

Mercia was ceded to them. It is worth pointing out that up to this time there were often great differences between the regional churches in England, in particular between those north and south of the Humber.¹⁴ Letters from Pope Leo to Charlemagne deplore the hostility between King Eardwulf and his Archbishop Eanbald in the north and Cenwulf, King of Mercia and his Archbishop in the south. All this might make it less than likely that a saint such as Oswald of Northumbria would be likely to be revered in Mercia, especially as he had originally encouraged the Gewissae, the precursors of the West Saxon kingdom and as such enemies of the expanding Mercia, to create the See of Dorchester for Birinius in the first place. Above all else however Christianity was the one great unifying factor which greatly contributed to the defeat of the Danes and ultimately the creation of a united England.

In the seventh and eighth centuries, following the Mercian consolidation, there had been an unparalleled number of religious houses or Minsters founded under the rule of an abbot, especially along the Upper Thames valley, usually close to rivers and hence waterborne trade.¹⁵ Patronage of royal families ensured that not only did religious life focus around these foundations but that they also became economic and administrative centres and in effect strategic tribute-gathering centres worth controlling. As a result royal families usually installed their family members to rule these houses and control often quite large mother-parishes that covered the surrounding areas. Royal sisters or daughters were often made abbesses at such religious houses. Some of these Minsters, always collegiate, were paired in some way with secondary sites of outlying cells for priests or hermits. Cropredy, with a Minster on the upper Cherwell close to the modern Warwickshire county boundary, seems to have had one such site at Prescot. In the ninth century the monastic ideal declined although there was a brief revival in the tenth century. By the eleventh century secular clergy, now the majority, were more closely tied to powerful landlords who had built their own private chapels on their estates. These chapels were to become

¹⁴ See Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England*, Vol 1, concerning differences between the churches north and south of the Humber, p.198.

¹⁵ See Blair, *Anglo Saxon Oxfordshire*, concerning Minsters in the Upper Thames valley p.56; also Slater, *A History of Warwickshire*, p.31, concerning the early Church in Warwickshire.