Formation of the English kingdom in the 10th century

In *The Formation of the English Kingdom in the Tenth Century*, George Molyneaux investigates how territories under the dominion of the Cerdicing kings of Wessex developed into a clearly defined and conquerable kingdom. The book’s fundamental argument is that the period 871 through 1066 cannot be treated as a cohesive block of history. Rather, the institutions that shaped the later Anglo-Saxon state – as well as the ‘maximalist’ style of royal administration that relied upon them – were products of the later part of this period. Where traditional scholarship holds that such innovations were rooted in the age of Alfred (871–99) and Æthelstan (924–39), Molyneaux makes a compelling case that there is little evidence for a centrally directed royal administration or a precisely defined territorial kingdom before at least the 960s. This study challenges the assumption that a cohesive kingdom emerged in the late ninth or early tenth century, contending instead that the administrative advances of Edgar’s reign (959–75) made it possible for England to coalesce into a stable, governable, and precisely-defined territorial kingdom.

The book opens with an Anglo-Saxon Chronicle annal for 1017, which proclaims the Danish conqueror Cnut sole ruler of *eallon Angelcynnes ryce*, ‘all the kingdom of the English’ (p. 1). The perceived existence of a kingdom by *c.*1017 is the starting point for Molyneaux’s examination of when exactly this polity emerged, what territories it encompassed, and who exercised dominion over it. Working from the premise that ‘by the early eleventh century, there was an English kingdom’ (p. 1) that could be conquered as a cohesive unit, the introductory chapter is concerned with the definition of ‘kingdom’ before Cnut’s conquest. Molyneaux considers the medieval vocabulary applied to English territory by medieval authors (notably the Domesday survey’s *Englaland* and *Anglia*, as well as Old English *rice* and Latin *regnum*), contending that these terms rarely indicate a precise geographical area but were often applied to loosely-defined territories or populations of mixed ethnic or national identity. Despite this all-encompassing terminology, Molyneaux argues, the desire to unify peoples or regions into a territorial kingdom was not in itself a driving objective for Cerdicing rulers. Instead of seeking an ideological explanation for geopolitical developments, Molyneaux works backwards from the territorial boundaries of Domesday England, questioning how and when these borders – and the authority of the kings who enforced them – solidified. The following chapters seek to provide answers by evaluating the limits of and advances in royal power and territorial control, from the late ninth through the tenth century.
Chapter one opens with a survey of territorial acquisition and consolidation of royal authority by Cerdicing and Anglo-Scandinavian kings from c.850 through 1066. Molyneaux is clear that the development of a kingdom was neither linear nor inevitable: control of the north shifted among authorities during the tenth century, and the Cerdicings’ southern territory was repeatedly divided between rival kings and æthelings. Accordingly, Molyneaux proposes that early tenth-century expansion should not be understood as conquest. Rather, it was ‘domination’ – the establishment of lordship – achieved through military aggression and the savvy disposal of acquired lands. The political divisions of early tenth-century Britain meant that the Cerdicings did not face widely-coordinated resistance to their expeditions: although it took time to overcome so many opponents, the dynasty’s military strength enabled them to defeat or coerce rivals into submission. Once territory was taken, though, Molyneaux argues that the Cerdicings often left it in local control. Regional rulers typically retained their property and positions under Cerdicing overlordship, while confiscated lands were redistributed to friendly magnates or churches. Molyneaux persuades that the establishment of lordship was a key objective, motivated in part by Scandinavian footholds in the British Isles. By securing loyalty from regions and peoples who might make the Cerdicings vulnerable, either by allying with or submitting to Scandinavian magnates, Alfred and his successors sought to insulate their interests from foreign encroachment.

The next two chapters assess how Cerdicings consolidated and exerted power outside of formal administrative structures, from the late ninth to the mid-tenth century. Chapter two focuses on relationships with high-ranking magnates. First, Molyneaux considers these subjects’ obligations to the king, both in the south, where the Cerdicings’ power was most secure, and in other areas of Britain, where their control was less consistent. Across these territories, magnates submitted to Cerdicing authority by attending royal assemblies and fulfilling military commitments to the king – evidence that the Cerdicings were in fact able to command powerful subjects. The second part of chapter two examines how the Cerdicings secured this obedience. Molyneaux recognizes oaths as a significant tool, but he is skeptical that an oath of loyalty was systematically exacted from every subject. Instead, he suggests that oaths were rendered by magnates on their people’s behalf in exchange for royal patronage. The promise of lands, appointments, movable wealth, or royal support in dispute resolution kept magnates reliant on the Cerdicings and enhanced the perception of unique royal authority. Still, the Cerdicings’ most important resource was military strength. Their unrivaled wealth mean that they could raise forces to inflict extensive damage, and Molyneaux argues that it was the threat of violence – not administrative structures – that provided a basis for Cerdicing power through the mid-tenth century.

Where chapter two is concerned with magnates, chapter three focuses on the Cerdicings’ control over ‘ordinary people’ (p. 86), individuals who had minimal contact with the king or his agents. The first part of the chapter considers this population’s obligations to the king, including labor and dues, arguing that these were mediated through local magnates rather than royal administrators. Notably, Molyneaux argues that the construction, upkeep, and defense of Alfred’s *burh* network were supervised by local authorities; he also proposes that royal dues based on property values were calculated by landowners themselves, not royal officials. The remainder of chapter three examines the implementation of royal legislation from Alfred’s reign through Æthelstan’s, suggesting that law enforcement was largely left to local authorities. Molyneaux contends that *ports* and *burhs* – which law-codes designated as judicial centers, supervised by royal reeves – had limited influence over the wider population. Although kings may have formalized efforts to punish wrongdoing at these royal centers, such activity was predominantly undertaken by local magnates and communities who already had enforcement procedures in place, not by royal agents. Molyneaux contends in this chapter that kings appropriated existing processes and structures to establish authority over wider populations, taking advantage of existing territorial divisions, networks cultivated by regional magnates, and local initiatives such as policing and assemblies. By maintaining relationships with influential individuals, who extended the reach of royal authority, the Cerdicings controlled the population without a formal administrative apparatus.

The eventual emergence of a centralized royal administration is the focus of chapter four, the longest in the
book. Molyneaux demonstrates that key administrative advances – which are traditionally associated with Cerdicing ascendancy – emerged in the later tenth century, not in the time of Alfred or his immediate successors. The argument concentrates on developments during the reign of Edgar: the implementation of monetary reforms, which imposed uniformity in minting and reissuing coinage; the establishment or royal appropriation of territorial administrative units including hundreds and wapentakes, which assumed a new prominence in Edgar’s law-codes and administrative initiatives; and the cultivation of new royal agents including sheriffs and abbots of reformed monasteries, who extended the reach of Edgar’s authority, particularly in the north. These innovations all had an enduring impact on royal power, and Molyneaux argues that they were vital steps toward the cohesiveness of the 11th-century kingdom. The chapter concludes by questioning why these administrative initiatives were concentrated in the later tenth century, proposing that Edgar and his successors needed more stable institutions to efficiently collect resources and muster military force – concerns which became increasingly urgent after Edgar’s death, as Scandinavian incursions escalated. Yet Molyneaux also contends that administrative change was driven by ‘moral motivations’ (p. 187) and new ideologies of Christian kingship, promulgated primarily by Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester. According to this logic, the same impetus which led Edgar to patronize England’s monastic reforms compelled him to initiate administrative reforms: as Christ’s vicar, the king was responsible for ensuring correct order on earth.

Chapter five is concerned with long-term implications of later tenth-century administrative change. Molyneaux argues that the geographical boundaries of Domesday England are generally set by the end of Edgar’s reign, with a royal administrative apparatus operating from the Channel to the Tees. This structure is taken for granted by Edgar’s successors through the Norman Conquest and beyond, with the administrative advances outlined in chapter four cementing the authority of kings over that of local or regional magnates. However, these developments had clear territorial limits. Where earlier Cerdicings had claimed control over a broad (if poorly defined) geographical dominion, the implementation of bureaucratic structures toward the end of the tenth century sharply delineated the extent of the king’s practical power. This shift from an ethnic or pan-Britannic conceit of rulership to a territorial model based on Domesday-era boundaries emerges in this chapter as a central theme of the book. In particular, Molyneaux contends that Alfred and his pre-Edgarian successors had little interest in ruling a unified geographical unit: all-encompassing kingship over subject peoples did not require a cohesive territorial kingdom; it was only developments of the later tenth century that enabled the creation of the latter.

While late tenth-century advances largely enhanced kings’ authority within their territorial dominion, there were also restraints placed on their power. Although kings wielded greater control over the wider population, they continued to deal with their highest-ranking subjects on a personal basis, with privileges granted or withheld at will. Molyneaux considers how this type of ‘royal arbitrariness’ (p. 218) was curbed among Edgar’s successors, with Æthelred II submitting to his subjects’ demands in 1014 and Cnut formally renouncing Ethelred’s abuses a few years later. The political vulnerability of these kings at times of crisis, along with an increasing emphasis on Christian kingship, led to greater scrutiny of royal behavior and more pronounced calls for the kingdom’s elites to be treated consistently – a trend which established precedent for post-Conquest developments, including Magna Carta. Nevertheless, it was the administrative developments of the later-tenth century that allowed for the formation of ‘a single and discrete political entity’ and established the kingdom of England ‘as a territorial unit, distinct both from the island of Britain, and from the full area of English habitation’ (p. 231). Molyneaux concludes that over the course of the tenth century, ‘what shifted was not so much the Cerdicings overall aims, as certain of their means of pursuing them’ (p. 231). The study closes by considering whether England’s tenth-century developments were exceptional. After reviewing political analogues across eastern and western Europe, Molyneaux concludes that the development of the English kingdom was neither exceptional nor normative. Rather, it was ‘part of a wider pattern of change’ (p. 245) in political power and government throughout the medieval West.

The Formation of the English Kingdom presents a meticulously researched and logically argued thesis. Molyneaux draws upon a broad corpus of information in his analysis, offering nuanced examinations of the evidence while acknowledging gaps and silences in the sources. Two strands of argument in this book make
it a particularly valuable contribution to the scholarship of later Anglo-Saxon England. First, the study traces the development of pre-Conquest rulership from a ‘minimalist’ model, in which kings held limited control over the territories and populations they purported to rule, to a ‘maximalist’ one, in which kings wielded considerable practical authority buttressed by stable institutions. Molyneaux ably demonstrates how the Cerdicings’ administrative apparatus evolved across the tenth century, providing a welcome counterweight to recent studies which have examined royal power by focusing on law and justice or religious and political ideologies. The consolidation of a territorial kingdom and emergence of centralized royal authority was not inevitable, as Molyneaux makes clear, and it is useful to have the power of the ‘late Anglo-Saxon state’ presented as a continuum. Second, this study largely credits Edgar – rather than Alfred or his early tenth-century successors – with consolidating the institutions that made England a cohesive, conquerable unit in the 11th century. Certainly, Molyneaux shows that kings from Alfred onward appropriated existing administrative structures and resources to enforce their authority, with Edgar building on the groundwork laid by his royal predecessors. Yet by identifying the late tenth century as the moment in which the Cerdicings’ dominion coalesced into a kingdom, and by framing this transformation as a product of administrative innovation during this period, Molyneaux persuades that in discussions of the emergence of the English kingdom, ‘the focus of the historiographical limelight should be broadened beyond the likes of Alfred and Æthelstan’ (pp. 13–14).

Molyneaux is justified in challenging the traditional historiography of this period, and much of the book serves as an evidence-driven response to long-held scholarly impressions. A by-product of this forceful approach, however, is that elements of the argument are presented in black-and-white terms. This is true of the book’s focus on geographical boundaries. Molyneaux’s consideration of how the English kingdom developed as a territorial unit is important, especially since Cnut and William each appear to have understood their conquests in geographical terms; moreover, it is significant that the most effective ‘maximalist’ manifestations of pre-Conquest royal administration were concentrated within the territorial limits of Domesday England. Still, the early English polity was not defined by territory alone, and measuring the kingdom’s early tenth-century development against 11th-century boundaries is problematic. The study rejects the premise that Alfred aimed to rule ‘a kingdom coterminal with the area inhabited by the English’ (p. 206) or that the early Cerdicings’ ambitions ‘were focused on the creation of a kingdom with bounds based on those of existing English habitation’ (p. 209). This is surely correct, but if Alfred and his successors did not envision a kingdom defined by geography, how exactly did they understand their *rice* or *regnum*? The ambiguity of these terms in pre-Conquest texts (which Molyneaux repeatedly acknowledges) suggests a medieval understanding of royal dominion that encompassed more than geography. Even if Alfred did not solidify the boundaries of a territorial kingdom, his reign was marked by efforts to legitimize and standardize Old English, document the history of English-speaking people, and create a cohesive legal community with innovative legislation. While Molyneaux argues effectively against the idea of unification for its own sake, this sort of royal initiative indicates a commitment to cultivating a collective identity that was not strictly tethered to geography. By treating the ‘English kingdom’ predominantly as a territorial unit, Molyneaux misses the opportunity to investigate how contemporary concepts of ‘kingdom’ manifested across the later Anglo-Saxon period, especially as royal power and administration evolved.

A similar critique can be advanced for the book’s treatment of ideologies of kingship and national identity. The study seeks ‘to refute the claim that the eleventh-century English kingdom represented the realization of an earlier blueprint’ (p. 13), and Molyneaux makes a strong case that the unifying ideals which underpinned Bede’s *gens Anglorum* or Alfred’s *Angelcynn* cannot sufficiently explain the military, political, and administrative advances of the tenth century. Still, the focus on late tenth-century developments draws attention to a disparity, in the preceding decades, between ideals of strong kingship over a cohesive political unit and the Cerdicings’ ability to implement those ideals effectively. In this context, it is troubling that early hints of later administrative developments – minting initiatives in the reign of Æthelstan, for example, or a reference to a hundred as a royal administrative unit in a law-code of Edmund (939–46) – are minimized: Æthelstan’s ‘putative aspirations for uniformity’ in coinage would ‘have been pretty modest’ compared to Edgar’s (p. 136), while the hundred ‘played no significant role in late ninth- and early tenth-century kings’
attempts to implement their legislation’ (p. 146). Instead, early tenth-century rulers are shown to pursue wide-ranging authority, with Alfred and his successors establishing loose dominion over much of the British Isles through military force and personal relationships; it was this expansion of lordship, Molyneaux contends, that set the groundwork for later administrative advances. Political ideologies of this early period – including ideas of royal exceptionality, all-encompassing rulership, and national identity – are construed as a result, not a cause, of expansion. By the end of the century, by contrast, Molyneaux presents the reforming ideologies of Bishop Æthelwold as the driving force behind Edgar’s administrative innovation (187–94). While this interpretation may give too much credit to a single advisor, the bigger question is why ideology would exert such significant influence during Edgar’s reign and so little in the preceding generations. If ideals of religious unity, or English identity, or all-encompassing kingship were not themselves motivations for political action in the earlier period, how did they contribute to the agendas of tenth-century kings? Why was the rhetoric of expansive rulership – over the Anglorum Saxonum, the Angelcynn, the Englisc, or all of Britain – so consistent across the period covered by this book, when political reality was so variable? The tension between kings’ aspirations and their ability to realize these ideals is implicit throughout the study, and a more direct assessment of how these ideologies shaped (and were shaped by) the notion of a ‘kingdom’ would have balanced the book’s territorial and administrative arguments.

Despite these critiques, however, a particular strength of this book is its author’s commitment to look beyond medieval ideology in his examination of the English kingdom. The Formation of the English Kingdom situates geopolitical developments in the British Isles within a wider European context, providing compelling parallels which indicate that the initiatives of Cerdicing kings were ‘neither typical nor exceptional’ (p. 234). Molyneaux’s clear focus on administrative institutions and territorial boundaries offers an important new perspective on the development of the late Anglo-Saxon state, making a strong case that traditional periodization schemas – which often treat the years from 871 through 1066 as a single unit – ought to be reconsidered.

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