



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

# OFFA

ANGLO-SAXON MERCIA'S GREAT WARRIOR KING

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# Offa - King of Mercia

## Introduction

Offa became King of Mercia in 757 AD. The son of Thingfrith, he claimed descent from Eowa, the brother of Penda, the great pagan King of Mercia who defeated the Christian Northumbrian King, Oswald at the battle of Maserfield in 641 or 642 AD.



## King of Mercia

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Eowa, may have been a co-ruler with Penda when Maserfield took place, but he died in the battle, leaving Penda as the ruler of Mercia.

In the formative years of his reign, Offa brought all the tribes of what is today's midlands under his control, tribes such as the Hwicce, Tomsaete, Gaini and the Magonsaete. He emerged from a civil war as the undisputed King of Mercia. We know that he defeated a number of enemies and that battles were fought but we have no detailed accounts of these events.

## Political Instability

He also took advantage of the political instability in the Kingdom of Kent marching his army into Canterbury and having that Kingdom's nobility acknowledge him as their overlord. Mercia was now on course to become Anglo-Saxon England's most powerful Kingdom and soon, Offa would become overlord of Sussex and most of the South East of England, gaining control of East Anglia. The Anglican King, Æthelberht was beheaded on Offa's orders. Æthelberht would later be canonised. This execution is the only known example of a vassal King being executed by an overlord in Anglo-Saxon history.

Offa suffered a set back in 776, when Kentish rebels defeated a Mercian force at the battle of Otford but this did not succeed in Kent gaining its independence.

## 779

In 779, Offa and his army defeated Wessex at the battle of Bensington in Oxfordshire. The defeated King of Wessex, Cynewulf retreated to his own Kingdom. In 786, Cynewulf was murdered and one Beorhtric became King. It is very possible that Offa was involved in this and that Beorhtric ascended to the throne on Offa's intervention.

Offa now allied himself with the Kingdom of Wessex, and its King Beorhtric. Offa married one of his daughters to Beorhtric, thus consolidating his position as the senior King and effectively making Beorhtric his underling or sub-Regulis.

## 789

In 789, the first recorded incident with the Vikings took place in Wessex. A Viking raiding party landed in Dorset near to the Isle of Portland. Beorhtric's Shire reeve, Beaduheard has gone down in history as the first named Anglo-Saxon to have been killed by the Vikings. The Reeve and his retinue approached them on a beach and thinking that they were traders, demanded that they accompany him to the King's Town. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle recorded that three ships of Danes had landed at Portland and that they slew Beaduheard. No further details of this event are known.

Four years later, the Vikings would raid Lindisfarne which can be viewed as the catalyst for the beginning of the Viking raids on the British Isles.

Offa, had incorporated London and Middlesex under his control as well as the Kingdom of Lindsey, which ceased to be an independent entity.

## Offa's Dyke

Offa is best remembered today for building Offa's dyke, a linear turf wall that more or less follows today's border between England and Wales. It is believed in some circles that this was the Mercians attempt to create a defended border and that they based it on Hadrian's wall, or the Antonine wall, which the Venerable Bede had knowledge of and recorded in his works. Offa may have decided to build this structure after suffering a defeat in 760 AD to the Welsh at the battle of Hereford.



**Offa's dyke today.**

Offa did form a relationship with the Franks and their King, Charlemagne and offered his son Ecefrith as a husband to one of the Emperor's daughters. This offer was refused and the relationship soured. Offa saw himself as Charlemagne's equal but the Frankish King obviously considered himself above Offa, given that he was the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

As a Christian, Offa wanted his own Archbishopric within central Mercia and he persuaded Pope Adrian I to grant him one at Litchfield, which he did, much to the dismay of Canterbury. Kent, though still under Mercian subjection was an unsettled Mercian province and considered themselves to be under foreign occupation. Offa also constructed several fortified Burhs which may be those of Stamford, Bedford, Hereford, Northampton and Oxford.

He also minted coins, copied from Abbasid dynasty gold coins, called Dinars. The below specimen shows the legend Offa Rex.



It would appear that Offa had no direct contact with the Vikings and there is no record known, that suggests that he may have fought against them.

He had made his son, Ecefrith his co-ruler, which again was unprecedented for an Anglo-Saxon King. Offa died at the age of 66 on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July in 796 AD.

He had forged Mercia into the most powerful Kingdom in England. Ecefrith died 141 days later. No male heirs of Offa's line existed so his dynasty came to an end. He was considered by later writers to have been a hard and ruthless King intent in securing power but for all that he never created a legacy and in the future, Wessex, not Mercia would become the dominant Anglo-Saxon Kingdom.

Offa is said to have been buried in a riverside chapel on the river Ouse, near Bedford. It is said that the river washed the chapel away but that for many years later, bathers could see his submerged tomb. Attempts to find it have not been successful so as to whether the story is true or not, cannot be verified.