

# Assembly practices in 10th-century England: continuities and innovations in military mobilisation

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## Abstract

This contribution outlines evidence for the development during the tenth century in England of an important local administrative institution known as the ‘hundred’. It argues that the origin of the hundred is related directly to that of regional strongholds—burhs—that were created during the West Saxon kings’ wars with the Vikings. In this development, hundreds together with burhs, can be regarded as superseding earlier systems of administration and military organization, aspects of which can be revealed by archaeological and place-name research. In turn, the emergence of hundreds, as a dense network of local administrative units, represented a significant moment in the territorialisation of royal power. Governance shifted from being an open system comprising a variety of different community forms and processes to one that was fully ordered, regulated, and part of the quotidian experience of local people.

## Keywords

Anglo-Saxon; hundred; assembly places; territory formation; military landscape

The ‘hundred’ is first mentioned in a mid-tenth-century source, commonly known as the ‘Hundred Ordinance’, surviving in Old English in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, manuscript 383, and in two Latin versions, the *Quadripartitus* and in the *Consiliatio Cnuti* (Whitelock 1955: 393). The text describes the schedule and procedures of the hundred court, suggesting that there were specific locations for regular four-weekly assemblies that were used to settle disputes, conduct trade, impose fines and other punishments, and—importantly—mobilize armed posses (effectively war bands) to enforce the law (Liebermann 1903: 192–194). Hundreds were usually named after the place where courts were held, so they were both a system and a geographical entity.

Later sources emphasise the importance of this institution. Commissioners working on Domesday Book, the great survey of landholding and taxable assets completed for William the Conqueror in AD1086, collected information through the hundred court. In the completed survey all entries are listed firstly under subdivisions of the country known as ‘shires’, and then subdivisions of the shire, usually referred to as ‘hundreds’, but in parts of the north and east called ‘wapentakes’ (Stenton 1971: 505; Loyn 1974: 1; Williams 2014). Using evidence in Domesday Book, the physical extents of hundreds can be approximated. By plotting named villis within each, supplemented by the boundaries of estates, parishes, and hundreds mapped at later dates, the approximate extents of 812 hundreds can be determined (Thorn 1989; Brookes 2020). The resulting plot shows us that, at least south of the River Humber, these hundreds formed a dense pattern of local districts, which, since shire courts only met twice a year, were the main way by which people had contact with royal government (Loyn 1974: 1) (Figure 6.1).

The origins of the hundred are much debated. The Hundred Ordinance is generally believed to belong to the reign of Edgar in the mid-tenth century and there is only one clear reference to hundreds before

that – in legislation issued by King Edmund, circa AD939–40, again referring to the organisation of armed groups to pursue thieves (III Edmund, clause 2; Chadwick 1905, 239–48; Stenton 1971: 292–301; Whitelock 1955: 393; Molyneux 2015: 141–157; Lambert 2017: 133, 229). It should be noted that seventh-century Merovingian laws similarly refer to *centena* ‘hundreds’ as both geographical areas and the posses that a *centenarius* led in pursuit of thieves (Molyneux 2015: 144). Despite this, recent authors like George Molyneux and Tom Lambert have focussed more on the legal and mercantile dimensions of hundreds which they regard largely to be an innovation of the mid-tenth century, whilst acknowledging that some kinds of territorial entities probably existed since early in the Anglo-Saxon period (Molyneux 2011: 84; 2015: 146–155; Lambert 2017). Supporting their view is additional landscape evidence that suggests that

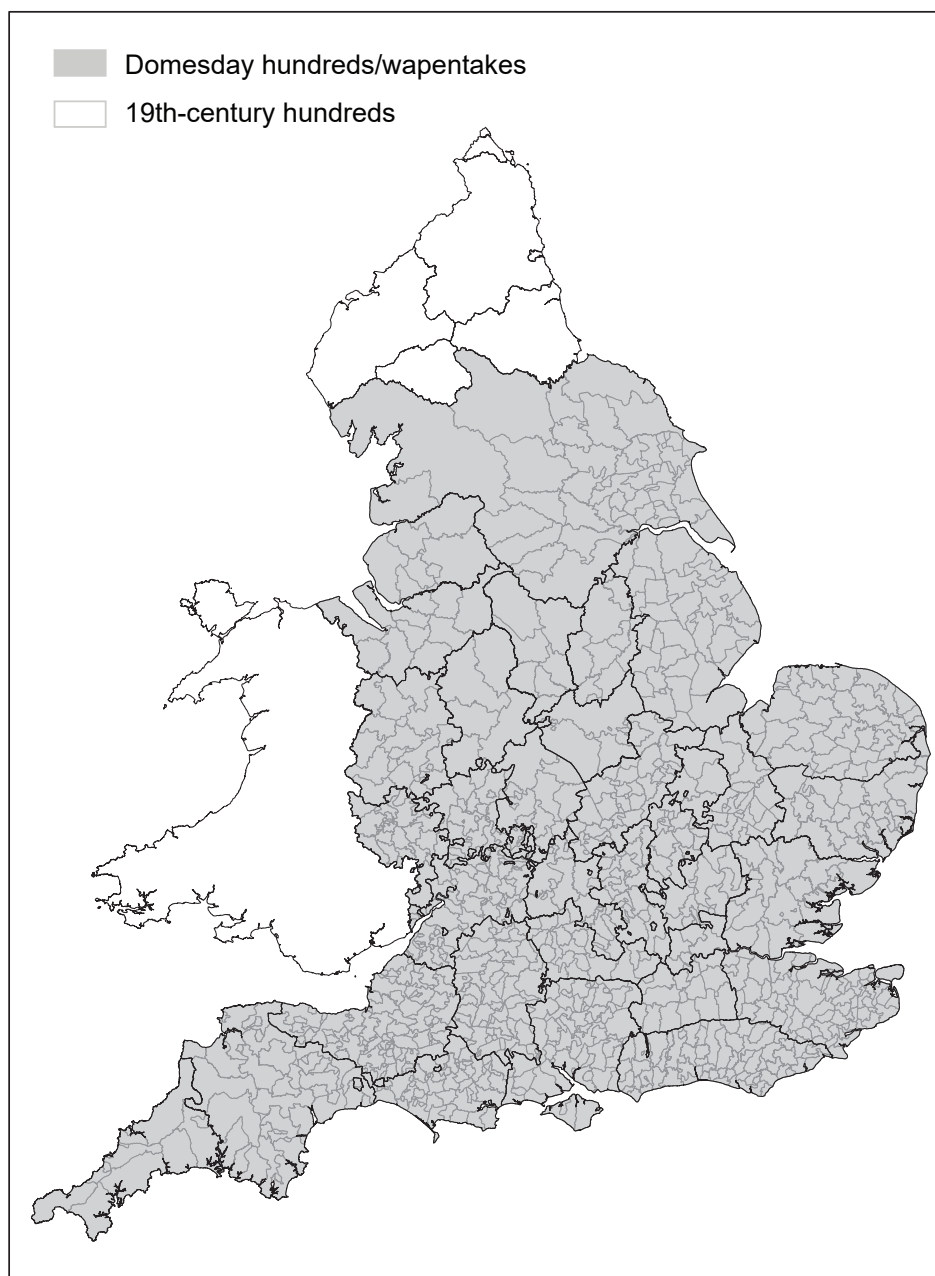


Figure 6.1. Shires and hundreds reconstructed from evidence in Domesday Book.

hundreds were a relatively late development. Some areas in Kent, for example, had yet to have hundreds at the time of the Domesday survey (Lawson 2004), while in parts of northern England, twelve-carucate ‘hundreds’ appear in the early twelfth century as supplementary divisions of wapentakes (Round 1895: 196-204; Stenton 1910: 89).

In trying to narrow down their origins, we can compare the pattern of hundreds with other territorial entities that we know of from early sources. Bede, for example, writing in the early eighth century, refers to types of territories using the Latin terms *regiones* and *provinciae* (e.g. Bede *HE* II.14, III.20, IV.13, IV.19, V.19, trans. Colgrave and Mynors 1969; Campbell 1979). Such territories may on occasion have been relatively well defined. Both *regiones* and *provinciae* are often named with reference to geographical features such as rivers or important central places, and are co-areal with geographical basins defined by watersheds, and these factors allow us to reconstruct some of them. Perhaps the most widely known is the *regio* of the *Hroþingas* in Essex. The extent of this putative ‘folk’ grouping—the land of ‘Hroða’s people’—is argued to be represented by an adjoining cluster of eight parishes all of which are named

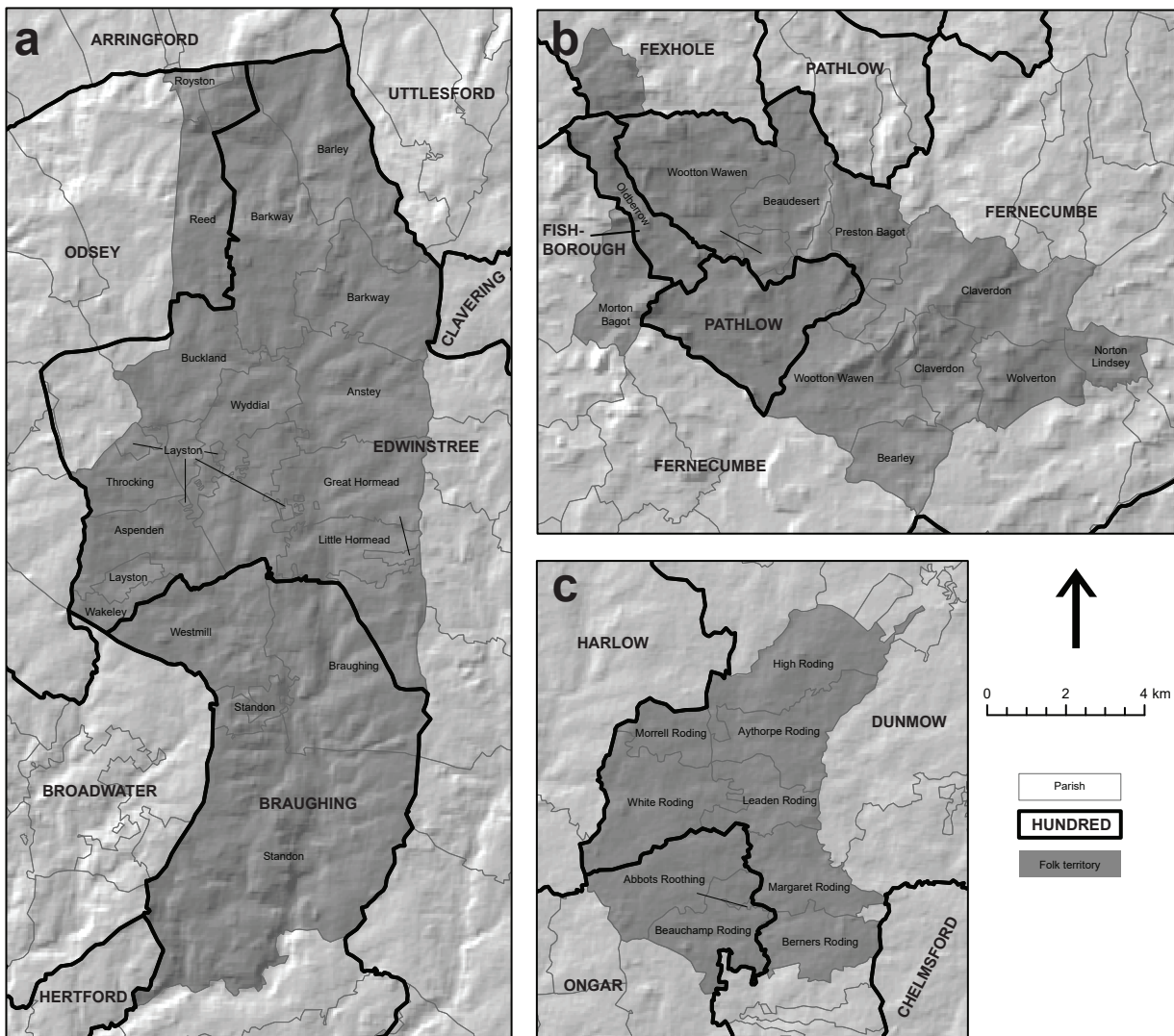


Figure 6.2. Some well-known ‘folk’ territories and their relationship to Domesday hundreds: a) Braughing; b) Stoppingas; c) Roding.

‘Roding’ lying either side of the River Roding and extending to the watershed of the river basin (Bassett 1989; 1997). By combining the evidence from landscape, administrative boundaries, and place-names, scholars have postulated the existence of a number of similar territories, such as the ‘folk-territories’ of the *Stoppingas* and *Braughing* (e.g. Bassett 1989; Blair 1991: 22-24; Brookes 2011; Rippon 2012: 186-191; Williamson 2013) (Figure 6.2).

Significantly, the existence of these territories appears to belong to a chronological horizon predating the administrative geography recorded in Domesday Book – by AD1086 the Roding parishes lay in two different hundreds (Dunmow and Ongar), neither of which preserves the name of the *Hroþingas* (Reaney 1935, map of hundreds and parishes). Likewise, many other postulated territories, such as those of the *Stoppingas* and *Braughing*, are not respected by later hundredal divisions. Indeed, in scale most ‘folk-territories’ are significantly larger than hundreds. From a survey of such known entities, Stephen Rippon has suggested that they typically cover 250–400 sq. km (2012, 151), while the average size of hundreds south of the River Humber is just 105 sq. km. In keeping with this observation, it is notable that only few (c. 4%) Domesday hundreds incorporate community names in Old English *-ingas*, *-sǣtan* ‘a dweller, resident, inhabitant’ or their semantic equivalents (Ekwall 1962; Baker 2015a), and even here the impression is that hundreds were a late attempt to formalise, or reconstruct, earlier arrangements rather than fossilise existing ones. Similarly, except when they converge along natural topographical features such as waterways and watershed boundaries, do hundred boundaries respect the extents of putative groups (*pace* Williamson 2013: 868). In form and function hundreds would seem to represent an administrative innovation largely ignoring earlier ‘folk-territories’. When and how then did the hundred come about?

A key innovation in the extension of royal administration would seem to have been the ‘shire’ (in Old English *scīr*) – the larger unit of territorial assessment used to organise the Domesday survey. In the south of England, at least some of these shires (e.g. Essex, Kent, Surrey) comprised the extents of kingdoms in existence by the seventh century, but elsewhere in Wessex they seem to have originated as subdivisions of the kingdom administered through different royal estates (Keynes 2014). A notable example of this is the putative ‘small shire’ of *Hylthingas* – a territorial unit apparently created to serve the emporium of *Hamwic* (Saxon Southampton) in the late seventh or early eighth centuries (Eagles 2015: 129). This ‘small shire’ would seem to be a precursor to a wider system, rolled out over the eighth century, of more extensive shires apparently administered and taking their names from their principal estate centre, e.g. Dorset-shire (Dorchester), Hampshire (Southampton), Somerset-shire (Somerton), and Wiltshire (Wilton).

The key function of the shire, at least in its earliest form, appears to have been the organisation of armed forces (Molyneaux 2015: 165). Indeed, it is this function that links the shire in Wessex with those originating as early kingdoms, as forces were answerable to the leadership of regional ealdormen, the term given to subordinate regional military leaders (Lambert 2017: 116-117). In areas absorbed by Wessex, the ‘identity’ of these regional military units remained that of pre-existing systems of mobilisation and authority under client kings or their equivalent (e.g. the ‘people of Kent’), whereas in Wessex military organisation had devolved to shires and their ealdormen. The earliest examples of shire units being used in this way appear in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ASC hereafter, trans. Garmonsway 1972) during the ninth century, when the men of *Wilsǣte* (AD 802), *Sumorsǣte* and *Dornsǣte* (AD 848), Hampshire and Berkshire (AD 860) are called into battle. What the shire, therefore, enabled kings to do, was to regulate and lock in at a regional scale a military response to external threats.

Using landscape archaeology and place-names the broad military contours of this shire system can now be sketched out. The ASC accounts suggest that shire units were assembled *ad hoc* under their local ealdorman for a specific task (a single battle or rapid succession of battles). Recently John Baker and

I (2013a; 2016) have argued that places where these shire-level units were mobilised are visible in the distribution of places incorporating the Old English place-name element *here* ‘army’, mustering sites named in early sources, and a class of assembly place combining these two types of evidence, which we have called ‘hanging promontories’ (Figure 6.3).

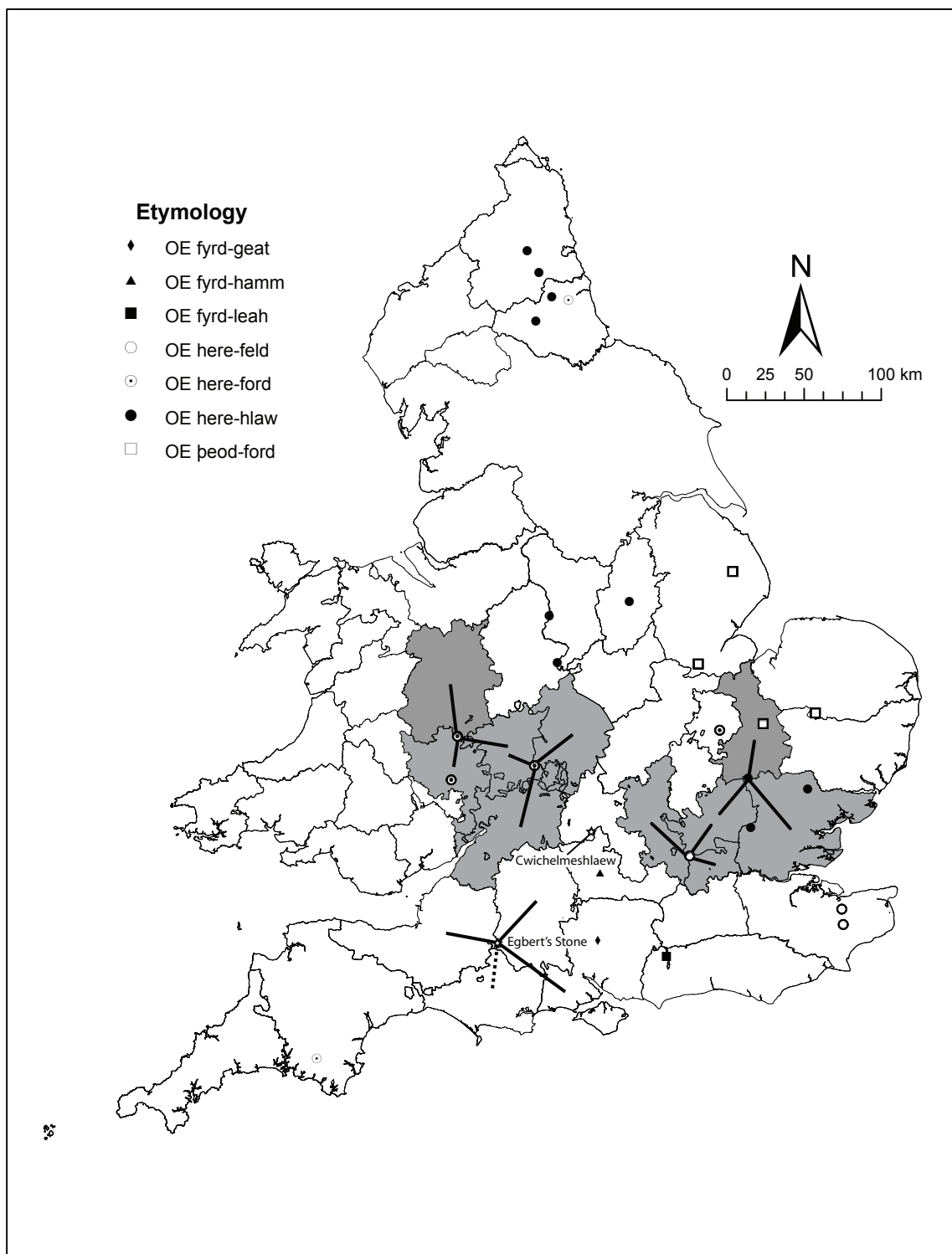


Figure 6.3. The shire system of military mobilisation.

These sites have a very distinctive landscape character, combining a number of topographical features as distinctive ensembles. However, they stand out not only for their idiosyncratic form but importantly also through their association to major territorial boundaries. Each ‘hanging promontory’ lies on or near to a shire border and is orientated so as to provide panoramic views across its associated shire. Each was connected by major routes to the adjacent shire estate centres, and in the case of at least one—the shire-level mustering site of Scutchamer Knob, on a former boundary of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, recorded in the ASC (AD 1006) and as a venue for a shire assembly in AD 990–2 (Sawyer 1968: cat. no. 1454; Gelling 1973–6, II: 481–482)—it was also at the head of an extensive relay of beacons stretching from the centre of England to the south coast (Hill and Sharp 1997). The impression gained from these locations is that they were deliberately chosen to function as part of a shire-level system of military mobilization.

While kings could be expected to draw on their own military retinues in times of war, clauses in charters and other sources suggest that there existed also a system by which fighters from the free population could be enlisted for military service (Hollister 1962; Abels 1988). In all likelihood these places—hanging promontories—served as the locations for such military mustering. This system was clearly still being used in AD 878, when—as the ASC tells us—Alfred the Great “rode to Egbert’s Stone to the east of Selwood, and there came to join him all Somerset and Wiltshire and that part of Hampshire which was on this side of the sea.” Egbert’s Stone can reasonably securely be identified as a hanging promontory site of Moot Hill Piece, adjacent to the county boundary between Dorset and Somerset, north-west of Bourton (Baker and Brookes 2013a).

If this was the system of mobilization in existence at the beginning of the Viking wars, by AD 893, the mustering of armies was starting to take place through a different system – that of the *burhs* ‘strongholds’. The physical links made between levies and strongholds is implied by the ASC entry for that year: “the king had divided his army in two, so that always half its men were at home, half out on service, except for those men who were to garrison the *burhs*”. From now on fighting forces were to assemble and coordinate from fixed military hard points. Two groups of burhs are commonly distinguished: the 31 strongholds listed in the so-called Burghal Hidage, distributed across Wessex, and usually associated with King Alfred; and two sets of burhs established across the English Midlands during the second decade of the tenth century by Alfred’s children, Edward and Æthelflæd, whose roles in their construction are recorded in various versions of the ASC (Hill and Rumble 1996; Lavelle 2010; Baker and Brookes 2013b).

In a recent book, Tom Lambert (2017) has argued that the development of Anglo-Saxon legal practice should be seen as lying on a parallel trajectory to that of military service. While military matters largely fell on ealdormen—and by implication the shires—non-military affairs, such as taxation, and the organisation of justice and labour services, relied on royal officials—reeves—operating through a system of rural assemblies and estate centres. In the tenth century, Lambert argues, one can discern in the legal material, attempts made by kings to centralise the system of reeves on burhs. What he does not elaborate on is that this same system of burhs was of course also a reform of military service—away from *ad hoc* mobilisation via the shire system—to more permanent service based on key strongholds.

If Lambert is correct in his assessment, we can thus see burhs as an experiment by kings to graft together military and non-military rights and services at burhs. However, Lambert does not see the origin of the hundred as part of this development but as a secondary innovation replacing the system based on burhs. This seems to me unlikely on two counts. Firstly, many shires had more than two burhs (e.g. Wiltshire which has four strongholds—Winchester, Wilton, Malmesbury, Chisbury—listed in the Burghal Hidage), and many, particularly in the Midlands, sit awkwardly within their shires. It is therefore unlikely that the earlier system of mobilisation based on shires continued in use for very long after AD 893. It is tempting instead to posit the establishment of a relatively regularly structured

system of multi-functional military musters more or less contemporaneously with, and supplementary to, a similarly regular system of strongholds. Coupled with the observation that hundreds as described in the Hundred Ordinance had clear military functions, it seems very likely that the hundred was this system and that the burh and the hundred constituted part of the same development. Indeed, this link between burh and hundred is made explicit in the earliest sources. So, the legislation Edgar issues at *Wihthordesstan* probably between AD966 and AD975, states that witnesses assemble ‘either in a *burh* or in a hundred’ (IV Edgar 6, 10; Molyneaux 2015: 122).

In this regard it is an interesting feature of hanging promontories that they do not typically give their names to the hundred in which they are located, and an alternative site can often be identified from place-name evidence. Thus, the site of Egbert’s Stone is within the hundred that takes its name from the great estate centre of Gillingham (Baker and Brookes 2013a).

Another hanging promontory gives us a sense of how the change from one system to the other was implemented. Kiftgate Court lies on the steep western scarp of the Cotswold Hills and has all of the typical features of a hanging promontory site as well as lying just a kilometre from the Gloucestershire and Warwickshire border. The name seems to derive from the Old English \**cȳft*, ‘coming’, meaning ‘meeting, conference’, and *geat*, ‘gate’ – a toponym often associated with significant breaks in terrain, as would be appropriate for this location (Ekwall 1957; Smith 1964: 261-262; Baker and Brookes 2013a; 2017). But there is a second location known as Kiftgate Stone on a ridgeway on top of the Cotswold escarpment some 5 km to the south-west. This was the meeting-place of the hundred in fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (Smith 1964: 261-262). Here it seems we have the preservation of the name Kiftgate from an earlier shire-level hanging promontory to a later roadside hundred meeting-place, demonstrating how the transition from one system to the other could sensibly be achieved.

Secondly, and returning to my earlier point about the regularity of some hundred groups, is the spatial relationship between hundreds and burhs. Several authors from F. W. Maitland onwards have suggested that connections between rural manors and burghal properties revealed in later sources such as Domesday Book can be used to demonstrate how obligations towards maintaining and defending burhs were tied to the landholders of their hinterlands, their ‘burghal territories’, at the times of their foundation (Maitland 1897; Halsam 2012).

Many of these burghal territories are visible in the pattern of hundreds surrounding burhs. David Roffe (2009) has convincingly argued that there is considerable continuity in the numbers of hundreds assigned to a burh across the sources from the early tenth to late eleventh centuries. Likewise, Jeremy Haslam has reconstructed primary burghal territories by plotting the links between rural manors and burhs (Haslam 2012; 2016). John Baker and I have similarly argued that burghal territories can be identified, particularly in the English Midlands, by reconstructing groupings of hundreds and their meeting-places, and how these were arranged around burhs of the early tenth century (Baker and Brookes 2013c). A case-in-point is Huntingdonshire. As reconstructed from Domesday evidence it displays a strikingly regular form, comprising a subdivision into four equal parts with meeting-places of similar type, all arranged in pie slices around the burh of Huntingdon, with an archetypal military mustering site Hertford—‘army ford’ directly beside the burh. The regular laying out of the shire extended to the value of each hundred: in each of the four quarters the Domesday vills add up to around 200 hides, perhaps indicating their origins as ‘double hundreds’. Indeed, an authentic Peterborough charter of AD963–84 mentions ‘the two hundreds that belong to Normancross’ (Sawyer 1968: cat. no. 1448). When originally constituted, perhaps in the early tenth century, the total value of Huntingdonshire is therefore likely to have been about 800 hides; an allocation similar to that made for the shire in the County Hidage of the early eleventh century.

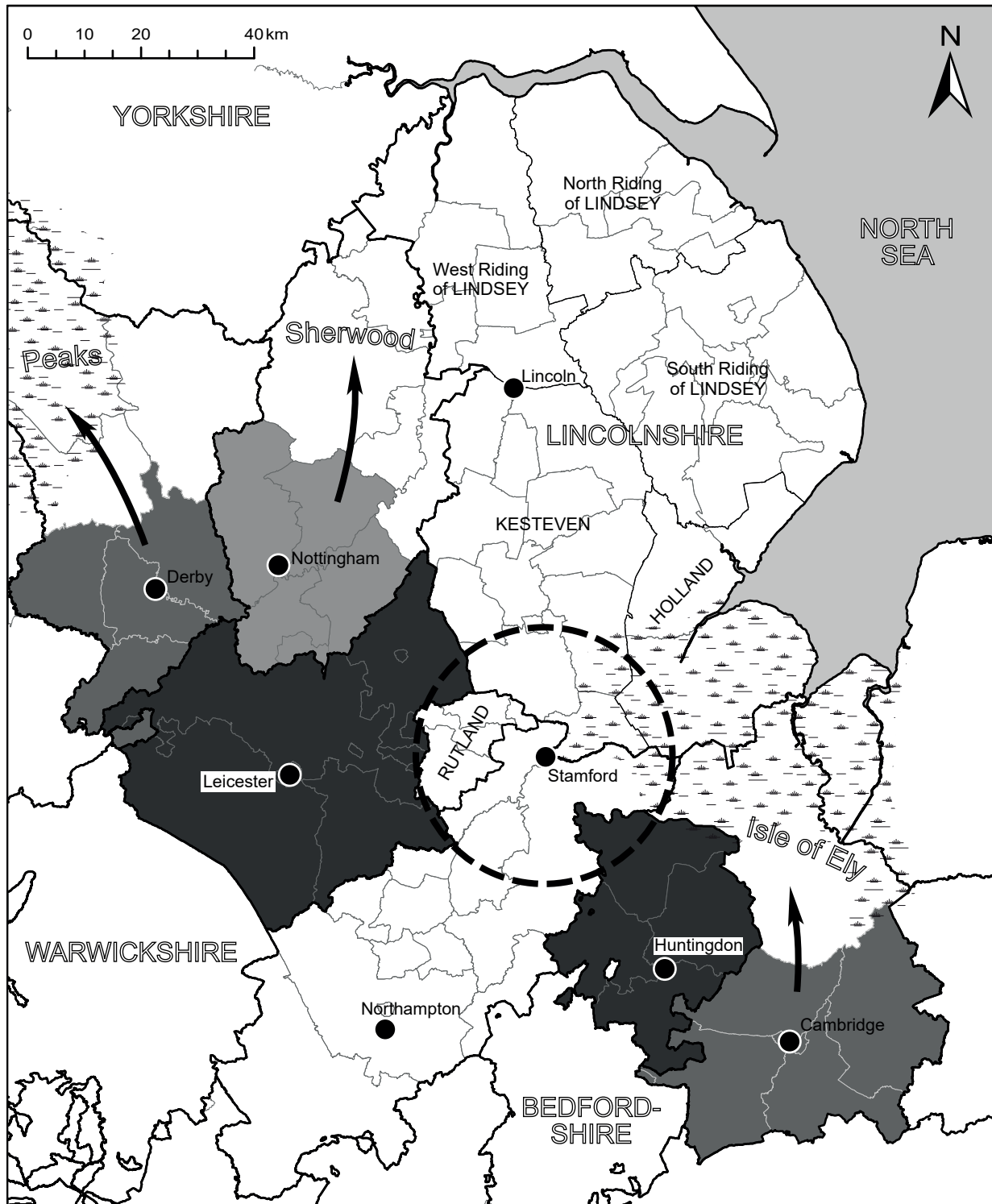


Figure 6.4. Burghal territories and shires in Midland England.



Several similar burghal territories can be found around each of the other Midland burhs. Discrete territories based on burhs can be reconstructed within what would later become the shires of Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire, and comprising the whole of Huntingdonshire and Leicestershire (Figure 6.4). In each case these burghal territories are remarkably regular in form and Domesday hidation strongly suggesting they were the result of a single moment of administrative re-planning, probably datable to the early tenth century when the burhs were founded by Alfred's children (as previously argued also by Loyn 1974). However, it is intriguing that these burghal territories did not provide for total administrative coverage. As reconstructed in the east Midlands, there were many gaps in the system that would only come to be defined administratively at a later date (Baker and Brookes 2013c; Baker 2015b). Apparently, in the first phase of establishing new military protocols, West Saxon political control could only exert itself directly over a proportion of the conquered populations. It is the subsequent rolling out of the hundred system across the whole of territorial England and its diverse communities that provides the context for the Hundred Ordinance and the apparent explosion in roles that the hundred takes on in the middle of the tenth century.

Early medieval kingship rested largely on military power, and systems enabling this clearly existed from an early date. What is so distinctive about the development of the burh-hundredal system is its break from earlier modes of raising armed forces. Initially, any military leadership over units greater than the select warband (*fyrð*) of elite warriors would be personal and impermanent, but as kings sought to maintain more permanent military forces, and perpetuate territorial hegemony, new systems of mobilization and deployment emerged. The development of the hundred thereby represents a key moment in the evolution of royal power, where administration shifted from being an open system comprising a variety of different community forms to one that was fully territorialized, with people's obligations no longer tied solely to lineages and regional identities, but now fully attached to a particular burh-hundred.

Although the creation of a burghal system represented a significant innovation in military mobilisation it is unlikely that kings had to invent entirely new structures for mustering forces; rather, they had to find a way of reconfiguring existing systems of shire-level mobilisation to a new focus on burhs. For fighting forces used to mustering at specific places this innovation did not require a significant shift in practice. What differed was the regularity and frequency of meetings and the clearer organisation of men into local companies. I have argued here that the 'hundred' was this new system of mobilisation, and that its origins must accordingly be seen as directly contemporary with that of burhs – that is to say in the decades around AD 900.

It is argued here that landscape analyses offer a fruitful avenue for research in this area, allowing us through detailed landscape and place-name research to identify systems of military mobilisation and communication. Placing this evidence alongside written sources suggests that we are seeing in documents of the mid-tenth century an expansion of royal power both in terms of territorial coverage and function to encompass law, administration and mercantile activities. By the end of the century, at least across most of central and southern England, there had emerged a dense pattern of supralocal law and administration; but military organisation was and remained an important dimension of this system. To ignore how this changed over the course of the tenth century is to ignore one of the fundamental issues about kingship and the development of states.

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