

Anglo-Saxon to Domesday

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The archaeological record concerning 5th and 6th century Cirencester is inconclusive. One interpretation has the town suddenly abandoned in the fifth century, possibly due to an outbreak of a virulent plague and the surviving inhabitants taking refuge in the amphitheatre. This might explain the hundred of Chesterton occurring just outside Cirencester, the fortified amphitheatre being the ‘chester’ taken by the Anglo-Saxons at the battle of Derham in 577.¹ According to the account of the battle Cealwin and Cuthwin, kings of the West Saxons, fought against the Britons led by Commal, Condidan and Farinmail, at Derham (*Deorham*) and took many camps from them, including Cirencester.² An alternative interpretation sees a continuation of civic life at Cirencester, such that it was the location of a school in the Roman tradition attended by Gildas in the sixth century. This would explain why Cirencester was thought worth taking in 577. The absence of Cirencester from the list of the twenty-eight cities of Britain recorded in the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum* may be explained by a misinterpretation of *Kaer Lirion*, *Lerion* or *Lergum* for Leicester rather than Cirencester.³

In the 7th century Cirencester became a frontier garrison against the Mercians.⁴ In 628 the West Saxon kings Cynegils (611-?642) and Cwichelm (d.636) fought against the Mercian king Penda (626/632-655) near the town of Cirencester (*quod vulgari sermone Cirnceastre*).⁵ Having fought until nightfall the two camps came to an agreement, by which Penda took Cirencester. The largely Christian territory of the Hwiccas were thus incorporated into pagan Mercia.⁶ The conquered territory, organised into the new principality of the Hwicce, was entrusted to a leading Northumbrian family.⁷ A burial site excavated in 1909 may have been that of a warrior who accompanied Penda to Cirencester in 628. The Mercian period of occupation is attested to by coin finds. Two early pennies (675-750) have been found at Cirencester, as also two coins from the reign of the Mercian king Cenwulf (796-821), one struck at Rochester and the other at London.⁸

Antiquarian tradition has the Anglo-Saxon minister at Cirencester founded by a Saxon named Alwyn in the reign of King Egbert (802x839).⁹ Archaeological evidence suggests the traditional dating of the foundation may be relatively accurate.¹⁰ The Danish invasions of the 9th to 11th centuries impoverished Mercian churches through tributes and Danegeld contributions, as well as physically if the churches stood in the path of a pagan army. In 879 the army of pagans left

¹ A. Selkirk, ‘Cirencester. Looking at 12 years of excavation in the town’, *Current Archaeology* 29 (1971), 147-9; A. McWhirr, L. Viner & C. Wells, *Romano-British Cemeteries at Cirencester* (Cirencester Excavations II, Cirencester, 1982), 27.

² J.A. Giles (ed.), *A-S Chron.* (1914), 12.

³ A. Breeze, ‘Gildas and the Schools of Cirencester’ 90 *The Antiquities Journal* (2010), 131-138.

⁴ Rudder, *History and Antiquities*, 8.

⁵ *A-S Chron.*, 16; A. Campbell (ed.), *The Chronicle of Aethelweard* (London, 1962), 1-56.

⁶ E.I. Cambria, *The Eosteric Codex: Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (2015), 85.

⁷ H.P.R. Finberg, *Early Charters of the West Midlands* (1961), 167.

⁸ *Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds* [<https://emc.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/>].

⁹ J. Collinson, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset* (Bath, 1791), II, 191.

¹⁰ D. Wilkinson and A. McWhirr, *Cirencester Anglo-Saxon Church and Medieval Abbey* (Cirencester Excavations IV, Cirencester 1998), 15.

Chippenham, as they had promised, and went to Cirencester (*Cairceri*) in the southern part of the land of the Hwicce. The army stayed at Cirencester for a year. On leaving Cirencester the army went to the East Angles (*ad Orientales Anglos perrexit*).¹¹ The Danes probably raided Cirencester again in 893 and in 1015, when the Anglo-Saxon church may have been damaged.¹²

In the 10th and 11th centuries Cirencester was visited by several of the English kings. King Aethelstan held a council at Cirencester in 935, attended by the sub-kings Constantin, Owain, Hywel, Idwal and Morgan. Aethelstan's charter records the location as 'in the city once built by the Romans called Cirencester (*Cirnecester*).¹³ In 956 King Eadwig (955-959) made a grant at Cirencester to Worcester minster of five hides of land at Phepson in Worcestershire with salt-furnaces.¹⁴ A synodical council held at Cirencester in 984 found Aelfric Cild (*dux, fl.990x1006*) guilty of high treason. He was expelled and his lands at Wormleighton, South Cerney and Farnborough forfeit to King Aethelred (978-1016).¹⁵ At Easter in 1020 King Canute held a mycelgemot/meeting at Cirencester where Aethelweard (*dux, fl. 1018-1020*) and Eadwig ('King of the Ceorls', put to flight in 1017) were outlawed.¹⁶

At the time of Domesday Alwin the sheriff held two hides of land in Cirencester among his extensive Gloucestershire holdings.¹⁷

¹¹ S. Keynes and M. Lapidge (eds), *Alfred the Great* (Harmondsworth, 1983), 67-110; *A-S Chron.* 54-5.

¹² Wilkinson & McWhirr, *Cirencester Anglo-Saxon Church and Medieval Abbey*, 15.

¹³ P. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1968), no.1792.

¹⁴ Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, no.633; *Hemingi Chartularium ecclesie Wigorniensis*, 333; cf. Delia Hooke, *Worcestershire Anglo-Saxon Charter Bounds* (Woodbridge, 1990), 167.

¹⁵ Sawyer, no.937; *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, VI, n.1312.

¹⁶ *A-S Chron.*, 108; Rudder, *History and Antiquities*, 11.

¹⁷ J. Morris, *Domesday Book Gloucestershire* (1982), 31; <https://opendomesday.org/name/alwin-the-sheriff-of-gloucestershire/>.