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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kinship and Power: Cynethryth and Æthelswith, Queens of Mercia

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Abstract

This article explores how kinship impacted upon the careers of two powerful queens of Mercia: Cynethryth, wife of King Offa (757–796) and Æthelswith (d. 886), wife of Burgred (r. 852–874). Cynethryth is chiefly remembered for her unique appearance on coins and the witnessing of royal charters. It has been assumed that she was a descendent of Cynewise, wife of Penda of Mercia (d. 655). It is suggested that both women were members of West Saxon royal families. Æthelswith's powerful connections ensured that she was a major player at the Mercian court, jointly issuing royal charters and appearing regularly in the witness lists. She was the first English queen to dispose of land in her own right and may have been the first crowned queen in England. She was the last queen of an independent Mercia before its subsummation within a new 'Anglo-Saxon' realm created by her brother Alfred.

It has long been acknowledged that queens of Mercia enjoyed a higher status than those of other English kingdoms. Two women in particular stand out, Cynethryth, wife of King Offa (r. 756–797) and Æthelswith, wife of King Burgred (r. 953–974). Both of them regularly attested their husband's charters, in strong contrast to the wives of West Saxon kings during the same period.[1] Asser famously attributed the near-invisibility of West Saxon royal women to the bad behaviour of King Beorhtric's wife Eadburh, herself a Mercian and the daughter of Offa, which one suspects may be connected with the long rivalry

[1] S. Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations in Anglo-Saxon Charters c. 670–1066* (Cambridge, 2002), Tables X and XVII respectively. For an overview of Mercian queenship see: P. Stafford, 'Political Women in Mercia, Eighth to Early Tenth Centuries', *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (London, 2001), pp. 35–49.

between the kings of Wessex and Mercia.[2] It is striking, however, that just as Offa's daughter Eadburh was married to Beorhtric of Wessex, so the West Saxon Æthelswith became the wife of Burgred of Mercia. It seems that the natal kinship of queens might have some bearing on their subsequent careers and reputations. Investigation of this possibility is hampered by the lack of narrative sources, especially in the case of Mercia, for which we are often reliant upon tangential evidence from neighbouring kingdoms who 'were frequently the victims of Mercian aggression'.[3] Surrounded by rival kingdoms, Mercia needed to be on a permanent war footing if it was to survive as a political entity. 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'.[4] Such a strategy would require diplomacy as well as military might, in which case royal wives drawn from powerful kindred would be an obvious asset and consequently they could potentially negotiate a prominent role for themselves at court.

The major problem in discussing such issues is, of course, that royal women are rarely more than names, and any deductions about their familial networks can only be speculative, but in the absence of more direct evidence, prosopography offers a possible way forward. The case of Cynewise, wife of Penda of Mercia (d. 955), is of particular interest since she has been suggested as a relative of Offa's wife Cynethryth.[5] Bede mentions her only once, as having custody of the Northumbrian hostage, Ecgbert, son of Oswiu of Northumbria, but he does call her 'queen' (*regina*), and given the first element of her name, she has been identified as the mother of Penda's saintly daughters, Cyneburh and Cyneswith.[6] The same first element is found in the name of the West Saxon king, Cynegils

[2] *Asser's Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of St Neot's, erroneously ascribed to Asser*, ed. W. H Stevenson (Oxford, 1959) (hereinafter *Vita Alfredi*), chs. 13–14, pp. 10–13; *Alfred the Great*, ed. S. Keynes and M. Lapidge (hereinafter Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*), chs. 13–14, pp. 71–2 and pp. 235–6, n. 28.

[3] B. Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Abingdon, 2005), p. 100. Pauline Stafford is the main authority for Anglo-Saxon royal women. The following are just a selection: 'The King's Wife in Wessex, 800–1066', *Past and Present* 91 (1981), 3–27; *Queen Emma and Queen Edith: Queenship and Women's Power in Eleventh-century England* (Oxford, 1997); *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: the King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1998); 'Queens, Nunneries and Reforming Churchmen: Gender, Religious Status and Reform in Tenth- and Eleventh-century England', *Past and Present* 163 (1999), 3–35.

[4] The phrase 'intensive and extensive lordship' is taken from C. Insley, 'Ottonians with Pipe Rolls': Political Culture and Performance in the Kingdom of the English, c.900–c.1050', *History* 102 (2017), 772–86 at 783–4. 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. For a discussion of early state formation see: S. Keynes, 'England, 700–900', *The New Cambridge Medieval History* 2: *c. 700–c. 900*, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1995), 18–42. For more specific discussion of Mercia and Mercian frontiers and borders see: M. Capper, 'Treaties, Frontiers and Borderlands: the Making and Unmaking of Mercian Border Traditions', *Offa's Dyke Jnl* 5 (2023), 208–38.

[5] Stafford, 'Political Women in Mercia', p. 36.

[6] Cyneburh and Cyneswith were venerated at Castor, Northamptonshire, and translated to Peterborough in the late tenth century: S. Kelly, 'Penda (d. 655), King of the Mercians', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), hereafter *ODNB*, available online.

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(*c.* 611–*c.* 642), who accepted baptism in 635 on the urging of Oswald of Northumbria. Oswald subsequently married one of the daughters of Cynegils, whose name is given, admittedly in a much later source, as Cyneburh.[7] It seems at least possible that Cynewise was also a daughter of Cynegils. Indeed, her marriage to Penda may have taken place simultaneously with that of Cenwealh son of Cynegils to Penda's (unnamed) sister.[8] Oswald fell in battle against Penda at *Maserfelth* in 642, and Cynegils may also have been a casualty, for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes the succession of Cenwealh in that year.[9] The deaths of both his father and his father's ally might have induced Cenwealh to seek accommodation with the victorious Penda, a supposition made more likely by the fact that Cenwealh had, according to Bede, refused conversion; it was only after he was temporarily driven out of Wessex by Penda, allegedly for repudiating his sister, that he accepted baptism at the court of Anna of the East Angles.[10] The fact that both her daughters entered religion suggests that Cynewise herself may have been Christian. Bede reveals that Penda did not hinder the practice of Christianity in Mercia, although the process of conversion began in earnest only after his death in 655.[11] Any direct influence which Penda was able to assert over Wessex ended with the re-instatement of Cenwealh in 648, but Cynewise maintained her position as lady of his household and the mother/stepmother of his children, for (as we have seen) she bore the title of queen and was entrusted with the custody of the Northumbrian hostage Ecgfrith during Penda's last campaign.[12]

Cynethryth

If Cynewise hailed from Wessex, can the same be true of her hypothetical kinswoman Cynethryth, wife of King Offa? Looking simply at her name, an obvious candidate for her father is the West Saxon king, Cynewulf (757–86), himself possibly a descendant of Cynegils and Cenwealh, the putative father and brother of Cynewise.[13] Cynewulf took the West Saxon kingship in 757 by deposing his kinsman Sigibert and driving him into exile, just as, in the same

[7] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969) (hereafter Bede), III. 7, pp. 232–3; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation*, ed. D. Whitelock, D. Douglas and S. Tucker (London, 1961), A *s.a.* 635. Hereafter *ASC*; Symeon of Durham, 'Vita sancti Oswaldi regis et martyris', *Symeonis monachi opera omnia* 1: *Historia ecclesiae Dunelmensis*, ed. T. Arnold, RS (Cambridge, 2012), p. 349. Oswald was also associated with Cynegils in the establishment of an episcopal seat at Dorchester-on-Thames for Bishop Birinus.

[8] Bede, III. 7. Penda would later negotiate a double marriage between his offspring, Cyneburh and Peada, with Alhfrith and Alhflaed respectively, the son and daughter of Oswui of Northumbria: Bede III. 21.

[9] *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, ed. C. Plummer and J. Earle, rev. D. Whitelock (Oxford, 1952); *ASC*, A *s.a.* 643.

[10] Bede, III. 7.

[11] Bede, III. 21.

[12] She is unlikely to be the mother of Penda's son Peada, since he accepted baptism only on the occasion of his marriage with Oswiu's daughter Alhflaed (see note 9 above).

[13] For the suggestion that Cynewulf was a descendant of Cenwealh, see Yorke, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 142.

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year, Offa drove his rival King Beornred from Mercia. Cynewulf had already attested a diploma of Æthelbald of Mercia, whose murder in 756 had sparked the clash between Beornred and Offa, and it would be natural for him to continue good relations with his more powerful neighbour by marrying his daughter to the new king.[14] For Offa, marriage with a woman from the kindred of Penda's queen might enhance his own relatively obscure background as heir to the Mercian throne.[15] We do not, of course, know the date of Offa and Cynethryth's marriage, but a rapprochement between the two kings is suggested by Offa's confirmation of a diploma issued by Cynewulf in favour of the minster of Bath in 758.[16] If the charter of Uhtred king of the Hwicce bearing the attestations of Queen Cynethryth and two of her children, Ecgfrith and Ælfflaed, is genuine or based on genuine materials, the marriage must have taken place before 770.[17]

The alliance between Offa and Cynewulf was maintained, despite some difficulties, until Cynewulf's murder in 786.[18] His eventual successor, Beorhtric, would marry Eadburh, daughter of Offa (and Cynethryth?), in 789.[19] Offa's willingness to forge dynastic ties with Wessex over two generations explains the prominence enjoyed by Cynethryth as the first English queen to regularly attest royal diplomas. Fifty-nine charters are attributed to Offa's reign, of which twenty-three were witnessed by Cynethryth.[20] The majority were issued in favour of religious houses and ten concerned the disposal of estates in the client kingdoms of Kent and the South Saxons. However, the most striking fact about

[14] S 96 (BCS 181). Charters are cited by their number in P. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography* (London, 1968). Where possible, texts are cited from the editions published in the multi-volume British Academy series: *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, ed. S. Kelly, 2 pts, AS Charters 7–8 (Oxford, 2000–1); *Charters of Christ Church, Canterbury*, ed. N. Brooks and S. Kelly, 2 pts, AS Charters 17–18 (Oxford, 2013); *Charters of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. S. Kelly, AS Charters 15 (Oxford, 2012); *Charters of St Augustine's Abbey Canterbury and Minster-in-Thanet*, ed. S. Kelly, AS Charters 4 (Oxford, 1995); *Charters of Selsey*, ed. S. Kelly, AS Charters 6 (Oxford, 1997); *Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, ed. S. Kelly, AS Charters 5 (1996); *Charters of St Albans*, ed. J. Crick, AS Charters 12 (Oxford, 2007), using abbreviations for the archive (Abing, CantAug, CantCC, Glast, Malm, Sel, Shaft, StAlb.), with number. Texts of charters not yet covered by the new edition are cited from W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, 3 vols. (London, 1883–94), using the abbreviation BCS, with number. For the status of Cynewulf see: S. Keynes 'The Kingdom of the Mercians in the Eighth Century', *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia. Papers from a Conference held in Manchester in 2000*, ed. D. Hill and M. Worthington (Oxford, 2005), pp. 1–26, especially 11ff., and M. Capper 'Titles and Troubles: Conceptions of Mercian Royal Authority in Eighth- and Ninth-century Charters', *Problems and Possibilities of Early Medieval Diplomatic*, ed. J. Jarrett and A.S. McKinley, Int. Med. Research 19 (Turnhout, 2013), 209–29.

[15] Stafford, 'Political Women', p. 36.

[16] S. 265 (BCS 327). For the suggested date of 758 see C. Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c. 650–c.850* (London, 1995), p. 268.

[17] S 59 (BCS 1880, 1882a); *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, ed. D. Whitelock, Eng. Hist. Documents 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1979) [hereafter *EHD*], no. 74, pp. 502–3; Stafford, *Political Women*, p. 38.

[18] The two kings clashed at Bensington in 779 (*ASC*) but both presided over the legatine mission sent to England in 786. For the legatine council, see *Alcuini Epistolae*, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH ii. (Berlin, 1895) [hereafter cited as Dümmler], Epist. 3, pp. 19–29; trans. *EHD*, no. 191, pp. 836–40.

[19] *Vita Alfredi*, chs.14–15, pp. 12–14. For Beorhtric's relationship with Offa see Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 71–2 and p. 236, n. 30.

[20] Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations*, Table X.

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Cynethryth is the minting of coins in her name. As of 2021, some forty-four specimens have come to light and all but two were minted by one Canterbury moneyer called Eoba.[21] The portrayal of Cynethryth on coins is clearly significant but in what way is difficult to assess, in the absence of other evidence. Traditionally, they have been linked with promotion of her status as the legitimate wife, and mother of Offa's son and heir, Ecgfrith.[22] Pauline Stafford rightly notes that Cynethryth's public *persona* emerges on the appearance of a viable male heir.[23] Stafford has also tentatively suggested a link between the imagery on Cynethryth's coins and those featuring St Helena, mother of Constantine.[24] However, while there are allusions to Helena as a role model for queens in sixth-century Francia, this not apparent in England before the early ninth century.[25]

Although Cynethryth's coinage is based on Roman models, the coins are very similar in design to those of her husband Offa. Rory Naismith suggests that the majority share similarities with those of Faustina, wife of the Emperor Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161).[26] What is particularly striking is the prominent engraving of the name of the moneyer 'Eoba' alongside the image assumed to be that of the queen. The descriptor 'Cynethryth regina' is consigned to the reverse on all her coins. Eoba's career as a moneyer spanned some forty years and he was clearly a significant figure in Canterbury, but nothing more is known of him. If the aim was to demonstrate Offa's dynastic ambitions, why didn't he simply use his own image and name, or that of Ecgfrith? Was Offa seeking to promote Cynethryth's issue at the expense of older sons by other women? Regrettably, the sources are completely silent on this. However, the visibility of Cynethryth as opposed to Ecgfrith on Offa's coins suggests that she had powerful connections that we can only view 'through a glass, darkly'.[27]

The minting of silver pennies in the queen's name takes on a wider significance following the recent discovery of a Carolingian denier engraved with the words 'Fastrada Regina'.[28] Fastrada was Charlemagne's third wife between 783 and her death in August 794; on stylistic grounds her coin can be dated to 793/4.[29] Thus, it post-dates the circulation and apparent cessation of Cynethryth's coinage. As Janet Nelson has shown, Fastrada features more prominently in Frankish records than other Carolingian queens. Her pre-eminence can be linked to her powerful East Frankish family connections, probably centred on Frankfort,

[21] R. Naismith, 'A New Moneyer for Cynethryth, Queen of the Mercians', *BNJ* 91 (2021), 183–5.

[22] For a brief summation of emerging Christian ideals of marriage and its implications for early English queens see: Stafford, 'Political Women', pp. 36–8.

[23] Stafford, 'Political Women', p. 38ff.

[24] In the British Museum there is a unique early seventh-century gold solidus depicting Helena, but it appears to be a medallion intended for veneration rather than monetary use. See: A. Gannon, *The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage: Sixth to Eighth Centuries* (Oxford, 2003), p. 40.

[25] S. Klein, 'Reading Queenship in Cynewulf's *Elene*', *Jnl of Med. and Mod. Stud.* 33 (2003), 47–89. For the sixth-century Frankish examples see pp. 47–8.

[26] R. Naismith, *Money and Power in Anglo-Saxon England: the Southern English Kingdoms 757–865* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 64, Table 3.5.

[27] Paul 1 Corinthians 13:12.

[28] S. Coupland, 'A Coin of Queen Fastrada and Charlemagne', *EME* 31 (2023), 1–13.

[29] *Ibid.* pp. 2–4.

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apart from any other charms she may have possessed.[30] In a personal letter written in early September 791, Fastrada is described as 'our beloved and most loving wife'.[31] The queen's influence over her husband, despite having no surviving sons of her own, would explain the hostile press she received subsequently from Einhard, who accused her of cruelty.[32] We should perhaps see Charlemagne's circulation of the Fastrada currency as an attempt to engender loyalty to the Carolingian *regnum* among a peripheral elite. This invites further speculation as to the motive behind Offa's earlier distribution of coins in his wife's name.

If we simply associate Cynethryth's coinage with the promotion of her son, Ecgfrith, as Offa's heir, then presumably his consecration in 787 explains the apparent halt in production by the late 780s, as it had served its purpose. However, this did not lead to a diminution in the queen's position at court as she continued to witness Offa's charters with her son. Cynethryth's ongoing influence can be surmised from a letter written by Alcuin to an otherwise unknown nun, Hundrud (Hundrada), before 796. In the missive, Alcuin asks to be remembered to Cynethryth and says:

> I would have written her a letter of counsel if the King's business had permitted her to read it. Let her rest assured that I am as faithful to her ladyship also as I can be.[33]

Offa went to some lengths to secure the possession of several unnamed religious houses by obtaining a *priviligium* from Pope Hadrian (772–795) that confirmed they were to be 'held under the 'authority' (*dicio*) of Offa, Cynethryth, and those born of their '*genealogia*'.[34] The document is fragmentary and its Mercian provenance was only identified by the preservation of a single name, *Cynedridae regine.*[35] In restricting the ownership of these monasteries and estates to the royal couple's *genealogia*, 'the privilege outlines a way in which these might remain familial possession even if this family were to lose royal title, and kingship were to pass to another line'.[36] This is clearly how Cynethryth viewed the situation, as borne out by her attempts in widowhood to ensure that Bedford, Cookham and Glastonbury remained within the control of her kin. Indeed, Benjamin Savill moots the idea that Hadrian's privilege was originally addressed

[30] J. Nelson, 'The Siting of the Council at Frankfort: Some Reflections on Family and Politics', in her *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others* (Abingdon, 2019), pp. 149–65 at 154 and 162.

[31] Nelson, 'The Siting of the Council of Frankfort', p. 159 and n. 49.

[32] For a detailed discussion see: Nelson, 'The Siting of the Council at Frankfort', pp. 157–8. Like Fastrada, Cynethryth incurred a poor postmortem reputation.

[33] Dümmler, Epist. 61, pp. 104–5; S. Allott, *Alcuin of York c. A.D. 732 to 804: his Life and Letters* (York, 1974) [hereafter Allott], no. 36, p. 49.

[34] B. Savill, *England and the Papacy in the Early Middle Ages: Papal Privileges in European Perspective, 680–1073* (Oxford, 2023), p. 157.

[35] Preserved in the *Liber Diurnus*: Levison, *England and the Continent*, pp. 29–30. For a full discussion of this document see: Savill, *England and the Papacy*, pp. 77–8 and especially pp. 155–8.

[36] Savill, *England and the Papacy*, p. 160

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jointly to Offa and Cynethryth and that its purpose was to protect her interests in properties distinct from those of the king.[37] Although the names of the monasteries are missing, we are told that they were all dedicated to St Peter, which has led to the identification of a number of possible candidates including: Bedford, Bath, Bredon, Chertsey and Woking. Savill augments this choice in his discussion of Cookham, Glastonbury and Winchcombe.[38] What is particularly striking is that several of these sites were located within the Thames Valley and shared a connection with Cynethryth and her natal family.

That Cynethryth continued to be politically active during her son's brief reign is evident from her presence in the witness list of two of his three surviving charters as sole king.[39] We might also detect her guiding hand behind the existence of a papal privilege issued to Ecgfrith's successor, Coenwulf, in 798 by Pope Leo III. This document confirmed an agreement that had been made between her son Ecgfrith, and son-in-law, Beorhtric of Wessex, to settle another family monastery, Glastonbury, on an otherwise unknown abbot Cynehelm in perpetuity.[40] Coenwulf had apparently confirmed the gift in the presence of Cynethryth as abbess 'cum karissimis congnatis meis Etheburh et Celfled [Ælfflaed]'.[41] The attestation by Cynethryth's daughters implies that their agreement to waive any rights of inheritance was necessary. Given Cynethryth's involvement in the securing of Glastonbury for an otherwise unknown Cynehelm and his successors, and the shared first element in their names, he may have been a kinsman.[42] The confirmation by Coenwulf may have been an attempt at reconciliation, to forestall potential hostilities with Wessex, where Cynethryth's daughter was queen.[43] The possibility that Ecgfrith was murdered may be inferred from another letter sent by Alcuin to Ealdorman Osberht, in which he states:

> For truly, as I think, that most noble young man has not died for his own sins; but the vengeance for the blood shed by the father has reached the son. For you know very well how much blood his father shed to secure the kingdom on his son.[44]

The death of Cynethryth's closest male family members in quick succession left her in a vulnerable position. Ecgfrith's successors were distant cousins, Coenwulf (796–821) and his brother Ceolwulf I (821–823), who claimed descent

[37] Savill, *England and the Papacy*, pp. 161–2.

[38] Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, p. 116; Savill, *England and the Papacy*, p. 157f.

[39] S 150 and 151 (StAlb. 4 and 5; 796). Cynethryth also attests a confirmation by Offa to Selsey, which is also witnessed by Ecgfrith as *rex Merciorum*, i.e., after his consecration in 787: S 50 (Sel. 11; *c.* 787–796).

[40] S 152 (Glast. 15; 797). See also Savill, *England and the Papacy*, pp. 77–8 and especially 165–70.

[41] For the dating of this confirmation to 8 March 798 see: Savill, *England and the Papacy*, p. 78.

[42] The identity of Cynehelm is discussed by Kelly, *Charters of Glastonbury*, pp. 299–301. For commentary on Cynehelm (St Kenelm) and the identity of Cynethryth in relation to Winchcombe see: P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990), pp.165–8 and especially n. 107.

[43] *ASC s.a.* 796; *EHD* p. 182 and n. 6.

[44] Dümmler, Epist.122, pp. 178–80; *EHD* no. 202, pp. 854–6.

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from a Coenwalh, said to be the brother of Penda and Eowa.[45] There is no evidence that Penda had a brother called Coenwalh, but he did have a brother-in-law, Cenwealh, King of the West Saxons. If he was Coenwulf's ancestor, then (if the links suggested above have any validity) Coenwulf may have been related to Cynethryth herself, which would be a further reason to acquiesce in her seeking of a papal privilege to protect Cynehelm's position at Glastonbury. It is perhaps worth noting that both Coenwulf and his brother Cuthred had sons who shared the first name element 'Cyne'.[46] As Ann Williams says: 'In view of the enmity of the West Saxons and Mercians in the early ninth century, it would be ironic indeed if Coenwulf and Ceolwulf were descended from a West Saxon King.'[47] The irony is all the more bittersweet, given that a putative descendant of the same family, Ceolwulf II (874–*c.* 879) would be the last king of independent Mercia

After her son's death, Cynethryth retired to become abbess of Cookham. At first sight this seems to have been an unwise choice given its location within liminal territory where the West Saxons and Mercians regularly clashed in their attempts to expand political and economic control. That Cynethryth's position was insecure is revealed by the fact that she immediately faced litigation. It is suggested that what saved her was the existence of Hadrian's privilege, obtained during Offa's lifetime, and the desire of Coenwald to reach an accommodation with his wider kindred. At the Council of *Clofesho* (798), in order to retain Cookham, Cynethryth was forced to relinquish to the Archbishop of Canterbury 110 hides in Kent that Offa had appropriated to the church at *Bedeford* [Bedford] and which appear to have been retained by Cynethryth. In addition she was given the monastery *aet Pectanege.*[48] The agreement preserved at Christ Church reveals that the ownership of Cookham had long been a cause of friction between Wessex and Mercia. From a rather garbled account of the abbey's history, it would appear that Cynewulf of Wessex was despoiled of Cookham by Æthelbald, who then granted it to Canterbury before his death in 757. At some point thereafter, Offa acquired the monastery and settled it upon Cynethryth. It is possible that this was a precondition of their marriage.[49] It is suggested that Cynethryth's desire to retain Cookham after Offa's death was because it was a West Saxon foundation that had once belonged to her family.[50] At this point Cynethryth disappears from historical sources.

[45] For Coenwald and Coenwulf I, see: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 104, 118–22.

[46] Cynehelm (St. Kenelm) and Cyneberht respectively: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, p. 118.

[47] A. Williams, *Kingship and Government in Pre-Conquest England c. 500–1066* (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 29 and n. 62.

[48] S 1258 (CantCC 27; 798); *EHD* no. 79, pp. 508–10.

[49] In 2021 archaeologists, led by Professor Gabor Thomas of the University of Reading, discovered the location of the monastery in the ground of Holy Trinity Church and, more recently, have uncovered the remains of what appears to have been a substantial riverside commercial centre. The existence of a 'trading emporium' upriver from London was clearly a valuable asset and would be another reason why Offa entrusted Cookham to his queen. It is highly likely that Cynethryth enjoyed trading privileges on a par with those granted to Mildrith at Minster-in-Thanet, by Æthelbald in the 730s: S 86 (CantAug. 49; 716 or 717 [? for *c.* 733].

[50] The following queens are known to have retired to houses founded within either their natal homeland or on dower estates: Æthelburh, wife of Edwin of Northumbria: Bede, II. 20; Seaxburh, wife

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Æthelswith

Although there may be ambiguity as to Cynethryth's kindred there is no such issue with Æthelswith, daughter of Æthelwulf, King of Wessex (839–858). In 853, she married Burgred, King of Mercia (852–874), and as we shall see, Burgred's military dependency on his West Saxon in-laws was reflected in the extraordinarily high status enjoyed by his queen. Unlike her *immediate* Mercian predecessors, Æthelswith not only witnessed *all* Burgred's diplomas, she was also named as joint donor on at least two occasions.[51] As queen, Æthelswith held land in her own right that she could dispose of as she wished.[52] No equivalent examples of queenly activity have been documented in England before the eleventh century; such evidence only survives for widowed royal abbesses.

Burgred seems to have belonged to a family that ruled Mercia in the early ninth century.[53] 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.[54] In 853, Burgred and his council sought military assistance from Æthelwulf against the Welsh and Burgred cemented the alliance by marrying Æthelwulf's daughter.[55] Perhaps indicative of his subordinate status, it was Burgred who had to travel to Wessex to collect his bride.[56] 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 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in their

of Eorcenberht of Kent: Bede, IV. 19; Æthelthryth, first wife of Ecgfrith, King of Northumbria: Bede, IV. 19; Eormenhild, wife of Wulfhere of Mercia: D. W. Rollason, *The Mildrith Legend: a Study in Early Medieval Hagiography in England* (Leicester, 1982); and Cyneburh, wife of Ahlfrith, king of Deira: S. Kelly, *ODNB s.n.* Penda. It is also possible that Eormenburh, second wife of Ecgfrith of Northumbria retired and eventually became abbess of her sister's foundation in Carlisle where she had originally taken refuge during Ecgfrith's fatal battle against the Picts: *Two Lives of St Cuthbert: a Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life*, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), ch. xxvii, p. 243. On that basis it has been suggested that she was a British princess from Rheged: M. McCarthy, 'Carlisle: Function and Change between the First and Seventh Centuries AD', *ArchJ* 173 (2020), 292–314 at 308. However, the 'Eormen-' element in her name would favour a Kentish origin. It is also likely that Cynethryth's daughter, Ælfflaed, who married Æthelred of Northumbria in 792, returned to Mercia after his murder in 796: *ASC s.a.* 794 *recte* 796. Alcuin wrote to her sister, Æthelburh, urging her to persuade the dowager queen to enter a convent. Given Ælfflaed's attestation of S 152 (Glast. 15; 797), it would appear that Alcuin's entreaty was successful: Dümmler, Epist. 102, pp. 148–9. Ælfflaed may have been destined to succeed her mother as abbess of Cookham.

[51] S. Keynes, *An Atlas of Attestations*, Table XVII; S 210 (BL Cotton Tiberius xiii, ff 29f–30r; 864) and S 214 (CantCC. 92; 869).

[52] S 1201 (Abing. 17; 868).

[53] For discussion of the so-called 'B' kings of Mercia see: S. Keynes 'Mercia and Wessex in the Ninth Century', *Mercia: an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. Brown and Farr, pp. 310–28 at 316–19; B. Yorke, 'Mercia and Wessex *c.* 800: Connections and Comparisons' (unpubl. paper delivered at the Annual Brixworth Lecture, Brixworth, 2015), 26 pp., at 14–15, available at her academia.edu page. and Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, p. 119.

[54] *ASC s.a.* 851.

[55] *ASC s.a.* 853.

[56] Asser is the sole authority for the marriage taking place at Chippenham, Wilts: *Vita Alfredi*, ch. 9, p. 8; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 69 and p. 232, n. 21.

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description of the expedition into Wales. The manuscripts written from a West Saxon perspective, unsurprisingly, give the initiative to Æthelwulf whereas the northern text attributes the leading role to Burgred.[57] In 868, however, Burgred was again forced to seek help from his brothers-in-law, King Æthelred I (865–871) and Alfred, against the Vikings who had taken up winter quarters at Nottingham.[58] Simon Keynes notes that, in this instance, Asser promotes the idea of West Saxon superiority by alluding to Burgred's 'humble appeal'.[59] As with the joint campaign against the Welsh, the agreement in 868 was cemented by a diplomatic marriage, this time between Alfred and Ealhswith, whose mother, Asser claimed, was descended 'from the royal stock of the king of the Mercians'.[60]

That same year, Æthelswith, without reference to her husband, granted fifteen *manentes* at Lockinge, Berkshire, to her faithful minister Cuthwulf, 'with the consent and testimony of my elders'.[61] She specifically described the estate as her property (*mee proprie potestatis*). It is possible that Lockinge, close to the royal manor of Wantage, was part of her share of the family settlement made by her father, Æthelwulf, at Easter 854 prior to his departure for Rome.[62] This would explain the predominantly West Saxon signatories headed by King Æthelred.[63] Included in the witness list was another sibling, Alfred, and an Osweald, both of whom were described as 'filius regis'.[64] A year later, in 869, Æthelswith and Burgred jointly granted five hides (*manentes*) at *Uptrop* to an otherwise unknown Wulflaf in return for fifty mancuses of gold. The diploma survives as an original or near contemporary copy and the text is particularly 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 focused on the assertion of parity between both royal houses rather than the meaning of the term *coronata*, never before used to describe a royal consort in England.[65] While Julie-Ann Smith makes a passing reference, Janet

[57] *ASC*, A *s.a.* 853; D, E *s.a.* 852. See also S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', *Kings, Currency and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century*, ed. M. A. S. Blackburn and D. N. Dumville (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 1–45 at p. 7.

[58] *ASC s.a.* 868.

[59] Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 10–11.

[60] *Vita Alfredi*, ch 29, pp. 23–4; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 77 and p. 241, n. 58.

[61] S 1201 (Abing. 17; 868).

[62] P. Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance: a Gendered Perspective on Alfred's Family History', *Alfred the Great, Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. T. Reuter (Abingdon, 2016), pp. 251–64 at 255.

[63] S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Mercians', pp. 10–11. Burgred and Æthelswith attest only after the West Saxon signatories. Interestingly, the list of *duces* is headed by Ealdorman Wulfhere, possibly the father of Æthelred's queen, Wulfthryth (see n. 78 below).

[64] For the suggestion that Osweald was the illegitimate son of either Æthelbald or Æthelred I see: J. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family: Reflections on Alfred, from Asser, Chapter 2', *People and Places in Northern Europe: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. I. Wood and N. Lund (Woodbridge, 1991), 47–66 at 59. By 1066 Lockinge was in the hands of Abingdon Abbey: GDB 59v.

[65] S 214 (CantCC. 92; 869).

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Nelson consigns it to a footnote.[66] 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. Significantly, the earliest references to consecration ceremonies in England emanate from Mercia. The first was that of Ecgfrith who, following the Frankish practice, was anointed in 787, during his father's lifetime.[67] There is also the charter of Ceolwulf I (821–823), to Wulfred, Archbishop of Canterbury, which explicitly states that it was issued on the day of the king's consecration, 17 September 822.[68] 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.[69] However, it is not until the ninth century that we have surviving *ordines* specifically prepared for queens. The earliest *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 the Leofric missal. She suggests that clerics in Æthelwulf's entourage may have been involved in its compilation.[70]

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 in 853 or should we see the unique reference in S 214 as indicative of a 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'?[71] The point has already been made that the celebrations were performed in Wessex. Unfortunately, Asser does not elaborate on Æthelswith's position as *regina* despite his subsequent, famous explanation of why the West Saxons did not have queens.[72] 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 to become *pari coronata stemma regali Anglorum regina* in 853? It is tempting to take Nelson's hypothesis a stage further by suggesting that the English clerics

[66] J.-A. Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', *Church Hist.* 66 (1997), 18–35 at 24; J. Nelson, 'The Earliest Surviving Royal *Ordo*, Some Liturgical and Historical Aspects', in her *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1986), pp. 341–603 at 351, n. 51. Pauline Stafford also makes a general 'not above suspicion' comment on the charter in a footnote: P. Stafford, 'Charles the Bald, Judith and England', *Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom*, ed. M. Gibson and J. L. Nelson (Oxford, 1981), pp. 139–53, at 149, n. 65.

[67] *ASC s.a.* 787. For discussion of the evolution of Carolingian self-coronations and its impact on England from the tenth century see: J. Aurell, *Medieval Self-Coronations: the History and Symbolism of a Ritual* (Cambridge, 2020), especially ch. 6.

[68] S 186 (CantCC. 53; 822); *EHD*, no. 83, pp. 514–16. For the evolution of the English coronation *ordines* see: D. Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation *Ordo*', *ASE* 46 (2017), 147–258 especially 154–63. His arguments are expanded in *English Coronation Ordines in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. D. Pratt, Harry Bradshaw Soc. 125 (Woodbridge, 2023).

[69] Smith, 'The Earliest Queen-Making Rites', p. 19; J. Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites of Queen-Making and the Shaping of Medieval Queenship', *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe*, ed. A. Duggan (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 301–16 at 302–3.

[70] Nelson, 'The Earliest Surviving Royal *Ordo*', pp. 343ff.

[71] *Vita Alfredi*, ch. 9, pp. 7–8; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 69.

[72] *Vita Alfredi*, chs. 13–14, pp. 10–13; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, pp. 71–2, pp. 235–36, nn. 28, 30.

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involved in adapting the first English *ordo* 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 a queen. On this occasion it was for the consecration of Judith's mother, Queen Ermentrude, wife of Charles the Bald. By this time the couple had been married twenty-three years and produced at least eleven children.[73] Ermentrude's anointing was accompanied by prayers that conveyed not only hopes of future offspring, but also political messages relating to divine sanction of dynastic continuity and good kingship.[74] It has been suggested that the consecration of Ermentrude took place amidst fears for the future of the Carolingian dynasty.[75] 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'.[76] Similar concerns may have been in the minds of Burgred and Æthelswith, who appear to have been childless. We shall return to this point later. The failure to produce a male heir would only have compounded Burgred's political weakness. It would therefore have been in the royal couple's interests to embrace the ideology around queenly status that was developing in West Francia from the 820s onwards.[77]

Coincidentally, dynastic fears regarding the succession may have been in the mind of Æthelswith's brother, Æthelred I of Wessex, as evidenced by the unique appearance of his wife, Wulfthryth, probably the daughter of Wulfhere, ealdorman of Wiltshire, as *regina* in a charter dated 868 (S 340).[78] Was it a coincidence that Wulfthryth's visibility was enhanced in the very year that Æthelred's younger brother, Alfred, was married? Æthelred's concern to ensure a line of succession would explain Wulfthryth's title. 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.[79] Ultimately, it was Æthelred's early death at a time of crisis that caused his young sons to be sidelined in favour of their uncle Alfred in 871.

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

[73] J. Nelson, 'Carolingian Coronation Rituals: a Model for Europe?', *The Court Historian* 9 (2004), 1–13 at 5.

[74] Z. Mistry, 'Ermentrude's Consecration (866): Queen-making Rites and Biblical Templates for Carolingian Fertility', *EME* 27 (2019), 567–88 at 572.

[75] Mistry, 'Ermentrude's Consecration', p. 574.

[76] J. Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals', in her *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 283–307 at 304.

[77] Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites', p. 302ff.; E. Ward, 'Agobard of Lyons and Paschasius Radbertus as Critics of the Empress Judith', *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Shiels and D. Woods, Stud. in Church Hist. 27 (Cambridge, 1990), 15–25.

[78] J. Nelson, 'A King Across the Sea: Alfred in Continental Perspective', *TRHS* 36 (1986), 45–68 at 52ff. See S 340 (BCS 520) for Wulfthryth's sole appearance as *regina*. Her name follows those of Alfred and Oswald, both described as *filius regis* as in Æthelswith's grant of Lockinge discussed above on p. 10.

[79] Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family', p. 55.

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narrative regarding the royal succession, so was any reference to the thoughts of Judith's second husband, Æthelbald, on the matter.[80] 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'.[81] The story of Eadburh, who was also 'foreign', served as a caveat against powerful women.[82] David Pratt notes that a deliberate 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.'[83] 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.[84] By the 890s, Alfred was also seeking to secure the rule of an extended West Saxon *regnum*, 'the kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', on his son at the expense of his nephews, hence Alfred's wish to suppress his brothers' dynastic ambitions in official records. This contention would support David Pratt's argument for a revised dating of version A of the Second English ordo to the late 890s. If correct, this would suggest that Alfred was seeking to legitimise Edward's position as his successor in the eyes of the Church. The text of the ordo includes a section on the coronation of a queen, presumably Edward the Elder's wife Ælfflaed.[85]

Aside from Æthelred's sons, it is possible that Alfred had another nephew to contend with – that is, Æthelred, Lord of the Mercians. In 2001, Alex Woolf mooted the idea that Æthelred's parents were Æthelswith and Burgred.[86] If this is correct (and there is no occasion when Æthelred attests Burgred's charters as *filius rex*), it adds another dimension to Alfred's policy regarding English Mercia. In 874, Burgred was driven into exile by the Danes and replaced by Ceolwulf II (874–*c.* 879). Though described by the A version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as 'a foolish king's thegn', Ceolwulf was clearly a legitimate king in Mercia, and possibly a descendent of Ceolwulf I.[87] The 'Two Emperors' coinage, issued in both kingdoms and in the names of both Alfred and Ceolwulf, suggests a far more equal, even collaborative relationship between the West Saxon and the Mercian

[80] Stafford, 'Succession and Inheritance', p. 258.

[81] *Vita Alfredi*, ch. 13, pp. 10–12; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 71 and pp. 235–36, n. 28.

[82] See n. 72 above.

[83] Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation Ordo', p. 161.

[84] Stafford, *Succession and Inheritance*, pp. 257–8. Only two charters survive for the reign of Æthelbald and both were witnessed by Judith (S 326 (Shaftsbury 3; 860)) and S 1274 (BCS 495) dated 858. See: Nelson 'The Queen in Ninth-Century Wessex', pp. 74–6.

[85] D. Pratt, 'The Making of the Second English Coronation Ordo', pp. 218–22 and p. 227 for the dating of Edward's marriage to Ælfflaed by 901. For an alternative dating see: J. Nelson, 'The Second English Ordo', in her *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 361–74, and her revised argument in 'The First Use of the Second Anglo-Saxon *Ordo*', *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in honour of Nicholas Brooks*, ed. J. Barrow and A. Wareham (Aldershot, 2008), pp. 117–26.

[86] A. Woolf, 'View from the West: an Irish Perspective on West Saxon Dynastic Practice', *Edward the Elder 899–924*, ed. N. J. Higham and D. H. Hill (London, 2001), pp. 89–101 at 98.

[87] See: Williams, *Kingship and Government*, p. 70 and p. 183, n. 40, and Capper, *Titles and Troubles*, p. 221. For his membership of the so-called 'C' kings, see: Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 18–19. It is worth remembering that the A version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* emanates from Wessex and is inevitably biased against evidence of Mercian rule.

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kings.[88] As for Æthelswith, it is presumed that she accompanied her husband to Rome, which is borne out by the appearance of their names in the *Liber Vitae* of Brescia.[89] Whether she stayed there is another matter. Asser tells us that Burgred died soon after arriving in Rome and thus it is possible that Æthelswith returned home to Wessex.[90] If we accept Woolf's premise that Æthelred was her son, she may have sought to negotiate on Æthelred's behalf for his Mercian inheritance after Ceolwulf II disappeared from view in *c.* 879. The first documented reference to Æthelred occurs in 883 when he granted privileges to Berkeley Abbey. 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'.[91] When Alfred took control of the former Mercian city of London in 886, he entrusted it to Æthelred and it must have been about this time that Æthelred married Alfred's daughter Æthelflaed.[92] Perhaps it was only after his future was assured that Æthelswith returned to Italy, where she died, at Pavia, in 888.[93]

Conclusion

It is clear that the illustrious career of Cynethryth was a direct consequence of the extraordinary activities of her husband Offa of Mercia. No other Mercian king achieved the military success enjoyed by him at the expense of neighbouring kingdoms. However, while Offa's dynastic ambitions undoubtedly enhanced Cynethryth's status, equally she gave legitimacy to his rule by virtue of her Mercian and West Saxon royal antecedents. That this was important to Offa is evident in Cynethryth's continued presence at court even after the assassination of her putative father, Cynewulf, in 786. The queen's appearance on coins served to demonstrate that only her sons were to be considered throne-worthy. Nevertheless, despite her visibility, Cynethryth's career was still ultimately defined by her roles as wife, mother and widow. The death of her husband and son in quick succession condemned her to the usual fate of royal wives, that of retirement to a religious house. However, her wider familial connections ensured a high degree of agency in negotiating the terms of her widowhood.

Cynethryth was concerned to ensure that some if not all the religious houses founded by her natal family should continue to be held by her surviving relatives. No doubt she intended that Cookham should be inherited by her daughters. As abbess of Cookham, the dowager-queen almost certainly engaged in mercantile activity on a par with the abbess of Minster-in-Thanet. It may be that her distant

[88] R. Naismith, *Citadel of the Saxons: the Rise of Early London* (London, 2019), pp. 115–16, n. 52.

[89] *ASC s.a.* 873; *EHD*, p. 194; S. Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxon Entries in the *Liber Vitae* of Brescia', *Alfred the Wise: Studies in Honour of Janet Bately*, ed. J. Roberts and J. Nelson (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 99–119 at 109–15.

[90] *Vita Alfredi*, ch. 46, pp. 34–5; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred*, p. 82 and p. 244, n. 82.

[91] S 218, F. E. Harmer, *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1914) no. 12, with translation on pp. 53–4.

[92] *ASC s.a.* 886; this is Æthelred's first appearance in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

[93] *ASC*, A *s.a.* 888.

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kinship with Ecgfrith's successor, Coenwulf, made her a potential force with whom it was necessary to seek accommodation. This could explain his willingness to obtain a papal privilege confirming the ownership of Glastonbury in perpetuity by another mutual kinsman, abbot Cynehelm.[94] Unfortunately, the destruction and suppression of Mercian culture by vikings and the royal house of Wessex in the ninth century precludes a more in-depth study of the usual role played by queens as religious patrons. This applies to both Cynethryth and Æthelswith.

In the case of Æthelswith, we see another royal consort who was able to enjoy an extraordinary position of power thanks to her powerful West Saxon family. Æthelswith's status as a crowned queen relies on the veracity of S 214, which has not been seriously questioned. Pauline Stafford has noted that there was 'a tradition of queenly importance in Mercia'.[95] This tradition reached its apogee during the queenship of Æthelswith, which suggests that Mercian kings relied more than usual upon their choice of wives and their family connections in order to maintain control of an enclosed kingdom. This dependency is all the more visible during the ninth century when faced with the additional external threat posed by the Danish invasions. Burgred's reliance on the support of his in-laws may have prevented Æthelswith from being repudiated despite her apparent failure to produce a viable heir during twenty years of marriage. However, if she was the mother of ealdorman Æthelred, then we might conclude that she was a resourceful woman who, on the death of her husband, returned to Wessex to fight for her son's share in the governing of the new 'Anglo-Saxon' realm being created by her brother.

Cynethryth and Æthelswith were West Saxon princesses who married men who had emerged from obscure backgrounds to become kings of Mercia. This enabled both queens to exercise a degree of agency unparalleled elsewhere in England at the time. Offa was a successful king, whereas Burgred ultimately was not, and this impacted upon the fortunes of their widows. Cynethryth, as queen mother/dowager, retained power during the lifetime of her son and even afterwards, while Æthelswith's eventual fate was to die in exile in Pavia. If, however, she was in fact the mother of Ealdorman Æthelred, then her son enjoyed an illustrious career as Lord of the Mercians, perhaps because his mother was not only sister and aunt of the West Saxon rulers, but also 'crowned queen of the Angles'.

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[94] For Coenwulf's continuation of Offa's policy regarding the acquisition of monasteries, see Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms*, pp. 118–19.

[95] P. Stafford, 'The King's Wife in Wessex, 800–1066', *Past and Present* 91 (1981), 3–27 at 4.

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