglo-Saxon construction is proposed in the context of territorial disputes between the consolidating Mercian and West Saxon kingdoms, while the frontier we suggest may well respect pre-existing territories in places and incorporate earlier features. We argue also that the nature of this frontier zone markedly affected the way that medieval settlement patterns emerged from the late Roman landscape.

Individual communities in the Wessex region are historically defined for the first time in the Domesday Survey of the later eleventh century, a historical source that identifies two principal social groupings: those at the level of the 'village' community, where social stratification is evident from the level of landowner down to slaves; and the collective community of the hundred* which bound together individual settlements into a framework of supralocal common interest. The 'village' community can also be approached using physical evidence alone, but here the definitions of the historian and the archaeologist differ markedly. While the historian, sources permitting, can address social interaction between individual settlements or between households, an archaeological perspective provides a proximal view based on the study of cultural affinity, economic interaction via material culture studies, and spatial relationships based on the character, form and function of settlements. In the absence of explicit documentation relating individual communities to spatial dynamics and territorial definition, collective participation at varying levels can be approached integrating sources such as placename evidence with archaeological material. Our case study approaches people and space in a region hotly contested at kingdom level, which

raises fundamental issues of how early medieval populations were articulated on the ground.

One of the principal factors of the group's research was to address ways that early medieval communities reacted to their environments in greatly differing landscapes and social and political situations and with varying degrees of internal and external influences. Community identities are central to the study of frontier zones, which themselves ensure a dynamic aspect to social definition with scales of identity running from the individual to the household, and from settlement to tithing to estate, before social groupings of a yet higher order: hundred, shire* and kingdom.

Of the regions studied by the group, England was the most intensively settled. This aspect has left a remarkable record for students of the early Middle Ages both in physical terms, for there is barely any part of the English countryside that has not been divided by boundaries at some time, and also in the documentary record in the form of Anglo-Saxon charter bounds.

This essay offers a 'revisionist' view of the Wansdyke earthworks and associated features, utilizing physical and written evidence. Traditionally the monument is considered either late or immediately post-Roman (see below). A case is made here, however, that the frontier's monumentality, extent and composition bear closer comparisons with political and military frontiers of middle to late Anglo-Saxon date. We refer specifically to either West or East Wansdyke, or to what we term the Wansdyke frontier comprising both stretches of dyke and the Roman road that links them (Fig. 2.1). A description of the character of the dykes and related features, including the so-called Bedwyn Dykes, is given below.

West Wansdyke

Wansdyke's westerly termination is generally considered to be the hill-fort Maes Knoll in north Somerset, although in the 1920s Major and Burrow noted evidence for its continuation west of the hill-fort. Eastwards, between Maes Knoll¹ and Horescombe in South Stoke parish* (2 km south of Bath), the dyke is continuous, with the exception of a break of about 3 km where the River Chew

¹ A. F. Major and E. J. Burrow, *The Mystery of Wansdyke* (Cheltenham, 1926).

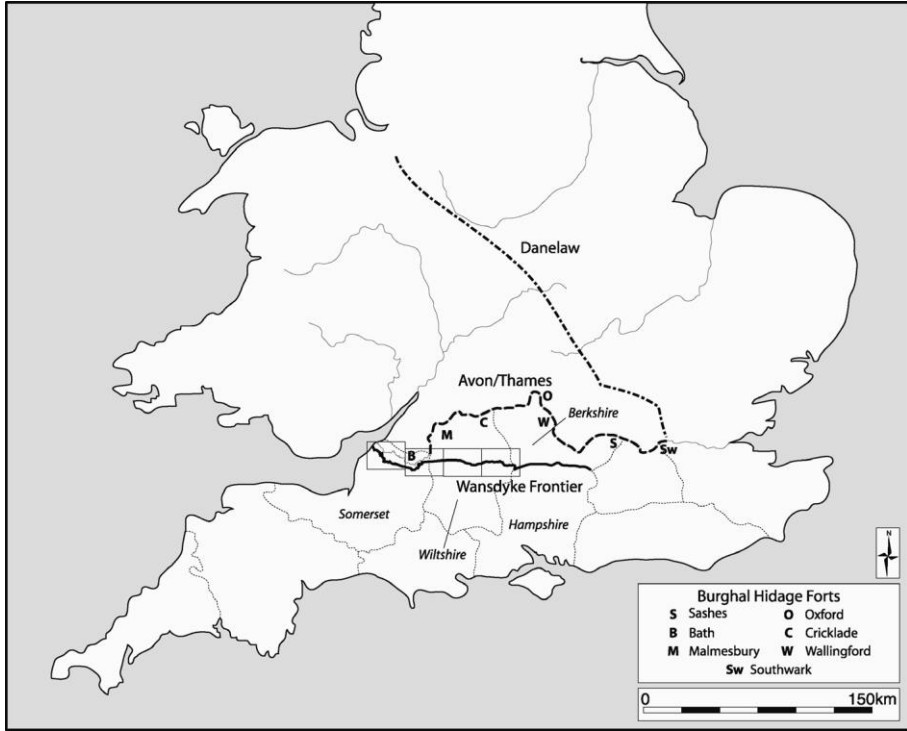


Figure 2.1. The course of Wansdyke in relation to shire boundaries in southern England.

marks the boundary line. Major and Burrow recorded the line of an earthwork to the north of the River Chew and the first edition OS map of 1811 traces this feature incorporating earthworks on Publow Hill. At Maes Knoll the ploughed-out dyke begins as a soil mark 25 m wide. Across open downland at Compton Dando, English Combe and Stantonbury it maintains a width of 22–25 m, while a bank 1.3 m high produces a scarp slope of about 8 m.

The dyke faces north on the Oolite ridge between 3 km and 6 km south of the River Avon flowing from Bath to the Severn Estuary. Through the parish of Compton Dando the dyke sits on a thin band of Coal Measure, with remaining stretches on Lias clay formations. The dyke crowns open downland at Maes² Knoll at 200 m OD; at Stantonbury and Horescombe it reaches 175 m. Fox and

² A. Fox and C. Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', *Archaeological Journal*, 115 (1958), 1–48.

Fox assert that the route chosen is not a commanding one, arguing that the field of view to the north is obscured by higher ground ‘flanking’ the Avon. At no³ point north of Maes Knoll, however, are the downs higher than 130 m OD (as at Newton, St Loe); they normally range between 50 m and 80 m OD.

West Wansdyke shares several attributes of design with East Wansdyke. Where it can, West Wansdyke crowns the north-facing slope of the highest ground. This achieves the best defensive and visible line but allows for a series of strategic high points to be either incorporated into the dyke (e.g. Maes Knoll and Stantonbury) or sited immediately south of it (hills in Priston parish, 167 m; and English Combe parish, 143 m). For Offa’s Dyke it is conjectured that beacons would have signalled from stations at high points behind, although little field⁴ evidence has been brought to bear on this issue.

Whether Wansdyke continues west from Maes Knoll to the Severn at Portishead remains contentious. Major and Burrow assembled a series of sketches and earthwork surveys, while Collinson, vicar of Long Ashton, is said to have recorded earthworks in Somerset parishes beyond Maes Knoll and as far as Portishead.⁵ Early in the nineteenth century Colte Hoare met with little success attempting to trace the same monuments, and little can be added to the debate without new survey data. Fox and Fox dismiss the monument beyond Maes Knoll on the⁶ grounds that west of the river crossing at Saltford (near Keynsham) there is no need for a fortified boundary.⁷

The monument recorded by Major and Burrow follows the design specifications of West and East Wansdyke. It passes across the north-facing slope of Dundry Hill (202 m) skirting round the highest point of the Oolite ridge (223 m), incorporating earthworks at Windmill Hill and at Portbury Camp on Conygar Hill. This feature is common to the better-evidenced earthworks of West Wansdyke. Although no references to this dubious stretch of Wansdyke appear in pre-Conquest boundary clauses, it is noted in two early fourteenth-century deeds. One, dated 1310, in the reign of Edward II, describes a grant from William

³ Fox and Fox, ‘Wansdyke Reconsidered’, p.45.

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D. Hill and M. Worthington, *Offa’s Dyke, History and Guide* (Stroud, 2003), Fig. 46 (p.127).

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Major and Burrow, *The Mystery of Wansdyke*; C. S. Taylor, ‘The Date of Wansdyke’, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 27 (1908), 131–55. ⁶ R. Colte Hoare, *The Ancient History of Wiltshire*, 2 vols (London, 1812–21).

⁷ Fox and Fox, ‘Wansdyke Reconsidered’, p.37.

de Goudulph to Adam de Cloptone of a cottage with adjoining land in *Aystone juxta Bristole*, on the eastern side of *Venelle de Wondesdicke*; the other grant is closely comparable. The date of both deeds makes it unlikely that the term was²retrospectively applied, and they surely represent a genuine documentary reference to Wansdyke along a course previously dismissed.³

The intersection of the Fosse Way with West Wansdyke on Odd Down has considerable command over lines of approach to Bath, where no fewer than three Roman roads converge along with the Jurassic way. Bath is a major strategic centre and, if in the hands of an antagonistic northern aggressor, as it was from a West Saxon perspective, of fundamental importance to defend against.

The Roman Road from Bath (Aquae Sulis) to Mildenhall (Cunetio)

Opinion is divided on the course of Wansdyke from Horescombe Down to Morgan's Hill, the western terminus of the stretch known as East Wansdyke. Major and Burrow found evidence for a linear earthwork running across the top of Horescombe Vale on Combe Down. Modern development obscures most of this possible stretch, although its path conforms to the design specifications of the better-preserved earthworks on the Bath-facing scarp of Bathampton Down encompassing Bathampton Camp overlooking Bath at 204 m OD. Major and Burrow's findings convinced neither Crawford nor Fox and Fox.⁴ In 1956–57 Clark set out to identify what relationships existed between West Wansdyke and the Roman road from *Aquae Sulis* (Bath) to *Cunetio* (Mildenhall, near Marlborough).⁵ Rejecting slim evidence for a linear earthwork connecting the two at Bathford, Clark, like Crawford, opted for a course incorporating the southern loop of the Avon. Thus West Wansdyke abutted Horescombe Brook in the Horescombe Vale and adopted the course of Midford Brook into the Avon, where the boundary would have followed the loop of the Avon up to Lacock where it would continue its course along the Roman road. Clark assumed that a bank and ditch would reappear at this junction and continue eastwards to Morgan's Hill. His excavations revealed no significant developments to the fabric

² Taylor, 'Date of Wansdyke', p.134.

³ Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', p.37.

⁴ O. G. S. Crawford, *Archaeology in the Field* (London, 1953), pp.252–57; Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', p.36.

⁵ A. J. Clark, 'The Nature of Wansdyke', *Antiquity*, 32 (1958), 89–97 (pp.92–93).

of the Roman road, while Fox and Fox investigated the termination of East Wansdyke *c.*270 m west of Morgan's Hill.¹²

Between West and East Wansdyke the boundary runs over Oxford Clay through Selwood Forest, a significant boundary to north–south movement. Asser referred to Selwood as *Coit Maur*, 'great wood'.¹³ That it represented a boundary of political significance between two halves of the later kingdom of Wessex is clear. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, for example, refers to Aldhelm, as the bishop 'west of the woods' *s.a.* 709, and in AD 893 King Alfred, in countering the Danes, summoned men 'both west of Selwood and east'.¹⁴

East Wansdyke

Wansdyke is most impressive over the Wiltshire downs and is continuous for 19.5 km from Morgan's Hill to the western edge of Savernake Forest. On Bishop's Cannings Down, including the counterscarp bank, it is over 45 m wide. A bank of *c.*5 m produces a scarp slope of 12.5 m. In comparison, Offa's Dyke reaches a height of 2.44 m with a scarp slope of 9 m and is 21 m wide.

The ridge of Upper Chalk that bounds the Vale of Pewsey to the north side is followed by the course of the dyke. The highest points on the downs all lie within the strip of downland between the dyke and the northern scarp of the Vale of Pewsey; again comparable to Offa's Dyke.¹⁵

East Wansdyke does not apparently incorporate prehistoric fortifications, although it runs close to Rybury hill fort near All Cannings. It is possible that Tan Hill served a role similar to that of Stantonbury on West Wansdyke as virtually the whole monument from Morgan's Hill to West Woods is visible from the summit. In particular, the dyke forms the northern side of a rhomboid-shaped enclosure of unknown date on Tan Hill.

Fowler's investigation of access points through East Wansdyke in West Woods uses charter perambulations. Taking each reference to a *geat* or *gete* along the course of the dyke, Fowler employs earthwork survey to suggest ten original gateways, although the evidence for 'outworks' to the north of several of the gaps

¹² Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', p.6. ¹³ *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), ch. 55. ¹⁴ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. M. Swanton (London, 2000). ¹⁵ Hill and Worthington, *Offa's Dyke, History and Guide*, p.127, Fig. 46.



Photo 2.1. The Vale of Pewsey looking south from the northern scarp of the vale, with Rybury hillfort in the foreground. Photo: Andrew Reynolds.

in the dyke might just as easily have resulted from breaching the monument.¹⁶ This aspect invites comparisons with Hadrian's Wall and the issue of controlled, not restricted movement. Regular gates within West Woods alone allow for free but monitored movement. The pattern of milecastle > turret > turret > milecastle > turret > turret > milecastle of Hadrian's Wall is, Fowler argues, echoed in the spacing of main and minor gates on Wansdyke: main > minor > minor > main > minor > minor > main.¹⁷

Another feature of interest is a possible marking-out line selecting the best course in relation to local topography and field of view.¹⁸ On Offa's Dyke, during

¹⁶ P. J. Fowler, 'Wansdyke in the Woods: An Unfinished Roman Military Earthwork for a Non-event', in *Roman Wiltshire and After: Papers in Honour of Ken Annable*, ed. P. Ellis (Devizes, 2001), pp.179–98 (pp.187–91); Judie English, pers. comm. (2004). ¹⁷ Fowler, 'Wansdyke in the Woods'.

¹⁸ Fowler, 'Wansdyke in the Woods', p.191.

a breach of the bank for drainage works, a marking-out ditch was identified.¹⁹ Perhaps a year had elapsed between the conception and construction of the dyke prompting Hill to conclude that it was a ‘mature, planned response rather than a panic measure’.²⁰

The Ridgeway or Icknield Way runs from the Wash in East Anglia, across central and southern England into the Vale of Pewsey, and possibly beyond to the Solent. Fowler’s study identifies a 5 km-broad corridor stretching from Red Shore to Short Oak Copse where the Ridgeway exists as a series of braided routes running across varying terrain. Wansdyke was designed, he argues, to marshal movement along these routes.²¹

The Bedwyn Dykes

The Bedwyn Dykes run over clay soils better suited to cultivation, and thus ploughing and erosion. At no point does the width of the dyke exceed 5.5 m. Stretches of what is better described as a ‘system’ of dykes have been recorded in the parishes of Great and Little Bedwyn, Shalbourne, Ham and Inkpen.²² Major and Burrow, working from Colte Hoare’s notes, were content that this represented a continuation of Wansdyke and identified a continuous course from Savernake to Inkpen Beacon. Today, the dykes are a series of apparently discontinuous stretches of earthwork of differing proportions.

Sections in Belmore Copse and Chisbury Wood have been discounted by both Crawford and Fox and Fox.²³ While Crawford implicitly refers to the stretch of bank and ditch that runs in a south-easterly direction from Chisbury Iron Age fort as ‘Wansdyke’, Fox and Fox see no reason to view this as a continuation of Wansdyke. Although Colte Hoare’s account of the Bedwyn Dykes is early nineteenth century, stretches known to the vicar of Ham as late as 1913 had disappeared in his

¹⁹ D. Hill, ‘The Construction of Offa’s Dyke’, *Antiquaries Journal*, 65 (1985), 140–42 (p.141). ²⁰ Hill, ‘Construction of Offa’s Dyke’, pp.141–42. ²¹ Fowler, ‘Wansdyke in the Woods’, p.195. ²² E. Hostetter and T. N. Howe, *The Romano-British Villa at Castle Copse, Great Bedwyn* (Bloomington, 1997), p.359. ²³ Crawford, *Archaeology in the Field*, p.257; Fox and Fox, ‘Wansdyke Reconsidered’, pp.18–19.

own lifetime.²⁴ Over one hundred years of agricultural activity could easily destroy such earthworks on clay soil. Whether the Bedwyn Dykes were

continuous will perhaps never be known, although other evidence suggests its course.

Like Fowler, we can utilize pre-Conquest charters. For this area grants for Great Bedwyn, Burbage and Little Bedwyn all have boundary clauses (S756, S688 and S264).²⁵ Building on Crawford's 1942 map of the features in these boundary clauses, there are nine references to gates, all in close proximity to the dyke as plotted by Colte Hoare and Major and Burrow. Crawford suggests that these 'gates' represent breaks in hedgerows,²⁶ yet it is likely they are related to more substantial boundaries. *Straet Geat*, located in the south-east corner of the Great Bedwyn estate, for example, is the point where the Roman road from *Cunetio* to *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester) passes through a possible stretch of dyke, identified by Major and Burrow.²⁷

As with the dubious stretch from Maes Knoll to the Severn, reference to the Bedwyn Dyke in association with Woden occurs in the parish of Ham, where Old Dyke Lane is referred to on a Common Award map of 1733 as Wans Dyke.²⁸

Dating Wansdyke: A Review of the Evidence

The dating of Wansdyke is less secure than is often presumed. Linear boundary dykes are widely attested in the British landscape, in both upland and lowland regions, although the limited attention that they have received relative to other monuments is testimony to the often considerable difficulties of placing them in time and space. For most writers a late or sub-Roman date is accepted for Wansdyke, yet this is unproven and arguably reflects a long-running tradition in British field archaeology of ascribing such a date to substantial linear earthworks not otherwise placed in the later prehistoric period, such as those on the Tabular Hills of northeast Yorkshire.²⁹ Elsewhere, linear earthworks like the South Oxfordshire Grim's

²⁴ Major and Burrow, *Mystery of Wansdyke*, p.380. ²⁵ Numbers preceded by 'S' refer to catalogue entries in P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated Hand List and Bibliography* (London, 1968).

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O. G. S. Crawford, 'The Anglo-Saxon Bounds of Bedwyn and Burbage', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 131 (1942), 280–301. ²⁷ Major and Burrow, *Mystery of Wansdyke*. ²⁸ Crawford, *Archaeology in the Field*, p.257. ²⁹ D. A. Spratt, *Linear Earthworks of the Tabular Hills, Northeast Yorkshire* (Sheffield, 1989).



Photo 2.2. The contributors walking Wansdyke, Orri Vésteinsson in the lead.
Photo: Alex Langlands.

Ditch, initially claimed as sub-Roman, are also likely to be Iron Age, a date supported by archaeological excavation.³⁰ Longer chronologies for the construction, augmentation and alteration of major earthworks should also be given serious consideration. This factor is exemplified no more clearly than in the remodelling of Bokerley Dyke on the Wiltshire/Dorset border, a later prehistoric earthwork subjected to various alterations, including a late phase when the Dorchester to Old Sarum Roman road was cut through by a massive ditch at the point where it passes through the earthwork.³¹

Wansdyke has engaged distinguished antiquarians and archaeologists including Pitt-Rivers, Cyril and Aileen Fox, Albany Major and Edward Burrow, O. G. S.

³⁰ M. Hughes, 'Grimsditch and Cuthwulf's Expedition to the Chilterns in AD 571', *Antiquity*, 5 (1931), 291–314; R. Bradley, 'The South Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch and its Significance', *Oxoniensia*, 33 (1968), 1–13; J. Hinchliffe, 'Excavations at Grim's Ditch, Mongewell, 1974', *Oxoniensia*, 40 (1975), 122–35. ³¹ H. C. Bowen, *The Archaeology of Bokerley Dyke*, ed. B. N. Eagles (London, 1990).

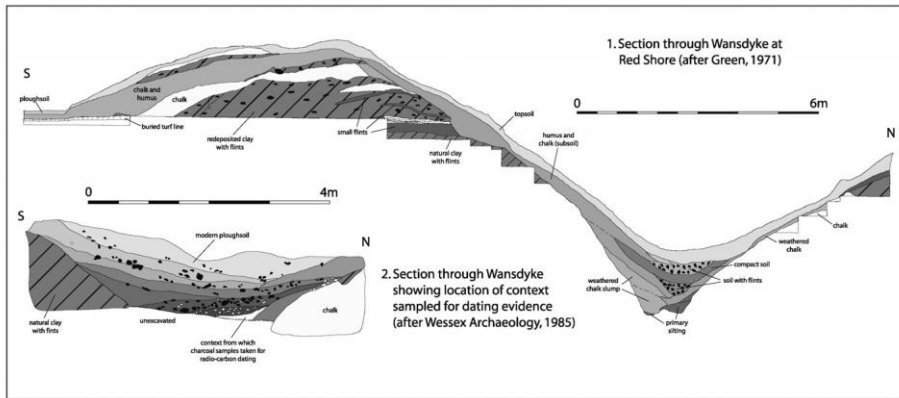


Figure 2.2. Sections through East Wansdyke after Colt Hoare, *Ancient History of Wiltshire*; Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations in Bokerly and Wansdyke Dorset and Wilts.*; Green, ‘Wansdyke: Excavations 1966 to 1970’; and Wessex Archaeology (unpublished report, 1985).

Crawford and Tony Clark and more recently Peter Fowler; but fundamental questions relating to the origin of the dyke remain unresolved. John Aubrey first recognized that the western termination of East Wansdyke overlay the Roman Road on Morgan’s Hill, thus demonstrating its Roman or later origin, at least at that point.

As early as the sixteenth century, Leland commented that the earthwork was built to separate the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, while Aubrey and Stukeley maintained conflicting views as to its date and origins.³² Colte Hoare traced East Wansdyke beyond Savernake Forest, identifying stretches of bank and ditch on Aldermaston common near Silchester, although his search to the east of Inkpen was fruitless.³³

Pitt-Rivers recognized that the only means to establish a chronology was targeted excavation. His two sections through East Wansdyke were cut at Old Shepherd’s Shore and Brown’s Barn (Fig. 2.2).³⁴ The first failed to retrieve dateable finds, although samian ware lay on the ground surface beneath the counterscarp. The second section yielded samian ware and a late Roman sandal cleat from

³² *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535–43*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, 5 vols (Carbondale, 1964); J. Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica* ([n.d.]); W. Stukeley, *Itinerarium Curiosum, Centuria*, 2 parts (London, 1776). ³³ Colte Hoare, *Ancient History of Wiltshire*. ³⁴ A. H. L. F. Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations in Bokerly and Wansdyke Dorset and Wilts. 1888–1891* (printed privately, 1892).

the ground surface sealed beneath the bank, thus providing a terminus post quem. Taylor identified our terminus ante quem by considering references to the dyke in tenth-century charters.³⁵ Taylor's consideration of the relationship between royal grants of land and the course of the dyke suggested to him a mid-seventh-century date for its construction.

Two major surveys of the monument in its entirety have been made. Major and Burrow's survey does not opt for a single period of construction, but serves as an overview of all possible periods.³⁶ Sir Cyril and Lady Fox undertook a full study of Wansdyke in the 1950s having previously undertaken similar surveys of Devil's Dyke, Cambridgeshire, and Offa's Dyke. Their 'Wansdyke Reconsidered' identifies 'minor' alignments of straight, sinuous and irregular earthwork and considers their relationship to local topography.³⁷ The article concludes with a series of bold summary points. The Bedwyn Dykes and East and West Wansdyke, they argue, are separate earthworks and thus there is no one moment in time when a frontier containing all three monuments was constructed.³⁸ References in charter bounds are thought to imply a pagan dedication, and construction dates for both stretches are related to the pagan Saxon period.³⁹

Prior to the Foxes' work, O. G. S. Crawford's commentary on Wansdyke's eastern extent was written to counteract the influence of *The Mystery of Wansdyke* that he considered a 'bad book'.⁴⁰ Crawford began his survey at Maes Knoll and finished at the foot of Inkpen Beacon on the Wiltshire/Berkshire county boundary. Unlike the Foxes, Crawford considered East and West Wansdyke one and the same along with the Bedwyn Dyke.⁴¹

Contemporary with the Foxes' survey, A. J. Clark cut two sections through the Roman road at Spye Park, with a view to ascertaining the relationship between the dykes and the road that was thought to connect both stretches. Clark found no evidence for a bank and ditch in conjunction with the road and concurs with the Foxes' interpretation.⁴² Myres summarizes these early contributions and reiterates

³⁵ Taylor, 'Date of Wansdyke'. ³⁶ Major and Burrow, *Mystery of Wansdyke*. ³⁷ Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered'. ³⁸ Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', p.39. ³⁹ Fox and Fox, 'Wansdyke Reconsidered', p.45. See Hill and Worthington, *Offa's Dyke, History and Guide*, pp.145–47, for critique of the Foxes' survey of Offa's Dyke. ⁴⁰ Crawford, *Archaeology in the Field*. ⁴¹ Crawford, *Archaeology in the Field*, p.257. ⁴² Clark, 'Nature of Wansdyke', pp.95–96.

the Foxes' view.⁴³ Myres, however, questions both that the various stretches of upstanding earthwork are of different periods and the late sixth-century date for the construction of East Wansdyke. Although he introduces the 'origins of

Wessex' as a conceptual tool, this is not developed further than the early seventh century.

Subsequently, excavations have been undertaken at Red Shore and New Buildings, and more recently just south of Marlborough at Wernham Farm in the modern parish of North Savernake during the laying of a pipeline.⁴⁴ Various sections cut through Wansdyke are shown in Figure 2.2. Environmental evidence suggests that the dyke at New Buildings lay in abundantly wooded surroundings, whilst on the downs at Red Shore there is evidence of plants characteristic of pasture.⁴⁵

The full profile of the ditch at Wernham Farm was not revealed, although oak charcoal from a layer of flint rubble deposited near the base of the ditch yielded a radiocarbon date of cal. AD 890–1160 at 2 sigma (BM-2405). It is possible that the ditch had been cleaned out and further investigation is required. The course of the pipeline had been diverted to avoid upstanding sections of the bank, thus eliminating the opportunity to analyse sealed ground surfaces. The date and section are published here for the first time.

Eagles considers worm action and, citing A. J. Clark *in litt.*, argues that, at a rate of 4 cm for every ten years, it would have taken some fifty years for the discarded finds to reach the stratigraphic levels they achieved in Pitt-Rivers's excavations.⁴⁶ Discussion of the Bedwyn Dykes in the publication of the archaeological research on the Romano-British villa* at Castle Copse, Great Bedwyn, argues that they are not part of the Wansdyke complex but correspond with late Roman activity in the region.⁴⁷ Fowler's recent survey of East Wansdyke as part of the Fyfield and Overton Downs project concluded that it was 'An unfinished Roman Military Earthwork for a Non-event'.⁴⁸

⁴³ J. N. L. Myres, 'Wansdyke and the Origin of Wessex', in *Essays in British History*, ed. H. R. Trevor-Roper (London, 1964), pp.1–27.

⁴⁴ H. S. Green, 'Wansdyke: Excavations 1966 to 1970', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 67 (1971), 129–46. ⁴⁵ G. W. Dimpleby contributing to Green, 'Wansdyke: Excavations 1966 to 1970', p.136. ⁴⁶ B. N. Eagles, 'Evidence for Settlement in the Fifth to Seventh Centuries AD', in *The Medieval Landscape of Wessex*, ed. M. Aston and C. Lewis, Oxbow Monograph, 46 (Oxford, 1994), pp.13–32 (pp.23–24).

⁴⁷ Hostetter and Howe, *Romano-British Villa at Castle Copse*, pp.359–67. ⁴⁸

Fowler, 'Wansdyke in the Woods'.

Territory, Warfare and Politics: The Context of Wansdyke

There are numerous reasons for placing Wansdyke in a later period based both on a reassessment of earlier approaches to dating and by examining in detail its

relationship to patterns of settlement and land use from the late Roman period onwards. Bonney argued that the dyke was laid over existing estates on the basis that parish boundaries, including several parcels of land described in charter bounds, bear little if any relationship to the course of the earthwork (Fig. 2.3).⁴⁹ Indeed, a series of long, narrow estates, typical of downland and vale landscapes terminate on the high chalk, yet they do not respect East Wansdyke, nor are they respected by it. Small projections of land belonging to estates both north and south of the earthwork give every indication of a complex pattern of landscape development. Bonney argued for a potentially Roman or even earlier date for these estates with Wansdyke built without regard to their form. In other words, while there is no logistical sense in a monumental earthwork following a network of boundaries of local significance, one might expect estates post-dating the dyke to utilize it as a boundary feature. West Wansdyke exhibits a similar relationship to parish boundaries.

There are indications that the estates in question are later in origin than proposed by Bonney. In the first instance, along the course of the Roman road between the two stretches of dyke, parish boundaries respect the road in every case except at Chittoe (Wiltshire), a land unit which may have Roman origins and within which partly lay the small Roman town of *Verlucio* (Fig. 2.3).⁵⁰ Clearly the pattern of estates post-dates the Roman road, yet by how much? Current thinking places the development of villages and estates (by the twelfth century, parishes) between the later ninth and twelfth centuries.⁵¹ Evidence for this view is derived largely from charters granting small parcels of land almost frenetically during the central decades of the tenth century, with far fewer grants of earlier and later date.⁵² Archaeology has revealed a similar chronological horizon with regard to

⁴⁹ D. Bonney, 'Early Boundaries in Wessex', in *Archaeology and the Landscape*, ed. P. J. Fowler (London, 1972), pp.168–86.

⁵⁰ Bonney, 'Early Boundaries in Wessex', pp.176–78; A. J. Reynolds, 'From Pagus to Parish: Territory and Settlement in the Avebury Region from the Late Roman Period to the Domesday Survey', in *The Avebury Landscape: Aspects of the Field Archaeology of the Marlborough Downs*, ed. G. Brown, D. Field and D. McOmish (Oxford, 2005), pp.164–80.

⁵¹ D. Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester, 1998). ⁵² D. Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981), Fig. 36 (p.26).

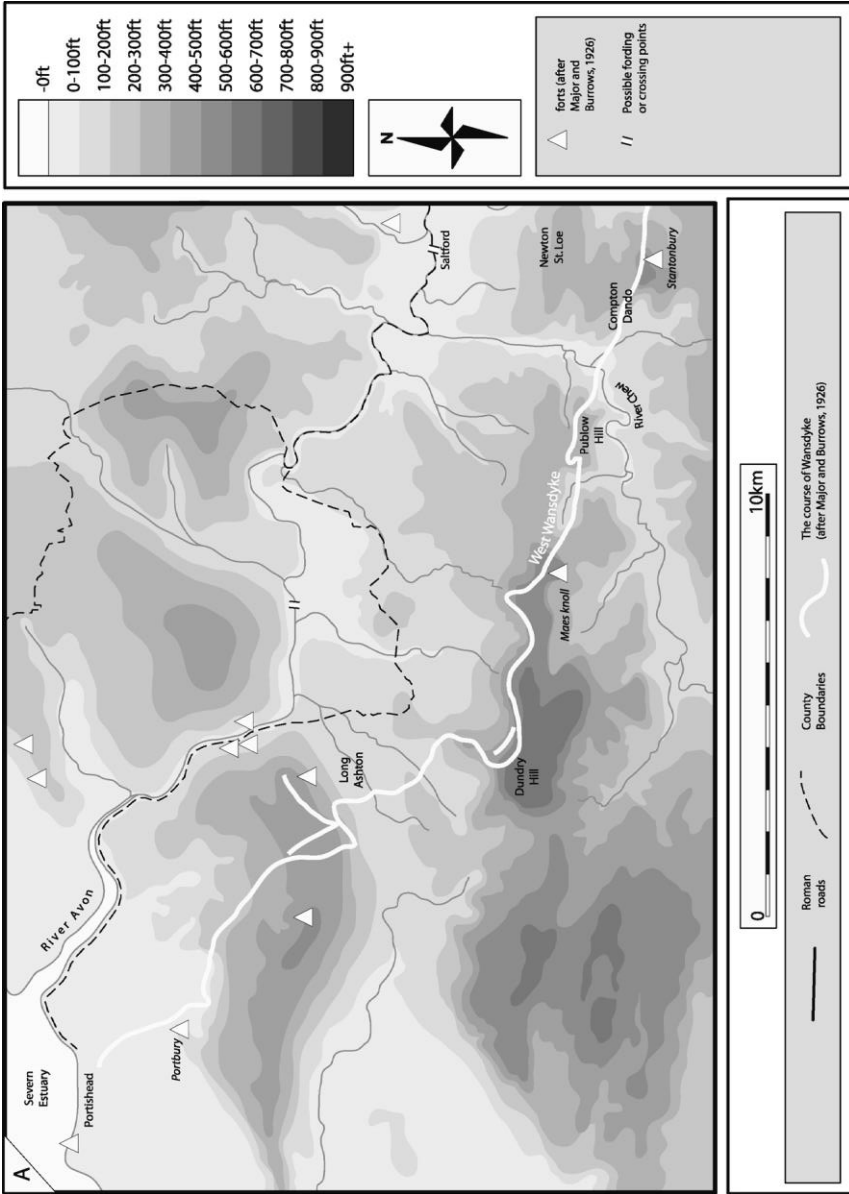


Figure 2.3. The course of the Wansdyke frontier: a) West Wansdyke.

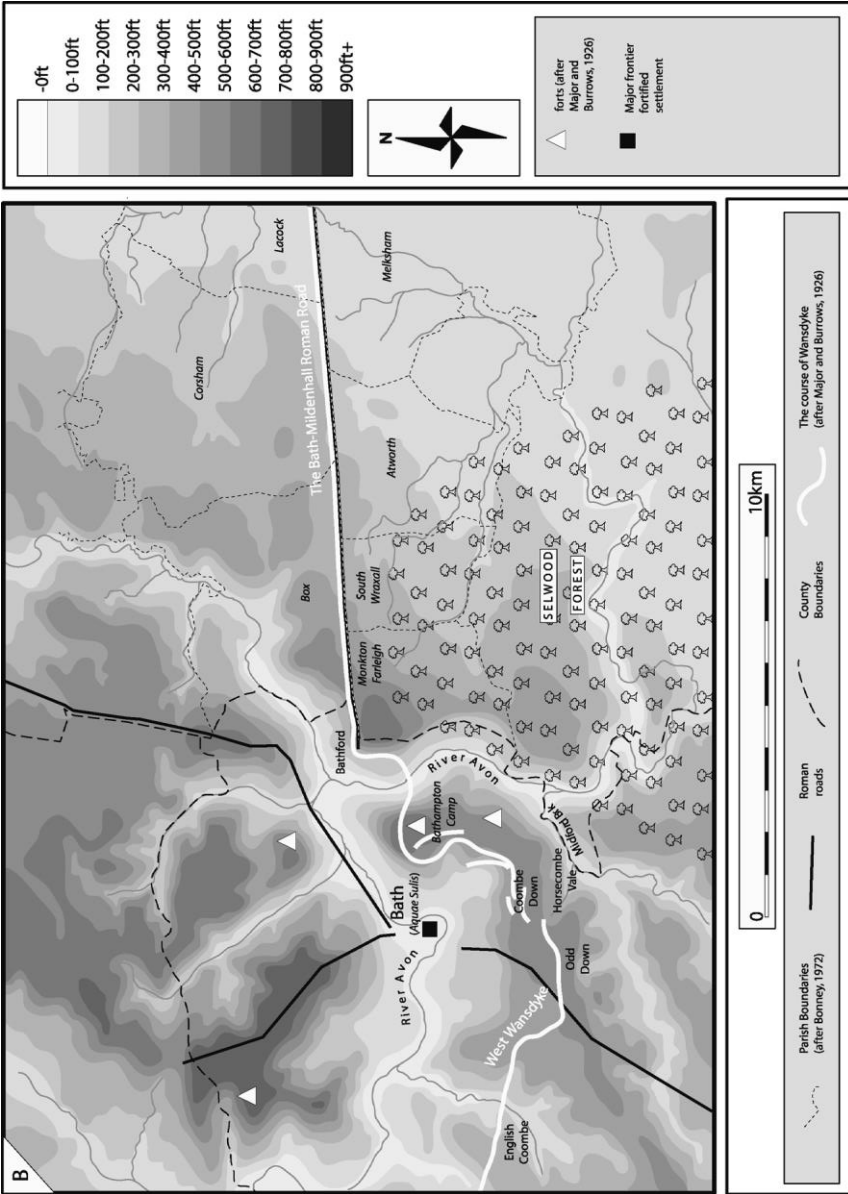


Figure 2.3. The course of the Wansdyke frontier: b) the Bath-Mildenhall Roman road.

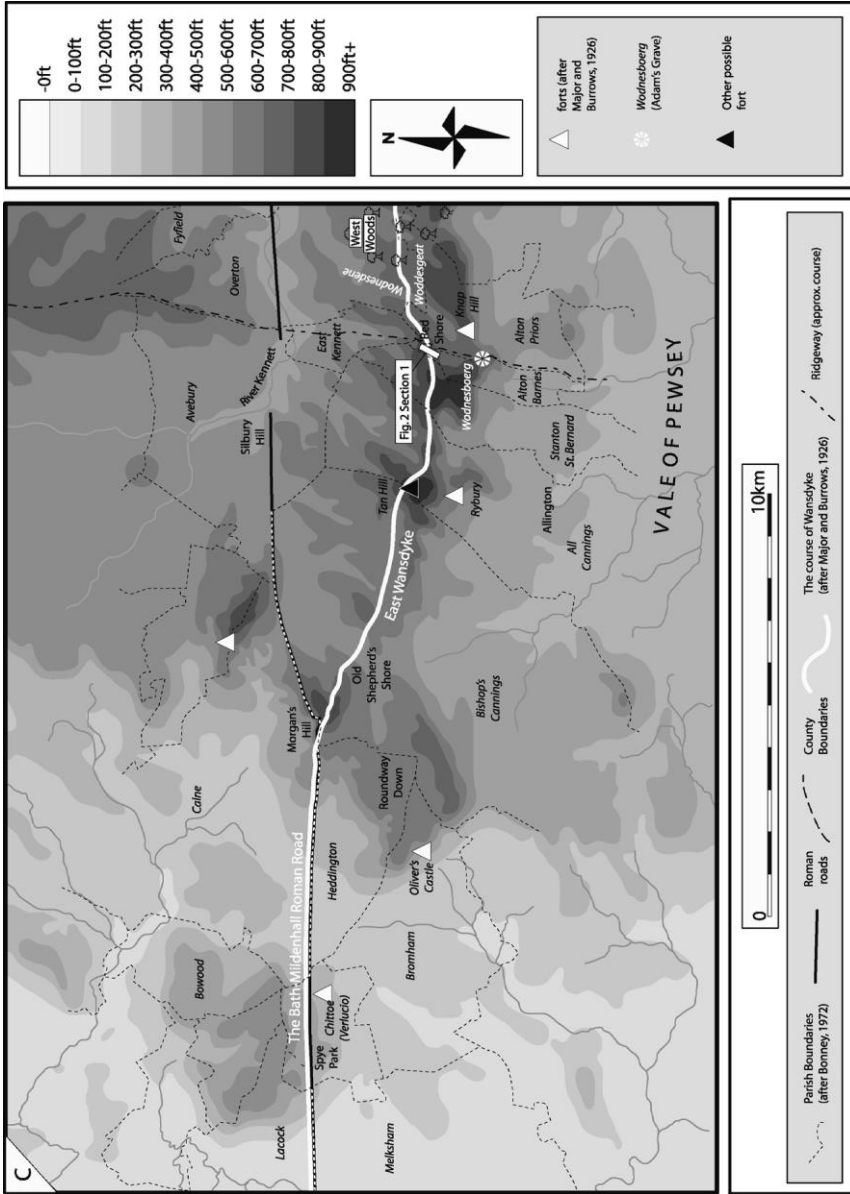


Figure 2.3. The course of the Wansdyke frontier: c) East Wansdyke.

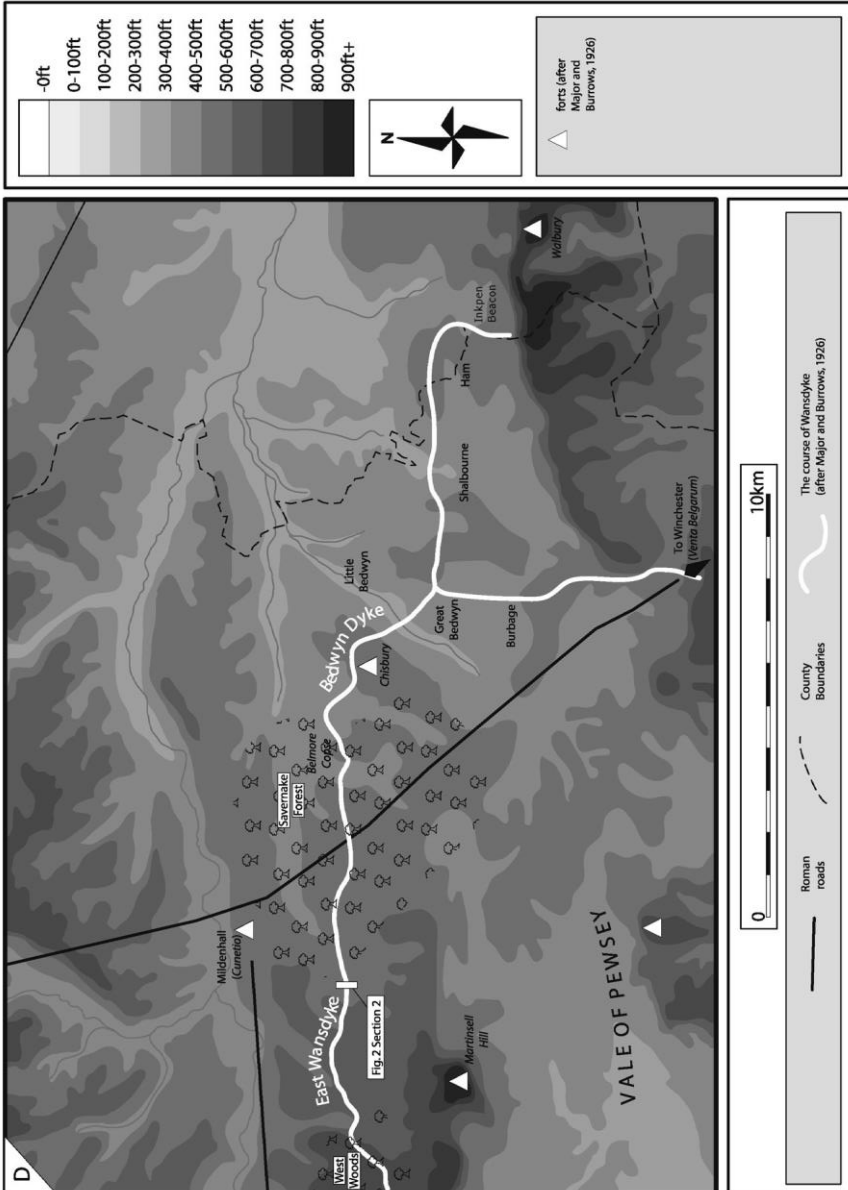


Figure 2.3. The course of the Wansdyke frontier: d) the Bedwyn Dykes.

the emergence of enclosed ‘thegny’ residences, with a hall (often aisled), associated church and settlement.⁵³

On closer inspection the local picture is more complex than that indicated by national overview, and for both Wiltshire and Somerset there are eighth- and

ninth-century grants that describe in topographical terms parcels of land that compare closely with the apparent economic determination behind the estate morphology of later grants. The likelihood here, then, is that Wansdyke is indeed later than the estates it traverses, as Bonney suggested, yet the latter are very likely middle Anglo-Saxon creations at the earliest. A topic that requires further research is whether late Anglo-Saxon estates were freshly described when granted by charter or whether they represent instead the component parts of middle Anglo-Saxon ‘multiple’ or ‘complex’ estates. The latter view, coupled with a later dating for Wansdyke, raises interesting questions with regard to the origins of estates and their continuity at a local level either side of the construction of the dyke in physical and chronological terms.

It is unfortunate that no document earlier than 903 describes either the East or West sections of the earthwork. Wansdyke is not mentioned explicitly by Bede, nor is it found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In 1924 Passmore brought attention to Gildas’s reference to a turf wall built from sea to sea, while Bede makes a fleeting but specific reference to an ‘earthwork’, fortified by a series of towers constructed by Severus, that stretched from sea to sea.⁵⁴ Fowler takes this to be consistent with Wansdyke concluding that the frontier was unfinished, while Hill and Worthington consider its relevance to Offa’s Dyke.⁵⁵

Entries in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle relate battles at *wodnesbeorg* (now Adam’s Grave) *s.a.* 592 and 716.⁵⁶ The battle site itself is the massive Neolithic chambered tomb just south of East Wansdyke and alongside the Ridgeway. Identification of the place as that of the battles is substantiated by a reference to

⁵³ A. J. Reynolds, ‘Boundaries and Settlements in Later Sixth to Eleventh-Century England’, in *Boundaries in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. D. Griffiths, A. J. Reynolds and S. Semple (Oxford, 2003), pp.98–136.

⁵⁴ A. D. Passmore, ‘The Age and Origin of the Wansdyke’, *Antiquaries Journal*, 4 (1924), 26–29; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), I.5. ⁵⁵ P. J. Fowler, *Landscape Plotted and Pieced: Landscape History and Local Archaeology in Fyfield and Overton, Wiltshire* (London, 2000), p.196; Fowler, ‘Wansdyke in the Woods’, pp.196–97; Hill and Worthington, *Offa’s Dyke, History and Guide*, pp.103–05. ⁵⁶ J. E. B. Gover and others, *The Place Names of Wiltshire* (Cambridge, 1939), p.318; *AngloSaxon Chronicles*, ed. Swanton, pp.20–21.

the barrow as *wodnesbeorg* in tenth-century bounds appended to a (probably conflated) charter of 825 for Alton Priors (S272).

While the Alton estate is one of those ‘clipped’ by East Wansdyke it remains to consider the significance of the name and whether the barrow is named from the earthwork or vice versa. It is plausible on several grounds that the latter is the case. As noted above, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the barrow as the site

of battles in 592 and 716, events that took place long before its completion, although the Chronicle is increasingly reliable in its accounts from c.850.⁶ If we are to accept the reliability of the earlier event and, indeed, the location of the site, then any later projected date of construction and naming of the dyke might logically reflect the major battles fought on the frontier. Equally, the conjoining of a mythical ancestor with both barrow and dyke might have been made independently.

The first battle was ostensibly fought between Britons and Saxons, while the later event was a skirmish between Mercians and West Saxons and is more likely to have actually happened.⁷ The locality also saw two documented battles in the early eleventh century when the Vikings were active in the region at Kennet (1006), on the Ridgeway just south of Avebury, and at Cannings Marsh (1010), most likely as it was close to Allington (OE *Atheling's tun* or 'prince's farm'), perhaps a royal tax collection centre and a ready supply of provisions for the raiding army.

The name of the barrow is also suggestive of a pre-Christian cult site; the coincidence of cult and warfare is a matter of not inconsiderable interest. For the name of an earthwork in a neighbouring county (Somerset) to be reflected by that of a barrow many miles to the east is a further matter of significance, implying a strongly ideologically imbued concept of a major frontier. The course of the Ridgeway north of *wodnesbeorg* runs along a valley floor known from charter evidence as *wodnesdene* and through a break in the earthwork itself termed *woddesgeat* (S449; S272). These Woden names, based on those of the barrow and dyke, underscore the sense of place of this major waypoint for travellers into southern England, where the Great Ridgeway crosses a boundary of formerly great importance and where a series of battles had been fought. Effectively, the locale around *wodnesbeorg* was an early medieval 'hot-spot', its special character determined by the coincidence of monuments, communications and politics.

A seventh-century silver gilt pyramidal stud, inlaid with niello, found 'near Adam's Grave' is probably a sword fitting.⁵⁹ It is tantalizing to think that the barrow might also have acted as a high-status burial place during the seventh century as is known in the region at Swallowcliffe Down and Roundway Down, both of which also reused prehistoric barrows.⁶⁰ The likelihood that such high-status burials were also of 'sentinel' type, placed at territorial limits, bears serious

⁶ J. M. Bately, 'The Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 60 BC to AD 890: Vocabulary as Evidence', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 64 (1978), 93–127.

⁷ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, ed. Swanton, p.42, n.3.

consideration here and brings to mind the group of seventh-century finds from Silchester indicative of another high-status burial along the line of our proposed frontier (see below).⁶¹

The place-name Wansdyke or ‘Woden’s Ditch’ has generated much discussion. In virtually every article published it is either implicit or stated that construction of the dyke is earlier than AD 600.⁶² This appears to be due to historical references to the activities of entrepreneurial Anglo-Saxon princes and the conversion of Wessex to Christianity from AD 634. Recent studies of early chronicle references urge extreme caution in using them as a means to construct historical chronologies.⁶³ It is also apparent that certain pagan place-names might be fabrications of tenth-century Christian propaganda.⁶⁴ Aubrey, in his *Monumenta Britannica*, remarks how the name caused local people to conclude erroneously that it was named because the ‘Divell’ erected it upon a Wednesday. Oman’s assertion that, ignorant of its origins, the Saxons called it after their ancestral god, as a maker of all things marvellous, is dismissed as naive by Fox and Fox because it is improbable that such a ‘sacred’ name should be given by the Saxons to an obsolete defence.⁶⁵

The establishment of the See of Dorchester in AD 634–35 and subsequent conversion of Wessex has served as a terminus ante quem for the construction of

⁵⁹ P. Robinson, ‘The Treasure Act’, *Trilithon*, 46 (2002), 3. ⁶⁰ S. Semple, ‘Burials and Political Boundaries in the Avebury Region, North Wiltshire’, in *Boundaries in Early Medieval Britain*, ed. Griffiths, Reynolds and Semple, pp.72–91. ⁶¹ G. C. Boon, ‘The Latest Objects from Silchester, Hants.’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1959), 79–88 (p.83).

⁶² Myres, ‘Wansdyke and the Origin of Wessex’; Bonney, ‘Early Boundaries in Wessex’, p.174; L. Alcock, *Arthur’s Britain: History and Archaeology AD 367–634* (London, 1971), p.349. ⁶³ B. A. E. Yorke, ‘Fact or Fiction? The Written Evidence of the 5th and 6th Centuries AD’, in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, vol. VI (Oxford, 1993), pp.45–50. ⁶⁴ S. Semple, ‘A Fear of the Past: The Place of the Prehistoric Burial Mound in the Ideology of Middle and Later Anglo-Saxon England’, *World Archaeology*, 30 (1998), 109–26. ⁶⁵ C. Oman, ‘Wansdyke’, *Archaeological Journal*, 87 (1930), 60–70 (p.69); Fox and Fox, ‘Wansdyke Reconsidered’, p.40.

the dyke. Even Taylor, opting for a mid- to late seventh-century date, suggests that Christianity could hardly have, by then, become widespread among the West Saxons, arguing that the name ‘Woden’ would have had perceived influence for its constructors as the protector of boundaries.⁶⁶ Major, however, argues that little evidence exists in northern mythology to associate Woden, or indeed Mercury, with boundaries.⁶⁷

The most recent consideration suggests that only in the context of a ‘joke’ would Christian West Saxon builders have named the dyke so. For Fowler, the

attribution of a pagan name ‘Woden’ can only indicate a pre-Christian origin for the monument yet, as one of us has noted previously, Woden was a ‘live’ figure in Christian Anglo-Saxon England appearing, as he does, in King Alfred’s genealogy not as a god but as an ancestor.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the evidence of the tenth-century charters shows beyond doubt that clerics producing boundary descriptions were not troubled with such nomenclature. The name of the earthworks is undoubtedly highly significant. They are the only such linear earthworks to be so-named, an observation that is made all the more striking by their association. That the name survived into the tenth century indicates at least a memory that the dykes were once considered as elements of a common boundary line. The reference to Woden may have been connected with a desire to name the frontier after a heroic ancestor, deeply rooted in the familial traditions of the West Saxon royal house. Barbara Yorke, drawing on work by Dorothy Whitelock, has raised the possibility that the eighth-century King Offa of Mercia may have been christened so as to associate him with the heroic ancestor of the same name (himself a descendant of Woden in the so-called ‘Anglian Collection’).⁶⁹ Yorke also identifies a possible link between textual references to the heroic Offa in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, with an inference to the creation of a boundary in the latter perhaps alluding to the later King Offa’s dyke.⁷⁰ Parallels with Wansdyke are clear.

The length of the boundary as described by both stretches of earthwork with the Roman road between also raises major objections to a Roman or sub-Roman

⁶⁶ Taylor, ‘Date of Wansdyke’, p.152. ⁶⁷ Major and Burrow, *Mystery of Wansdyke*, p.133. ⁶⁸ Fowler, ‘Wansdyke in the Woods’, p.196; J. Pollard and A. J. Reynolds, *Avebury: The Biography of a Landscape* (Stroud, 2002), pp.187–89. ⁶⁹ B. A. E. Yorke, ‘The Origins of Mercia’, in *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (London, 2001), pp.13–22 (p.16); D. M. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp.58–64. ⁷⁰ Yorke, ‘Origins of Mercia’, p.16.

date. While a much longer frontier can be suggested (see below), even the widely accepted stretch must relate to an extensive polity. Eagles and Fowler have suggested sub-Roman elites as the builders (see above). The line of the frontier contrasts with the suggested Roman administrative geography (*civitas** boundaries), although Eagles suggests that the boundary between the Dobunni and the Belgae may have run close to the line of East Wansdyke.⁷¹ The settlement archaeology of the corridor of the frontier reveals virtually no evidence for fifth-century occupation, and not the faintest trace of an infrastructure capable of instituting a monumental public work traversing southern England from the Bristol Avon to the Inkpen Beacon and perhaps much further east as originally conceived.

Eagles's work on fifth- to seventh-century material in the region has established a clear division in northern Wiltshire between material culture of Germanic character found to the east of a north–south line running broadly through Avebury, and finds and place-names of British type to the west.⁷² Eagles suggests an extensive territory, based on Bath, itself only 2 km north of West Wansdyke, while to the east a contemporary unit, potentially that of a group termed the *Canningas* is proposed for the Avebury region.⁷³ The proximity of West Wansdyke to Bath and the probability that the *Canningas* unit included territory on both sides of East Wansdyke indicates that the monument was built following a post-Roman phase of medium-sized territories. That East Wansdyke cuts across Eagles's zone of cultural contrast rather than following it yet further strengthens a later dating. Overall, the extent of the Wansdyke frontier suggests that the growth and consolidation of the West Saxon kingdom provides a more plausible historical context for its construction.

North Somerset, North Wiltshire and Berkshire were hotly contended during the enlargement of the West Saxon and Mercian kingdoms, and the 716 event is significant in terms of placing the Wansdyke frontier within this era. There is a general consensus that Wansdyke is unfinished. Echoing David Hill, Fowler suggests that the earthworks are 'a mature, planned response', the need for which may have subsided during the course of its construction.⁷⁴ The struggle for territory between the Mercians and West Saxons provides several 'windows' when such a project might quickly become redundant.

⁷¹ M. Millet, *The Romanisation of Britain* (Cambridge, 1990); B. N. Eagles, 'Anglo-Saxon Presence and Culture in Wiltshire', in *Roman Wiltshire and After*, ed. Ellis, pp.199–233. ⁷² Eagles, 'Anglo-Saxon Presence', p.208, Fig. 11:2. ⁷³ Reynolds, 'From Pagus to Parish'. ⁷⁴ Fowler, 'Wansdyke in the Woods', p.192.

The termination of East Wansdyke at the junction of the boundaries of Berkshire, Hampshire and Wiltshire at Inkpen Beacon implies a relationship. The suggested course west of Maes Knoll is used by, or otherwise runs virtually parallel to, the shire boundary. The continuation of the boundary of Berkshire in an easterly direction along what would be the ideal line for a continuing bank and ditch deserves further enquiry. Whilst the 'Men of Somerset' and the 'Men of Wiltshire' had been pressed into constructing dykes, perhaps the 'Men of Hampshire' either failed to pull their weight or the need for it had passed. This interpretation implies that Wansdyke represents military organization based on the shire system or at least post-dating the shire boundaries (see below).

While we have presented part of our case for a middle Anglo-Saxon date for the Wansdyke frontier in its entirety, precisely when it came into being and how long it lasted are questions that remain unanswered. Competition for territory between the West Saxons and Mercians from the late seventh to the ninth centuries is complex, yet poorly documented in the grand narrative sources. The principal type of evidence from which to assess the pace and extent of overlordship exercised in the region by either polity are the series of grants relating to the foundation or endowment of religious houses, in particular those at Abingdon, Bath, Cookham and Malmesbury.

The West Saxons controlled Surrey in the 680s (as evidenced by Cædwalla's Farnham charter, S235), Kent by 694 (under Ine), along with Sussex between 690 and 710 and apparently Devon by 722, when Ine's men were fighting the Cornish.⁸ Ine granted land at Streatley in Berkshire between 688 and 690 (S252), although there is no evidence that he ever controlled old West Saxon lands in the Dorchester-on-Thames region.

A further indication of West Saxon dominance in Berkshire in the later seventh century is provided by the foundation of Abingdon abbey, apparently by a West Saxon King Cissa in the late seventh century.⁹ By contrast, the nunnery at Bath was founded by a grant made by an underking of the Hwicce, Osric, c.675 (S51). It may be no coincidence that West Wansdyke runs south of Bath and, arguably, the shire boundary was moved to the north of Bath after it passed into West Saxon hands in the tenth century. Overall, territorial claims between the two kingdoms appear less geographically significant along the western part of the frontier than further to the east where both northern Wiltshire and Berkshire witnessed a series of land grants by Mercian kings, including the estate at Long Newton (Wiltshire), which was given to Malmesbury abbey in 681 (S73). Estates in Gloucestershire at Somerford Keynes and Tetbury, both close to the border with Wiltshire, were granted to Malmesbury under Mercian auspices in the 680s (S71; S1169). Throughout the eighth century the Mercians apparently dominated Berkshire. Following Offa's defeat of Cynewulf in 779 at Bensington, the shire remained under Mercian overlordship for about seventy years.⁷⁷ We suggest that this period provides a clearer social and political context for the Wansdyke frontier than arguments presented to date. It remains to be demonstrated whether this is indeed the case, although the period following Ine's domination of southern England and the apparent West Saxon foundation of Abingdon and

⁸ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), pp.68–73.

⁹ F. M. Stenton, *The Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon* (Reading, 1913), pp.9–18 and 49.

perhaps, more precisely, the immediate period following the West Saxon defeat at Bensington, deserve serious consideration.

By 850 diocesan geography followed the northern boundaries of Somerset, Wiltshire and Berkshire, while the post-Danelaw reorganizations saw just Wiltshire and Berkshire united by the creation of the See of Ramsbury in 909. Viewed on this scale it is possible to visualize how north Wiltshire and west Berkshire at least stand out as a cohesive topographical area, defined by downland. Indeed, David Hill's map of places visited by Mercian kings up to 871 shows only one location, Glastonbury (798), south of our projected frontier, while to the north royal visitations come close to the line (Fig. 2.4).⁷⁸ Similarly, Hill's mapping of the itineraries of West Saxon kings up to 871 shows only Chippenham north of our suggested frontier (Fig. 2.4).⁷⁹ Both Mercian and West Saxon kings were present at Chippenham in 853 for the marriage of King Æthelwulf's daughter to King Burhgréd of Mercia, following their joint campaign against the Welsh in the same year (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle s.a.* 853). In a diplomatic and administrative sense our view of the Wansdyke frontier as a major political boundary, however shortlived, is corroborated, bearing in mind that such distribution maps lack the details and circumstances of individual visits over a long period.

⁷⁷ Stenton, *Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon*, p.50. ⁷⁸ Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, p.83, fig. 145. ⁷⁹ Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, p.83, fig. 146.

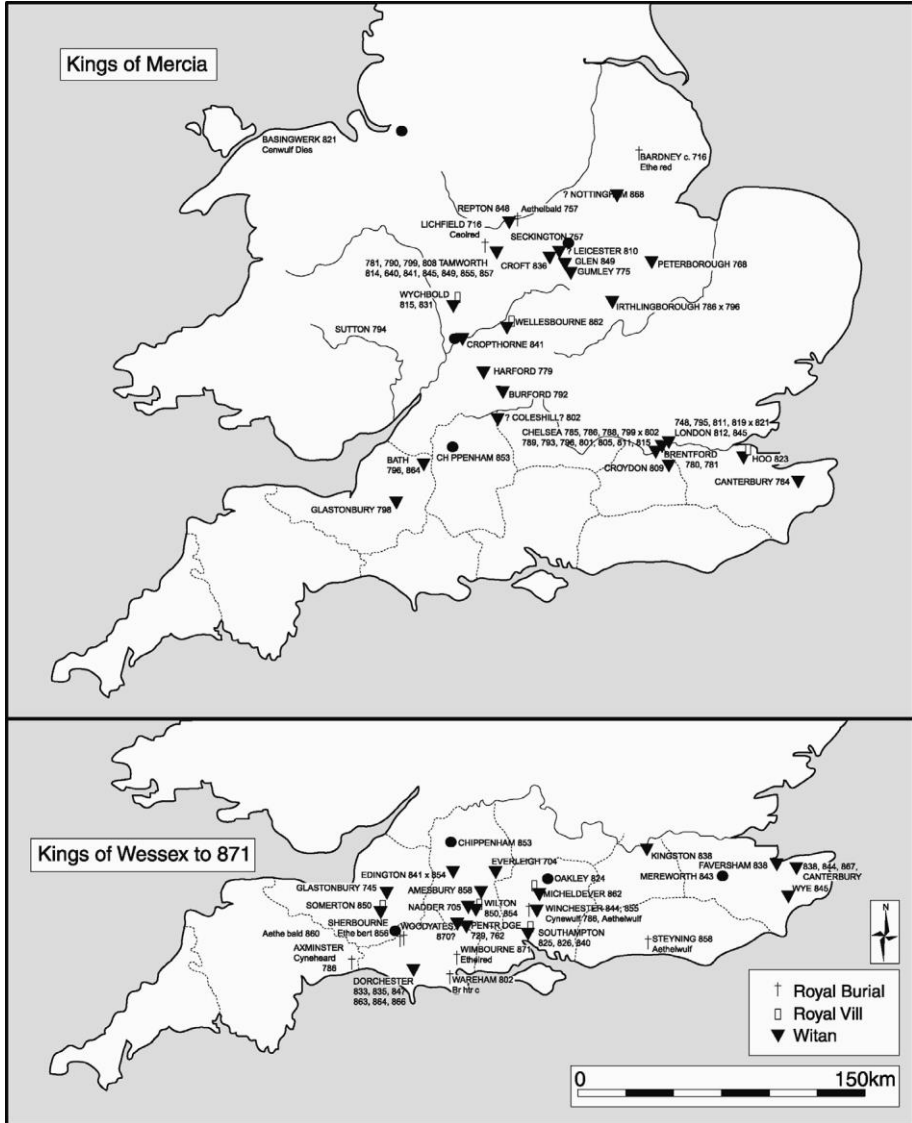


Figure 2.4. Itineraries of Mercian and West Saxon kings up to 871 (after Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*).

The Administrative Background to the Wansdyke Frontier

Charter material, chronicle references and other Anglo-Saxon diplomatic have been mined regarding the nature of military obligation and drafting labour, and

taxation from the eighth to eleventh centuries.⁸⁰ Hill's comparison of existing earthworks with projected lengths based on the Burghal Hidage assessments shows a remarkable correlation.⁸¹ Although of early tenth-century date, the Burghal Hidage is thought to relate to a scheme of national defence implemented by King Alfred.⁸² It relates to the assessment and/or upkeep of thirty-three fortifications (*burhs**) in southern England, broadly demarcating the extent of West Saxon power between AD 911 and 919.

Attached to each fort is a hidage assessment ranging from 2400 hides* for Wallingford to as few as 100 for Lyng, Somerset. Of relevance here is the 'Calculation' appended to one surviving version.⁸³ Stating the ratio of men required to construct and/or maintain stretches of earthwork, the document specifies four men for the construction of a 'perch' of earthwork (English perch = 5.5 yards, Germanic perch = 5.16 yards). Thus, the projected lengths of fort walls could be deduced from the hidage assessments granted to each. Hill set about applying this theory to archaeological reality and met with a surprising degree of success.⁸⁴ With the exception of Bath, Chichester and Exeter (most likely owing to the fact that these had existing Roman walls), the actual lengths of fort walls came within a 5% margin of error from those projected from Burghal Hidage assessments.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ N. P. Brooks, 'The Development of Military Obligations in Eighth- and Ninth-Century England', in *England before the Conquest*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), pp.69–84; N. P. Brooks, 'England in the Ninth-Century: The Crucible of Defeat', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 29 (1979), 1–20; N. P. Brooks, 'The Administrative Background to the Burghal Hidage', in *The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications*, ed. D. Hill and A. R. Rumble (Manchester, 1996), pp.128–50. ⁸¹ D. Hill, 'The Burghal Hidage: The Establishment of a Text', *Medieval Archaeology*, 13 (1969), 84–92.

⁸² M. Biddle, 'Towns', in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. M. Wilson (London, 1976), pp.91–150 (p.124).

⁸³ D. Hill, 'The Calculation and the Purpose of the Burghal Hidage', in *Defence of Wessex*, ed. Hill and Rumble, pp.92–97.

⁸⁴ Hill, 'Burghal Hidage: The Establishment of a Text'. ⁸⁵ Hill, *Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England*, p.85.

Burghal Hidage forts are so regularly spaced and accurately reflexive of their dependent hinterlands that this 'scheme' fits with what is known of the administrative capabilities of King Alfred. Yet, was Alfred drawing from and revising an existing system? Did this levy, providing the exact ratio of men to fort wall, have its origins in an earlier period? In *Beowulf*, for example, Hrothgar summons men from far and wide to adorn the wallsteads of his palace at

Heorot.⁸⁶ Is this a poetic echo of the reality of the Burghal Hidage? *Beowulf* is now promoted as an eighth-century work again.⁸⁷

Contemporary with Alfred, Charles the Bald issued a series of capitularies as part of his Edict of Pîtres (880s) calling for the construction of fortresses and bridges along with guard duty in his Frankish realms ‘according to the ancient custom and that of other peoples’. Charles maintained a diplomatic mission in England headed by the port-reeve of Quentovic and would have been no stranger to English military activity.⁸⁸

Charter evidence shows that Mercian kings were exacting a similar levy in the eighth century.⁸⁹ The *Trinoda Necessitas* comprised three common obligations: service in the *fyrð* (military service), work on bridges, and the construction of fortifications.⁹⁰ Although found in a spurious charter of King Cædwalla of Wessex (AD 680 x 688) the first genuine reference features in a charter of Offa to his *minister* Æthelmund (793 x 796, S139). They describe necessary labours from which no one might be excused.⁹¹ These services are first required in response to the Danish threat in charters of the Mercian Kings Cenwulf (811, S168) and Ceolwulf (822, S186). The first explicit West Saxon reference to military obligations is dated 847 in a charter of King Æthelwulf (S298).

Charter evidence suggests that obligations to undertake public works of defence existed before the reign of King Alfred. To what extent, however, did Alfred adapt these to suit his system? If the origins of ‘boroughwork’ and the *Trinoda Necessitas* lie in the eighth century, as the Mercian charters demonstrate, can the same be argued for the ratio of four men for every perch? That the Calcu-

⁸⁶ *Beowulf*, ed. J. Alexander (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.37. ⁸⁷ M. Lapidge, ‘The Archetype of Beowulf’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 29 (2000), 5–41. ⁸⁸ D. G. Russo, *Town Origins and Development in Early England, c. 400–950 A.D.* (Westport, CN, 1998), p.207.

⁸⁹ Brooks, ‘Development of Military Obligations’. ⁹⁰ W. H. Stevenson, ‘Trinoda Necessitas’, *English Historical Review*, 29 (1914), 689–702. ⁹¹ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp.286–87.

lation is attached to only one of the surviving versions of the Burghal Hidage suggests that it may be of separate diplomatic identity, unrelated in origin to the

list of forts.¹⁰ Hill has demonstrated the merits of isolating the Calculation from the Burghal Hidage by applying it to Offa's Dyke.¹¹

Can the Calculation be applied to Wansdyke or to the two sections of earthworks? What size of labour force and land unit would be required to construct, for example, the most continuous stretch of earthwork, at 19.5 km, from Morgan's Hill to New Buildings? This distance equates to approximately 21,500 yards. With the Calculation in mind, such a distance divides into approximately 3900 English perches (5.5 yards). With four men required for each perch, the requisite number of hides is 15,600. Burghal Hidage totals for Hampshire (3520), Dorset (3060), Somerset (2613), Wiltshire (4800) and Devon (1534 with Cornwall, perhaps an externally enforced but nominal levy), when combined, provide a grand total for Wessex of 15,527 hides.

Of course, juggling figures can result in a convincing correlation between defensive monument and territorial context, but what we have attempted to show is that construction of the earthworks of the Wansdyke frontier required military organization on a scale equivalent to that of the burghal system of the late ninth and tenth centuries. When viewed in such a light, Wansdyke seems less isolated from its kindred artefacts, Offa's Dyke and the Burghal Hidage forts.

The Development of Settlement in a Frontier Zone

Patterns of settlement provide further valuable insights into the changing nature of the delineation of communities from the late Roman period. While not a single Roman-period estate in England can be mapped on the ground, the distribution of settlements known archaeologically reveals a dense and stratified pattern based on villas*, some with outlying farms, upland settlements and small towns. With regard to East Wansdyke, the settlement pattern to the south of the dyke is one of regularly spaced farms on the chalk scarp facing south but close to the dyke itself. To the north there is extensive settlement around Avebury, along the Kennet valley to the east and on the west-facing scarp of the Marlborough Downs.¹² Very few of these sites have revealed early medieval activity and then

¹⁰ A. R. Rumble, 'Diplomatic Sub Sections', in *Defence of Wessex*, ed. Hill and Rumble, pp.69–74 (p.70).

¹¹ Hill, 'Construction of Offa's Dyke', p.142; Hill and Worthington, *Offa's Dyke, History and Guide*, pp.116–18.

¹² Pollard and Reynolds, *Avebury: The Biography of a Landscape*, p.154, Fig. 63.

only in the form of a few sherds of chaff-tempered pottery which has a fifth- to tenth-century date range in the region. Although the late Roman farm on Overton Down excavated by Peter Fowler has revealed high-status occupation into the early fifth century, evidence for the continuity of the Roman settlement pattern beyond that period is non-existent.¹³

The lack of influence of Roman towns on the later pattern of urban centres is illuminating. As described above, at its maximum extent the Wansdyke frontier arguably runs from Avonmouth near Bristol to the southern boundary of Berkshire, which is itself a creation of a top-down planning measure running in a more or less straight line to the county boundary with Surrey and the River Thames. One of the most distinctive features of this corridor is the consistent failure of Roman towns along its length (with the exception of Bath) to develop into postRoman towns, as is common in other regions. From *Abonae* (Sea Mills near Bristol) through *Verlucio* (Sandy Lane near Calne), the newly discovered Roman small town at the foot of Silbury Hill (near Avebury), *Cunetio* (near Marlborough), and indeed *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester) on the Berkshire/Hampshire border, former Roman centres apparently entered terminal decline at the end of that period. *Verlucio*, the Silbury settlement and *Cunetio* failed, yet they were replaced by three more or less equally spaced small towns by the tenth century. This aspect demonstrates at least that the physical geography of Roman central places was fundamentally changed between the two periods.

Major Early Medieval Frontiers

A profitable approach is to consider how Wansdyke compares with the form and extent of other major frontiers. An obvious parallel can be drawn with the Antonine Wall in southern Scotland, of the mid-second century, a short-lived frontier built of turf on a stone base.¹⁴ Clearly there is a Roman milieu within which such a boundary feature can be fitted. By contrast, however, the Wansdyke frontier incorporates features of a varied character: earthworks, roads and major topographical features such as watercourses. Early medieval parallels are close to hand.

Offa's Dyke is no longer seen as a continuous earthwork, but as part of a boundary that incorporated woodland, waterways and other topographical

¹³ Fowler, *Landscape Plotted and Pieced*, p.104.

¹⁴ P. Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981), pp.194–202.

features.⁹⁷ Similarly, the course of the Danelaw boundary of later ninth-century date is famously described in the text known as Alfred and Guthrum as running ‘up the Thames, and then up the Lea, and along the Lea to its source, then in a straight line to Bedford, and then up the Ouse to Watling Street’.⁹⁸ Both these latter frontiers were drawn up on a grand scale as measures designed to define space over great distances by substantial political entities. Wansdyke fits with the general character of these frontiers and appears to reflect the mindset of the larger middle Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with regard to how they separated themselves from their neighbours. It is worthy of note here that in virtually all other contexts (for example settlements and burial location) the precise physical definition of space in social terms became significant again from the late sixth century, but more commonly during the seventh and eighth centuries.⁹⁹

What was the social reality of living in a major frontier zone? Did populations either side of the Wansdyke frontier view themselves as Mercians or West Saxons, or were they articulated by supralocal communities, such as the hundred? Were individual settlements considered to be the lowest common denominator?

The nature of early medieval frontiers has been considered from a documentary perspective in a series of European studies pertinent to this discussion.¹⁰⁰ Barrow’s essay on the relationship between frontier and settlement in the AngloScottish border region notes how ‘the Border was an artificial creation, the product of a series of compromises or bargains negotiated with little regard for either the inhabitants or even the geography of the region through which its line was patiently drawn’. The degree to which the line of the frontier fluctuated between the tenth and mid-twelfth centuries is of interest with major topographical features determining limits at any given time.¹⁰¹

The field archaeology of the Wansdyke frontier exhibits exactly what might be expected of such a frontier, particularly with regard to the relationship of the

⁹⁷ Hill and Worthington, *Offa’s Dyke, History and Guide*. ⁹⁸ The Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, known as AGu I, is printed in *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, ed. A. J. Robertson (Cambridge, 1922). ⁹⁹ Reynolds, ‘Boundaries and Settlements’. ¹⁰⁰ R. Bartlett and A. Mackay, eds, *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Oxford, 1989). ¹⁰¹ G. Barrow, ‘Frontier and Settlement: Which Influenced Which? England and Scotland, 1100–1300’, in *Medieval Frontier Societies*, ed. Bartlett and Mackay, pp.3–21 (p.4).

dykes to estate boundaries apparently ignored when the county boundary between Berkshire and Hampshire was created. The failure of Roman towns to regenerate along the Wansdyke frontier finds useful parallels further afield. For example, in northern Italy in the early Middle Ages, Gian Petro Brogiolo has

noted that territories quickly dominated by their neighbours exhibit a high degree of central place continuity, while those in regions of longer-term dispute do not.¹⁰²

One of the most intriguing questions is why the Wansdyke frontier is so obscure in documented terms. It was clearly intended as a major undertaking by a polity based to the south, yet with regard to the earthworks, it has left little trace on the documented administrative geography of the landscapes that it crosses, nor does it feature explicitly in the cosmology of the more shadowy accounts of subRoman Britain found in Gildas, and then re-related in Bede and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. It can be tentatively proposed that the Wansdyke frontier was the first of three successive West Saxon frontiers in central and southern England (Fig. 2.1). The second is the Thames, which became relevant, in this context, once Berkshire and North Wiltshire were safely consolidated into Wessex by the ninth century. It can be no coincidence that the Thames rather than the Danelaw frontier appears to be the concern of military planners with regard to the Burghal Hidage forts along its course. For those that see the Burghal Hidage as simply a reshuffling and augmentation of earlier arrangements, the defensive nature of the Thames frontier is perhaps best seen as that succeeding the Wansdyke line once firmer boundaries became established between Wessex and Mercia. The Danelaw boundary represents the third major frontier under consideration.

The physicality of the Wansdyke frontier can be read as an articulation of communities at the level of the embryonic state. For a short period, imbued with meaning related by name to a heroic ancestor, the boundary line must have promoted the forging of a West Saxon identity in early England.¹⁰³

¹⁰² G.-P. Brogiolo, 'Towns, Forts and the Countryside: Archaeological Models for Northern Italy in the Early Lombard Period', in *Towns and their Territories between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. G. P. Brogiolo, N. Christie and N. Gauthier (Leiden, 2000), pp.299–323 (p.310).

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