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THE *MERESÆTE OF NORTHWEST SHROPSHIRE¹

In Domesday Book, the villis listed in the northwest of Shropshire, roughly the area that became Oswestry Hundred, are grouped into a district, or hundred, called Merset(e).² The name is not recorded in other sources, and is traditionally taken to be a compound of OE (ge)mære 'boundary' and the plural of sæte¹ or sæta both meaning 'dweller', thus naming a folk-group called 'the boundary dwellers'.³ This interpretation is formally acceptable, and is perhaps strengthened by the location of Maesbury and Maesbrook within the hundred. Margaret Gelling took the first probably and the second possibly to have OE (ge)mære as first element, and at Domesday the hundred called Mersete apparently belonged to Maesbury.⁴

¹ This discussion comes out of the work of the Place-Names of Shropshire project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/K000233/1). I would like to thank Steven Bassett, Jayne Carroll, Paul Cavill, Chris Lewis, David Parsons and Trevor Rowley for reading and commenting in detail on earlier drafts.

² O. Anderson, The English Hundred-Names (Lund, 1934), 155.

³ O. Anderson, The English Hundred-Names (Lund, 1934), 155; A.H. Smith, English Place-Name Elements (Cambridge, 1956), II, 34; M. Gelling, 'The early history of western Mercia', ed. S. Bassett, The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (Leicester, 1989), 184–201; M. Gelling, The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages (Leicester, 1992), 118–20, and fig. 48; C.P. Lewis, 'Welsh territories and Welsh identities in late Anglo-Saxon England', ed. Nick Higham, Britons in Anglo-Saxon England (Woodbridge, 2007), 129–43.

⁴ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 191–93.

The motivation for a name meaning 'boundary dwellers' would be the position of their territory on the Anglo-Welsh frontier, where it is traversed by both Wat's Dyke and Offa's Dyke;⁵ but it is more problematic than is sometimes acknowledged. For one thing, the putative *Mæresæte seem to have been one of a number of sæte groups situated along the same border, discussed at length by several commentators.⁶ Any one of these might have been named with equal justification from their position on that frontier. To put it another way, a name *Mæresæte, if it was understood to mean 'boundary dwellers', would not have distinguished that community very effectively from several others in the same region. It should be noted that the dykes here coincide with an impressive geographical boundary between the North Shropshire Plain and the foothills of the Welsh mountain, and that the boundary in the area of Mersete may therefore have been more striking or distinctive than elsewhere in Shropshire.⁷ As a first element in place-names and charter boundary features, however, OE (ge)mære frequently qualifies elements that might have acted as boundary markers—streams, ditches, roads, fords—suggesting that concrete senses such as '(balk forming) a boundary' were rare.⁸ By extension, a meaning '(physical features forming) a boundary' might not be anticipated. In any case, the strength of this topographical boundary as the defining characteristic of the supposed *Mæresæte must nonetheless have been reduced by the proximity of other sæte groups that were similarly close to the continuation of the same notional boundary.

⁵ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 193.

⁶ M. Gelling, 'The early history of western Mercia', ed. S. Bassett, The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (Leicester, 1989), 199–201; M. Gelling, The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages (Leicester, 1992), 118–20, and fig. 48; N.J. Higham, The origins of Cheshire (Manchester, 1993), 85; C.P. Lewis, 'Welsh territories and Welsh identities in late Anglo-Saxon England', ed. Nick Higham, Britons in Anglo-Saxon England (Woodbridge, 2007), 129–43.

⁷ Trevor Rowley (pers.comm.).

⁸ B. Jepson, English Place-Name Elements Relating to Boundaries (Lund, 2011), 23–91, 223, 225.

Secondly, group-names in sǣte are well attested across midland and southern England,⁹ and in just about every case, the qualifying element is either a settlement-name such as Somerton, Dorchester (*Sumorsǣte, *Dornsǣte), the name of a larger district such as Elmet, The Peak and Wight (*Elmedsǣte, *Pēacsǣte, *Wihtsǣte), or the name of a tangible topographical feature—a river-name such as the Tame or Stour (*Tomsǣte, *Stursǣte), or a hill-name such as Wrekin or Chiltern (*Wreocensǣte, *Cilternsǣte). Use of an abstract concept such as (ge)mǣre 'boundary', would make *Mǣresǣte unique, unless the first element can be interpreted as a district-name referring to an area especially characterised by the presence of a boundary. This would again require the application of (ge)mǣre as a concrete noun, and the fact that it is seldom if ever found as a simplex in major names and indeed is comparatively rare as a generic of any kind also counts against the possibility.¹⁰ It would, moreover, be strangely coincidental to find a district whose name meant 'boundary' on the edge of the territory of the Mercians, whose name means 'boundary people'.¹¹ In any case, too much doubt attaches to this etymology for it to be accepted without question. This discussion sets out two alternative explanations for the name Mersete, both of which seem preferable to the traditional interpretation.

The first is that the Mersete were in fact 'the dwellers around Maesbury'. Compounds of the type 'place-name plus sǣte' are well attested in charter bounds and other early sources, and survive in

⁹ G.H. Wheeler, 'The Method of Formation of Old English Place-Names in "-haeme," "-saetan," "-tūningas"', The Modern Language Review, xi (2) (1916), 218–19; O.K. Schram, 'Place-names in -sett in the east of England', Zeitschrift für Ortsnamenforschung, iii (1927–8), 200–11; A.H. Smith, English Place-Name Elements (Cambridge, 1956), II, 94.

¹⁰ B. Jepson, English Place-Name Elements Relating to Boundaries (Lund, 2011), 23–91; A.H. Smith, English Place-Name Elements (Cambridge, 1956), II, 33–4; Smith's only example of its use as a generic is doubtful, see A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, with J.E.B. Gover, The Place-Names of Sussex, 2 volumes (Cambridge, 1929–30), 516.

¹¹ E. Ekwall, 'Tribal Names in English Place-Names', Namn och Bygd 41 (2–4) (1953), 129–77, at p.141. Their name is not, it should be noted, based on the element (ge)mǣre, but is related to OE mearc.

the names of the counties of Somerset and Dorset.¹² These are often elliptical: a shortened form of a place-name followed by sǣte, thus Beardsǣtena abbud in the OE translation of Bede's Ecclesiastical History is 'the abbot of the community of Bardney (Lincolnshire)', and to bocsǣtena hig wege in a charter of 1031 is 'to the highway of the inhabitants of Buckland (Devon)'.¹³ In coining sǣte compounds of this kind, no attention seems to have been paid to the morphology of the underlying place-names. This is a feature noted by Wheeler, especially where the first element of the settlement's name was a genitively inflected personal name, as is the case with Bardney, which is derived from OE *Beardan-ēg 'Bearda's island', but reduced to Beard- in compound with sǣte. The place-name Dorchester has also been drastically reduced in forming the group-name *Dornsǣte.¹⁴ Maesbury is first attested as Meresberie (1086 DB), and is taken to be a compound of OE (ge)mære 'boundary', in its genitive form (ge)mæres, with burg 'stronghold'.¹⁵ If treated in the same way as Bardney in forming a sǣte compound, and reduced to its first syllable, the expected form would be something like *Mærsǣte, which by the eleventh century might well appear in documents as Mersete.

It is just possible that this type of sǣte name did occur in the west midlands, but against this suggestion is Barbara Yorke's observation that Mercian sǣte compounds (when used as names for the dwellers within large districts rather than as lexical noun phrases to denote the inhabitants of single settlements) differ from those in Wessex in being named from natural features rather than

¹² G.H. Wheeler, 'The Method of Formation of Old English Place-Names in "-haeme," "-saetan," "-tūningas"', The Modern Language Review, xi (2) (1916), 218–19; V. Watts, The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names (Cambridge, 2004), 192, 559; J. Carroll, and D. Parsons, Anglo-Saxon Mint Names (Nottingham, 2007), I, 125–6.

¹³ P.H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: an annotated list and bibliography (London, 1968), charter no. 963; J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, The Place-Names of Devon, two volumes (Cambridge, 1931–2), 225.

¹⁴ J. Carroll, and D. Parsons, Anglo-Saxon Mint Names (Nottingham, 2007), I, 125–6.

¹⁵ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 192–3.

major central settlements.¹⁶ There are, however, two possible examples of the latter type in the west midlands. A late reference to the *Scrobsæte, presumably an alternative name for what became Shropshire, might mean 'dwellers around Shrewsbury',¹⁷ but is of doubtful relevance—it is not clear from its occurrence in the C manuscript of the Chronicle that the name was used locally in Shropshire itself, and it might in any case have been named from the same putative district, *Scrobb, that is thought to have given Shrewsbury its name.¹⁸ The Tomsæte of two ninth-century charters might be 'the dwellers around Tomtun or Tamworth' rather than 'the dwellers on the River Tame'.¹⁹ Again the evidence is not conclusive and the broader pattern in the west midlands seems to be for sæte to take their names from rivers or other major topographical features.²⁰ This means that *Mærsæte would be unusual, perhaps even unique, within local naming practice, if indeed it was based on a reduced form of the place-name Maesbury.

¹⁶ B. Yorke, 'Dorchester and the early shire centres of Wessex', Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeology Society, cxxxiv (2013), 106.

¹⁷ The reference is in MS C of the Chronicle under the year 1016, see M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 4 (Nottingham, 2004), xv.

¹⁸ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 267–71.

¹⁹ P.H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: an annotated list and bibliography (London, 1968), charter nos. 1272 (849 (e.11)) and 197 (844 for 848 (12)); E. Ekwall, English River-Names (Oxford, 1928), 389–90; J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, with F.T.S. Houghton, The Place-Names of Warwickshire, (Cambridge, 1936), xvii–xviii; M. Gelling, The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages (Leicester, 1992), 146–7; D. Horovitz, The Place-Names of Staffordshire (Brewood, 2005), sub Tamworth.

²⁰ The *Arosæte and *Temesæte are named from the River Arrow and the River Teme respectively; see J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, with F.T.S. Houghton, The Place-Names of Warwickshire, (Cambridge, 1936), xviii, 195; R. Morgan, Welsh Place-Names in Shropshire (Cardiff, 2008), 73.

Another potential problem with this explanation is the status of Maesbury itself. In charter bounds, OE sǣte was often compounded with the name of a relatively low-status, nearby settlement;²¹ but when that type of compound was used as the name of the inhabitants of a large district, the settlement can always be shown to have had an important central function in the Anglo-Saxon period. Dorchester, Shrewsbury, Somerton, Tamworth and Wilton all seem to have been royal villis in the Anglo-Saxon period.²² There is, however, reason to think that Maesbury's pre-Conquest status was significant. Apart from its position as the head manor of Mersete at the time of Domesday, Maesbury was also in royal hands in 1066,²³ and after the Conquest it was on land of the parish of Maesbury that Oswestry castle was built and its borough founded, and to Oswestry's church that the ecclesiastical authority of Maesbury was transferred. The church of Oswestry is recorded as the head of its district in the time of Henry I, and so Maesbury may formerly have had its own minster parish.²⁴

A final possible explanation of the name Mersete is that the first part is neither (ge)mǣre, nor the reduced form of a place-name with the first element (ge)mǣre. On the basis of the only surviving forms, all from Domesday, OE (ge)mǣre is an acceptable interpretation of the first element, because OE ǣ developed to ME /e:/, usually written <e> and thus indistinguishable orthographically from the

²¹ G.H. Wheeler, 'The Method of Formation of Old English Place-Names in "-haeme," "-saetan," "-tūningas"', The Modern Language Review, xi (2) (1916), 218–19.

²² P. Sawyer, 'The royal tun in pre-Conquest England', in P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds), Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford, 1983), 273–99; J. Baker, 'OE sǣte/sǣtan: establishing a corpus', forthcoming.

²³ F. Thorn and C. Thorn (eds), Domesday Book: Shropshire (Chichester, 1986), §4.1.11. See also P. Sawyer, 'The royal tun in pre-Conquest England', in P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds), Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (Oxford, 1983), 281–82.

²⁴ R.W. Eyton, Antiquities of Shropshire, volume 10 (London, 1860), 319–21, 335; Steven Bassett pers.comm.

outcome of OE e.²⁵ It is not, therefore, the only possible explanation, since the vowel in question could of course be a reflex of OE e, which means that it might instead be OE mere 'a pool'. North Shropshire and south Cheshire is an area famous for its meres and mosses, many of which were drained during the late medieval and modern periods. These are most notable around Ellesmere and Whitchurch, but extend over a much wider area including part of that which became Mersete hundred.²⁶ In 1309, Ellesmere alone contained more than eight meres,²⁷ and the parish is itself named from the largest of them.²⁸ Ellesmere is generally assumed not to have been part of Mersete Hundred at the time of Domesday, and is placed instead in Baschurch (later Pimhill) Hundred. While the context in which the Domesday survey lists Ellesmere makes its location in Baschurch Hundred a reasonable supposition, it should be noted that it is entered in a long section without hundred headings and is not necessarily assigned to Baschurch.²⁹ The allocation to Baschurch of Ellesmere and the other villis with which it is listed is based on geographical coherence and knowledge of the extent of the later hundred of Pimhill, which did contain Ellesmere; but there can be no certainty that the boundary between Mersete and Baschurch was simply linear and without detached portions at the time of Domesday, or that Oswestry and Pimhill were geographically more or less

²⁵ R. Jordan, Handbook of Middle English Grammar: Phonology, trans. and rev. E.J. Crook (The Hague and Paris, 1974), 75–7.

²⁶ G.C. Baugh and C.R. Elrington (eds), The Victoria History of Shropshire, IV (London, 1989), 5–20; T. Rowley, The Shropshire Landscape (London, 1972), 162–8; C.A. Sinker, 'The north Shropshire Meres and Mosses: a background for ecologists', Field Studies, i (1962), 102 Fig.1, 106–7.

²⁷ R.W. Eyton, Antiquities of Shropshire, X (London, 1860), 244.

²⁸ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 122–3.

²⁹ Great Domesday Book, folio 253v; F. Thorn and C. Thorn (eds), Domesday Book Shropshire (Chichester, 1986), §4.1.17–20 and Introductory Note 3; C. Lewis, 'An introduction to the Shropshire Domesday', in A. Williams (ed.), The Shropshire Domesday (London, 1990), 4–5; F. Thorn, 'Hundreds and Wapentakes', in A. Williams (ed.), The Shropshire Domesday (London, 1990), 31–5.

coextensive with Mersete and Baschurch. Ellesmere parish borders directly onto Mersete and includes a salient projecting into that hundred. The configuration of the boundary between the two hundreds certainly suggests that it divides what was once a single unit.

Even if the assignment of Ellesmere to Baschurch is correct, two points are worth bearing in mind. First, it is likely that the hundreds of Shropshire (and elsewhere) had already undergone significant territorial evolution by the time of the Domesday survey. It is worth noting, moreover, that the *Temesæte, whose name survives in Tempsiter, a late medieval Welshry, means 'the dwellers on the River Teme'; and although the name survives only in the very south-western tip of Shropshire, the River Teme and, by extension, perhaps the district inhabited by the *Temesæte, extends across much of southern Shropshire. In other words, the original extent of Mersete may have been very different from that recorded in 1086, and from the extent of later Oswestry Hundred. It originally perhaps encompassed a much larger area than the Domesday hundred, including (as the arrangement of the boundaries suggests) all or parts of what became the parish of Ellesmere and the hundred of Baschurch. Second, modern canals have drastically altered the drainage of this area, reducing the amount of wetland. During the Anglo-Saxon period it is quite possible that the flat areas further to the west had their own meres.³⁰ There was a very low population density and few plough-teams are recorded in this part of Shropshire at the time of Domesday, which may well have been partly symptomatic of its marshy nature.³¹

Mersete might then be taken to contain OE mere 'a pool', perhaps as a district-name *Mere. This would be paralleled by The Peak in Derbyshire, where an uninflected form of *pēac (Pec 1086, c.1130, Pech 1157) seems to be used to denote the district characterised by many peaks, perhaps in

³⁰ I am very grateful to Trevor Rowley for this information about the landscape of the district west of Ellesmere.

³¹ V.A. Saunders, 'Shropshire', in H.C. Darby and I.B. Terrett (eds), The Domesday Geography of Midland England (Cambridge, 1954), 113–59, at 124–34.

ellipsis for Peac lond 924 (c.925).³² Indeed, this district-name came to form the basis of an analogous group name, the *Pēacsāete.³³ Thus *Mere might have been understood as a short-form of *Mereland, and *Meresāete either as 'Pool dwellers' or 'dwellers in *Mere(land) or the pool-district', a reference to the inhabitants of northwest Shropshire and the surrounding area.

In this case, the superficial similarity between the name of the hundred and that of its head manor at the time of Domesday might be coincidental, but need not be. While the early forms of that name do not lend themselves convincingly to an alternative interpretation as *Meresāetnabyrg '(at the) stronghold of the *Mere dwellers', they cannot rule out an original *Meresbyrg '(at the) stronghold of *Mere(land)'. A burh compound of this kind, with (as first element) a genitively inflected topographical term that was effectively a district-name, would be directly comparable with Shrewsbury, '(at the) stronghold of the scrub(land)', where the first element again describes the local district.³⁴ The location of Maesbury on the periphery of the region characterised by meres (which is centred further to the east) would require explanation, but this is by no means a fatal objection, especially if meres were once more common further to the west. Whether the stronghold was the administrative centre, a refuge for the inhabitants of the area, or a military focus, it need not have been geographically central to the topographical zone that characterised the district, only to the district itself; and that centrality might be judged by ease of access (perhaps especially by the elite) and therefore based on the configuration of communication routes rather than spatial centrality.

³² K. Cameron, The Place-Names of Derbyshire (Cambridge, 1959), 1–2.

³³ This group is named in the Tribal Hidage and in a charter of 963 (17; lost original), P.H. Sawyer, Anglo-Saxon Charters: an annotated list and bibliography (London, 1968), charter no. 712a.

³⁴ M. Gelling, The Place-Names of Shropshire, Part 1 (Nottingham, 1990), 267–70; M. Gelling, with W.

Champion, The Place-Names of Shropshire, Part 4 (Nottingham, 2004), xiii–xviii. The further parallel with the

*Scrobsāete, above, is worth noting.

Alongside the traditional explanation of Mersete, two alternatives have been set out here. In the final analysis, it is impossible to say which solution is correct. Of all the explanations, the weakest is surely that it goes back to *Mæresæte 'boundary dwellers', which would perhaps be semantically undistinctive and more or less unparalleled within the wider corpus of sæte names. The group-name based on a reduced form of the place-name Maesbury is perhaps the most persuasive: it fits with the fact that Maesbury was the centre of the hundred in 1086, requires no special pleading about the former extent of the district, and has clear parallels in the wider corpus of sæte names (though not necessarily geographically close ones). Nevertheless, the idea that Mersete might preserve a lost district-name, descriptive of the meres that are so characteristic of this region, is not without its appeal. It too would have a number of clear parallels, and would be topographically appropriate, especially if it is accepted that Mersete once applied to the inhabitants of a more extensive area than the Domesday hundred and that the district characterised by meres stretched further west in Anglo-Saxon times. A place-name '(at the) stronghold of *Mere(land)', within a district known for its meres, serving as the chief manor of a district inhabited by 'the *Mere(land) dwellers', would then be the most economical explanation.

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