

Kinship and Power: Æthelswith, Queen of Mercia

It has long been acknowledged that queens of Mercia enjoyed a higher status than those of other English kingdoms as revealed by the witness lists of Mercian royal diplomas between 770 and 873. This is particularly striking when compared with the lack of importance afforded to West Saxon royal wives during the same period.¹ However, it is all too easy to exaggerate the differences between Wessex and Mercia. There are several instances where the royal houses of both kingdoms intermarried during the ninth century, a policy that can be traced back to the seventh century.

Little in-depth study has been made of Mercian queens as agents of royal power.² This is understandable given the lack of narrative sources and reliance on tangential evidence from neighbouring kingdoms who 'were frequently the victims of Mercian aggression.'³ Mercia's integration within the West Saxon hegemony, which began in the late ninth century, explains the focus by historians on the evolution of queenship in Wessex.

The prominent role played by Mercian royal women during the eighth and ninth centuries owed much to geographical factors. Surrounded by rival kingdoms, Mercia needed to be on a permanent war footing in order to survive as a political entity. Military might and diplomacy were the keys to success. To borrow a phrase used to describe tenth-century statecraft, we might conclude that the so-called 'Mercian Supremacy' comprised both 'intensive and extensive lordship'. Intensive lordship describes areas over which the king could impose taxes and administer justice while extensive lordship implies a degree of overlordship/tribute status beyond the royal patrimony.⁴ Thus, in the case of a land-locked

¹ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, Chapter 13. For all Asser references I have used the translation in Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*.

² For an overview see: Stafford, 'Political Women in Mercia'

³ Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 100

⁴ Insley 'Ottonians with Pipe Rolls', 772-786 at 783-84. See also Molyneaux, 'Why Were Some Tenth-Century Kings Presented as Rulers of Britain?', 62 and fn 12.

kingdom like Mercia, royal wives drawn from local or peripheral, powerful kindred groups, had the potential to negotiate a more visible presence for themselves.

SLIDE – FAMILY TREE

To illustrate this point, this paper focusses upon the career of Æthelswith, daughter of Æthelwulf, King of Wessex and sister of Alfred the Great. In 853, she married Burgred, King of Mercia (852-874), and as we shall see, Burgred's military dependency on his Wessex in-laws was reflected in the extraordinarily high status enjoyed by his queen. Unlike her Mercian predecessors, Æthelswith witnessed *all* Burgred's diplomas and, on at least two occasions, issued grants jointly with her husband (S 210 and S 214). As queen, she held land in her own right that she was able to dispose of as she wished (S 1201). No equivalent examples of queenly activity have been documented in England before the eleventh century; only as widowed, royal abbesses does such evidence survive.

Burgred was a member of the family of so-called "B" kings that ruled Mercia in the early ninth century.⁵ He emerged as ruler in 852 after his predecessor, Beorhtwulf (839/40-851), 'had been put to flight, with his army' by the Danes in 851.⁶ In 853, Burgred and his council sought military assistance from Æthelwulf against the Welsh and cemented the alliance by marrying his daughter.⁷ Perhaps indicative of his subordinate status, it was Burgred who had to travel to Wessex to collect his bride.⁸ However, caution is needed when assessing the relationship between Burgred and his in-laws as can be seen by comparing the tone of the various recensions of the *ASC* in their description of the expedition into Wales. The manuscripts written from a West Saxon perspective (A, B, and C), give the initiative to

⁵ Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, 2005, p. 119.

⁶ *ASC* 'C' s.a. 853 *recte* 851.

⁷ *ASC* 'C' s.a. 854 *recte* 853.

⁸ *ASC* 'C' s.a. 854 *recte* 853; Asser, *Life of Alfred*, Chapter 9.

Æthelwulf whereas the northern recensions (D and E) attribute the leading role to Burgred.⁹ Nevertheless, the exalted status enjoyed by his queen was unparalleled at the time, thanks to her powerful kindred south of the Thames.

In 868, Burgred was forced to seek further help from his brothers-in-law, King Æthelred I (865-871) and Alfred, against the Vikings who had taken up winter quarters at Nottingham.¹⁰ Again, this was cemented by a diplomatic marriage, this time between Alfred and Ealhswith whose mother was described by Asser as descended 'from the royal stock of the king of the Mercians'.¹¹ That same year, Æthelswith, without reference to her husband, granted 15 *manentes* at Lockinge, Berks, to her faithful minister Cuthwulf 'with the consent and testimony of my elders' (S 1201).¹² She specifically described the estate as her property (*mee proprie potestatis*). Given that Lockinge is only a mile and half from the Wessex royal manor of Wantage, it is likely that she held Lockinge in her own right rather than as a marriage gift from Burgred. The alienation of land belonging to the Wessex royal patrimony would explain the predominance of West Saxon signatories headed by Æthelswith's brother, King Æthelred. Included in the witness list was another brother, the future Alfred the Great, and an Osweald, both of whom were described as '*filius regis*'.¹³ By 1066, Lockinge was in the hands of Abingdon Abbey.¹⁴

A year later, in 869, Æthelswith and Burgred, jointly, granted 5 hides (*manentes*) at *Uptrope* to an otherwise unknown Wulflaf in return for 50 mancuses of gold (S 214). The diploma survives as an original or near contemporary copy and the text is particularly

⁹ Whitelock, 1979, p. 188-89.

¹⁰ ASC 'C' s.a. 889 *rected* 868.

¹¹ Asser, *Life of Alfred*, Chapter 29, ed. Keynes and Lapidge; ASC 'C' s.a. 869 *recte* 868. We only know Ealhswith's name from Alfred's will: Keynes and Lapidge, p. 177 and fn 87.

¹² Kelly, *Charters of Abingdon Abbey* no. 17, pp. 72-76

¹³ For the suggestion that Osweald was the illegitimate son of either Æthelbald or Æthelred I see: Janet L. Nelson 'Reconstructing a Royal Family', 59.

¹⁴ GDB 59v.

revealing about the relationship between the royal couple. Æthelswith is referred to as *pari coronata stemma regali Anglorum regina* (crowned queen of the Angles, of equal royal pedigree). The full significance of this statement has not received the attention it deserves. Historians have focussed on the assertion that the Cerdicings were on a par with Mercian royalty, rather than the significance of the term *coronata*, never before used to describe a royal consort in England.¹⁵ While Julie Ann Smith makes a passing reference, Janet Nelson consigns it to a footnote.¹⁶ This is perhaps understandable as the evidence for queen-making and king-making rites in the west is somewhat tenuous before the mid-ninth century.

The earliest references to royal consecrations in England emanate from Mercia. The first was that of Ecgfrith in 787 who was anointed, following Frankish practice, during his father's lifetime. Significantly, only the "D" version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, produced at Worcester, notes this event. Ecgfrith's successor, Ceolwulf I (821-823), issued a charter to Wulfred, Archbishop of Canterbury, in which he states that it was made on the day of his consecration, 17 September 822, (S 186).¹⁷ In neither case does an *ordo* survive.

That queens received some form of blessing can be traced back to Bertrada, wife of Pippin, and the events of 751 and 754.¹⁸ However, it is not until the ninth century that we have *ordines* specifically prepared for queens. The earliest surviving *ordo* was written by Hincmar of Rheims for the consecration of Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, on her marriage to Æthelwulf of Wessex in 856. Janet Nelson has argued for an Anglo-Saxon provenance, noting that the "Judith" *ordo* shares several of the formulas used in the first English *ordo* preserved in

¹⁵ Brooks and Kelly, *Charters of Christ Church Canterbury*, no. 92, pp. 788-93 and Kelly, *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, no. 17, 74.

¹⁶ Julie Ann Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', 18-35 at 24; J. L. Nelson, 'The Earliest Surviving Royal *Ordo*', 341-60 at 351 fn 51.

¹⁷ Whitelock, 1979, no. 83, 514-516. For the evolution of the English coronation *ordines* see: David Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation *Ordo*' 47-258, especially 154-163.

¹⁸ Julie Ann Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', 18-35 at 19; Janet L. Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making', 302-3.

the Leofric missal. She suggests that clerics in Æthelwulf's entourage may have been involved in its compilation.¹⁹

The English connection is particularly interesting when thinking about Æthelswith. Is it possible that she was a consecrated queen for whom a Mercian *ordo* has not survived? When was she 'crowned queen of the Angles'? Was it at the time of her marriage in 853 or should we see the unique reference in S 214 as indicative of a more recent event? Did the ceremony involve anointing? Can we read anything into Asser's description of Æthelswith's marriage beyond the fact that it was ostentatious when he says it 'was conducted in royal style'?²⁰ Reference has already been made to the fact that the celebrations were performed in Wessex. Unfortunately, Asser does not elaborate on Æthelswith's position as *regina* despite his subsequent, famous explanation as to why the West Saxons did not have queens.²¹ The nuptials celebrated in 'royal style' implies that a more significant ceremony than usual was involved, but in what way is unknowable. Did Æthelswith undergo some form of anointing in 853? It is tempting to take Nelson's hypothesis a stage further by suggesting that the English clerics involved in adapting the first English *ordo* in the Leofric Missal for Judith in 856, were chosen for their track record in preparing an earlier version, now lost, for Æthelswith in 853.

It is possible, however, that Æthelswith's enhanced position as *coronata* occurred in response to a more recent event that had taken place across the Channel. In 866, three years prior to the issue of S 214, Hincmar of Rheims was, once again, involved in preparing an *ordo* for the consecration of Judith's mother, Queen Ermentrude, wife of Charles the Bald. By that time the couple had been married twenty-three years and produced at least 11 children.²²

¹⁹ Janet L. Nelson, 'The Earliest Surviving Royal *Ordo*', 343ff.

²⁰ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, Chapter 29.

²¹ Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, Chapter 13.

²² Janet L. Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals' in *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* London, 1986, pp. 283-34 at 302.

Ermentrude's anointing was accompanied by prayers that conveyed not only hopes of future offspring, but also political messages about divine sanction of dynastic continuity and good kingship.²³ It has been suggested that the consecration of Ermentrude took place amidst fears for the future of the Carolingian dynasty.²⁴ As Janet Nelson says, the emergence of queenly anointing was associated with her role as the mother of royal heirs 'and the implied confining of those heirs to a single line'.²⁵ Similar concerns may have been in the minds of Burgred and Æthelswith, who appear to have been childless. A point to which we will return. The failure to produce a male heir would only have compounded Burgred's political weakness. It would therefore have been in the couple's interests to embrace the ideology around queenly status that was developing in West Francia from the 820s onwards.²⁶

Coincidentally, dynastic fears regarding the succession may also have been in the mind of Æthelswith's brother, Æthelred I of Wessex as evidenced by the unique appearance of his wife, Wulfthryth, as *regina* in a charter dated 868 (S 340). Was it a coincidence that Wulfthryth's visibility was enhanced in the very year that his younger brother, Alfred, got married? Æthelred's concern to ensure a lineal line of succession would explain Wulfthryth's title.²⁷ If the witness list for S 340 is genuine, then Æthelred was clearly bucking the trend of West Saxon kings to downplay the position of royal consort. Given that his mother may have been repudiated in favour of a more illustrious marriage to Judith, this was a significant move.²⁸ Ultimately, it was Æthelred's early death at a time of crisis that caused his young sons to be side-lined in favour of their uncle Alfred, in 871.

²³ Zubin Mistry, 'Ermentrude's consecration (866): queen-making rites and biblical templates for Carolingian fertility' *Early Medieval Europe* 27.4. (2019), pp. 567-88 at 572.

²⁴ Mistry, *Ermentrude's consecration*, p. 574.

²⁵ Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals', p. 304.

²⁶ Janet L. Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites' p. 302ff.; Elizabeth Ward, 'Agobard of Lyons and Paschasius Radbertus as critics of the Empress Judith' in W.J. Shiels and D. Woods (eds), *Women in the Church*, Studies in Church History 27 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1990), pp. 15-25.

²⁷ Nelson, *Reconstructing a Royal Family*, p. 55.

²⁸ Nelson, *Reconstructing a Royal Family*, 55.

Asser may have been instructed to suppress any mention of Wulfthryth, especially given the existence of her progeny, and the lack of status afforded to Ealhswith. Just as Æthelred's family were airbrushed out of the Alfredian narrative regarding the royal succession, so was any reference to Æthelbald's thoughts on the matter.²⁹ Judith is only alluded to in relation to her first marriage to Æthelwulf ensuring that her position could, if the need arose, be dismissed as a 'foreign aberration'.³⁰ The story of Eadburh, who was also 'foreign' served as a caveat against powerful women.³¹ David Pratt notes that a deliberately policy of downgrading royal wives 'may have had advantages for a dynasty tightening its grip on the kingdom, in circumstances which made use of fraternal succession.'³² The enhanced status afforded to Judith and Wulfthryth in charters represented a change in policy by Æthelbald and Æthelred in favour of *rihtfaedrencynn*, (direct paternal ancestry), a lineal descent of kingship from father to son.³³ By the 890s, Alfred was also seeking to secure the rule of an extended West Saxon *regna*, 'the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', on his son at the expense of his nephews. Hence, Alfred's wish to suppress [both] his brothers' dynastic ambitions in official records. The compilation of the so-called second *English ordo* for his son in the second half of the 890s would serve to legitimise Edward's position in the eyes of the Church. Significantly, the second *ordo* included a queen's *ordo* for his wife Ælfflaed.³⁴

Aside from Æthelred's sons, it is possible that Alfred had an adult nephew to contend with - Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians. In 2001, Alex Woolf mooted the idea that Æthelred's

²⁹ Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance', 258.

³⁰ Asser, Chapter 13.

³¹ Asser, Chapters 14-15.

³² Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation Ordo', pp. 147-258 at 161.

³³ Stafford, *Succession and Inheritance*, p. 257-258. Only two charters survive for the reign of Æthelbald and both were witnessed by Judith (S 326 and S 1274). See: Nelson 'The Queen in Ninth-Century Wessex', pp. 74-76.

³⁴ David Pratt 'The Making of the Second English Coronation Ordo'. The author dates the second English *ordo* to the mid-late 890s. The queen's *ordo* is discussed at 218-224. The author also provides an excellent summary of the historiography underpinning the study of early coronation *ordines*. Asser completed his *Life* in 893, before the compilation of the second English *ordo* which would explain the anomaly caused by his comments on the low status of royal wives.

parents were Æthelswith and Burgred.³⁵ If this is correct, it adds another dimension to Alfred's policy regarding English Mercia. In 874, Burgred was driven into exile by the Danes and replaced by a puppet king, Ceolwulf II (874-c. 879), described by the "C" version of the *ASC* as 'a foolish king's thegn'. No mention is made of Æthelswith, but it is presumed that she accompanied her husband to Rome.³⁶ However, if we accept Woolf's premise that Æthelred was her son, she may have stayed in England to negotiate with Alfred for his inheritance which would have been a possibility after Ceolwulf II disappeared from view in c. 879.

The first documented reference to Æthelred is in 883 when he granted privileges to Berkeley Abbey (S 218). In the proem Æthelred describes himself as 'endowed and enriched with a portion of the realm of the Mercians' and says his charter was made 'with the leave and cognisance of King Alfred, and the whole of the Mercian council, both ecclesiastical and lay'.³⁷ Three years later, in 886, Æthelred married Æthelflaed and it is noteworthy that it was only after his future was thus assured, that Æthelswith set out on her ill-fated trip to Rome in 888.³⁸

To conclude, it is unfortunate that the destruction and suppression of Mercian culture by the Vikings and the royal house of Wessex in the ninth century precludes a detailed study of the usual role played by queens as religious patrons. However, it is clear that Æthelswith enjoyed an extraordinary position of power thanks to her powerful West Saxon kin. It may be this factor alone that prevented her from being repudiated despite her apparent failure to produce an heir during twenty years of marriage. However, if she was the mother of Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians, then we might conclude that she was a resourceful woman who chose not to follow her husband into exile or retire to a nunnery, but to stay and fight for her son's right to a share in the governing of the new 'Anglo-Saxon' realm being created by her brother.

³⁵ Alex Woolf, 'View from the West', 89-101 at 98.

³⁶ *ASC 'C'* s.a. 875 *recte* 874; Whitelock, 1979, 194.

³⁷ F. E. Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents* no. 12, with translation of English, 53-54.

³⁸ This is noted by the northern recensions *ASC* 'D', 'E' and 'F': see Whitelock, 1979, 200 and fn 3.

In many respects, Æthelswith had much in common with her more famous niece. Æthelflaed would also act jointly and independently of her husband, albeit in a more spectacular way. As Stafford says, both women were able to draw upon 'a tradition of queenly importance in Mercia'.³⁹ This enhanced status would reach its apogee during the queenship of Æthelswith. Nevertheless, Æthelswith and Æthelflaed were constrained by the policies of their paternal kin. In the 850s and 860s Wessex could not consider exercising lordship over Mercia beyond dynastic alliances in the face of a hostile enemy. However, by the 880s the situation had changed. Æthelflaed and Æthelred would not be anointed rulers, but would operate with the consent of the kings of Wessex. Henceforth the concept of an independent Mercian kingdom would be dependent upon the dictates of West Saxon royal politics.

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³⁹ Pauline Stafford 'The King's Wife in Wessex', p. 4.