In Domesday Book, the villls listed in the northwest of Shropshire, roughly the area that became Oswestry Hundred, are grouped into a district, or hundred, called Merset(e). 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 sæte or sæta both meaning 'dweller', thus naming a folk-group called 'the boundary dwellers'. 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 Merse apparently belonged to Maesbury.

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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 *Mǣresǣte 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 *Mǣresǣte, 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 Merse is 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 *Mǣresǣte 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.
(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.).
Secondly, group-names in sæte are well attested across midland and southern England, and in just about every case, the qualifying element is either a settlement-name such as Somerton, Dorchester (*Sumorsæte, *Dornsæte), the name of a larger district such as Elmet, The Peak and Wight (*Elmedsæte, *Pēacsæte, *Wihtsæte), or the name of a tangible topographical feature—a river-name such as the Tame or Stour (*Tomsæte, *Stursæte), or a hill-name such as Wrekin or Chiltern (*Wreocensæte, *Cilternsæte). Use of an abstract concept such as (ge)mære 'boundary', would make *Mæresæte 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)mære 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. 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'. 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 Mersetæ, both of which seem preferable to the traditional interpretation.

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


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)mære, but is related to OE mearc.
the names of the counties of Somerset and Dorset. These are often elliptical: a shortened form of a place-name followed by sæte, thus Beardsætena abbud in the OE translation of Bede's Ecclesiastical History is 'the abbot of the community of Bardney (Lincolnshire)', and to bocsætena hig wege in a charter of 1031 is 'to the highway of the inhabitants of Buckland (Devon)'. In coining sæte 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 sæte. The place-name Dorchester has also been drastically reduced in forming the group-name *Dornsæte. 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)mâres, with burg 'stronghold'. If treated in the same way as Bardney in forming a sæte compound, and reduced to its first syllable, the expected form would be something like *Mârsæte, which by the eleventh century might well appear in documents as Merseete.

It is just possible that this type of sæte name did occur in the west midlands, but against this suggestion is Barbara Yorke's observation that Mercian sæte 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

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

There are, however, two possible examples of the latter type in the west midlands. A late reference to the *Scrobsǣte, presumably an alternative name for what became Shropshire, might mean 'dwellers around Shrewsbury', 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. The Tomsǣte of two ninth-century charters might be 'the dwellers around Tomtun or Tamworth' rather than 'the dwellers on the River Tame'. Again the evidence is not conclusive and the broader pattern in the west midlands seems to be for sǣte to take their names from rivers or other major topographical features. This means that *Mærsǣte would be unusual, perhaps even unique, within local naming practice, if indeed it was based on a reduced form of the place-name Maesbury.


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.


20 The *Arosǣte and *Temesǣte 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), xvii, 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 \textit{sæte} was often compounded with the name of a relatively low-status, nearby settlement;\textsuperscript{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 vills in the Anglo-Saxon period.\textsuperscript{22} There is, however, reason to think that Maesbury's pre-Conquest status was significant. Apart from its position as the head manor of \textit{Merse} at the time of Domesday, Maesbury was also in royal hands in 1066,\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{24}

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


\textsuperscript{24} R.W. Eyton, \textit{Antiquities of Shropshire}, volume 10 (London, 1860), 319–21, 335; Steven Bassett pers.comm.
outcome of OE e.\textsuperscript{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 Merse\textsuperscript{26}te hundred.\textsuperscript{26} In 1309, Ellesmere alone contained more than eight meres,\textsuperscript{27} and the parish is itself named from the largest of them.\textsuperscript{28} Ellesmere is generally assumed not to have been part of Merse\textsuperscript{26}te 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.\textsuperscript{29} The allocation to Baschurch of Ellesmere and the other vills 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 Merse\textsuperscript{26}te and Baschurch was simply linear and without detached portions at the time of Domesday, or that Oswestry and Pimhill were geographically more or less


\textsuperscript{27} R.W. Eyton, Antiquities of Shropshire, X (London, 1860), 244.

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

coextensive with Merse and Baschurch. Ellesmere parish borders directly onto Merse 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 *Temesâte, whose name survives in Temsiter, 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 *Temesâte, extends across much of southern Shropshire. In other words, the original extent of Merse 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. 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.

Merse 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

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

ellipsis for Peac lond 924 (c.925).\textsuperscript{32} Indeed, this district-name came to form the basis of an analogous group name, the *Pēacsǣte.\textsuperscript{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 *Meresātnabyrg '(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 genitivally 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.\textsuperscript{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.

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

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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 *Scrobsǣte, above, is worth noting.
Alongside the traditional explanation of Merse, 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 *Mæresǣte 'boundary dwellers', which would perhaps be semantically undistinctive and more or less unparalleled within the wider corpus of sǣte 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 sǣte names (though not necessarily geographically close ones). Nevertheless, the idea that Merse 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 Merse 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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