THE BRETWALDA KINGS

I. G. MAIER

During the past fifty years much has been done by specialist students of archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, philology, literary-sources, palaeography and place-names to illuminate certain aspects relating to those four centuries of Anglo-Saxon history which begin with the adventus saxonum and culminate in the reign of king Alfred. In the field of purely political history, however, one particular aspect requires a little further illumination.

As yet, no serious investigation has been made in relation to the problem of the correct political and historical position of the seven or eight Anglo-Saxons to whom the mysterious title Bretwalda was given. To be able to discover a precise meaning for this term, its origin and correct form, and the nature of the position and powers held by the kings to whom it was applied, might enable us to achieve a greater understanding of the political organization of the early Heptarchy period.

Unfortunately, most previous examinations and elucidations of this term have been connected with pre-conceived and somewhat unrelated theories on the part of those historians who have used the word Bretwalda. Thus, for example, H. M. Chadwick\(^1\) argued backwards in time from the known to the hypothetical by using the pseudo-imperial connotations inherent in the Bretwaldaship as proof for his contention that the Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement — at least down to the battle of Mons Badonicus — was executed by a large, united military force under a single leadership. To Chadwick, the later Bretwalda was the direct successor of this pan-tribal general directing the invasion and settlement. On the other hand, F. M. Stenton\(^2\) reversed this chronological progression, seeing in the Bretwaldas less of a Continental origin, and regarding them as the informal precursors of the later de iure monarchs of Anglo-Saxon England. Accordingly, Stenton equated the indefinite term Bretwalda with the later and definite regnal style rex Britanniae. A third variation was provided by M. Deansley,\(^3\) who suggested that the Bretwaldaship was something approximating to a constitutional emperorship. According to this view, the Bretwaldaship was an office created by the Germanic invaders solely in order to revive or to perpetuate the imperial Roman concept of a single ruler at the head of a centrally-governed dioecesis Britanniarum. Into the same category falls a fourth opinion, which sees in the Bretwaldaship an early and insular equivalent of that form of constitutional and elective imperial title and office which was later part of the structure of the medieval Ottonian empire. Another group regards the Bretwaldas not as “rulers of ( Anglo-Saxon) Britain,” but rather as “rulers of the (indigenous or aboriginal) Britons.”

Each of these interpretations is mutually-exclusive of the others, and each is perhaps based upon a different translation of the word Bretwalda. Since the problem relating to these kings turns largely upon the text tradition of the title Bretwalda, it is proposed to re-examine here the relevant literary sources together with the philological implications of the term. This method is perhaps preferable to one which would accept one of the aforementioned interpretations at the outset.
and then attempt to discredit the other views. Therefore, our general aim will be to examine the term Bretwalda both philologically and with reference to the relevant literary sources, because whereas several equally competent translations of the term are possible, the correct alternative can only be selected after some reference to the nature and position of this form of kingship itself.

At the outset it should be pointed out that the term Bretwalda comes from a different source to that which provides the list of kings to whom this title is applied. Although variant forms of the title have been known to occur in spurious charters, the only genuine reference to the term Bretwalda occurs in a single entry of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (hereafter A.S.C.) under the annal entry for 827 (corrected to 829). Here it is applied to a list of eight kings, seven of whose names were copied directly from a similar list in Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica. Now Bede, who himself, of course, nowhere uses the English word Bretwalda, speaks of seven Anglo-Saxon kings each of whom held, individually, a kind of superior power or “sovereignty” over a fairly wide geographical area outside their own kingdoms. Speaking of one of these kings, Ethelbert of Kent, Bede tells us:

Ethelbert ... was indeed the third of the kings in the nation of the English (qui tertius quidem in regibus gentis Anglorum) to hold dominion (imperium) over all their southern provinces, which are divided from the northern by the river Humber . . . The first who had sovereignty (imperium) of this kind was Aelle, king of the South Saxons . . . the second, Cealwin, king of the West Saxons . . . the third, as we have said, was Ethelbert, king of the people of Kent; the fourth was Raedwald, king of the East Angles, who, even while Ethelbert was still alive, was gaining the leadership for his own race (eodem suae genti ducatum praebet, obtinuit), the fifth, Edwin, king of the Northumbrians — that is, of the nation which dwells on the north side of the Humber — who, being a prince of greater power than all other that inhabited Britain, ruled over the English and the Britons as well (maiore potentia cunctis qui Brittaniam incolunt, Anglorum pariter et Brettonum populis praefuit), the sixth, Oswald, king of the Northumbrians; the seventh, his brother, Oswiu . . .4

Thus Bede seems to be using three different terms to describe the superior power which he attributes to each of these seven kings: imperium, meaning “sovereignty,” “leadership” or “rule” and which is to be distinguished from regnum, meaning “sovereignty” or “kingdom” as applied particularly to a definite, delimited territorial domination; secondly, ducatus, meaning “leadership” particularly in the sense of “generalship” or “military general” (dux), and, thirdly, as a variant perhaps of imperium, Bede ascribes to these kings maiore potentia or “greater power.” Now it is this list of seven kings which was copied by the compilers of the A.S.C. — who added an eighth king, Egbert of Wessex — and the A.S.C. gives the Old English title Bretwalda to each of these kings possessing the imperium or maiore potentia described by Bede.

Purely from a textual viewpoint, therefore, the Bretwalda of the A.S.C. should be regarded as being a king of one of the states of the Heptarchy, who at some time during his reign held a kind of superior, especially superior military power, over any number of surrounding kingdoms. It is difficult to agree with some historians that Bede is referring to a de iure constitutional office, rather than to an ill-defined and de facto supremacy. And Bede’s definition is important because it was this definition which was used by the A.S.C. scribe. Unfortunately, there exists some difficulty in relation to this passage from Bede and textual precision is made extremely difficult by the hidden fact that Bede changes the scope of the attributed power of his kings.

The first four kings are said to have a sovereignty over that part of England “south of the Humber.” The second group of three Northumbrian kings, however, have a sovereignty extending over all of England, both to the north and to the
south of the Humber. In addition, the sixth king, Edwin, is referred to in particular as having a sovereignty over the indigenous or aboriginal Britons (presumably, though not for certain, this particular power also extended to the remaining two Northumbrian kings on the list). The problem, of course, is to know which of these particular powers was comprehended by the A.S.C. scribe and rendered under the title Bretwalda. The single, relevant A.S.C. entry reads:

King Egbert conquered the kingdom of the Mercians, and everything south of the Humber; and he was the eighth king who was Bretwalda. (Ecgbryht waes se cahteda cyning, se de Bretwalda waes.) The first who had so great authority was Aelle... [at this point follows a transcription of the list of Bede's seven kings].

Clearly, then, the Bretwalda of the A.S.C. is Bede's "holder of sovereignty": but this is as far as the comparison of the two texts will allow us to proceed. What is not certain is whether the A.S.C. scribe used the word Bretwalda to describe Bede's "ruler of the area south of the Humber," or "ruler of the area both north and south of the Humber" or "ruler of the Britons."

An obvious way to supplement this deficiency arising from textual comparison and correlation is to examine the philological implications of the word Bretwalda itself.

The common form of the word, used in all history books and adopted in this essay for the sake of simplicity, is Bretwalda. This form, however, occurs in only one of the several MSS through which the text of the A.S.C. has been transmitted. It occurs only in MS "A", the Parker Chronicle, and its copy, MS "G". If Whitelock's stemma codicum is correct, then the variant form, Bretenanwealda, in MS "C", must go back to the archetype of all the other MSS apart from "A", and must have replaced the form Bretwalda (which is simply a corrupt abbreviation) at an early date. Thus we read Bretenanwealda in "C", Brytenwalda in "B", Brytenwealda in "D" and "E", and Brytenweald in "F". This differentiation is of some importance. The words Bret- or Bryt-, when used as the component elements of a compound noun, always refer to the words "Briton" or "Britain" (as, for example, in Bret-walas meaning "the Britons of Wales," or in Bryt-land meaning "Britain"). Similarly, the nominative form Bryten refers to the geographical designation "Britain." However, whereas the prefixes Bret- and Bryt- do not change their meaning when used in compound nouns, the word bryten, when used as an adjectival prefix, does change in meaning each time it is compounded with a noun, as, for example, in bryten-rice meaning "a spacious kingdom." In such cases, where the word bryten is prefixed to another noun, it takes the form of an adjective meaning "wide," "spacious" or "extensive." Accordingly, only two particular spellings could be rendered for the translation "ruler of Britain": the first, Bretwalda, is adopted by Whitelock's first translation, but this form, as we have seen, is only an abbreviated corruption of the form contained in all other MSS; the second possible form, Breuten-wealda, does not, of course, appear in any of our MSS. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the translation "ruler of Britain" should be abandoned. For much the same reason, it is difficult to agree with Stenton, that Bretwalda, as a style, was the informal precursor of the later de iure regnal title rex Britanniae. For, apart from other considerations, the style rex Britanniae refers to a geographical area over which the first four kings in both lists could hardly have claimed to possess "sovereignty." For both these reasons, also, the variant translation "ruler of the Britons" is to be regarded as doubtful. Bede, whom the A.S.C. scribe seems to have followed, was always careful to reserve the word "Briton" for the native or aboriginal non-Germanic peoples. Clearly, then, if Bede had meant to call each of his seven kings "ruler of the Britons," he would have used the formal style rex Brittonum. However,
not only does he refrain from using this form, but he also makes no use of the
form *rex Anglorum patriae* or “king of the (whole) nation of the English,” which
Stenton’s translation would seem to warrant.

Now if we reject both the form *Bretwalda* and its translation “ruler of Britain”
or “of the Britons,” we are left to consider the variant form *Bryten-walda* or
*Brytenwealda*. The first form, if taken separately from the second, rather
than as a derivative of it, would consist of the elements *bryten-* (in a compound
noun an adjective meaning “wide,” “spacious” or “extensive”) and *-wealda*
(meaning “ruler,” derivative of *wealdan* meaning “to have power over”). The
word would thus be translated to mean “powerful ruler” or “great ruler.” White-
lock’s second alternative adopts this form with the translation “mighty ruler.”

Similarly, this form is translated by Hallam as “ruler of an extensive realm.”
Stenton, on the other hand, objects to this, arguing that *Bryten-wealda* was a
derivative of *Breten-anwealda* (MS “C”) and that, therefore, the second element
was *anwealda* meaning “sole ruler,” (being a compound of an meaning “one” or
“sole,” and *wealda* or *wald*. Stanton may very well be correct in this view, but
I see no reason why his form should replace that of the other MSS, particularly
in view of certain attendant implications not developed by him. In the first place,
Stenton gives no translation of the second compounding element in his version,
namely, *Breten-* Secondly, the form adopted by Stanton, that is *Bretenanwealda*,
occurs only in MS “C”, against which, MSS B-D-E-F give, respectively *Bryten-
walda*, *Brytenwealda* and *Brytenweald*. Now if we accept Stanton’s reading of
the second element as *-anwealda* in these three variant cases, we are left with the
form *Bryt-* *-anwealda*, which would have to be translated as “sole ruler of
Britain.” Not only would this translation be more extreme than that derived
from the corrupted abbreviation *Bretwalda*, but, purely as a translation, it could
easily be rejected as referring to an historical impossibility for the Heptarchy
period. Alternatively, if we retain our original compounding elements *Bryten-
and *-wealda* meaning “ruler of an extensive realm” no such problem would seem
to be encountered. For, in this case, the reading which Stanton has drawn from
MS “C” could be rendered entirely as it stands, namely, *Bretenanwealda*, with the
elements *bry*ten-*an-wealda* which might, perhaps, be translated as “sole ruler
of an extensive realm.” Philologically speaking, it is both impossible and un-
desirable to go much further than this. No matter which of the abovementioned
translations is adopted, be it “sole ruler” or “ruler of an extensive realm” or “sole
ruler of an extensive realm,” it would be hazardous to select one translation to
the exclusion of the others purely on philological grounds. Only an examination
of the nature of this kingship will allow us to decide whether it is profitable to
select a more specific rendition.

Associated with the question of the historical nature of this title is the question
of whether or not the word *Bretwalda* refers to a de iure constitutional title, in
the sense of an hereditary “super” kingship or elective emperiorship, or whether
it simply referred to an informal recognition by the kings of the Heptarchy that
one of their number was the most powerful ruler at any given particular time.

We have already seen that Bede uses vague expressions like *imperium* and
*maiores potentiae* instead of *regnum* because, of these three terms, only the latter
refers to a specific and delimited territorial kingdom. Secondly, there is no re-
corded authentic use of the term *Bretwalda*, whether on coins, in charters or
among formal regnai titles. We might be allowed to suppose that such usage of
the term would be a necessary pre-requisite if we were to regard it as referring
in any way to a constitutional actuality. The closest approximation found any-
where linking a Bretwalda of the A.S.C. with a “constitutional” title occurs in Adamnan’s description of Oswald, king of Northumbria, to whom he refers as totius Britanniae imperator. We may, however, safely reject this as being a reference to the actual regnal style of this king because, apart from the fact that this type of source is not regarded as being strictly “authentic” (in the sense used above), if Oswald had really carried the formal title imperator we would expect to find a reference to this in Bede. However, Bede, who was demonstrably partial towards the Northumbrian royal house, makes no such mention.

Related to this question of a de iure “sovereignty,” certain other aspects of the nature of this kingship and of the powers of its kings are worth considering.

Firstly, an examination of the regnal lists and dates reveals that the individual reigns of a number of these Bretwaldas overlapped each other. Thus, for example, Cealwin, the second king on the list, ruled in Wessex from 560 to 593 and Ethelbert, third on the list, ruled in Kent from 560 to 616. Now the A.S.C. tells us that in 568 “Cealwin and Cutha fought against Ethelbert and drove him in flight into Kent.” Presumably, therefore, Cealwin acquired his “sovereignty” in southern England as a result of this battle, and, if he continued to enjoy this power throughout his reign, it is unlikely that Ethelbert could have been recognised as being the Bretwalda until either shortly before or shortly after the death of Cealwin in 593. This example illustrates two aspects of the Bretwaldaship. Firstly, the primary pre-requisite of each of these Bretwaldas seems to have been the possession of great military power. “Sovereignty” was particularly ascribed to those kings who had fought against a neighbour, defeated him, and effectively imposed terms upon him. Secondly, it indicates that this informal “supremacy” was not necessarily enjoyed by each Bretwalda throughout his entire formal reign as king of one of the states of the Heptarchy. In view of the above-mentioned pre-requisites of these Bretwaldas, it almost goes without saying that this “sovereignty” could not be handed down from father to son, as could an hereditary constitutional prerogative; instead, it belonged to the successor only so long as, and insofar as, he could continue to assert his supremacy over those whom he may have regarded as being his “vassal kings.”

Secondly, in the A.S.C. the first recorded instance of the title Bretwalda is associated with the last king on the list. It is strange that the first seven kings are given this title retrospectively in the A.S.C. rather than in the earlier entries of this annal where the exploits of each of these kings are described and listed. Stranger still is the fact that no later references to the title Bretwalda are contained in the A.S.C., for it is precisely in the ninth and tenth centuries that England was being rapidly transformed from a Heptarchy into a monarchy. In view of this, it seems particularly relevant to suggest that the title Bretwalda, far from being an earlier equivalent of the de iure titles rex Britanniae and rex Anglorum patriae, was probably not an early Old English title of common currency at all. Indeed, despite Stenton’s argument to the contrary, I am very much inclined to think that the title was itself an invention of the Winchester scribe. It does not seem unlikely that this scribe, engaged upon the entry for 829, gave this title retrospectively to Egbert of Wessex, and then copied down Bede’s list of seven kings with the idea of giving this title some pseudo-historical foundation and in order to provide Egbert with some historical predecessors to the power of “sovereignty” he enjoyed. For this reason it is only with difficulty that the title Bretwalda can be viewed either as a common or even de iure style, far less as one which originated on the Continent in the pre-adventus period.

Thirdly, as indicated briefly above, the territorial extent of the Bretwaldas’
rule is far from certain. In describing the powers of the first four kings to whom he assigns his imperium, Bede claims that each of them was supreme “over all their provinces (i.e., of the English) south of the river Humber.” Now this expression contains a number of problems, which are, perhaps, insoluble. If, for example, Bede is claiming that all four kings ruled over the same number of English (by which he means non-British or “Anglo-Saxon”) kingdoms south of the Humber, his statement must be regarded as being of doubtful validity. If, on the other hand, his phrase “over all their southern provinces” means “those Anglo-Saxon states now south of the Humber” (referring to Bede’s own day, about A.D. 731) then he must certainly be mistaken. This second meaning would be equivalent to saying that the first four kings ruled over the entire geographical area of England which lay south of the Humber — and this is obviously what Bede meant, because in an earlier passage he makes specific mention of the extent of the imperium of Aethelbert, the third king on the list. Here Bede states:

At that time [referring to the coming of St. Augustine, that is, A.D. 597] Ethelbert was king in Kent, with very great power, for he had extended the frontiers of his empire as far as the boundary of the great river Humber, by which the southern and northern peoples of the Angles are divided.  

This must be an exaggeration because we can be certain that neither Aelle nor Cealwin possessed such a vast territorial dominion, either directly or indirectly, since during their collective reigns much of central and north-west Britain, south of the Humber, was still in the hands of the native indigenous Britons. And the power of these Britons to assert and retain their freedom was well demonstrated at the famous Battle of Mons Badonicus. Therefore, if we discount this latter definition by Bede as an exaggeration and read his earlier passage rather loosely to mean that each of his four kings had a sovereignty “over the kings of the other Teutonic settlements which existed south of the Humber during their individual reigns” we shall probably be reading his meaning correctly. But, if so, this carries with it the further and necessary amendment that the “sovereignty” of each of these first four kings extended over a territory of continually differing or fluctuating geographical proportions.

Bede’s second definition contains a greater discrepancy and its occurrence brings us to the fourth consideration, namely, that some of the listed Bretwaldas were not always the most powerful of the contemporary kings and that other kings who wielded far greater power than they have been excluded from the list. In relation to the remaining three kings, the Northumbrians Edwin, Oswald and Oswiu, we are told by Bede that their “sovereignty” comprised all of England, both north and south of the Humber, with the solitary and somewhat inexplicable exception of the small kingdom of Kent. Unqualified, this statement is quite clearly an exaggeration, if not entirely false, because during the major part of the collective reigns of these three kings (A.D. 617-670), the supreme power in Anglo-Saxon England was centred in the midland state of Mercia under king Penda, who ruled from c. A.D. 626/8-655. And, despite the fact that Penda defeated and killed Edwin and then “laid waste all the land of the Northumbrians,” his name is included neither among the powerful kings in Bede’s list nor in the later and slightly amended list of the A.S.C. Therefore, not only is Bede’s second definition mistaken, but we have also raised another problem which is most difficult to answer, namely, the reason for the total exclusion, from both surviving lists, of all those Mercian kings whose power should have demanded their inclusion upon them. Before passing on to this we may mention that the Winchester scribe of the A.S.C., when transcribing the list of Bede, apparently failed to realize that Bede’s first four kings did not exercise a very wide terri-
torial power. And it is perhaps largely due to the generalization made by this scribe that the title Bretwalda is so difficult to equate with any particular type or extent of territorial dominion. Finally, of course, this scribe followed Bede in both exaggerating the powers of the three Northumbrian kings and in omitting all reference to the Mercians.

As stated, the omission of certain of the kings of Mercia is problematical. Aethelbald (ruling between A.D. 716-755/6) was king of Mercia in A.D. 731 when Bede completed the writing of his Historia Ecclesiastica. He is not included in Bede's list of powerful kings and this despite the fact that Bede attributes to Aethelbald precisely the same sphere of influence and of power which he claims was possessed by the seven kings whom he does list. Speaking of Aethelbald, Bede says:

All these provinces, and the other southern provinces as far as the boundary formed by the river Humber, together with their kings, are subject to Aethelbald, king of the Mercians. (omnes provinciae . . . cum suis quaque regibus, Merciorum regi Aedilbaldo subjectae sunt.)

Similarly, Offa, king of Mercia from A.D. 757 to 796, gains no inclusion in the later and slightly amended list contained in the A.S.C., even though Offa was without any doubt the first Anglo-Saxon king to have complete control over all the kingdoms of the Heptarchy, including Kent. He wielded direct control and power over the kingdoms south of the Humber and was more than influential in Northumbria by virtue of marriage alliances. Not only was Offa on cordial terms with the emperor Charlemagne, but his genuine regnal titles, such as rex totius Anglorum patrisae and rex Anglorum would seem to have established a real innovation since, as far as we know, no earlier ruler had ever claimed to possess a de iure supremacy over all the nations of the English. Indeed, the phrase totius Anglorum patrisae in the regnal style refers to the “whole nation of the English” which formally included not only the Anglian nations south of the Humber but the kingdom of Northumbria as well. Some writers would like to carry this expression of de iure “imperial” authority back to Offa’s predecessor, Aethelbald, who, in a charter of A.D. 731, describes himself as

Ego Aethilbalth non solum Mercensium sed et universarum provinciarum quae communi vocabulo dicuntur Suthengli divina largiente rex. (“I, Aethelbald, king not only of the Mercians but also of all the provinces which are called by the general name ‘South English’, over whom God has set me.”)

Therefore, against the subtle contention of the A.S.C. that there was no overlord-king between Oswiu (A.D. 642-670) and Egbert (A.D. 802-839), we have direct evidence that, during this period, the overlordship was in the hands of a succession of powerful Mercian kings of whom the last two were the first to translate into fact the claims and titles to which the earlier Bretwaldas had unsuccessfully aspired. How, then, can we explain the omission? Stenton prefers to think that the omission in the A.S.C. was caused by the scribe’s mechanical transcription of Bede’s list. This viewpoint may explain why Offa is missing from the A.S.C. list, together with Penda, Wulfhere and Aethelbald; but it does not explain why these last three kings are missing from Bede’s list in the first place. Indeed, this makes it difficult to escape the unwelcome conclusion that the omission of these Mercian kings from both lists is to be explained by the existence of a direct bias against Mercia in both our recording sources — with Bede representing the Northumbrian bias and the A.S.C. representing that of Wessex.

In conclusion, therefore, we may perhaps suggest that there is something approximating to historical truth in Bede’s list and description which was taken over by the A.S.C. Although Bede’s list is incomplete, it does contain the names
of many of those kings who at some time during their reigns exercised, either an informal or actual supreme power over some of their neighbours. If informal, it might perhaps take the form of a strong king “protecting” a weaker neighbour against outside aggression. If formal, in one degree or another, it usually resulted from the conclusion of a successful war on the part of the new “overlord” who imposed such terms as he saw fit upon the defeated neighbour and retained his “sovereignty” only so long as and insofar as he was able to enforce his imposition. The definition of the “sovereignty” of these kings, as given by Bede, is in some respects exaggerated, but in most respects extremely vague and flexible. It was probably meant to be vague on purpose. Indeed, how can one accurately describe a kind of “sovereignty” which, rather than being necessarily sought or claimed by its holder, was usually attributed to him by his neighbours and subjects? And, despite the fact that the holder of this “sovereignty” might sometimes aspire to impose his authority over other kings, these kings continued to assert their independence. Furthermore, there is no instance of one of the subject kings being deposed by the holder of the “sovereignty,” nor of the annexation or permanent incorporation of one Anglo-Saxon kingdom by another before the time of Offa and Egbert. Whatever it was, then, that Bede meant to express, the A.S.C. scribe represented it by the term Bretwalda. This term, as we have seen, is probably a late invention. It occurs only once in the A.S.C., never on coins, in authentic charters or among genuine and formal regnal titles. And, since the authority and power comprehended by this title cannot be accurately defined, the title itself should not be translated more precisely than: “sole, temporary and mighty king who receives from his wide, ill-defined and informal hegemony the appellation of Overlord.” Far from being de iure, imperator, princeps, basileus or rex Britanniae, the Bretwalda of the Heptarchy period was, de facto, primus inter reges and temporarily attributed with having maiore potentia.

NOTES


18. Bede. H.E. Bk. II. ch. 5.

In view of the controversy about the constitutional status of the Bretwaldas, Whitelock’s translation of the imperii as “the frontiers of his empire” (Whitelock. op. cit. E.H.D. 1955, p.587) should be accepted only with due caution. It has been pointed out that imperium does not have the territorial connotations inherent in regnum and, therefore, fines imperii might be translated less ambiguously as “the limits of his command (sovereignty)”.
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21. A.S.C. sub anno 633. The second Northumbrian king, Oswald, was likewise slain by Penda in A.D. 642 (A.S.C. sub anno 642).


23. W. de Gray Birch. Cartularium Saxonicum. No. 214, being an original charter of King Offa of Mercia and is dated to A.D. c.774.


27. F. M. Stenton. op. cit. (1947). p.34.