Lecture 3: Kings and Kingdoms before the Vikings, 600-800- 05/10

Pre-Lecture Notes:

This lecture complements the last, looking at how kings and kingdoms became established around the time of the conversion and in the centuries that followed, down to the transformational invasions by the Vikings in the mid- and late ninth century. A single kingdom of England was still centuries away. Instead, numerous separate kingdoms competed for supremacy. Some of these are reflected in counties or regions which still form the building blocks of modern geography, such as Kent, Surrey, Sussex and East Anglia. Others, including some of the most powerful kingdoms such as Northumbria, Mercia and Wessex, have left a less obvious but still profound impression.

At the start of the period covered here, around AD 600, these kingdoms were embryonic and left little trace in writing. Archaeological evidence therefore plays a large role in defining the processes by which stable and powerful kingships came into being. Comparing the testimony of written and material evidence remains critical throughout this period, even as the seventh and eighth centuries wear on and the range of sources broadens to include a diverse range of texts: charters recording royal grants of land and privilege; laws, normally issued in the vernacular; and also saint’s lives and histories which discuss kingship. The balance of these sources is uneven, with some kingdoms being much better represented than others. This period can therefore seem challenging, but the detective work of piecing together and comparing the sources is highly rewarding, and all the more important for shedding light on a very different form of England which represents the foundation of subsequent developments.

We will look in this lecture at the forces behind the formation of kingdoms, including economic foundations of increasing complexity. This leads into how dominance ebbed and flowed between various protagonists, from Kent and Northumbria in the seventh century to Mercia and Wessex in the eighth and early ninth centuries. Outstanding figures we will meet include the saintly overlords of seventh-century Northumbria (Edwin and Oswald), and the ambitious Mercian kings who challenged them and others over the seventh and eighth centuries (Penda, Æthelbald, and Offa). We will also consider relations between Britons, Anglo-Saxons and others. Major questions we will look at in the lecture and the seminars include:

- How was authority represented in different kinds of text, such as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, charters and laws? How and why did they highlight different aspects of kingship?
- What powers and resources did kings in this period possess?
- In what ways can material remains (such as Offa’s dyke, coins and archaeological finds) contribute to understanding of government and society in this period?
- How effectively could rulers tap into the contemporary economy?
- Why was the political balance of power sometimes so fluid in England during this period? Why was it more stable at other times?
- Did relations between Anglo-Saxon kingdoms differ from interactions with Welsh/Brittonic and other kingdoms?