

Fall 11-15-2017

# Royal Daughters in Anglo-Saxon England

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**ROYAL DAUGHTERS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND**

**by**

**ALICE WEHLING**

**B.A., HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, 2014**

**THESIS**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
History**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2017**

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**Alice Wehling****B.A., History, University of New Mexico, 2014****M.A., History, University of New Mexico, 2017****ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to investigate the social roles of royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England. The daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were raised in monasteries or in the royal households of their parents, and were educated in accordance with their royal status. Through their marriages to the rulers of other kingdoms, royal daughters served as the primary vehicles by which Anglo-Saxon ruling dynasties made political alliances with their domestic and continental neighbors. Royal daughters could also be consecrated to the religious life; as nuns and abbesses of prominent monastic institutions, these women served their family's spiritual interests and wielded substantial spiritual and political influence. In addition, royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England were in some cases able to wield formal political power. As witnesses to the charters of their fathers and brothers, and, in a few rare cases, as candidates to succeed their fathers on the throne, royal daughters served as instrumental agents in Anglo-Saxon political administration. By examining the diverse roles of royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon society, this thesis argues that these women possessed a degree of power and social influence which was inherent in their status at birth, rather than entirely dependent on their marriages to powerful men.

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## Introduction

The daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings included among their number faithful wives, devout saints, land magnates, military leaders, and even murderers. Despite their brief appearances in historical sources, these royal daughters possessed dynamic and unique personalities. Yet these remarkable women all had one thing in common: royal status at birth. This study seeks to investigate the implications that this royal status had for the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings. Throughout this work, I will primarily explore the roles that royal daughters played within Anglo-Saxon society, as well as the ways in which their royal status affected their ability to hold social and political power. By investigating the various experiences of royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly their upbringings, marriages, and roles in both religious and secular life, I argue that these women were born with an inherent degree of power and social influence that stemmed from their royal status, rather than from their marriages to powerful men.

The study of women in Anglo-Saxon England faces many of the same problems which occur for any historian of medieval women. Women usually appear in medieval sources sporadically, and certainly to a much lesser extent than men, while the sources in which they do appear are most often written from a male point of view. The study of Anglo-Saxon women must therefore entail what Joel Rosenthal has termed the “bits-and-pieces approach,” in which scant information from multiple sources is combined to form a picture of female “identity.”<sup>1</sup> In many ways, historians must be content with simply identifying individual women, and, as the most prominent women in the historical record,

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<sup>1</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, “Anglo-Saxon Attitudes: Men’s Sources, Women’s History,” in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History*, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 268.

royal and aristocratic women have long been the focal point of their efforts. As Sheila Dietrich has so aptly observed, although this “great women” approach has been criticized for its reliance on a small subset of supposedly “representative” individuals, the search for great women in the historical record is “valuable since it reveals the public or political activities available to women” throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.<sup>2</sup> This thesis uses this traditional form of women’s history as its primary methodological approach. However, since the power held by Anglo-Saxon royal daughters stemmed from their status within their birth families, their relationships to male kin, particularly fathers and brothers, are of paramount importance in evaluating their ability to exercise social and political power. Rather than simply exploring the lives of “great women,” the study of royal women must therefore also involve a gendered reading of any primary source. By illuminating some of the biographical details of a small subset of very elite women, and by exploring their relationships with their parents and siblings, I hope to illustrate general trends within Anglo-Saxon society regarding royal status, birthright, and gender.

Despite the problems inherent in the study of women in the early Middle Ages, a great deal of information about women in Anglo-Saxon England can be found in surviving chronicles, biographies, hagiographies, and diplomatic sources. Most of our information for Anglo-Saxon women in the seventh and eighth centuries comes from the Venerable Bede. Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731, serves as the primary source for women during the conversion period, and is used extensively throughout this thesis. To a lesser extent, Bede’s prose *Life of Cuthbert*,

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<sup>2</sup> Sheila C. Dietrich, “An Introduction to Women in Anglo-Saxon Society (c. 600-1066),” in *The Women of England from Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present: Interpretative Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Kanner (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), 34.

completed by 721, can also provide us with some insight into the lives of Anglo-Saxon women, and its complex and controversial depiction of Abbess Ælfflæd (d. 714) is addressed in Chapter Three. Bede generally privileges the spread of the Christian Church in England over the actions of individuals, and his focus on the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons means that he tends to present women as virginal saints or agents of conversion, thereby largely ignoring women's activities within the political sphere. However, Bede does provide some nuanced and insightful portraits of women, and his depictions of the royal daughters Æthelburh, Eanflæd, Ælfflæd, and Æthelthryth provide some of the most detailed accounts of women during the early Anglo-Saxon period.

In addition to Bede, there are numerous other Anglo-Saxon sources which provide historians with information about royal daughters. Stephen of Ripon's *Life of Wilfrid*, written in the 710s, discusses in greater detail the political influence of Anglo-Saxon royal women in the seventh century. Asser's *Life of King Alfred* serves as our primary source of information for royal daughters during the reign of Alfred the Great (r. 871-899). Written in 893, Asser's *Life* provides a wealth of information about Alfred's family life, including his relationships with his parents and siblings, his wife Ealhswith, and his five children. Although Asser is by no means an impartial source, but rather intent on conveying a distinctly pro-Alfred agenda, his account enables us to catch a glimpse of gender and kinship relations within the royal household in ninth-century Wessex. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, made up of multiple collections of annals that were first compiled during Alfred's reign, provides much of our information for Anglo-Saxon history from the ninth to the eleventh century. Although women in the *Chronicle* "are



primarily noteworthy for their total absence” and “absolute silence,”<sup>3</sup> its report of King Alfred’s daughter Æthelflæd (d. 918) provides one of the few accounts of early medieval women acting unopposed and unquestioned in a political role.

In addition to these narrative texts, diplomatic sources provide a great deal of evidence for the activities of royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England. Anglo-Saxon women make numerous appearances in wills and charters, and their presence within these documents provides us with a picture of women as powerful and independent figures. Anglo-Saxon documents show that women were able to freely inherit and bequeath both landed and moveable property. High-profile documents such as King Alfred’s will indicate that female members of the royal family often inherited substantial amounts of land and money. The frequent appearance of royal daughters in the witness lists of the charters of their fathers and brothers also indicates that these women were instrumental participants in political administration.

As indicated by the above discussion, Anglo-Saxon women appear in narrative histories, chronicles, hagiographies, and administrative documents, each of which presents its own unique problems. But perhaps the greatest difficulty for the study of women in the Anglo-Saxon period is not the type of source, but rather the gulf between contemporary and non-contemporary sources. Many of the sources that relate to Anglo-Saxon women date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries and were written by Anglo-Norman or continental chroniclers and hagiographers. Unlike Bede or Asser, these authors could not have witnessed the incidents they described, nor could they have had access to individuals with first-hand information about women who died centuries earlier.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal, “Anglo-Saxon Attitudes,” 265.

In fact, sources written during the Norman period “have more to tell us about the time in which they were written than that in which their subjects lived.”<sup>4</sup> They therefore express different values than Anglo-Saxon sources, and may not accurately convey Anglo-Saxon views on gender. However, these sources are often the historian’s only opportunity for discovering any biographical information about many Anglo-Saxon women, particularly during the later period. In many cases, these Norman writers may have had access to original Anglo-Saxon sources or oral traditions handed down through monasteries.<sup>5</sup> This means that at least some of the biographical details that they relate can potentially be trusted, and oftentimes the historian of Anglo-Saxon women has little choice but to take them at their word.

Perhaps the most important of the Norman chroniclers for the later history of Anglo-Saxon England is William of Malmesbury. William’s *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, both written in the first half of the twelfth century, provide much of the political and ecclesiastical history for the middle and late Anglo-Saxon periods, particularly the ninth and tenth centuries. William’s anecdotal accounts of a number of female saints, most of whom were the daughters of kings, can help fill in the gaps surrounding the activities of royal daughters in the Church during this period. The *Liber Eliensis*, composed by an anonymous monk at the monastery of Ely in the twelfth century, describes in great detail the founding of the monastery and the exploits of Æthelthryth and her sisters, daughters of King Anna of East Anglia (d. 653/4). In addition, hagiographical writing from the post-Conquest period, such as Goscelin’s

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Yorke, “‘Carriers of the Truth’: Writing the Biographies of Anglo-Saxon Female Saints,” in *Writing Medieval Biography: Essays in Honour of Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia Crick, and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2006), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

eleventh-century *Life of Edith*, which describes the life of Eadgyth, daughter of King Edgar (r. 959-975), can provide us with a great deal of information about saintly royal daughters during the late Anglo-Saxon period.

Despite many of the difficulties presented by the above-mentioned primary sources, royal Anglo-Saxon women have long attracted the attention of historians. Interest in royal women during the Anglo-Saxon period began in the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> and continued to grow into the early twentieth, prompted in large part by the first wave of feminist activity and the women's suffrage movement. By the middle of the twentieth century, a growing interest in Anglo-Saxon studies intersected with the burgeoning field of women's history, and primarily female historians began attempting to recover the previously overlooked history of women in the early Middle Ages. As the most visible women in the historical record, queens and royal women became in many ways the focal point of these historians' investigations. Both Dorothy Whitelock and Doris Stenton, writing in the 1950s, recognized the prominence of Anglo-Saxon women in wills and charters, and their analysis of women's actions in the world of landed property led them to conclude that Anglo-Saxon women held a higher status than their Norman counterparts.<sup>7</sup> In *The English Woman in History*, Stenton even went so far as to claim that men and women in Anglo-Saxon England "lived on terms of rough equality with each other."<sup>8</sup> Although this narrative of Anglo-Saxon England as a "golden age" for

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<sup>6</sup> For a particularly early, if somewhat romantic, discussion of Anglo-Saxon princesses and queens, see Mrs. Matthew Hall, *Lives of the Queens of England before the Norman Conquest* (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1854).

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (New York: Penguin, 1952), 94; Doris Mary Stenton, *The English Woman in History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Stenton, *English Woman in History*, 28.

women has been called into question by more recent scholarship,<sup>9</sup> many of Whitelock's and Stenton's observations on the political power and property rights of royal and aristocratic women have continued to influence the field of Anglo-Saxon women's studies.

By the 1970s, no longer content to study great women in isolation from their social context, historians began to investigate how medieval women operated within larger social and kinship networks. Prompted in large part by the unquestioned ability of elite women to inherit property during the early Middle Ages, historians began to realize that women's power was deeply intertwined with familial power.<sup>10</sup> The study of the relationship between women, power, and family dynamics in Anglo-Saxon England is largely indebted to Pauline Stafford, whose studies on Anglo-Saxon queenship continue to be the standard works in the field. Stafford argued that early medieval queens were able to exercise power within the realm of "family politics," and played an active role in royal succession practices.<sup>11</sup> In her 1983 work, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, Stafford asserted that the ability of early medieval queens to exercise both formal and informal power was based upon their prominent role within the royal household,<sup>12</sup> and presented early medieval royal women as shrewd players in a complex network of social and familial entanglements.

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<sup>9</sup> See Pauline Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994): 224, and Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450-1500* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 83-4.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this topic in a Frankish context, see Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100," *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1973): 132.

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Stafford, "Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 100.

<sup>12</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 93-101.

Following Stafford's publication of *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, Christine Fell produced the first in-depth study to focus on the broad scope of women's roles in Anglo-Saxon England. In her 1984 work, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, Fell expertly examined the daily lives of women of all social classes in both the religious and secular spheres.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the legal sources, charter evidence, and narrative works that had previously served as the backbone of Anglo-Saxon women's studies, Fell effectively analyzed material culture, archaeological evidence, and literary sources to uncover the roles of Anglo-Saxon women in marriage, family and kinship groups, and court and monastic life. By employing a broad methodological approach, Fell showed that women were able to assume multiple and diverse roles in Anglo-Saxon society.

The prominent role of Anglo-Saxon royal women in monastic life, acknowledged by Doris Stenton and discussed at length by Christine Fell, has been the primary subject of more recent studies. Susan Ridyard's 1988 study of the cults of royal Anglo-Saxon saints, and particularly her analysis of the association of royal status with sanctity, has served as an important contribution to the study of royal daughters in the Church.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Sarah Foot's *Veiled Women* explores the shifting definition of female monastic life in Anglo-Saxon England, and recognizes the prominent role of royal women in religious houses.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps most notably, Barbara Yorke's 2003 study *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* provides a wealth of information about the role of royally-founded female monastic houses, and the royal daughters who were often in charge of

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<sup>13</sup> Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum Publications, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Susan J. Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study of West Saxon and East Anglian Cults* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women*, vol. 1, *Studies in Early Medieval Britain* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 44.

them, in ensuring the political and spiritual success of the royal dynasty.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Yorke's analysis of the royal status of King Edgar's daughter Eadgyth as presented in the *Life of Edith* has provided a useful framework through which to interpret post-Conquest depictions of Anglo-Saxon female saints.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these works, two other recent contributions to Anglo-Saxon women's studies have been focused on literary interpretations of royal women. Stephanie Hollis's *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* has thoroughly examined the ways in which Anglo-Saxon religious women were perceived and presented by male clerical authors, and has provided an extensive analysis of Bede's biases and personal agenda in his portrayal of monastic women.<sup>18</sup> Stacy Klein's 2006 study *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* has examined the depictions of queens in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and in Old English literature, and has illustrated how literary constructions of Anglo-Saxon royal women can express societal views on gender.<sup>19</sup> Both of these works have provided historians with valuable interpretive frameworks through which to view Anglo-Saxon royal women, as well as a fresh perspective on the role of women in Anglo-Saxon society.

The above discussion of the major works on Anglo-Saxon royal women has shown that a significant number of historians have devoted their attention to the study of Anglo-Saxon queenship and the power that royal women held as the wives of kings. Yet, substantial work still remains to be done on the experiences of royal women whose power

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses, Women, Power and Politics* (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Yorke, "The Legitimacy of St. Edith," *Haskins Society Journal* 11 (2003).

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

and influence did not depend on their marriages to powerful men. No one has published a detailed study of royal daughters, nor has anyone explored the possibility that, unlike their queenly counterparts, Anglo-Saxon princesses may have been endowed with an inherent and acknowledged royal status upon their births that was entirely independent of their marriages. While the investigations of queens and kings' wives provide valuable insights into the status and activities of royal princesses, the field of Anglo-Saxon women's studies would greatly benefit from a full-scale study of the social role of the king's daughter. This present study seeks to fill this gap by focusing exclusively on Anglo-Saxon royal women as the daughters and sisters, rather than wives, of kings.

This study seeks to investigate the lives of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters by illuminating the roles and opportunities available to them, and is thus organized around four broad themes, each of which represents a distinct realm of experience for women in the Anglo-Saxon period. Chapter One focuses on the childhood, adolescence, and education of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings. By examining narrative accounts of the births and baptisms of Anglo-Saxon princesses, as well as their consecrations to the religious life, I will show that these young women were considered to be valuable members of the royal family from birth, and that their earliest years were overseen with great care. This chapter will also discuss the education of royal daughters, their experiences growing up within the royal court, and the ways in which they were prepared for their future lives as nuns and wives. I also hope to give a sense of their daily lives as young unmarried women, a topic which is perhaps one of the least explored aspects of medieval women's studies. By investigating the early lives of Anglo-Saxon royal

daughters, this chapter will show that these young women possessed a recognized status from birth, and that their families ensured that this status was fostered and respected.

I then move on to discuss the adult roles for which these royal daughters were prepared as children and adolescents. Chapter Two examines the marriages of Anglo-Saxon princesses and the role that these marriages played in the formation of political alliances throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Narrative and chronicle accounts of royal marriage reveal that royal daughters served as the primary vehicle by which the Anglo-Saxon ruling dynasties made alliances with their local and continental neighbors. I will examine how the power inherent in this role made these young women of vital importance to the success of their birth families. In addition, this chapter will explore the ability of these women to exercise agency and exert their own influence within their marriages. By examining the ways in which Anglo-Saxon princesses maintained connections with their birth families, asserted independence within their marriages, and in some cases even determined whether they stayed married, I hope to show that the royal status which these women held enabled them to remain somewhat independent from the influence of their husband and his family.

Chapter Three explores the role of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters in the Christian Church. I will examine the strategies inherent in the consecration of royal daughters to the religious life, and how these daughters served as the representatives of their family in the spiritual sphere. The daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were often able to exercise a remarkable degree of choice in whether they took religious vows; I will therefore explore the opportunities for agency which the monastic life afforded to Anglo-Saxon women. Royal daughters who entered monastic life rarely severed all connection with their birth



families and frequently displayed a marked attachment to the material aspects of the secular world; this chapter will therefore discuss the various ties that these women maintained with their families and secular life. A close examination of the accounts of Anglo-Saxon female saints shows that royal daughters were able to attain a high degree of spiritual and administrative power, usually as the abbesses of influential monastic institutions. I will investigate to what extent this power enabled royal female monastics to influence the secular world.

Finally, Chapter Four investigates the roles that the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings played in secular politics. While the political actions of Anglo-Saxon queens have received substantial attention from scholars, particularly Pauline Stafford, the ability of royal daughters to engage in politics by virtue of their status as a king's daughter has remained largely unexplored. By examining a number of royal charters, particularly the ninth-century will of King Alfred and several grants of Mercian kings dating from the seventh to the tenth century, I will show that Anglo-Saxon royal daughters played an important role in property relations and politics. Royal daughters were able to inherit property from their parents and siblings, and frequently appeared in their fathers' and brothers' charters as witnesses. In this chapter, I argue that the prominence of royal daughters as charter witnesses indicates that these women were integral to the political administration of their fathers and brothers. This chapter will also investigate the possibilities for political succession on the part of royal daughters. While female succession was rare, I argue for the possibility that a few remarkable women during the Anglo-Saxon period were able to exercise political power solely because of their status as a king's daughter.

By examining their roles in childhood, marriage, religious life, and secular politics, I hope to show that royal daughters were a vital part of Anglo-Saxon society. The daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings cemented political alliances through their marriages, helped spread and maintain the Christian faith, served as their family's representative in the Church by taking monastic vows, and in some cases even exercised significant political power. By investigating the nature of the various roles that royal daughters were able to play in Anglo-Saxon England, I argue that these princesses possessed a degree of power and social influence which was inherent in their status at birth, rather than entirely dependent on marriage. Despite the frequent characterization of Anglo-Saxon England as a "warrior society," relentlessly dominated by masculine exploits, royal daughters were often able to participate in the same social realms as their male kin due to their status at birth. While they were no doubt subject to some limitations, these women were able to operate as independent and powerful agents in a man's world.

## Chapter One

### Childhood and Education

In describing the lives of early medieval queens, many of whom were also the daughters of kings, Pauline Stafford has written that “no period of a queen’s life is more obscure than her childhood.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the darkness in which these years are shrouded, we can glean some information about the early lives of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters.

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, the births of royal daughters were celebrated and their initiation into the Christian community was taken seriously. For many Anglo-Saxon princesses, entry into monastic life occurred at a very young age, and the consecration of royal daughters to serve Christ within the Church was a momentous decision for both the girls and their families. Those daughters who were destined to marry were often brought up at court under the watchful and affectionate eyes of their parents and maintained close relationships with their other siblings. Whether destined for marriage or the Church, these girls were equipped with an education that enabled them to operate competently in both the secular and religious spheres. Furthermore, the upbringings of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings suggest that they were born with a certain status that enabled them to fully participate in the activities of their families, and that this status was respected and acknowledged throughout their formative years.

#### Birth

The births of royal daughters were important occasions in Anglo-Saxon England, and often had far-reaching implications for both the royal family and the kingdom at

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<sup>1</sup> Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 55.

large. Few narrative accounts of royal births from the Anglo-Saxon period exist, but those that have survived are highly revealing of the attitudes which Anglo-Saxon kings held towards their children, and especially their daughters. Perhaps the most detailed account of a royal birth occurs in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, in which Bede described the birth of Eanflæd, the daughter of King Edwin of Northumbria (r. 616-633) and his Kentish wife Æthelburh. Bede writes that on Easter Day, 626, “the queen was delivered of a daughter, to be named Eanfled.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than being disappointed in the birth of a girl and lamenting that he was not given a son, the still pagan King Edwin “thanked his gods ... for the birth of his daughter.”<sup>3</sup> The birth of Eanflæd was therefore a joyous event for Edwin, who saw the birth of his daughter as an opportunity for giving thanks to his pagan gods.

Furthermore, since Bede specified that Edwin and Æthelburh’s marriage had taken place after Paulinus’s consecration as bishop on 21 July 625, and since Eanflæd was born on Easter Day, 20 April 626,<sup>4</sup> Eanflæd must have been the first-born child of Edwin and Æthelburh. Earlier in his narrative, Bede described the marriage negotiations between Edwin and Æthelburh’s brother Eadbald, during which Edwin agreed that Æthelburh would be allowed to practice Christianity unhindered and “professed himself willing to accept the religion of Christ” if he was allowed to marry her.<sup>5</sup> The complexity of the marriage negotiations and the concessions that Edwin made to Eadbald in order to marry Æthelburh indicate that Edwin very much desired the marriage and the alliance it

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price (New York: Penguin, 1990), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> C.R. Cheney, ed., *Handbook of Dates for Students of English History* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1970), 142, Table 30.

<sup>5</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 118.

provided him with the powerful kingdom of Kent. Although Edwin already had two grown sons named Osfrith and Eadfrith, “who were both born to him in exile of Coenburg, daughter of Cearl, King of the Mercians,”<sup>6</sup> his thanksgiving for the birth of a daughter as the first-born child of his politically important marriage to Æthelburh suggests that the births of daughters among the royal families of Anglo-Saxon England were viewed in a positive light.

Eanflæd’s birth also served as an important factor in the eventual conversion of Edwin and the Northumbrian people to Christianity. Bede writes that Bishop Paulinus was also present at Eanflæd’s birth. Paulinus was sent to England by Pope Gregory in 601 to assist the Roman missionary Augustine in his conversionary efforts, and had subsequently traveled to Northumbria as Æthelburh’s chaplain upon her marriage to Edwin in 625. According to Bede, Paulinus responded to Edwin’s thanksgiving to his pagan gods by asserting that it was in fact Christ who “had given the queen a safe and painless delivery in response to his [Edwin’s] prayers.”<sup>7</sup> Immediately after hearing this statement, Edwin declared his intention to accept the Christian faith if granted victory over his enemies. Although Paulinus had assiduously been evangelizing the Northumbrians since his arrival in 625, he had been unable to convert Edwin. Thus, the birth of a healthy daughter, and the belief that it was Christ who ensured her safe delivery, was more responsible for Edwin’s later decision to convert than Paulinus’s preaching.

Another Anglo-Saxon daughter whose birth is recorded is Eadgyth, more popularly known as St. Edith, the daughter of King Edgar (r. 959-975). The major source

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

for Eadgyth's life is the *Life of Edith*, written ca. 1080 by Goscelin of Saint-Bertin, the Flemish-born chaplain of Wilton Abbey in Wiltshire.<sup>8</sup> Goscelin purportedly got most of his information from "the testimony of faithful people or from local books," and although his primary intention was to establish Eadgyth's saintliness rather than adhere strictly to "the facts of history," his work provides valuable information about her life.<sup>9</sup> Eadgyth's mother was Wulfthryth, whom Goscelin described as "a descendant of princes and a nobly-born child of a royal duke."<sup>10</sup> Both medieval chroniclers and modern scholars disagree over whether Wulfthryth was Edgar's legitimate wife or concubine, and hence whether Eadgyth herself should be considered Edgar's legitimate daughter.<sup>11</sup> However, Barbara Yorke makes a convincing case that Wulfthryth could very easily have been Edgar's second legitimate wife and that the statements of medieval authors "in support of Wulfthryth being a full wife of Edgar should be accepted."<sup>12</sup> According to William of Malmesbury, Wulfthryth was "a girl of lay status" who "had adopted the veil out of fear of the king, but later had it snatched away and was forced into a royal marriage."<sup>13</sup> Goscelin also stated that Edgar "had taken her ... from the very schoolroom by divine dispensation, and united her with the kingdom by indissoluble vows."<sup>14</sup> Although it is clear that Wulfthryth was married to Edgar against her will, a fact further evidenced by

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<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Hollis, Introduction to *Writing the Wilton Women: Goscelin's Legend of Edith and the Liber Confortatorius*, ed. Stephanie Hollis, W.R. Barnes, Rebecca Hayward, Kathleen Loncar, and Michael Wright, *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts 9* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Goscelin, *The Vita of Edith*, trans. Michael Wright and Kathleen Loncar, in *Writing the Wilton Women*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>13</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, completed by R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 261.

<sup>14</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 26.

her desire to return to her monastery after the birth of her daughter, both William and Goscelin agree that they were in fact married, and thus that Eadgyth was Edgar's only legitimate daughter.

According to Barbara Yorke, Eadgyth's birth probably occurred in 963, and at least no later than 964, when Edgar married his third wife Ælfthryth.<sup>15</sup> Goscelin writes that Eadgyth "was born in her father's kingdom in the country of Kent, in a royal manor named Kymesinthia," or modern-day Kemsing, and that her birth was accompanied by "a heavenly omen" in which "a ray of sunlight shone out continuously from the crown of her head."<sup>16</sup> Goscelin furthermore states that after her birth, Eadgyth was "received by the metropolitan of Canterbury, and the rest of the senior men and nobles, as was fitting."<sup>17</sup> By stating that Eadgyth was accepted by the archbishop of Canterbury and her father's thegns, Goscelin implies that Eadgyth's birth was important to members of both the religious and political establishment in Anglo-Saxon England. Although Barbara Yorke argues that Goscelin was intentionally trying to emphasize Eadgyth's royal status, and thus her legitimacy, as a response to the political challenges following the death of Edgar,<sup>18</sup> this episode still shows that the births of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters were prepared for and attended to with great care, and were potentially of interest to individuals outside the royal family who were responsible for the governance of the kingdom.

While the births of Eanflæd and Eadgyth resulted in healthy daughters, this was not always the case. Throughout the Middle Ages, pregnancy and childbirth were fraught

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<sup>15</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 104.

<sup>16</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 26-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 112.

with dangers for mother and child alike. Based on comparable data from modern underdeveloped countries, Sally Crawford has estimated that infant mortality rates in the Anglo-Saxon period may have been as high as “100 deaths per 1,000 live births,” with an even higher rate for infants up to four years old.<sup>19</sup> The most common causes of death for infants and children during this period were “complications associated with birth, congenital disorders and infectious diseases.”<sup>20</sup> The devastating effects of high infant mortality were felt in the households of Anglo-Saxon kings as well as commoners. Eanflæd appears to have been the only child of Edwin and Æthelburh who survived to adulthood, since Bede writes that two of their children, Ethelhun and Ethelthryd, “were snatched from life while still wearing their white baptismal robes.”<sup>21</sup> Edwin and Æthelburh’s son Wuscfrea and Edwin’s grandson Yffi lived at least until Æthelburh was forced to return to the kingdom of Kent following Edwin’s death in battle in 633, but “both died in infancy and were buried in church with the honor due to royal children and innocents in Christ.”<sup>22</sup> The fact that royal children had a set manner of burial indicates that their death as infants was a regular occurrence. Asser’s biography of Alfred the Great, King of Wessex (r. 871-899), similarly states that, in addition to Alfred’s five surviving children by his wife Ealhswith, there were numerous others “who were carried off in infancy by an untimely death.”<sup>23</sup>

Sally Crawford has argued that, in contrast to the theories of pre-modern childhood pioneered by social historians such as Phillipe Ariès and Lawrence Stone, who

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<sup>19</sup> Sally Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1999), 75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 131.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (New York: Penguin, 1983), 90.



argued that people in the Middle Ages had a limited conception of childhood and little affection for their children, the Anglo-Saxons showed “a committed expenditure of time and energy in encouraging children through the dangerous years.”<sup>24</sup> This indicates that, despite the dishearteningly high levels of infant mortality during the Anglo-Saxon period, “children were very much wanted” by their parents.<sup>25</sup> The fact that a significant number of royal children died in infancy makes it all the more understandable that the births of Eanflæd and Eadgyth were so celebrated; royal daughters could be just as highly prized as male heirs to the throne in a society which frequently experienced the heart-rending loss of children.

The value which Anglo-Saxon kings placed on their daughters is further evidenced by descriptions of their children’s birth order. The anonymous author of the *Liber Eliensis*, a twelfth-century history of the Abbey of Ely, states that Anna, the seventh-century king of the East Angles, had two sons, Aldwulf and Jurminus, and four daughters, Seaxburh, Æthelburh, Æthelthryth, and Wihtburh. While he is mistaken in attributing Aldwulf, the future king of East Anglia, as a son of Anna, since he was in fact the son of Anna’s brother Æthelhere, it is significant that the author’s assertion that Anna had two sons does not stop him from describing his daughter Seaxburh as *primogenita* (“first-born”).<sup>26</sup> In his *Life of King Alfred*, Asser gives a detailed account of the birth order of the children of Alfred the Great. Asser similarly describes Alfred’s daughter Æthelflæd as *primogenita*, and states that she was followed by her brother Edward the Elder, her sisters Æthelgifu and Ælfthryth, and finally by the youngest, Æthelweard.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Liber Eliensis*, ed. E.O. Blake (London: Royal Historical Society, 1962), 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Asser’s Life of King Alfred*, ed. William Henry Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 57.

The description of Æthelflæd as Alfred's first-born implies that she had some kind of status that was superior even to that of her brother Edward the Elder, who was acknowledged as Alfred's heir. Eadgyth was similarly described as the first-born of her father King Edgar, although there is considerable confusion among historians regarding the order of Edgar's marriages and relationships with concubines and thus the birth order of his children.<sup>28</sup> In his *Life of Edith*, Goscelin described Eadgyth as "the first-born of her father," and listed her first in his description of Edgar's children, giving her precedence over her half-brothers Edward and Æthelred the Unready.<sup>29</sup> While Barbara Yorke argues that Eadgyth was the daughter of Edgar's second wife Wulfthryth, and was thus younger than her half-brother Edward, who was born to Edgar's first wife Æthelflæd the White,<sup>30</sup> Goscelin believed, or at least claimed, that Eadgyth was Edgar's eldest child and therefore possessed special status.

The same term used by these authors to describe the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings was also applied to royal sons. Æthelstan, the son of Edward the Elder and grandson of Alfred, was referred to as *primogenitum* by William of Malmesbury;<sup>31</sup> William also described Alfred Ætheling, the oldest son of Æthelred the Unready and his wife Emma of Normandy, as *primogenito*.<sup>32</sup> Since the Latin term for "first-born" is an adjective with both feminine and masculine endings, it does not necessarily carry with it a gendered context; rather, it can be equally applied to sons or daughters. This shows that both sons and daughters could be afforded the status of the first-born and that, among the

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<sup>28</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 97.

<sup>29</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 103.

<sup>31</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 198.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

royal families of Anglo-Saxon England, the birth of sons was not necessarily more highly valued than that of daughters.

### **Baptism and Consecration**

Shortly after their births, Anglo-Saxon princesses were usually baptized and, in some cases, were even consecrated to serve Christ and the Church in the monastic life. Again, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* provides one of the most detailed accounts of the baptism of a king's daughter. Bede writes that Eanflæd was born on the same day that an assassin named Eumer was sent to Edwin's court by the West Saxon king Cuichelm. This assassin was only prevented from fatally wounding Edwin by the efforts of his loyal thegn Lilla. Immediately following Eanflæd's birth, Edwin "promised that if God would grant him life and victory over the king his enemy who had sent the assassin, he would renounce his idols and serve Christ; and as a pledge that he would keep his word he gave his infant daughter to Paulinus to be consecrated to Christ."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, "this infant, together with twelve others of her household, was the first of the Northumbrians to receive Baptism."<sup>34</sup> Bede writes that Edwin, after a lengthy bout of indecision, was finally baptized in 627, and subsequently ensured that "other children of his by Queen Ethelberga were also baptized," including the above-mentioned Ethelhun, Ethelthryd, and Wuscfreea, as well as his grandson, Yffi.<sup>35</sup> Eanflæd's baptism thus ushered in a wave of conversion to Christianity within the royal household, and was therefore instrumental in the ultimate conversion of the kingdom of Northumbria.

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<sup>33</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 119.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Baptism was an essential rite of passage for all Christians, and infant baptism was being recommended by the Church by the time of Augustine's Christian mission to England in 597, although it was by no means a universal practice.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore possible that Eanflæd would have been baptized even without Edwin's added pledge. Eanflæd's mother Æthelburh, who would likely have been responsible for her early upbringing and education, had been raised in the Roman Christian tradition in Kent, and continued practicing Christianity among Edwin's pagan court after her marriage. It is therefore possible that Æthelburh would have taken it upon herself to have Eanflæd baptized by Paulinus without Edwin's direction. However, by stating that Edwin was the one who insisted on Eanflæd's baptism, and by directly connecting that baptism to his promise to convert and his determination to defeat his West Saxon enemy, Bede places Eanflæd within an overtly political context. Eanflæd's entry into the Christian faith becomes essential for the military and political success of Edwin and his realm against a rival kingdom. Eanflæd's baptism therefore shows that, in the writings of Anglo-Saxon authors, royal daughters could be portrayed as central figures in the political and spiritual well-being of entire Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

In addition to baptism, royal daughters could also be consecrated to the Church while still in their infancy or childhood. One such daughter was Ælfflæd, the daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria (r. 642-670) and his wife Eanflæd. Bede writes that in 655, Oswiu's kingdom of Northumbria was being threatened by Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, who had "declared his intention of wiping out the entire nation."<sup>37</sup> After first trying unsuccessfully to negotiate with Penda, Oswiu "vowed that, if he were victorious,

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<sup>36</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 183.

he would offer his daughter to God as a consecrated virgin.”<sup>38</sup> Oswiu subsequently met Penda in battle and, although his army was greatly outnumbered by the pagan Mercian forces, was victorious. Then, “in fulfilment of his vow to the Lord, King Oswy gave thanks to God for his victory and dedicated his daughter Aelfflæd, who was scarcely a year old, to his service in perpetual virginity.”<sup>39</sup> Bede states that Ælfflæd was given into the care of Abbess Hild at the monastery of Hartlepool, and was transferred to Hild’s newly-built monastery of Whitby two years later.<sup>40</sup> Much as Edwin had done with Ælfflæd’s mother Eanflæd, Oswiu offered his daughter to God in exchange for granting him victory over his worldly enemies. Ælfflæd therefore also takes on a political role, since her acceptance by God is essential for the survival of the kingdom of Northumbria against external threats. The stories of Eanflæd and her daughter Ælfflæd indicate that Anglo-Saxon royal daughters could serve a symbolically important role as signs of their father’s promised conversion or thanksgiving for his military victories. The fact that Edwin and Oswiu were willing to consecrate their daughters to Christ in a high-stakes exchange for political, military, and religious stability shows that, “far from devaluing their daughters, both Edwin and Oswiu clearly view[ed] their infant girls as precious gifts.”<sup>41</sup>

In the second half of the tenth century, King Edgar’s daughter Eadgyth was also consecrated to the monastic life. According to Goscelin, Eadgyth was two years old when she was entrusted to the care of her mother Wulfthryth at the monastery of Wilton.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 29.

However, Eadgyth's consecration differed from that of Eanflæd or Ælfflæd in that it was presented by Goscelin as "a major state occasion."<sup>43</sup> Goscelin stated that King Edgar arrived at Eadgyth's dedication ceremony "as if about to give away his child at her wedding or to offer up his first-fruits," indicating that the consecration was an extremely important occasion for both Edgar and Eadgyth.<sup>44</sup> Edgar was furthermore accompanied by "a multitude of lords, of senior men, of the court and of the people."<sup>45</sup> Two sets of objects, one representing worldly wealth and the other the spiritual life, were set before Eadgyth, who was then left to choose for herself which set she preferred.<sup>46</sup> According to Goscelin, Edgar's entire court and the community of nuns at Wilton actively participated in this elaborate ceremony by praying that Eadgyth's choice would reveal the path which God had destined for her.<sup>47</sup> When it was clear that Eadgyth gravitated towards the holy objects, Edgar and Wulfthryth "offered their only child to the Saviour."<sup>48</sup> Although she was not explicitly consecrated as a pledge of her father's promised future conversion or as a sign of thanks for a military victory, Eadgyth's commitment to the monastic life had implications that extended far beyond her personal holiness. By involving Edgar's subjects and senior advisors, as well as nuns from one of the most prestigious monastic institutions in England, Eadgyth's consecration to Christ became entwined with the political and spiritual security of her father's entire realm. The baptism of Eanflæd and the consecrations of Ælfflæd and Eadgyth reflected the worldly concerns of their fathers and their fathers' subjects. However, it is also important to remember that these events

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<sup>43</sup> York, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 105.

<sup>44</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

resulted in a fundamental change in the lifestyles of the girls themselves. The consecrations of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters irrevocably set these young girls on the path they would follow for the rest of their lives, and were therefore extremely important events for the daughters themselves as well as their parents.

### **Growing Up at Court**

Other than these accounts of baptism and consecration for a select few of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings, very little is known about their childhood and adolescence. Medieval sources provide limited information about the experiences of children and young adults in general, and even less about the experiences of young women. While it is extremely difficult for historians to form a full picture of the childhood and adolescent years of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters, particularly from the point of view of the daughters themselves, it is possible to get some sense of their daily lives. Through careful reading of the available sources, we can gain vital information about the upbringing and education of Anglo-Saxon princesses and their transition into young adulthood.

Those princesses who had been consecrated for service in the Church, such as *Ælfflæd* and *Eadgyth*, would have grown up in the monasteries to which they had been entrusted as infants. However, princesses destined for a secular life were most likely raised at the royal court, frequently in close daily contact with their parents and siblings. There is some disagreement among historians over whether the practice of fostering, or sending one's children to be raised in the household of a relative or overlord, was widely practiced in England during the Anglo-Saxon period. Dorothy Whitelock found “no

evidence that there was any general habit of letting them [children] be fostered away from home,” except for the sons of high-ranking nobles who might be sent to the king’s court or the household of a prominent bishop in order to embark on their career.<sup>49</sup> Sally Crawford, on the other hand, states rather emphatically that “fostering ... was the custom in Anglo-Saxon society of the ninth century.”<sup>50</sup> Mathew Kuefler has expressed uncertainty over whether the question can be answered at all, citing a lack of sufficient evidence for either side of the argument, but states that fostering “does not seem to have been practised within the royal family,” since “[King] Alfred, and all his children, were brought up at the royal court.”<sup>51</sup> There is nonetheless some evidence that royal sons were fostered. William of Malmesbury states that King Alfred arranged that his grandson Æthelstan be educated “at the court of his [Alfred’s] daughter Æthelflæd and Æthelred his son-in-law, where he was brought up with great care by his aunt and the eminent ealdorman for the throne that seemed to await him.”<sup>52</sup> Over a century later, the Ætheling Æthelstan, oldest son of Æthelred the Unready (ca. 966-1016), left a will in which he provided property to his “foster-mother, Ælfswith,” and mentioned his grandmother, Ælfthryth, “who brought me up.”<sup>53</sup> Crawford suggests that this Ælfswith was probably a nurse who worked in the household of Æthelstan’s grandmother Ælfthryth.<sup>54</sup>

While it appears that the fostering of royal male children occurred with some regularity in Anglo-Saxon England, some evidence for the general experiences of

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<sup>49</sup> Whitelock, *Beginnings of English Society*, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 138.

<sup>51</sup> Mathew S. Kuefler, “‘A Wryed Existence’: Attitudes toward Children in Anglo-Saxon England,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 830.

<sup>52</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 211.

<sup>53</sup> Will of Ætheling Æthelstan in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930), 61-3. Discussed at length in Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 123.

<sup>54</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 123.



princesses in eighth- and ninth-century Europe can be seen in the household of Charlemagne (742-814), King of the Franks and Holy Roman Emperor, who raised his six daughters at his court in Aachen. Charlemagne's biographer Einhard states that he was deeply affectionate towards his children and was so attached to both his sons and his daughters that "he never dined without them when at home, and he never journeyed without them."<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, Charlemagne did not allow any of his daughters to marry, "but kept them all with him until his death, saying that he could not give up their companionship."<sup>56</sup> Janet Nelson has suggested that Charlemagne kept his daughters from marrying "because he had to prevent excessive dispersal of Carolingian blood, but also because he needed their political help within the household and the court."<sup>57</sup> Whatever the reason, their prolonged stay in their father's household gave Charlemagne's daughters a remarkable level of influence; these young women served prominent roles at court and were an integral part of its operation.<sup>58</sup> While this particular situation was extreme and highly unusual, it does show that the raising of royal daughters at court and in the presence of their parents was fairly well-established in the early Middle Ages. It is not difficult to picture the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings interacting with their parents in a similar way. It should be noted, however, that a nurse such as the Ætheling Æthelstan's foster-mother Ælfswith, who was responsible for the day-to-day care of children, was an essential element in royal and aristocratic households throughout the early Middle Ages;

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<sup>55</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. David Ganz (London: Penguin, 2008), 33.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?" in *The Frankish World, 750-900* (London and Rio Grande, OH: Hambledon, 1996), 241.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* See also Anton Scharer, "Charlemagne's Daughters," in *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet L. Nelson, and David Pelteret, *Studies in Early Medieval Britain* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 280.

therefore, even for those children raised at home, there could still be significant distance between parents and children in their daily contact.<sup>59</sup>

While there is very little historical evidence concerning the upbringing of royal daughters in the early Anglo-Saxon period, it seems likely that, much like Charlemagne's daughters, they were raised within the households of their fathers and under the general supervision of both of their parents. The Northumbrian princess Eanflæd was about seven years old when her father Edwin was killed in battle in 633. Bede writes that Eanflæd's family was forced to flee from Northumbria to Kent, and that this retreat was organized by Bishop Paulinus, who had served as the first Roman missionary to the northern kingdom.<sup>60</sup> The swiftness with which Paulinus was able to gather up Æthelburh, Eanflæd and her brother Wuscfreea, and Edwin's grandson Yffi, suggests that they were all living with their parents within the royal household when Edwin was killed. Upon her arrival in Kent, Æthelburh, her children, and Paulinus were received by Æthelburh's brother Eadbald, who had succeeded their father Æthelberht as king of Kent. Bede states that Eanflæd was still in Kent nine years later, when Oswiu, the new king of Northumbria, sent for her to be his wife, which probably occurred shortly after his accession in 642.<sup>61</sup> We can probably assume that Eanflæd thus spent her formative years at the Kentish court of her uncle Eadbald under the watchful eyes of her mother Æthelburh.

A close reading of the *Liber Eliensis* suggests that the daughters of King Anna of East Anglia may also have grown up within their parents' household. The *Liber Eliensis* states that the saintly Æthelthryth was born "among the East Angles at a well-reputed

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<sup>59</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 124.

<sup>60</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 141.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

place called Exning,” and that she “passed her adolescence in a home of good breeding,” referring to the household of her mother and father.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Æthelthryth frequently visited churches, sometimes alone and “sometimes following in her parents’ footsteps,” and began to manifest the tendency towards a holy life under the watchful eyes of her parents.<sup>63</sup> This shows that Æthelthryth grew up at the East Anglian court and spent a reasonable amount of time with her parents, whether this involved going to church or simply going about her daily activities. While one of Æthelthryth’s sisters, Æthelburh, entered a monastery in Gaul and so probably spent her childhood there, it is likely that her oldest sister Seaxburh grew up in a similar manner until her marriage to the King of Kent, and that her youngest sister Wihtburh did so as well until the death of their father Anna, when she departed from home “to live in solitude.”<sup>64</sup>

The practice of raising royal daughters within the king’s household was firmly established by the reign of Alfred the Great in the ninth century. Alfred’s biographer Asser writes that Alfred’s youngest daughter Ælfthryth, along with her older brother Edward the Elder, was “at all times fostered at the royal court under the solicitous care of tutors and nurses.”<sup>65</sup> Asser does not tell us whether Ælfthryth’s older sisters, Æthelflæd and Æthelgifu, were raised in the same manner. However, it stands to reason that both Æthelflæd and Æthelgifu had similar upbringings to their brother and sister at least until their marriage and entry into monastic life, both of which probably occurred in their mid to late teens. At the time of Asser’s writing in 893, Æthelflæd was already married to

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<sup>62</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, trans. Janet Fairweather (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2005), 15-16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 90.

Æthelred, the ealdorman of Mercia, and Æthelgifu was already established as abbess of the monastery of Shaftesbury. Æthelgifu's appointment probably occurred when she was still a teenager, although it is unclear whether she entered monastic life at another institution before this, in which case she would have received a monastic upbringing.<sup>66</sup> However, if Æthelgifu's appointment as Abbess of Shaftesbury marked a late entry into religious life, her birth position between Edward and Ælfthryth suggests that she would have been raised at the royal court along with her siblings.

Despite the difficulties in forming an exact picture of the upbringings of Anglo-Saxon princesses, we can glean some information about the nature of the relationships between royal daughters and their parents and siblings during their formative years. The shared education of Ælfthryth and Edward that Asser describes implies that these two spent a significant amount of time together, and "seems to be the only recorded instance of a prince and princess being given the same upbringing."<sup>67</sup> Other than this unusual instance, it is extremely difficult to tell whether individual siblings were close as children, but some of their later interactions as adults suggest that they probably were. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, when Seaxburh decided to join her sister Æthelthryth's monastery at Ely, "queen greeted queen" and "sister conducted sister within ... They wept profusely for joy, and, as there was true love between them, a double happiness resulted."<sup>68</sup> Both Seaxburh and Æthelthryth were adults at this time; both had previously been married and both had entered monastic life after their marriages ended. However, their meeting at the Abbey of Ely suggests that the bonds of affection they may have

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<sup>66</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Yorke, "Edward as Ætheling," in *Edward the Elder, 899-924*, ed. N.J. Higham and D.H. Hill (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 27.

<sup>68</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 48.

formed as children growing up together at their father's court were still very strong. The numerous daughters of Edward the Elder were also raised and educated together at their father's court, while their oldest brother Æthelstan appears to have served as a competent and affectionate provider and protector following Edward's death. William of Malmesbury writes that Æthelstan showed "remarkable affection towards his other brothers" and "brought them up lovingly in childhood."<sup>69</sup> He also assiduously searched about for respectable husbands for his sisters who did not enter monastic life and whom "his father had left without husband or dowry."<sup>70</sup> Even daughters who entered the cloister as children had some contact with their birth families. Joan Nicholson has raised the possibility that Ælfflæd's family continued to visit her regularly at the monastery of Whitby, indicating that young women who took monastic vows may have had frequent communication with their birth families.<sup>71</sup> Eadgyth even grew up under the direct supervision of her mother Wulfthryth, who was "at the same time her spiritual and natural mother," upon her entry into monastic life at the monastery of Wilton.<sup>72</sup>

Despite their wealth and high status, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were not allowed to idle away their time while growing up at the royal court. According to Christine Fell, textile work was the single activity most associated with the daily lives of Anglo-Saxon women, and was the primary occupation of royal and aristocratic women in particular.<sup>73</sup> Einhard states that Charlemagne "ordered that his daughters learn to work wool with distaff and spindle, so that they might not grow dull in idleness and should

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<sup>69</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 229.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Joan Nicholson, "Feminae Gloriosae: Women in the Age of Bede," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 17.

<sup>72</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 30-1.

<sup>73</sup> Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 40.

spend their time in learning all virtuous activities.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, William of Malmesbury asserts that the daughters of King Alfred’s son Edward the Elder were encouraged “to acquire further skill with distaff and needle, that with the support of these arts they might pass their girlhood in chastity.”<sup>75</sup> Einhard’s and William’s association of spinning and weaving with chastity is certainly intriguing. According to Valerie Garver, “spinning, weaving, and sewing had long indicated female virtue,” and a young woman’s proficiency in needlework implied that she had little time for morally questionable activities.<sup>76</sup> The fact that Einhard and William of Malmesbury took pains to assert that the daughters of early medieval kings did not spend time in idleness or fall prey to the temptations provided by wealth and status indicates that this was a continually held concern regarding the privileges of royal women.

Sally Crawford has argued that Anglo-Saxon girls may have had “a much shorter period of adjustment between the two states” of childhood and adulthood than did boys, and so may have transitioned to adult tasks at a fairly young age.<sup>77</sup> While the lives of secular young women in Anglo-Saxon England may appear to have been a tedious cycle of textile work and household chores before the inevitable transition to marriage and childbirth, evidence from the sources provides a glimpse of a somewhat livelier existence, especially for the daughters of kings. Although one of the holiest of the Anglo-Saxon saints, accounts of Æthelthryth show that she was accustomed to fine clothing and jewelry in her youth. The *Liber Eliensis* states that Æthelthryth grew up “in the manner

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<sup>74</sup> Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 32.

<sup>75</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 201.

<sup>76</sup> Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 225-7.

<sup>77</sup> Crawford, *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England*, 166.

customary for a girl of that age with her parents' wealth," but that she was successful in resisting the temptations of youth and "neglecting the pastimes of girls," although it is not clear what exactly these pastimes entailed.<sup>78</sup> However, Bede states that, towards the end of her life, Æthelthryth was horribly afflicted by a "tumour and pain in her jaw and neck," which she attributed to the fact that "when I was a girl, I used to wear the needless burden of jewellery."<sup>79</sup>

While Æthelthryth wore fine jewelry before her entry into monastic life, Eadgyth, who was raised in a monastery from her earliest years, was kept from indulging in youthful vanity by her mother Wulfthryth. Once they entered the monastery of Wilton, Wulfthryth refused "to load her [Eadgyth's] reddish hair with gold," or "to obscure the stronghold of the cross with a gold plate or jewels hanging over her forehead," and "in place of purple, in place of cosmetics for the face and eyes, she taught her modesty."<sup>80</sup> While we are told that Wulfthryth and Eadgyth utterly rejected these extravagant items, their very mention reveals a great deal about what would have been typical attire for an Anglo-Saxon princess. Valerie Garver has argued that the rich adornment of royal and aristocratic women in the early Middle Ages was intentionally used to reflect the wealth and power of their male relatives.<sup>81</sup> Although Garver was discussing high-status women in a Carolingian context, the same point may be applied to women in Anglo-Saxon England. In most cases therefore, these young women were allowed, and probably encouraged, to indulge in the trifles that their wealth and status afforded.

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<sup>78</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 16.

<sup>79</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 238.

<sup>80</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Garver, *Women and Aristocratic Culture in the Carolingian World*, 32.

## Education

In addition to spending their days doing needlework and perhaps enjoying the rather more frivolous pursuits of teenage girls, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters would have spent a significant portion of their days studying. Anglo-Saxon princesses were remarkably well-educated, and their education fits the pattern of early medieval high-born women. The earliest daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were given a primarily religious education in a monastic setting. According to Bede, in the seventh century, a monastic education on the Continent was the most prestigious method of educating royal daughters. Bede writes that “girls of noble family” were often sent to Gaul “for their education, or to be betrothed to their heavenly Bridegroom, especially to the houses of Brie, Chelles, and Andelys.”<sup>82</sup> The assumption here is that girls sent abroad for their education would eventually return home to England in order to marry, while those who were destined to enter the cloister would remain and learn the rules of monastic life.<sup>83</sup> Bede writes that this was the case for Anna’s daughter Æthelburh and his step-daughter Sæthryth, both of whom “were of such merit that they became abbesses of Brie.”<sup>84</sup> Earcongota, daughter of King Earconberht of Kent, similarly “served God in a convent in Frankish territory ... at a place called Brie.”<sup>85</sup> However, the sending of girls to Gaul for their education or entry into monastic life does not necessarily reflect Joan Nicholson’s assertion that “parents were readier to part with daughters” than sons.<sup>86</sup> Rather, Bede attests that “as yet there were few monasteries built in English territory, and many who

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<sup>82</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 155.

<sup>83</sup> Helen Dominica Leibell, *Anglo-Saxon Education of Women: From Hilda to Hildegarde* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 70.

<sup>84</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 156.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>86</sup> Joan Nicholson, “*Feminae Gloriosae*,” 16.



wished to enter conventual life went from Britain to the Frankish realm or Gaul for the purpose.”<sup>87</sup> Sending daughters to the Continent, which was probably undertaken at no small expense, may in fact show that Anglo-Saxon kings took great pains to ensure that their daughters were sufficiently educated in a place with more well-established monastic traditions. Furthermore, Bede tells us that Earcongota apparently “shared her father’s zeal” in religion and “was a nun of outstanding virtue.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, while she may have been placed in a monastery by her parents, it is reasonable to think that Earcongota might have chosen to become a nun. Rather than being a way to get troublesome or burdensome daughters out of the way, sending them to the Continent could in fact have been an attempt to comply with their personal wishes to enter the cloister.

Once monasticism took off in England, the education of royal daughters was primarily religious until the reign of King Alfred. The number of female monastic houses in England greatly increased during the second half of the seventh century, following the establishment of the earliest monasteries in Kent and the Irish mission in Northumbria, both of which began in the 630s.<sup>89</sup> From this point up until the ninth century, “the convent was the sole source of women’s education.”<sup>90</sup> Education in the text-based religion of Christianity inherently involved learning to read, and girls were probably taught Latin in order to read the Scriptures. In fact, Dorothy Whitelock asserts that a liberal education “was not confined to the male sex,” and that “women, like men, studied the scriptures and their fourfold interpretation, the works of the Fathers, chronography,

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<sup>87</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 155.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 36-7.

<sup>90</sup> Josephine Kamm, *Hope Deferred: Girls’ Education in English History* (London: Methuen, 1965; repr., New York: Routledge, 2010), 9.

grammar, and metrics.”<sup>91</sup> Although Anglo-Saxon royal saints were most often praised for their holiness rather than their intellect, there are some descriptions of them as extremely well-read and learned women. Bede writes of Abbess Hild, who was herself related to King Edwin of Northumbria, that “those under her direction were required to make a thorough study of the Scriptures ... to such good effect that many were found fitted for Holy Orders and the service of God’s altar,” and that she produced five illustrious bishops through her efforts.<sup>92</sup> Since Hild ruled over the double monastery of Whitby, we can assume that the young women under her charge received rigorous training in the study of Scripture that was identical to that of the monks. Oswiu’s daughter Ælfflæd, who was entrusted to Hild as an infant, would have received just such an education.

Furthermore, the *Liber Eliensis* states that when Æthelthryth went to Ely to found her own monastery, her reputation became extremely well-known and “a great many people vied to live under her rule; they also handed over their daughters to be educated by her.”<sup>93</sup> After succeeding her sister Æthelthryth as abbess, Seaxburh similarly “instructed the Lord’s flock in the doctrine and form of true religion.”<sup>94</sup> Wærburh, the daughter of King Wulfhere of Mercia and his wife Eormenhild, who was herself the daughter of Æthelthryth’s sister Seaxburh, “received and learnt from St. Æthelthryth the rule of the religious life.”<sup>95</sup> These instances of young royal women receiving instruction in the Christian faith from prominent abbesses indicates that Anglo-Saxon royal daughters were capable both of teaching and learning within a monastic setting.

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<sup>91</sup> Whitelock, *Beginnings of English Society*, 198.

<sup>92</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 244.

<sup>93</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 42.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Monastic training could entail more than just the learning of Latin and the rules of the religious life. Goscelin states that King Edgar's daughter Eadgyth received a singularly broad and intensive education while she was a nun at the monastery of Wilton. Eadgyth was taught by two prestigious teachers from Gaul, Radbodo of Rheims and Benno, canon of Trier, "instructors who were of special weight by Edgar's authority" and "venerable for their wisdom both in life and in scholarship."<sup>96</sup> Radbodo and Benno "took turns to teach ... this pupil of the Holy Spirit," in such a way that "the chaste teacher instructed from outside through a window," while Eadgyth's mother Wulfthryth supervised her inside the cloister.<sup>97</sup> Goscelin wrote that Eadgyth was an excellent pupil, and that only her all-consuming love for God could overshadow her "great enthusiasm as an academic student."<sup>98</sup> Eadgyth also learned a variety of subjects and possessed "a noble intellect capable in all kinds of thought" and "a perceptive ardour in reading."<sup>99</sup> She was also "accomplished in painting and in writing as scribe or as author."<sup>100</sup> Eadgyth's proficiency in reading, scribal work, and the fine arts, as well as her apparent authorship of original works, indicates that by the tenth century, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters who had taken the veil were receiving a broad education in the liberal arts.

The education of Anglo-Saxon royal children in a courtly, rather than monastic, setting was first instituted during the reign of King Alfred in the ninth century. According to his biographer Asser, Alfred had an abnormally keen interest in education, not only for himself, but also for his family and his entire kingdom. Asser states that Alfred's "desire

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<sup>96</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 32.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

for wisdom” was his most defining characteristic, even to the point of overshadowing his military exploits against the invading Vikings, but that his love of knowledge was continually undermined by his own lack of education throughout his life.<sup>101</sup> In order to fill in the sparse education that he had received in his youth, Alfred was wholeheartedly, and almost obsessively, committed to self-improvement as an adult, and Asser wrote that it was “his peculiar and most characteristic habit either to read books aloud himself or to listen to others doing so.”<sup>102</sup> As a result of his interest in education, Alfred gathered a number of outside scholars to his court in Wessex, including Plegmund and Wærferth from Mercia, Grimbald and John the Old Saxon from the Continent, and Asser himself from Wales.<sup>103</sup> With the assistance of these men, Alfred instituted one of the largest and most successful educational, cultural, and monastic revivals in Anglo-Saxon history.

As part of his educational reform, Alfred strongly advocated instruction in the vernacular for both clerics and laypeople. Although illiterate until age twelve, as a youth Alfred “was a careful listener ... to English poems,” and famously read and memorized an entire book of poems which his mother had promised to the son who could learn it the fastest.<sup>104</sup> Even after he became king, busy with administrative and military duties, Alfred occupied himself by “reading aloud from books in English and above all learning English poems by heart.”<sup>105</sup> Alfred’s fascination with the English language culminated in a substantial translation program under the direction of his court scholars. Alfred ordered to be translated into English seven works which he considered as the “most necessary for all

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<sup>101</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 75-6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-7.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

men to know,” including Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* and *Dialogues*, Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, Orosius’s *Histories against the Pagans*, and the first fifty Psalms.<sup>106</sup> In his prose preface to his translation of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, Alfred further stressed the importance of education in the vernacular, stating that the clergy gained “very little benefit” from books “because they could understand nothing of them, since they were not written in their own language.”<sup>107</sup>

Alfred’s concern for literacy in the English language extended to his children. Alfred began a school at which he educated the children of his nobles and which he funded with one eighth of his total yearly income.<sup>108</sup> Alfred’s youngest son Æthelweard attended this school, where he was “given over to training in reading and writing under the attentive care of teachers,” along with the children of both nobles and commoners.<sup>109</sup> Asser emphasizes that both Latin and English books “were carefully read” at Alfred’s school, and that the students “devoted themselves to writing” and “were seen to be devoted and intelligent students of the liberal arts.”<sup>110</sup> In addition to founding and sending his youngest son to this school, Alfred also educated his older children at court, a practice first made popular by Charlemagne.<sup>111</sup> Charlemagne “believed that his children should be brought up so that both sons and daughters were first educated in the liberal arts,”<sup>112</sup> and Alfred followed this same model. Asser emphasized that Alfred’s youngest daughter Ælfthryth and her older brother Edward the Elder were by no means “allowed to live idly

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<sup>106</sup> *Preface to the Translation of Gregory’s Pastoral Care*, in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 126.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 107.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Kamm, *Hope Deferred*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 32.

and indifferently, with no liberal education,” but rather “attentively learned the Psalms, and books in English, and especially English poems, and they very frequently make use of books.”<sup>113</sup>

Ælfthryth was therefore highly literate, particularly in the Old English language, and Asser’s description of her wide-ranging education indicates that she may also have been educated in the liberal arts. She may even have studied one or more of the texts which Alfred had commissioned to be translated from Latin into English. Barbara Yorke has drawn a distinction between the courtly education of Edward and Ælfthryth, for whom Asser emphasized education in the vernacular, and the more ecclesiastical education of Alfred’s youngest child Æthelweard, who learned both English and Latin at the school Alfred had founded, arguing that Latin was reserved only for men destined to enter the Church.<sup>114</sup> It therefore seems unlikely that Ælfthryth learned Latin while under her father’s care. Nothing is said of the education of her older sisters, Æthelflæd and Æthelgifu, who were already married and cloistered, respectively, at the time of Asser’s writing in 893. However, we can presume that Æthelflæd at least may have received the same education as her younger siblings, since she was probably only a few years older than her brother Edward, while Æthelgifu would have received either a monastic education or a liberal one similar to her siblings, depending on when she was committed to the religious life.

Alfred’s son, Edward the Elder, continued his father’s practice of educating his daughters at his court in Wessex. According to William of Malmesbury, Edward had at least eight daughters, all of whom “had been brought up to devote most time in their

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<sup>113</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 91.

<sup>114</sup> Yorke, “Edward as Ætheling,” 28.

childhood to letters.”<sup>115</sup> Alfred’s practice of educating his children in the English language suggests that Edward probably followed suit; his numerous daughters were therefore probably able to read and write English fluently, and may even have learnt English poetry as their aunt Ælfthryth had done. However, William does not state whether Edward’s daughters were also educated in the liberal arts, and the ability of those who did not enter monastic life to read and compose in Latin seems doubtful. While these girls may not have received a broad liberal education akin to that of Charlemagne’s daughters, the actions of Alfred and his son Edward the Elder show that, at least during the reign of the West Saxon royal house of the ninth and tenth centuries, royal women were highly literate and capable of intelligently engaging with works of English scholarship.

As women operating at the uppermost level of English society, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings received the highest form of education available to women in the Middle Ages. The opportunities available to these princesses were certainly not afforded to all classes of young women in early medieval Europe, but their very singularity shows that Anglo-Saxon kings spared no expense or effort in the education and upbringing of their daughters. As these young women grew into adulthood, their primary roles would be to advance the interests of their families by marrying and creating much-needed political alliances, or by taking monastic vows and serving as their family’s representative in the Christian Church. Anglo-Saxon princesses were therefore extremely valuable to their families, and their preparation for marriage or monastic life was undertaken with great care and deliberation. The experiences of the daughters of Anglo-

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<sup>115</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 201.

Saxon kings during their childhood and adolescent years suggest that these women were born with an inherent status, a form of power which they could exercise as representatives of their families through their marriages and religious vocations, and that this power was inculcated and fostered by their families upon their very entry into the world.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Marriage**

One of the two most important social roles for Anglo-Saxon royal daughters was to help solidify and expand the political influence of their royal families through their marriages. The marriages of Anglo-Saxon princesses to the rulers of neighboring kingdoms were essential for maintaining peace and forming dynastic alliances in Anglo-Saxon England. This was especially important during the early Anglo-Saxon period. After Wessex achieved supremacy over the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the marriages of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings became focused on forming and maintaining dynastic connections and political alliances with continental Europe. Whether they entered into marriages with a nearby neighbor or a more distant European empire, royal daughters acted as a stabilizing force in Anglo-Saxon England. Although the stabilizing effect of individual marriages may have been short-term, the act of continually creating and re-creating these alliances was essential to Anglo-Saxon politics. While they may have served as symbolic agents of peace between male rulers, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were not merely bargaining chips; rather, they were able to exercise a remarkable degree of independence and agency within their marriages.

#### **Royal Marriage in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries**

The marriages of royal daughters in the early Anglo-Saxon period were characterized by the formation of inter-kingdom political alliances. During the seventh and eighth centuries, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were most frequently married into the ruling dynasty of a rival kingdom. The most prominent marriages were those of

the daughters of the royal families of Kent, Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia. The marriage alliances formed between these kingdoms did not always follow consistent patterns, but, rather, formed a complex network of temporary connections that were extremely important for their particular historical moment. In this sense, the marriages of the royal daughters of early Anglo-Saxon England provided short-term, rather than long-term, stability. However, these royal marriages were essential for maintaining peace and stability between the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, the Venerable Bede described in great detail the respective marriages of Æthelburh (Ethelberga) and her daughter Eanflæd, both of whom married powerful kings of Northumbria in the seventh century. Æthelburh was the daughter of King Æthelberht of Kent (ca. 560-616) and his Frankish queen Bertha. Bede writes that Æthelberht was the third Anglo-Saxon king to exercise “overlordship” over the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and was the first Anglo-Saxon king to convert to Christianity after the arrival of Augustine’s Roman mission in 597.<sup>1</sup> Æthelberht was therefore the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king during his reign in the late sixth and early seventh centuries and held a strong connection to the increasingly influential Christian religion. His daughter Æthelburh thus presented a valuable marriage prospect to anyone wishing to form an alliance with the powerful Kentish kingdom. Bede writes that in 625, King Edwin of Northumbria (r. 616-633), seeking a marriage alliance between his kingdom in the far north of England and his southern neighbor, “sent an embassy of nobles to her [Æthelburh’s] brother Eadbald, then king of the Kentish folk, to

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<sup>1</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 111.

request her hand in marriage.”<sup>2</sup> The subsequent marriage between Æthelburh and Edwin created a powerful dynastic connection between the kingdoms of Northumbria and Kent.

The marriage alliance created by Æthelburh and Edwin came to an end when Edwin died after eight years of marriage. In 633, the British king Cadwalla killed King Edwin in battle and proceeded to commit a “terrible slaughter” across the whole of Northumbria.<sup>3</sup> Æthelburh and her children were forced to flee to the safety of her familial connections in the south of England. Bede writes that, in the wake of Cadwalla’s carnage, “Paulinus took Queen Ethelberga ... and returned by sea to Kent where he was most honorably received by Archbishop Honorius and King Eadbald.”<sup>4</sup> The party included one of Edwin’s loyal thegns, Edwin and Æthelburh’s children Eanflæd and Wuscfreea, and one of Edwin’s grandsons.<sup>5</sup> Æthelburh’s reception by her brother Eadbald (who had previously overseen the negotiations over her marriage to Edwin) shows that, upon her marriage, an Anglo-Saxon princess was not irrevocably separated from her birth family. Rather than being left to fend for herself in an unfamiliar and hostile country, Æthelburh and her retinue could reasonably expect to be aided by her own family members in Kent.

Although gone from Northumbria, Æthelburh’s marriage must have left a lasting impression, for another king of Northumbria sought to make a marriage alliance with Kent by marrying Æthelburh’s daughter. King Oswiu came to the throne amid severe political instability. After King Edwin’s death in battle in 633, Northumbria reverted to paganism until the accession of Oswald, who defeated the British king Cadwalla at the battle of Hefenfelth in 634. Oswald came from the Bernician royal house, and was thus

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

from a different dynasty than his predecessor Edwin. During Oswald's reign (634-642), Northumbria was re-evangelized by St. Aidan, a monk from the Celtic monastery of Iona. Oswald himself was killed in battle and was succeeded by his brother Oswiu in 642. Probably shortly after Oswiu's accession, "a priest named Utta ... was sent to Kent to bring back Eanfled as wife for King Oswy."<sup>6</sup> Although momentarily interrupted by the death of Edwin, the connection forged between the kingdoms of Kent and Northumbria by the marriage of Æthelburh and Edwin may have been important enough for Oswiu to seek to replicate it by marrying their daughter Eanflæd. Therefore, although unable to physically remain and defend the kingdom of Northumbria following her husband's death, Æthelburh proved extremely important in establishing a stabilizing link for the kingdom by her marriage.

Bede's subsequent narrative of Eanflæd's journey from Kent to Northumbria reveals the importance with which the Anglo-Saxons viewed the marriages of royal daughters. Bede writes that, when Utta was commissioned with retrieving the princess Eanflæd for King Oswiu, he set out from Northumbria "intending to make the outward journey by land and to return with the princess by sea."<sup>7</sup> Before setting out, Utta asked St. Aidan to pray that they might have a safe journey. In response, Aidan prophesied that Utta would run into a storm on his way home and gave him some "holy oil" that had the power to calm the waves.<sup>8</sup> As Aidan had predicted, Eanflæd and her retinue ran into a fierce storm off the English coast shortly after departing from Kent. When their boat was

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

on the point of sinking, Utta “took out the flask of oil, and poured some of it over the sea, which immediately ceased its raging as Aidan had foretold.”<sup>9</sup>

The use of a miracle story to document the arrival of Eanflæd in Northumbria indicates that her marriage to Oswiu was important enough to justify the need for divine assistance. While Bede asserts that Aidan’s ability to foresee the future and his successful calming of the storm served as proof of his potent holiness,<sup>10</sup> Aidan’s ability to perform miracles also proved instrumental in ensuring that Eanflæd arrived safely in Northumbria. Oswiu had recently gained the throne of a kingdom still reeling from a decade of religious and political disorder, and sought to solidify his power by reigniting Northumbria’s association with the staunchly Christian kingdom of Kent. Eanflæd’s arrival in Northumbria and her marriage to Oswiu would therefore have served as a stabilizing force for the battle-weary Northumbrians.

Once their marriage negotiations had been completed, both Æthelburh and Eanflæd began their entry into married life by moving from their homes in Kent to the royal court in Northumbria. The journeys undertaken by these princesses were by no means unique. Throughout the early Middle Ages, both in England and on the Continent, “royal marriages ... meant locational stability for the bridegroom, spatial movement for the bride.”<sup>11</sup> For medieval women, marriage entailed the forsaking of childhood home and family and relocation to the unfamiliar, and often foreign, household of their new husband. Æthelburh’s own mother Bertha, a Frankish princess, had traveled from her

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 167-8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>11</sup> Janet Nelson, “Queens as Converters of Kings in the Earlier Middle Ages,” in *Agire da donna: modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione, secoli VI-X: atti del convegno, Padova, 18-19 febbraio 2005*, edited by Christine La Rocca (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 97.

home in Francia to southern England to marry King Æthelberht, thereby cementing an alliance between the Anglo-Saxon people of Kent and the Frankish kingdom on the Continent.<sup>12</sup> However, for the Anglo-Saxon royal daughters of the seventh century, marriage into a neighboring kingdom did not necessarily result in complete isolation. Newly-married Anglo-Saxon princesses were not entirely subsumed into their husband's families, nor were they entirely cut off from their birth families or forced to shed their birth identities upon their marriage. Rather, Anglo-Saxon royal brides were able to maintain a certain level of independence from their husband, his family, and his court.

Anglo-Saxon princesses frequently traveled with their own entourages when they left their homes to be married into another kingdom. Æthelburh was accompanied by a sizeable retinue when she traveled to Northumbria to marry King Edwin in 625. As part of the marriage agreement, Edwin guaranteed the freedom to practice the Christian faith to "Ethelberga and her attendants, both men and women, priests and servants," indicating that it was expected that Æthelburh would bring members from her household in Kent to attend on her when she reached her new home.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Bishop Paulinus, who had been sent to England by Pope Gregory I in 601 to assist Augustine with the initial Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons, was commissioned to "accompany the princess as her chaplain and by daily Mass and instruction preserve her and her companions" from the threat of paganism.<sup>14</sup> Æthelburh's mother Bertha had received a similar promise on her marriage to Æthelberht, and was likewise accompanied by a bishop from her

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<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

homeland “as her helper in the faith.”<sup>15</sup> It is likely that, in addition to Bishop Liudhard, Bertha also brought other companions and attendants from Francia.

The East Anglian princess Æthelthryth (Etheldreda) similarly possessed an independent entourage upon her marriage to Ecgfrith of Northumbria, the son of Oswiu and Eanflæd. Bede writes of a monk named Owini, who “had accompanied Queen Etheldreda from the province of the East Angles, and had been her chief thegn and steward of her household” after her marriage to Ecgfrith.<sup>16</sup> Bede also tells of the adventures of the thegn Imma, who after being captured asked the king of Kent, who was Æthelthryth’s nephew, for his ransom to pay his captors “because he had once been one of the queen’s thegns” after she had been married into the Northumbrian royal house.<sup>17</sup> These instances suggest that, once married, Æthelthryth possessed her own loyal thegns and a household and sphere of influence that was separate from her husband’s. Rather than being served or protected by their husband’s retainers and family members, royal daughters brought their own people with them when they married, a fact which would probably have been no small comfort to a young woman suddenly transported to a new and unfamiliar home.

In addition to bringing an entourage with them, newly married Anglo-Saxon princesses possessed remarkable independence when it came to the practice of their religion. The right of a newly married bride to continue to practice her Christian religion was sometimes explicitly addressed in the contracting of marriages between princesses and kings. When Edwin first asked for the hand of Æthelburh, he “received the reply that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

it was not permissible for a Christian maiden to be given in marriage to a heathen husband.”<sup>18</sup> In response, Edwin “gave an assurance that he would ... afford complete freedom to Ethelberga ... to live and worship in accordance with Christian belief and practice,” and “on this understanding, the maiden was betrothed and sent to Edwin.”<sup>19</sup> That Eadbald only agreed to allow Edwin to marry Æthelburh on condition that she be permitted to practice her faith unhindered suggests that the daughters and sisters of Anglo-Saxon kings possessed certain rights which were ensured by their birth families even after they married.<sup>20</sup> This implies that, rather than simply consigning them to the authority of their husband, the fathers and brothers of these women were prepared to interfere if their rights were not protected.

The ability of royal women to practice their religion unhindered even enabled them to maintain throughout their marriages religious practices that were at odds with those of their spouse. Bede writes that the primary reason for the calling of the Synod of Whitby in 664 was because, while Oswiu celebrated Easter according to the Celtic tradition, “Queen Eanflæd and her court ... observed the customs she had seen in Kent.”<sup>21</sup> This shows that even after her marriage, Eanflæd possessed her own sphere of influence within the Northumbrian royal household and was able to continue to maintain the religious practices she had known from birth. The combination of these two different methods of calculating Easter meant that it “was sometimes kept twice in one year,” with Oswiu and Eanflæd celebrating the most important Christian feast-day one week apart.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Eanflæd's status as queen therefore gave her enough power to maintain her own Roman Christian practices among the overwhelmingly Celtic Christians in Northumbria.

Furthermore, her influence at the Northumbrian court was substantial enough that King Oswiu felt the need to summon a Church council to resolve the Easter issue, rather than simply enforcing his own religious practice among the queen and her retinue. Bede writes that Oswiu sought to resolve the issue of Easter by calling the Synod of Whitby in 664. After a lengthy debate and an eloquent speech from Wilfrid, who argued that St. Peter used the Roman method and that, as the guardian of the gates of heaven, he outranked St. Columba and his Celtic reckoning, Oswiu decided to adopt the Roman method.<sup>23</sup>

It is intriguing that Oswiu was the one who changed his practices and not Eanflæd. Bede ultimately depicted Eanflæd's practice as winning out because it was the indisputably correct method of calculating Easter, and because her side had the support of male authority in the form of Bishop Wilfrid, Paulinus's successor James, and Oswiu's son Alhfrith. Bede may therefore have downplayed Eanflæd's role in the Synod of Whitby. However, Eanflæd's ability to maintain this practice shows a remarkable independence from her husband's authority, at least in terms of religion. By continuing to maintain the practices of her youth, Eanflæd created a rallying point within the Northumbrian court for the Roman method of calculating Easter. Oswiu could have easily eliminated this divergence in religious practice by commanding Eanflæd to celebrate Easter with him, and the fact that he did not shows that she held certain rights which were independent from her role as a royal wife.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 192.

The possibility that a royal woman's birth family might step in if her rights were infringed upon in her husband's household was no empty threat. Coenwalh, the son of Cynigils, king of the West Saxons, ran into serious trouble when he wronged a royal daughter. Bede writes that Coenwalh "put away his wife, who was sister of Penda, King of the Mercians, and took another woman. This led to war, and Coenwalh was driven out of his kingdom by Penda and took refuge with Anna, King of the East Angles."<sup>24</sup> By both insulting Penda's sister and compromising the integrity of the political alliance that her marriage to him created, Coenwalh brought disaster to his kingdom. Penda's reaction to his sister's abandonment shows that the honor of royal daughters and sisters, as well as the political connections they created, were highly valued and fiercely protected, and that the alliances formed by their marriages could have serious consequences for both the women themselves and the kingdoms which they united.

### *Peace-weavers*

Because they married the kings and princes of rival kingdoms, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters are often presented as historical "peace-weavers." The concept of the peace-weaver served as the basis for a particularly well-known female archetype in Old English literature, and is most notably represented by the fictional queen Wealhtheow and her daughter Freawaru in the heroic poem *Beowulf*.<sup>25</sup> However, Peter Baker has recently argued that the peace-weaver is essentially an invention of the nineteenth century, and has no historical or literary basis.<sup>26</sup> Baker has asserted that royal brides who were

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>25</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf*, *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 20 (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2013), 103.

transferred from a dominant to an inferior group should be understood as gifts,<sup>27</sup> and that these women are best defined as angelic “auxiliary figures,” who assisted their husbands in maintaining the political and spiritual well-being of the realm.<sup>28</sup> Megan Cavell has similarly argued that the peace-weaver only occurs in a very few instances in Old English literature, and that the term has lost much of its original context.<sup>29</sup> Cavell furthermore suggests that the association of peace-weaving with women’s textile work detracts from its original association with “status, moral superiority, and good leadership.”<sup>30</sup>

While the existence of the peace-weaver as a genuine literary construction remains in doubt, the marriages of historical Anglo-Saxon princesses and their ability to forge sustainable alliances between kingdoms suggest that the cultural ideal of the peace-weaver served as “a potent political reality.”<sup>31</sup> For Anglo-Saxon princesses, their role as peace-weaver depended on their ability to contract a marriage that “cemented an alliance between two previously warring peoples, or ensured an under-king’s loyalty to his overlord.”<sup>32</sup> Katherine Bullimore has suggested that this role as “alliance-maker” was at least as important as the queen’s ability to bear a legitimate male heir to the throne.<sup>33</sup> Thus, by marrying the kings of rival kingdoms, royal daughters served as the vehicles for the forging of new political alliances and the maintenance of existing dynastic connections. Whether or not historical marriages were a literal manifestation of the poetic

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>29</sup> Megan Cavell, “Formulaic *Fripwebban*: Reexamining Peace-Weaving in the Light of Old English Poetics,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 3 (July 2015): 355.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine Bullimore, “Unpicking the Web: The Divorce of Ecgfrith and Æthelthryth,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 16, no. 6 (Dec. 2009): 849.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Hill, “Marriage in Seventh-Century England,” in *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Charles W. Jones*, edited by Margot King and Wesley Stevens (Collegeville, MN: Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, St. John’s Abbey and University, 1979), 68.

<sup>33</sup> Bullimore, “Unpicking the Web,” 836.

peace-weaving ideal, the marriages of royal daughters such as Æthelburh and Eanflæd created alliances and connections that had very real implications for their kingdoms and families.

### *Marriage and Conversion*

Because of their ability to independently maintain their own households and practice their religion, Anglo-Saxon princesses were often instrumental in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity. During the early Anglo-Saxon period, the information for most of which is provided to us by Bede, the marriages of royal daughters were strongly linked with the Christianization of the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. A significant number of royal marriages resulted in or were associated with conversion. This could possibly be due to Bede's personal bias. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* specifically charts the history of the Christian Church in England. Therefore, his accounts of political marriages between royal houses invariably propel and support the spread of the Christian faith. Whether or not this is simply Bede using history for his own ends, and whether these alliances were indeed the agents of conversion in reality, the marriages of royal daughters in the seventh and eighth centuries undeniably possessed some kind of connection with conversion to Christianity and the spread of the influence of the Christian Church in England. In this way, whether they recognized it or not, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings possessed a powerful social role as the representatives of the spread of Christianity. In addition to providing much-needed political stability through marriage alliances, in Bede's hands, the marriages of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters took on additional symbolic weight.

The marriage of Æthelburh was instrumental in the initial conversion of the Northumbrians to Christianity. Bede explicitly states that “the Northumbrian people’s acceptance of the Faith of Christ came about through their king’s marriage to Ethelberga” and that in addition to allowing Æthelburh freedom to practice Christianity, Edwin even “professed himself willing to accept the religion of Christ” upon their marriage.<sup>34</sup> Bede goes on to state that in 625, Paulinus “came to Edwin with the princess as her spiritual counselor in the marriage” and “directly he entered the province he began to toil unceasingly ... to bring some of the heathen to grace and faith by his teaching.”<sup>35</sup> By bringing Paulinus to Northumbria, Æthelburh thus set in motion the conversion of the Northumbrian people.

While Æthelburh’s brother Eadbald had a conversion experience as an adult, Bede does not tell us whether Æthelburh was brought up as a Christian or converted later. Since she was married in 625, she was most likely born after her father Æthelberht’s conversion, which probably occurred shortly after the arrival of the Roman mission in 597 and no later than 601, when Pope Gregory sent Æthelberht a letter exhorting him to continue his own growth in the Christian faith and ensure its protection throughout his kingdom.<sup>36</sup> Although unlikely, even if Æthelburh was born before Æthelberht’s conversion, she may have been raised in the religion of her Christian mother Bertha from her infancy. Therefore, Æthelburh was probably raised in an entirely Christian household.

Even Pope Boniface, in a letter written to Æthelburh shortly after her daughter Eanflæd’s birth, acknowledged that Æthelburh could potentially persuade her husband

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<sup>34</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 118.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Edwin to convert. Bede quoted a letter from Pope Boniface to Æthelburh in which he implored her to convert Edwin, telling her of her “opportunity to kindle a spark of the true religion in your husband.”<sup>37</sup> Boniface also commended Æthelburh for her faith, writing: “you are unshakeably devoted to the love of our Redeemer and labor constantly to propagate the Christian Faith.”<sup>38</sup> He even sent her gifts as a sign of his approval: “a silver mirror, together with a gold and ivory comb.”<sup>39</sup> Pope Boniface thus recognized the power of influence which Æthelburh possessed as queen and specifically asked her to use it to convert Edwin.

Much of Æthelburh’s story parallels that of her mother Bertha. Bertha was a Frankish princess who came from her homeland with the same kind of assurances that she would be able to practice her faith as Æthelburh received. When Augustine and his retinue first landed on the Isle of Thanet in Kent in 597, they were welcomed by Æthelburh’s father King Æthelberht, who “had already heard of the Christian religion, having a Christian wife of the Frankish royal house named Bertha, whom he had received from her parents on condition that she should have freedom to hold and practice her faith unhindered with Bishop Liudhard, whom they had sent as her helper in the faith.”<sup>40</sup> Although Æthelberht did not immediately accept the “new and uncertain” beliefs and practices of the Christian faith, choosing rather to maintain the “age-old beliefs that I have held together with the whole English nation,” he did promise Augustine that “we will receive you hospitably and take care to supply you with all that you need; nor will

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 75.

we forbid you to preach and win any people you can to your religion.”<sup>41</sup> Bede emphasizes that, rather than converting through the influence of his wife Bertha, Æthelberht only converted after hearing the preaching of Augustine and his fellow missionaries.<sup>42</sup> While Æthelberht did not necessarily convert because of his marriage to Bertha, his original positive reception of the missionaries was certainly the result of his previous exposure to Christianity through his wife Bertha and her ability to bring her religion with her.

Around 653, the Middle Angles were also converted to Christianity through the marriage of a king and a king’s daughter. Bede writes that Peada, son of King Penda of Mercia, “whom his father had appointed to the kingship of this people,” was ruling the kingdom of the Middle Angles.<sup>43</sup> Peada sought to make an alliance with the powerful Northumbrian kingdom and “went to Oswy King of the Northumbrians and requested the hand of his daughter Alchflæd in marriage.”<sup>44</sup> However, Oswiu refused to allow Alhflæd to marry Peada “unless the king and his people accepted the Christian Faith and were baptized.”<sup>45</sup> Peada therefore “received instruction in the true Faith,” and although this was initially undertaken with the hope that he would be able to marry Alhflæd, “he said that he would gladly become a Christian, even if he were refused the princess.”<sup>46</sup> Bede goes on to state that Peada “was chiefly influenced to accept the Faith by King Oswy’s son Alchfrid, who was his kinsman and friend, and had married his sister Cyniburg, daughter of King Penda.”<sup>47</sup> Alhflæd’s marriage to Peada therefore reinforced a double alliance that was already formed by Alhfrith and Cyneburh, a situation which reflects the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 75-6.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

complex web of marriage alliances in Anglo-Saxon England during the seventh century. Oswiu's initial refusal to agree to the marriage and Alhfrith's interest in Peada's conversion indicates that royal daughters were not given in marriage lightly, with no concern for their safety or souls; rather, their marriages were undertaken only after careful deliberation and assurances that their right to practice Christianity would be protected.

The marriages of Æthelburh, Bertha, and Alhflæd reflect the fact that “the holy queen in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* seems to function as a catalyst, initiating the process of conversion for her husband.”<sup>48</sup> Yet it is also important to keep in mind that, for Bede, the focal point in the marriage between Æthelburh and Edwin is not the arrival of Æthelburh herself, but rather the missionizing efforts of her bishop, Paulinus. Nor was King Edwin ultimately converted to the Christian faith at Æthelburh’s prompting. Instead, Bede reports that Edwin did not convert until after he had recognized the missionary Paulinus as the man whom he had seen in a heavenly vision during his time in exile, and that even then Edwin held a consultation with his nobles to determine whether Northumbria would accept the Christian faith. While Stacy Klein has suggested that the removal of Æthelburh from the conversion process reflects Bede’s reconstruction of the traditional peace-weaver role as one in which royal wives “weave peace with God and ... forge alliances between kings and clergy,”<sup>49</sup> Sharon Rowley has argued that it in fact reflects “Bede’s agenda to represent the unifying power of the Church,” which “causes

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<sup>48</sup> Dorsey Armstrong, “Holy Queens as Agents of Christianization in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*: A Reconsideration,” *Medieval Encounters* 4, no. 3 (1998): 229.

<sup>49</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 19.



him to ... downplay the role of women in conversion.”<sup>50</sup> Dorsey Armstrong has echoed this view, stating that Bede’s ultimate distancing of Edwin’s conversion from the time of his marriage to Æthelburh reinforces the notion that “in Bede, queens do not convert peoples – kings and bishops do.”<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the sidelining of Æthelburh in the initial conversion of Northumbria, Bede also downplays Eanflæd’s role in the Synod of Whitby. While Bede states that Eanflæd’s practice of the Roman Easter was the spark that initiated the Synod of Whitby, he attributes a great deal more importance to the eloquent speech of Bishop Wilfrid at the Synod than to Eanflæd’s influence over Oswiu. The agency of the wives of Anglo-Saxon kings in persuading their husband to convert is therefore greatly diminished by Bede. Nevertheless, Bede reveals that Anglo-Saxon women were instrumental in the initial movement of the material and ideological aspects of the Christian faith. Paulinus’ task to protect and foster the spiritual lives of Æthelburh and her retinue suggests that he also brought the material culture of the Christian faith along with him. When Paulinus first arrived in England to meet Augustine in 601, he brought “sacred vessels, altar coverings, church ornaments, vestments for priests and clergy, relics of the holy Apostles and martyrs, and many books.”<sup>52</sup> It is highly likely that Paulinus took at least some of these items with him when he traveled to Northumbria with Æthelburh in 625. Æthelburh and her marriage journey could therefore have been instrumental in the bringing of Christian liturgical objects to Northumbria. Eanflæd, on the other hand, fostered a

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<sup>50</sup> Sharon Rowley, “Queen Takes Bishop: Marriage, Conversion and Papal Authority in the *OEHE*,” in *The Old English Version of Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 16 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), 118.

<sup>51</sup> Armstrong, “Holy Queens as Agents of Christianization,” 239.

<sup>52</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 40.

divisive ideological aspect of Christianity by celebrating Easter according to the Roman method within her household. While Northumbria had already converted to Christianity, Oswiu's marriage to a princess from a different royal house thus resulted in the spread of what Bede considered to be an orthodox practice, one which was first introduced into Northumbria by Æthelburh's Roman-influenced retinue and allowed to flourish there under the influence of her daughter Eanflæd.

Whether or not Æthelburh and Eanflæd were truly essential to the success of the Christian mission in England, their marriages served as important factors in the mobility of powerful religious ideas. If we look at the conversion of Northumbria, not as the result of a queen influencing her husband through counsel, but as the result of a princess bringing material and intellectual culture with her upon her marriage, we can see that Anglo-Saxon royal daughters could be instrumental in the spread of Christianity. As vehicles for the transportation of material and intellectual culture, the daughters of kings were responsible for the Christianization of England because of their status as royal daughters rather than as the king's wife.

#### *Failed Marriages and Female Agency*

Not every marriage involving royal daughters proved successful. There were in fact several instances in which peace-weaving failed in seventh- and eighth-century England. The disastrous marriages of Æthelthryth, Cyneswith, Alhflæd, Osthryth, and Eadburh present the possibility of female agency within traditional Anglo-Saxon marriage alliances. While the accounts of Anglo-Saxon marriages depict royal daughters as having little say in whether or whom they married and as being given and taken as

wives by powerful men, these women in fact possessed a degree of agency in the sense that they could both support and undermine the formation of dynastic alliances.

Æthelthryth's explicit wishes concerning both of her marriages were deliberately disregarded. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, a twelfth-century history of the Abbey of Ely, when Æthelthryth was asked for in marriage by her first husband, Tondberht of the South Gyrwas, she "was very horrified" and "resisted for a long time."<sup>53</sup> Despite Æthelthryth's protestations, "the authority of her parents was victorious," and Æthelthryth was compelled into the marriage.<sup>54</sup> When Æthelthryth was betrothed to Tondberht in 652, she was "bound by a marriage-bond, even though against her will."<sup>55</sup> Following Tondberht's death three years later, Æthelthryth "rejoiced ... that she was free in the liberty of Christ from the yoke of marriage."<sup>56</sup> However, after her father Anna's death, King Ecgfrith of Northumbria began pestering her with unwelcome overtures of marriage. In 660, after being pressured by her family, Æthelthryth was married to Ecgfrith "contrary to her hopes."<sup>57</sup>

Despite her apparent passivity in this case, Æthelthryth was in fact able to exercise agency by continuing to preserve her virginity, which she had maintained during her brief marriage to Tondberht, throughout her twelve-year marriage to Ecgfrith. Bede writes that Ecgfrith set about trying to force Æthelthryth to consummate the marriage, even promising Bishop Wilfrid "estates and much wealth ... if he could persuade the queen to consummate the marriage."<sup>58</sup> However, with Wilfrid's advice, Æthelthryth

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<sup>53</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 236.

“absolutely refused assent to the king.”<sup>59</sup> Æthelthryth then “begged the king to allow her to retire from worldly affairs and serve Christ the only true King in a convent” and “at length obtained his reluctant consent.”<sup>60</sup> Katherine Bullimore has suggested that Ecgfrith desperately wanted to keep the marriage intact in order to preserve the political alliances it afforded him and that the dissolution of the marriage did indeed “upset a fragile balance of alliances that were symbolized and partly held together by marriage ties.”<sup>61</sup> The *Liber Eliensis* even described Æthelthryth’s act as the exercise of the secular political power which her marriage to Ecgfrith afforded, stating that “the first time that the famous queen believed she was exerting royal power was when she made her exit from her royal position, free for the service of Christ.”<sup>62</sup> Although unable to extricate herself from the original marriage agreement, Æthelthryth’s absolute refusal to consummate her marriage to Ecgfrith enabled her to exercise an indirect form of power by essentially invalidating the union.

Another royal daughter who interrupted the formation of a dynastic alliance was Cyneswith, one of the three daughters of Penda of Mercia. According to William of Malmesbury, writing in the first half of the twelfth century, Cyneswith “consecrated her betrothed, Offa [king of the East Angles], to celibacy.”<sup>63</sup> This Offa “had hoped to marry Cyneswith. But her advice taught him to divert his love into a better course, and he went off ... to Rome” where “he was tonsured for a monk, and said goodbye to the world for his lifetime.”<sup>64</sup> Cyneswith’s commitment to her religious faith and her ability to influence

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<sup>59</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 236.

<sup>61</sup> Bullimore, “Unpicking the Web,” 848.

<sup>62</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum: The History of the English Bishops*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 481.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

Offa to commit himself in the same way may therefore have destroyed an alliance that would have been extremely valuable to her family.

Bede also describes the failed marriages of a pair of sisters from the Northumbrian royal house. Osthryth and Alhflæd, both daughters of King Oswiu of Northumbria, were unable to maintain, and in one case actively destroyed, peace within their marriages. According to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Osthryth was married to King Æthelred of Mercia. However, this marriage did not prevent the outbreak of war between Mercia and Northumbria, as Bede tells us that Osthryth's brother Ecgfrith "fought a great battle near the river Trent against King Ethelred of the Mercians" in 679, at which another of her brothers, Elfwin, was killed.<sup>65</sup> Osthryth was ultimately unsuccessful in mitigating the violence between her husband's kingdom and that of her birth family; rather, it was Archbishop Theodore who stepped in and "smothered the flames of this awful peril by his wholesome advice."<sup>66</sup> Stacy Klein suggests that Osthryth's failure to maintain an alliance through marriage reflects Bede's notion that earthly marriage provided an ultimately "unreliable method of facilitating sustained national peace," which was instead guaranteed by the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Stephanie Hollis describes Osthryth as "a failed peaceweaver, whose efforts to forge peace proved tragically inadequate to the force of male vengeance and aggression."<sup>68</sup> However, Hollis also suggests that Osthryth's failure as a bringer of peace may have in fact been the result of her continued attachment to the political needs of her birth family and the disruptive nature of a "queen's identification

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<sup>65</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 240.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 162.

with her own people” in Anglo-Saxon marriage alliances.<sup>69</sup> Osthryth therefore exercised agency by choosing not to act in support of her husband.

According to Bede, Osthryth’s sister Alhflæd also failed as a peace-weaver; however, Alhflæd’s failure was the result of active participation in the destruction of her marriage rather than deliberate inaction. Alhflæd was married to King Peada by her father Oswiu on the condition that Peada become a Christian, which Bede states initiated the conversion of the Middle Angles. Bede writes that, following Oswiu’s defeat of Peada’s father Penda of Mercia, Peada himself “was foully assassinated through the treachery, it is said, of his own wife.”<sup>70</sup> Assuming that Peada had not remarried in the meantime, this wife who assisted in Peada’s murder would have been Alhflæd. Sharon Rowley suggests that Alhflæd may have murdered Peada at the behest of her father Oswiu, and that the Old English version of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* therefore highlights “the violent termination of a marriage for political purposes.”<sup>71</sup> Whether acting under her father’s orders or for her own personal reasons, Alhflæd exercised agency by actively destroying her marriage and undermining the political alliance it created.

Perhaps the most controversial marriage of the early Anglo-Saxon period was that between Eadburh, the daughter of Offa of Mercia, and Beorhtric of Wessex, which took place in 787.<sup>72</sup> According to Chapter 14 of Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*, soon after her marriage, Eadburh “began to behave like a tyrant after the manner of her father,” which included poisoning members of court and accidentally poisoning her husband in the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>70</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 185.

<sup>71</sup> Rowley, “Queen Takes Bishop,” 120.

<sup>72</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Michael Swanton (New York: Routledge, 1998), 54.

process.<sup>73</sup> Eadburh then retreated to the court of Charlemagne, where she was put in charge of a monastery. She was eventually expelled from this monastery for “debauchery” and later “died a miserable death in Pavia.”<sup>74</sup> Asser states that Eadburh’s exploits are the primary reason why, in the following century, “the West Saxons did not allow the queen to sit beside the king.”<sup>75</sup> This story has often been quoted in connection with the reduced power of women in Wessex, most notably by Pauline Stafford, who argued that Eadburh was used as “justification of the limited role allowed to royal wives.”<sup>76</sup> While Eadburh may have been the innocent victim of misogyny and historical manipulation, her exercise of political power and the accidental killing of her husband undeniably destroyed the alliance created by her marriage. As evidenced by the actions of Eadburh, Alhflæd, Osthryth, Cyneswith, and Æthelthryth, Anglo-Saxon princesses could effectively undermine the formation of dynastic alliances. By dissolving existing marriages, backing out of planned marriages, or attempting to exercise political power, these women could prevent a potentially valuable alliance from being formed.<sup>77</sup> Royal daughters were thus able to exhibit a remarkable degree of agency by disrupting traditional marriage practices.

### **Royal Marriage from the Ninth to the Eleventh Century**

During the ninth and tenth centuries, the marriages of royal daughters became increasingly focused on the formation and maintenance of political alliances with the

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<sup>73</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 71-2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>76</sup> Pauline Stafford, “The King’s Wife in Wessex,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 56.

<sup>77</sup> Bullimore, “Unpicking the Web,” 848.

European Continent, particularly among the descendants of King Alfred. In the wake of the political upheavals of the preceding centuries, a relatively united and overwhelmingly Christian English nation began to emerge during Alfred's reign. As the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms began to unite in the face of the Viking invasions during the ninth century, the maintenance of constantly shifting and tenuous political alliances between the smaller kingdoms became less important. The Anglo-Saxon kings of the late period therefore increasingly focused their attention on marriage alliances with continental powers.

The first notable marriage negotiations of the ninth-century West Saxon kings were traditional in that they involved marriage between the king's daughter and a ruler of another Anglo-Saxon kingdom. According to Asser, in 853 King Æthelwulf of Wessex (r.839-858), Alfred's father, "gave his daughter to Burgred, king of the Mercians, as queen, at the royal estate called Chippenham, and the marriage was conducted in royal style."<sup>78</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that this daughter was called Æthelswith and that she died in Pavia in 888.<sup>79</sup> The *Chronicle* notes that this marriage occurred after Burgred had asked for Æthelwulf's help in subjecting the Welsh.<sup>80</sup> In this case, therefore, the marriage of a king's daughter was used to consummate an alliance already formed by warfare, rather than to end fighting between Wessex and Mercia, or to preemptively form an alliance against an aggressive neighbor.

Like his father before him, Alfred appeared to be following the traditional practices of Anglo-Saxon kings by marrying his daughter to another Anglo-Saxon ruler. In this case, he even followed his father's precedent in marrying his daughter to the ruler

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<sup>78</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 69.

<sup>79</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 82.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-6.



of Mercia.<sup>81</sup> According to his biographer Asser, Alfred married his eldest daughter Æthelflæd to Æthelred, ealdorman of Mercia, who was loyal to Alfred and the Wessex line.<sup>82</sup> Alfred broke with this tradition, however, in the marriage of his youngest daughter. The first royal daughter to serve as an alliance-maker between Anglo-Saxon England and Frankish Gaul was Alfred's youngest daughter Ælfthryth. According to the chronicler Æthelweard, "Aelfred sent his daughter Aelfthryth ... to marry Baldwin [II, Count of Flanders]."<sup>83</sup> This marriage was unprecedented. Previously, marriage alliances between the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks had involved Frankish women coming to England to marry English kings. In the sixth century, as previously mentioned, Æthelburh's mother Bertha, a member of the Frankish royal family, had travelled to England to marry Æthelberht of Kent. Similarly, in 855, Alfred's father Æthelwulf returned from a journey to Rome, "bringing with him Judith, daughter of Charles [the Bald], king of the Franks."<sup>84</sup> This Judith shared the throne with Æthelwulf as queen. These were isolated instances and involved the marrying of Frankish women to English kings. However, after Ælfthryth's marriage, the practice of sending Anglo-Saxon royal daughters to marry continental princes became a regular occurrence, especially among Alfred's descendants and most notably for the daughters of his son Edward the Elder.

The marriages of the daughters of Edward the Elder were described in the opening dedication of the *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, a Latin chronicle written by the

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<sup>81</sup> Sheila Sharp, "The West Saxon Tradition of Dynastic Marriage: With Special Reference to the Family of Edward the Elder," in *Edward the Elder, 899-924*, ed. N.J. Higham and David Hill (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 81.

<sup>82</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> Æthelweard, *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. and trans. A. Campbell (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 2.

<sup>84</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 70.

ealdorman Æthelweard in the second half of the tenth century.<sup>85</sup> Æthelweard addresses his work to his relative Matilda, the illustrious abbess of the monastery of Essen in Germany from 974 to her death in 1101.<sup>86</sup> She was the grand-daughter of Emperor Otto I and his wife Eadgyth, one of the daughters of Edward the Elder.<sup>87</sup> In his dedication, Æthelweard describes how he and Matilda are related and traces their ancestry back to their common ancestor Æthelwulf, the father of King Alfred. According to Æthelweard, he was descended from Alfred's older brother Æthelred, while Matilda was descended from Alfred himself.<sup>88</sup> In discussing Matilda's combination of Frankish and West Saxon heritage, Æthelweard writes:

Eadgyfu was the name of the daughter of King Eadweard, the son of Aelfred ... and she was your great-aunt and was sent into the country of Gaul to marry the younger Charles. Eadhild, furthermore, was sent to be the wife of Hugo, son of Robert. King Aethelstan sent another two [of his sisters] to Otho, the plan being that he should choose as his wife the one who pleased him. He chose Eadgyth, from whom you spring in the first place. The other sister he married to a certain king near the Alps.<sup>89</sup>

The Charles whom Eadgifu married was Charles the Simple, who was a younger son of Louis the Stammerer and who ruled as King of West Francia from 898 to 922. Eadhild's husband Hugo was Hugh the Great (898-956), Duke of the Franks; he was the son of Robert I, King of the Franks, and the father of Hugh Capet, who would go on to

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<sup>85</sup> Æthelweard, *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, xiii.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

establish the Capetian dynasty in France. Eadgyth married Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor from 962 to 973. The daughters of Edward the Elder were therefore married to extremely high-ranking members of the Carolingian and Ottonian dynasties. William of Malmesbury provides additional information regarding the marriages of Edward's daughters, stating that a daughter by his first wife Ecgwynn was married to Sihtric, the Danish ruler of Northumbria.<sup>90</sup> This indicates that Scandinavian interests had also become a major factor in the marriage negotiations of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings. Sarah Foot has suggested that the actions of Edward and Æthelstan regarding their female relatives can be seen "not as part of a dynastic strategy for one family, but as reflecting a thought-through foreign policy, designed for the greater good of the whole, rapidly expanding Anglo-Saxon realm."<sup>91</sup> Whatever the reason, by the tenth century, the role of the royal daughter in Anglo-Saxon England had undeniably expanded to include the formation and strengthening of ties with continental Europe and the Viking invaders.

The rulers of the late Anglo-Saxon period built upon the marriage practices of their predecessors by employing a combination of inter-kingdom and continental alliances. Æthelred the Unready (ca. 966-1016) had two daughters whose marriages formed alliances with both Anglo-Saxon and Frankish noblemen. Ælfgifu, Æthelred's daughter by his first wife, Ælfgifu of York, was married to Uhtred, the earl of Northumbria.<sup>92</sup> Gode, Æthelred's younger daughter by his second wife Emma of Normandy and full sister of Edward the Confessor, was married first to Walter of Mantes,

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<sup>90</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 199.

<sup>91</sup> Sarah Foot, "Dynastic Strategies: The West Saxon Royal Family in Europe," in *England and the Continent in the Tenth Century: Studies in Honour of Wilhelm Levison (1876-1947)*, ed. David W. Rollason, Conrad Leyser, and Hannah Williams (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010), 246.

<sup>92</sup> *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Arnold, Rolls Series 75 (London: Longman, 1882), 216.

the count of Valois,<sup>93</sup> and then to Eustace II, count of Boulogne.<sup>94</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts an incident in 1051 in which Eustace visited England. After landing at Dover, Eustace's "men ... killed a certain man from the market town," igniting a fierce battle between the count's retinue and the citizens of Dover until Eustace's entourage "came to Gloucester to the king [Edward the Confessor], and he granted them safe-conduct."<sup>95</sup> While it is not clear whether Gode was still alive when this incident occurred, her marriage to Eustace may have proved instrumental in ensuring that he received her brother Edward's protection. The marriages of Ælfgifu and Gode provided the later West Saxon dynasty with ties to both Anglo-Saxon and Frankish lords, thereby creating a buffer against the increasingly troublesome Danes.

Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, royal daughters were essential to the peace and security of the ruling dynasties of England. In the seventh and eighth centuries, royal daughters were most frequently married to the kings and princes of rival Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, thereby creating a broad network of inter-kingdom alliances. From the ninth to the eleventh century, the political and dynastic alliances that these women facilitated expanded to include continental interests. In this later period, royal daughters became extremely important agents in the formation and strengthening of ties between England and an emerging Europe. Although Anglo-Saxon royal daughters may have had little choice in the contracting of their own marriages, they were still active participants in the formation of these dynastic alliances. Whether they married into kingdoms within England and reinforced longstanding connections between kin, or whether they crossed

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<sup>93</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 357.

<sup>94</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 173.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-5.

the English Channel to marry into an entirely new household, the ultimate success of these marriages, and thus of the dynastic ties which were integral to Anglo-Saxon politics, were largely dependent on the physical mobility and personal agency of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters. Furthermore, these women were able to transport and maintain their personal religious practices between kingdoms upon their marriages. Once married, royal daughters did not cease all contact with their birth families, nor did their families cease to feel some responsibility for them. Thus, the rights and influence which these women held were not entirely dependent on their entry into the married state. Rather, as the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings, they possessed an inherent power that made them essential agents in the formation and maintenance of political alliances in Anglo-Saxon England.

## Chapter Three

### Religious Life

While marriage provided one of the main avenues by which royal daughters could extend the influence of their respective families, young women in Anglo-Saxon England also had the option of entering monastic life. The primary role of royal daughters consecrated to the religious life was to serve as their family's representative in the spiritual sphere, and to play the role of intercessor between their families and God. Therefore, just as the marriages of royal daughters served as a way to form alliances with neighboring Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and continental powers, the placement of royal daughters in the Church served as a way for Anglo-Saxon royal families to make alliances with God.<sup>1</sup> Commitment to the religious life also enabled Anglo-Saxon princesses, particularly those who were young and unmarried, to exercise a remarkable degree of agency and personal choice in the direction of their own future lives. Furthermore, despite the apparent renunciation of the secular world which accompanied the taking of monastic vows, these women frequently maintained physical, material, and psychological connections with the secular sphere, and continued to sustain relationships with their brothers, sisters, and parents. Ultimately, the royal status of Anglo-Saxon nuns had implications for their holiness and subsequent reputations as saints and enhanced the power which they held as abbesses, while their status as a king's daughter even enabled them to directly influence the outcome of events in the kingdoms ruled by their fathers and brothers.

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 48-50.

### **Familial and Social Roles of Royal Female Religious**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the royal houses of Kent, Northumbria, East Anglia, Mercia, and Wessex used the marriages of their daughters to advance the interests of their families throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. However, these same royal families would also regularly consecrate at least one of their daughters to the Church. Of the three daughters of King Oswiu of Northumbria, one, Ælfflæd, was consecrated to the religious life as an infant.<sup>2</sup> Of the four daughters of King Anna of East Anglia, two of them, Æthelburh and Wihtburh, entered the religious life.<sup>3</sup> Earcongota, one of two daughters of King Earconberht of Kent and his wife Seaxburh, became a nun and entered a monastery in Gaul.<sup>4</sup> Æthelgifu, the second of King Alfred the Great's three daughters, was "subject and consecrated to the rules of monastic life" and "entered the service of God."<sup>5</sup> Three of the eight or nine daughters of Alfred's son Edward the Elder became nuns. William of Malmesbury states that Eadflæd and Æthelhild, Edward's daughters by his second wife Ælfflæd, entered the religious life, "Eadflæd taking the veil and Æthelhild in lay attire," while their sister Eadburh, one of Edward's youngest daughters by his third wife Eadgifu, entered the monastery of Winchester.<sup>6</sup> This statement occurs in the same chapter in which William lists Edward's numerous children and describes the various continental marriages of his many daughters, indicating that the spiritual alliances formed by the entry of royal daughters into monastic life were just as important as secular alliances formed through marriage.

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 90.

<sup>6</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 201.

The above discussion shows that Anglo-Saxon royal houses with multiple daughters usually consecrated at least one of those daughters to the religious life. A similar trend also occurred in royal families with only one known daughter. While it seems to have been more common for only daughters of kings to marry, this was not always the case. Æthelburh, Eanflæd, and Æthelswith, all discussed in the previous chapter, were the only daughters of their fathers and were all married, which would seem to suggest that marriage took precedence over religious life as a vocation for royal daughters. However, King Wulfhere of Mercia and his wife Eormenhild, herself the daughter of Earconberht of Kent, had only one daughter that we know of; this daughter, Wærburh, became a nun after the death of her father and entered the monastery of Ely under her great-aunt Æthelthryth.<sup>7</sup> King Edgar also had only one daughter, Eadgyth, who was consecrated as a nun under the authority of her mother Wulfthryth at the monastery of Wilton.<sup>8</sup> This pattern of consecrating daughters to the religious life suggests that the formation of dynastic alliances may not have been every royal family's overriding concern, and that monastic life could be seen as an equally important vocation for royal daughters as marriage.

By entering monastic life, these young women served as their family's representative in the religious sphere and provided their family with a vital connection to God and His Church. Many of these girls were consecrated to the Church at birth or as infants, some as young as one to three years old, and were therefore trained in religion from an early age. Oswiu's daughter Ælfflæd was consecrated as a nun as a sign of her father's faith and thanksgiving for his military victory when she was "scarcely a year

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<sup>7</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 29.



old.”<sup>9</sup> Earconberht’s daughter Earcongota, as well as Anna’s daughter Æthelburh and step-daughter Sæthryth, were all sent to Gaul, probably at a young age, for their education in religion.<sup>10</sup> Edward the Elder’s daughter Eadburh seemed destined for holiness when “scarcely three years old.”<sup>11</sup> Eadgyth, the only daughter of King Edgar, was “consecrated to God from her infancy” and entered the monastery of Wilton at age two.<sup>12</sup> The remarkably young ages of these girls at the time of their consecration indicate that they were deliberately placed within monasteries for their family’s spiritual benefit.<sup>13</sup> Although it is unclear at what age King Alfred’s daughter Æthelgifu first took monastic vows, her situation was different from other royal daughters in that she was intentionally installed as the head of a monastic institution by her father. Asser writes that, when Alfred established the monastery of Shaftesbury, “he appointed as its abbess his own daughter Æthelgifu, a virgin consecrated to God.”<sup>14</sup> According to Barbara Yorke, this appointment occurred when Æthelgifu was still a teenager.<sup>15</sup> Æthelgifu’s placement in a position of power at a relatively young age suggests that she was supposed to be in charge of the monastery in order to support Alfred’s spiritual agenda.

The consecration of infant daughters to the Church, as well as the placement of daughters in positions of spiritual and administrative power, suggest that these girls took monastic vows “in order to satisfy their family’s devotion vicariously” and “intercede on behalf of their kin.”<sup>16</sup> Monastic houses founded by kings and ruled by their daughters

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<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 184.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-6.

<sup>11</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 275.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 111.

<sup>14</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 39.

were expected to play an intercessory role for individual kings and their kingdoms by performing the holy office, or the daily round of prayers.<sup>17</sup> This role was apparently unique to Anglo-Saxon royal daughters, as “no sons of a reigning monarch are known to have been vowed to the monastic life in this way.”<sup>18</sup> Barbara Yorke convincingly argues that, for young women of the ruling dynasties of Anglo-Saxon England, the taking of religious vows was intrinsic to “the construction of elite male and female identities,” and that this specialized role enabled the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings to fulfill their familial responsibilities in a system based on highly gendered “kinship obligations.”<sup>19</sup>

The consecration of royal daughters to the Church was often accompanied by the endowment of large amounts of land. When Oswiu gave his daughter Ælflæd to Hartlepool, he also handed over twelve estates of ten hides each.<sup>20</sup> When Alfred founded the monasteries of Athelney and Shaftesbury and installed his daughter Æthelgifu as abbess of the latter, he “abundantly endowed these two monasteries with estates of land and every kind of wealth.”<sup>21</sup> According to a charter supposedly written at the time of the establishment of Shaftesbury, Alfred endowed the monastery with seven estates totaling one hundred hides of land, and granted his daughter Æthelgifu “to the convent along with the inheritance, since she took the veil on account of bad health.”<sup>22</sup> Æthelgifu’s installation as abbess was therefore explicitly connected to the enrichment of the monastery in terms of landed wealth. Although this charter is widely accepted as a forgery, later grants from Alfred’s grandson Æthelstan, great-grandson Eadwig, and

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<sup>17</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 106-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-12.

<sup>20</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 184.

<sup>21</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 105.

<sup>22</sup> Bequest of King Alfred to Shaftesbury, in A.J. Robertson, ed. and trans., *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 25.

great-great-grandson Æthelred the Unready, show that Shaftesbury was supported throughout the later generations of the West Saxon dynasty.<sup>23</sup> Goscelin writes that, upon offering his daughter Eadgyth to the monastery of Wilton, King Edgar “added lands, he added royal gifts and augmented pastures.”<sup>24</sup> Edgar made substantial grants of land to numerous monasteries throughout his reign, and did indeed grant nearby estates in Wiltshire to Wilton Abbey in 968.<sup>25</sup> The endowment of monasteries with substantial gifts of land, and the placement of that land often directly into the hands of their daughters, enabled Anglo-Saxon kings to fulfil their obligations towards the Church while at the same time keeping land under the direct control of their immediate family.<sup>26</sup> Royal daughters who ruled monasteries as abbesses thus served an essential role as both their family’s spiritual representative and the custodian of family property.

As shown in the grants of land made to Shaftesbury by the West Saxon royal house, a family could endow a particular monastery for multiple generations. In addition, a family could be represented in a single religious establishment through multiple generations of royal women. This shows that, just as alliances were made with other ruling Anglo-Saxon houses through marriage, long-standing alliances could be made with God through the repeated favoring of a particular monastery. Janet Nelson has stated that, during the early Middle Ages, “oblation worked to forge and reinforce on-going relationships between landed families and particular churches.”<sup>27</sup> These relationships can

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<sup>23</sup> *Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, ed. S.E. Kelly, Anglo-Saxon Charters 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), no. 8 (p. 30-7), no. 21 (p. 84-6), and no. 29 (p. 114-17).

<sup>24</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1968), no. 767.

<sup>26</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Janet L. Nelson, “Parents, Children, and the Church in the Earlier Middle Ages,” *Studies in Church History* 31 (1994): 110.

be seen in the same context as Anglo-Saxon marriage alliances, particularly if a royal daughter refused to marry or expressed a desire to enter the Church, in which case the alliance that she would have formed through her marriage could be diverted to one with a religious house. The decisions of royal daughters such as Æthelthryth and Cyneswith not to marry and instead to enter monastic life could disrupt the formation of dynastic marriage alliances; these alliances were then channeled towards a connection with a monastic establishment.

In contrast to the statements of some historians on the role of women in the early medieval Church, consecration to the religious life in Anglo-Saxon England was not a callous way of dealing with too many burdensome daughters.<sup>28</sup> Rather, it was a deliberate strategy designed to support the well-being of the entire family, and one in which the women themselves may have had some part. The above discussion has shown that these young women served as vital connections between their families and the religious establishment in Anglo-Saxon England, and that decisions made regarding their future lives were planned with some care and thought. While they may have had little choice in whether or not they became nuns, the sources indicate that these girls actively participated in the religious life, and some even chose it. Furthermore, although royal daughters were often consecrated to perform a specific role as intercessor for their families, their consecration to the Church should not be misinterpreted as simply the fulfillment of their family's obligations, undertaken with no further care for the welfare of their respective daughters. These women were in fact able to maintain strong

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<sup>28</sup> See especially Stafford, "Sons and Mothers," 97.

connections with their birth families, and frequently exercised a remarkable degree of agency, independence, and power.

### **Choice and Agency**

The consecrations of many Anglo-Saxon royal daughters as their family's representative in the spiritual sphere may seem to imply that these girls were simply pawns in a larger game. However, entry into monastic life could also provide the opportunity for elite women in Anglo-Saxon England to exercise agency and personal choice. According to the accounts of these women in medieval narrative sources, Anglo-Saxon princesses could make their own decisions concerning their futures by choosing to take monastic vows, whether as infants, young women, or widows. For young unmarried women, the choice to enter the cloister was often presented as an acceptable alternative to marriage.

Anglo-Saxon princesses were sometimes depicted as choosing the monastic life while still an infant. Eadburh, one of Edward the Elder's youngest daughters, apparently showed a tendency towards the monastic life when she was "scarcely three years old."<sup>29</sup> William of Malmesbury described a scene in which Eadburh's father Edward attempted to determine what course his daughter's future life would take:

Her father wanted to try out whether the little girl was going to tend towards God or this world. So he had put in a private room objects representing different ways of life, a chalice and gospel book on one side, and bracelets and necklaces on the other. The child was carried in by her nurse, and put to sit on her father's knee.

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<sup>29</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 275.

Told to choose whichever she liked, she frowned in rejection of the worldly things, and crawling quickly across worshipped the Gospels and chalice with the innocence of a child.<sup>30</sup>

Eadburh's selection of sacred objects in preference to worldly riches serves as a sign of her inclination towards the religious life. William further states that Eadburh's father and his entire household were overjoyed at her apparent choice to devote her life to Christ and the Church. Edward even "hugged his offspring more closely," instructing her to "go where God calls you" and "follow the Spouse you have chosen."<sup>31</sup> Following this episode, William states that Eadburh "put on a nun's habit," but it is not clear whether she entered a monastery at this point or as an older child or young adult.<sup>32</sup>

Goscelin's earlier *Life of Edith* described a similar scene, in which Eadgyth, the daughter of King Edgar, revealed her inclination towards the religious life by selecting holy objects. According to Goscelin, Eadgyth was taken to Wilton by her father Edgar, accompanied by the royal court, the nuns of Wilton, and numerous onlookers. Once they arrived, an elaborate ceremony took place, during which "a splendid robe was laid out" and "riches of different kinds were spread upon it, temporal and eternal."<sup>33</sup> These riches included "golden garlands, gold-embroidered cloaks, bejeweled purple, bracelets, rings, necklaces and the varied splendour of ornamental objects," which were juxtaposed against "the black veil of holiness, the chalice and paten, the dish of the Lord's passion, the psalter of heavenly prophecy."<sup>34</sup> According to Goscelin, the two-year old Eadgyth

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

was left to choose for herself which set of objects she preferred, and “with unwavering purpose picked out only the veil from the midst of the splendid colours and put it on her head as a crown.”<sup>35</sup> Just as Eadburh’s choice was viewed favorably by her family and the royal household, Eadgyth’s choice prompted “offerings of thanks” and “congratulations and joy for her father and mother” from the assembled crowd.<sup>36</sup>

In both of these accounts, material culture played an important part in the manifestations of holiness that Eadburh and Eadgyth presented. The sacred books, liturgical instruments, and the veil serve as a physical representation of the religious life, while the splendid jewelry and clothing serve as a physical representation of worldly, and specifically feminine, vanity. By selecting the sacred objects, these girls effectively rejected their royal status. Furthermore, for both Eadburh and Eadgyth, their entry into the religious life is presented as a marriage, albeit to Christ rather than a worldly husband, which reinforces the notion that taking the veil was seen as providing similar benefits to the royal family as secular marriage. While both of these stories appear to show that these young girls were able to exercise agency in determining the course of their future lives, the similarity between the two texts suggests that this appearance of personal choice may be deceptive. Barbara Yorke argues that the statements of medieval authors concerning the choice and agency exercised by infant oblates are examples of “hagiographic convention.”<sup>37</sup> Eadburh’s and Eadgyth’s consecrations to the monastic life as infants “underscores that the choice of vocation was being made to benefit those who took the decision on their behalf.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore the supposed “choice” of these infant girls

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

in fact reflects only their family's choice, and further reinforces the idea that these girls were meant to play a prescribed role as intercessors between their families and God.

Both of these sources were written following the Norman Conquest of England, and so may express Norman, rather than Anglo-Saxon, views on the role of choice in royal daughters' consecrations to the religious life. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe argues that Goscelin was attempting to use Eadgyth's consecration in order to repair the "fracture in identity" among female monastics at a time when many supposed nuns were in fact simply using monasteries as a refuge from the invading Normans.<sup>39</sup> Goscelin's account of Eadgyth therefore reflects anxieties about monastic women that were prevalent in the eleventh century, rather than female agency in the choice of monastic vocations in the ninth. While Barbara Yorke is perhaps correct in stating that these girls had very little choice in whether they entered the religious life or not, the important point for O'Keeffe is the appearance, rather than the actual presence, of choice. O'Keeffe suggests that, for medieval authors, obedience to God's will could serve as a manifestation of agency.<sup>40</sup> The consecrations of Eadburh and Eadgyth, although apparently carried out when they were still infants, could therefore have indicated a form of agency by showing that their actions aligned with God's plan for them. The choice of both Eadburh and Eadgyth to take monastic vows was met with support from both the secular and religious establishment, and even resulted in the increased affection of their parents, indicating that this choice was presented "simultaneously as identical individual, parental, communal, and divine acts."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Stealing Obedience: Narratives of Agency and Identity in Later Anglo-Saxon England*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 11 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012), 176.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.



The above discussion has shown that the supposed agency expressed in accounts of the consecrations of Eadburh and Eadgyth may in fact be an example of hagiographical rhetoric. However, by looking at those royal daughters who entered the Church as adults, we can form a clearer picture of the role of personal choice and agency in the lives of Anglo-Saxon royal women. Wærburh, the daughter of King Wulfhere of Mercia and Eormenhild, who was herself the daughter of Seaxburh and the sister of the nun Earcongota, appears by all accounts to have chosen the monastic life for herself without being encouraged or forced to do so by male relatives. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, “after her father’s death, Wærburh renounced the World and, with a view to receiving the habit of the holy life, entered the monastery of her great-aunt” Æthelthryth at Ely.<sup>42</sup> The statement that Wærburh only entered the religious life after the death of her father Wulfhere is intriguing; although it is impossible to know how old Wærburh may have been at the time, the fact that she entered monastic life after her father’s death shows that she was probably a teenager or a young adult, and so fully capable of making her own decisions. Wulfhere was succeeded by his brother Æthelred, and so most likely did not have any sons.<sup>43</sup> Wærburh therefore did not have any brothers to ensure that she was provided for after her father’s death, and the *Liber Eliensis* does not in any way imply that her uncles were involved in their brothers’ family matters.

The absence of a male relative’s influence in Wærburh’s decision indicates that she was free to make her own choice about her future life. In reality, Wærburh probably had limited options; she was not married before her father’s death and could not contract a marriage of her own without the intercession of a male relative. Wærburh’s mother

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<sup>42</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 46.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Eormenhild had herself taken monastic vows following Wulfhere's death, since we know from the *Liber Eliensis* that she eventually succeeded her own mother Seaxburh as Abbess of Ely.<sup>44</sup> The only option available to Wærburh may therefore have been to follow her mother into the Church. At the same time, it is equally likely that Wærburh may have wanted to enter monastic life even before her father died, and that his death provided the perfect opportunity for doing so without having to worry about a possible marriage negotiation or the input of a male relative.

The role of choice in women's monastic life is strongly apparent in the lives of widowed queens, most of whom were former princesses. Most of the royal widows of the early Anglo-Saxon period became abbesses of prominent monasteries. After the death of her husband Oswiu in 670, Eanflæd joined her daughter Ælflæd at the monastery of Whitby and ruled as co-abbess with her.<sup>45</sup> Seaxburh, the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia and wife of King Earconberht of Kent, entered her sister Æthelthryth's monastery of Ely following the death of her husband, and succeeded her as abbess there.<sup>46</sup> Earconberht and Seaxburh's daughter Eormenhild, who married King Wulfhere of Mercia, also entered the monastery of Ely, and in turn succeeded her mother Seaxburh as abbess.<sup>47</sup> These women exercised agency by choosing to enter the religious life rather than remarry. As widows of kings, Anglo-Saxon princesses turned queens would have been valuable marriage prospects, as well as foci for political opposition, to the king's successor and relatives. Pauline Stafford argues that, throughout the early Middle Ages, "dangerous women" such as these were often forced into convents in order to protect the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>45</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 255.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>47</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 69.

succession from potential political rivals.<sup>48</sup> However, much of the evidence from Anglo-Saxon England suggests that monastic life appears to have been the logical next step for widowed queens, particularly during the seventh and eighth centuries,<sup>49</sup> and those queens who were former princesses may have had enough support from their royal birth families to avoid this fate. Moreover, these women frequently joined monasteries where they already had family connections, indicating that they did so willingly and arranged their entries into certain institutions with their daughters, sisters, and mothers.

For young unmarried women, or married women who were not yet widows, the choice to enter the religious life is most frequently presented as an alternative to marriage. Wihtburh, the youngest daughter of King Anna of the East Angles, “despising kings’ sons and her parents’ honours, chose, after her father’s violent death, a humble place in his province at Dereham, her desire being to live in solitude.”<sup>50</sup> Wihtburh’s personal choice was important and emphasized, and her decision to renounce worldly wealth and marriage to an Anglo-Saxon prince was celebrated. Æthelhild and Eadflæd, two daughters of Edward the Elder, “took a vow of virginity and spurned the pleasures of earthly marriage.”<sup>51</sup> As mentioned above, the consecrations of Eadburh and Eadgyth in the tenth century were both presented as a marriage to Christ and an implied rejection of a worldly spouse. There were also numerous instances of women who were already married who decided to leave their husbands and enter a monastery. According to William of Malmesbury, Cyneburh, one of Penda of Mercia’s daughters, “became the wife of Aldfrith king of the Northumbrians; but later she wearied of this union in the

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<sup>48</sup> Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 180.

<sup>49</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 199-201.

flesh, and took the nun's habit in a monastery which her brothers Wulfhere and Æthelred had founded."<sup>52</sup> William here implies that Cyneburh dissolved her still valid marriage to Aldfrith, a fact that is not mentioned by Bede, and that her decision to take the veil was undertaken with the protection and cooperation of her brothers. The failed marriages of Æthelthryth and Cyneswith discussed in the previous chapter follow similar lines, and indicate that monastic life could serve as a viable "refuge from an unwanted betrothal or marriage."<sup>53</sup>

The majority of the sources that discuss female agency as it relates to monastic life in Anglo-Saxon England were written following the Norman Conquest and date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it is therefore difficult to say whether they can accurately capture the actions of women who lived hundreds of years before. In Anglo-Saxon sources, the question of agency is very difficult to answer, but its role in the adoption of the monastic life by royal women does not appear to have been as important to Anglo-Saxon authors as it does to the later chroniclers. Neither Bede nor Asser present young women as explicitly choosing the religious life, but they also do not imply that these girls entered convents entirely against their will. The fact that choice is not presented as being terribly important may point to the fact that daughters in the Anglo-Saxon period were consecrated to the religious life entirely for their families' benefit, and were restricted to performing the gendered roles of either marrying or serving as their family's spiritual intercessor. However, it is also possible that the ability of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters to choose their own future vocations was simply a matter of course to contemporary authors, and was not considered unusual or extraordinary enough to merit

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>53</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 40.

particular mention, while the later Norman sources found this ability notable enough to use it as a standard hagiographical plot point.

Despite the rhetorical strategies that defined later accounts of Anglo-Saxon royal saints, the stories of royal daughters entering the Church reflect that these women could often exercise their own judgment and make their own decisions about their futures. The choice to enter the religious life may have been the only acceptable alternative for young women who did not wish to marry. This would indicate that the opportunity for royal daughters to exercise agency and choose their own paths in life was limited to two options: marry or take monastic vows. Whether or not this was a genuine restriction on the actions of women during this period, their supposed choices at least show that these young women were capable of operating within the restrictions that society imposed upon them. These women were still able to make their own decisions, regardless of how many options they had, and their unique position as their fathers' daughters enabled them to make a choice and to have that choice supported by their families, despite the implications these choices could have for the dynastic alliances their families were attempting to make.

### **Secular Ties**

Despite the apparent assimilation of royal daughters within the Church, their entry into and subsequent experience of religious life was characterized by a constant tension between spiritual and secular matters. This tension could manifest itself in the interactions of these women with material culture, their birth families, and events in the secular world. The conflict between spiritual and secular ties was a unique problem for

Anglo-Saxon princesses who became nuns, since there is no evidence that their male counterparts entered the religious life as youths and only a few Anglo-Saxon kings are known to have taken monastic vows after their retirement from political life. Descriptions of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters in medieval sources indicate that, despite their active attempts to cast off their royal status upon their entries into religious life, these women continued to maintain strong material and psychological connections with the secular world, relationships with their birth families, and a notable interest in secular politics.

Royal daughters who entered the religious life were required to grapple with the disparity between the royal lifestyle which they had known from birth and the more ascetic lifestyle of early medieval monasticism.<sup>54</sup> Depictions of Anglo-Saxon princesses who took monastic vows indicate that these women both rejected and embraced fine clothing and jewelry. Material culture could thus serve to both separate them from and connect them to the secular world. Royal nuns in Anglo-Saxon England were frequently depicted as rejecting the objects, clothing, and adornments that characterized royal wealth and status in the early Middle Ages. Bede writes of Æthelthryth that “from the time of her entry into the convent she never wore linen but only woollen garments.”<sup>55</sup> The *Liber Eliensis* elaborates on Bede’s statement, saying that, upon entering the monastery of Coldingham under the rule of Abbess Æbbe, Æthelthryth “left behind, spurned, and ejected utterly from her heart, all the things which belong to the world,” and “in place of a diadem, she covered herself with a humble veil and, in place of fine linen and *purpura*, a coarse, black habit enfolded her.”<sup>56</sup> Æthelthryth therefore replaced a highly symbolic

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<sup>54</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 236.

<sup>56</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 32.

physical manifestation of secular status and power with a complementary object representing true, or spiritual, power. We have already discussed in this and previous chapters how King Edgar's daughter Eadgyth rejected the worldly material objects at her consecration, and how her mother Wulfthryth had refused to adorn her daughter with rich ornaments and cosmetics. In addition, Goscelin writes that Eadgyth "rejected and annihilated" every material and social aspect of her royal birth, including "her ancestral cities," "her royal inheritance," "her family treasures," and "the expectation that her sons would be kings."<sup>57</sup> Goscelin relates another instance in which the chest containing Eadgyth's clothes was almost destroyed by a careless sister of Wilton Abbey, who dropped a candle into the open chest and left the room. The inside of the chest and the room in which it was kept were set aflame, but miraculously the clothing inside survived, "unharmd by all the burning."<sup>58</sup> Before she had learned that the clothes were safe, Eadgyth, "with her mind firmly grounded in Christ, laughed at her losses, and showed by her cheerful countenance how much the show and wealth of the world meant to her."<sup>59</sup> Eadgyth's apparent indifference to the loss of her rich wardrobe suggests that she had severed all material connections with the secular world of her birth.

At first glance, these saintly women appear to be rejecting the material trappings of royalty in favor of an ascetic and pious existence. However, these same women also exhibited a connection and possible fascination with the very worldly objects which they purportedly rejected. As discussed in Chapter One, Æthelthryth attributed the tumor from which she suffered later in life to her tendency to wear fine jewelry as a young girl,

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<sup>57</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

indicating that despite her apparent holiness as a child, she was still accustomed to dressing ornately. Furthermore, the *Liber Eliensis* states, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, that upon Æthelthryth's second marriage to King Ecgfrith, "it was more on account of her rank rather than as a result of luxury and pride ... that fine linen and *purpura* were pleasing to her."<sup>60</sup> Therefore, although she longed to dissolve her marriage and devote her life to Christ and the Church, Æthelthryth did not shy away from dressing as befitted her royal status. That Eadgyth even possessed clothing as rich as is described by Goscelin in the incident with the fire, including garments "made of skin or of purple,"<sup>61</sup> shows that she remained unduly attached to fine objects even after her consecration to the religious life. Eadgyth also regularly wore fine clothing while going about her daily tasks within the cloister. William of Malmesbury relates an instance in which Eadgyth "disturbed men's judgment ... by an array of apparel rich in gold thread, and would go about more elegantly clothed than her sacred profession called for."<sup>62</sup> Eadgyth was apparently "told off for this in public by Bishop Æthelwold, but ... replied wittily and to the point," arguing that the humility of her heart could not be accurately measured by her outer appearance.<sup>63</sup>

As already discussed in Chapter One, elaborate dress and ornamentation was a hallmark of royal and aristocratic status in the early Middle Ages, and was an integral part of the social identity of young elite men and women. Barbara Yorke even suggests that fine jewelry and clothing may have served as "a statement of authority" for women

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<sup>60</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 297.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 297-9.



in charge of monastic communities.<sup>64</sup> Even the statements of medieval authors concerning the holiest of the Anglo-Saxon saints show that the tendency for young women to continue in the royal practices of their youth was not generally impeded by their entry into religious life. The fact that Bede and Goscelin felt the need to state that these saints rejected their worldly status indicates that it may have been a significant trend for monastic women to continue to wear fine clothing and jewelry, and thus that the rejection of these things was considered remarkable and noteworthy. Bede even cites an instance in which Æbbe, the pious abbess of Coldingham, was warned by an Irish monk of the community named Adamnan that the female members of her community occupied their free time “weaving fine clothes, which they employ to the peril of their calling, either to adorn themselves like brides or to attract attention from strange men.”<sup>65</sup> The continued presence of luxurious clothing and adornments in monasteries therefore appears to have been a recurring problem throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

The actions of royal Anglo-Saxon saints as depicted in medieval texts regarding their choice of clothing are by no means consistent. This suggests that the authors of these works were grappling with the problem of how to highlight the royal status of these women while at the same time praising their humility and sanctity. It also suggests that, whatever the statements of medieval chroniclers and hagiographers, there was in fact a tendency for royal women monastics to hold on to their royal clothing and material culture. The inconsistent reactions of individual women towards rich apparel shows that this problem was never fully resolved, and that medieval authors were never able to completely reconcile a woman’s royal status with her religion, illustrating the

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<sup>64</sup> Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses*, 148.

<sup>65</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 253.

fundamental tension between secular and spiritual life for the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings.

For Anglo-Saxon royal daughters, long-standing familial and kinship ties were too strong to be broken by their entry into monastic life. Kinship ties were integral to the functioning of Anglo-Saxon society, and the experiences of religious royal women during this period indicate that these ties were never fully severed. Just as royal daughters maintained connections with their birth family after marriage, these same kinship ties even transcended their commitment to God. This means that even those women whose lives were devoted to religion remained firmly entrenched within secular, and often politically charged, relationships.

In addition to maintaining a connection with the material culture of the secular world into which they were born, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters who entered the church often maintained strong connections with their birth families, whether these connections were physical, in that they entailed in-person contact with members of their families, or simply psychological. The leaving of monasteries to female relatives serves as one example of how kinship ties trumped religious vows during the Anglo-Saxon period. According to the *Liber Eliensis*, the succession to the monasteries of Ely and Sheppey were largely hereditary, and passed from mother to daughter for three generations. When Seaxburh left the monastery of Sheppey to move to her sister's monastery of Ely, she left her daughter Eormenhild in charge.<sup>66</sup> When Eormenhild herself renounced the position of authority which she held at Sheppey, she installed her own daughter Wærburh as abbess in her place.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Æthelthryth, her older sister Seaxburh, Seaxburh's daughter

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<sup>66</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 47.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

Eormenhild, and Eormenhild's daughter Wærburh all served as successive abbesses of Ely.<sup>68</sup>

The connections which the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings maintained with their birth families meant that they also maintained a vested interest in the outcome of secular events. The most significant case of a royal nun who fostered a strong interest in secular politics is that of Ælfflæd, the daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria and his wife Eanflæd. After being consecrated to the monastery of Hartlepool by her father shortly after her birth, Ælfflæd was eventually transferred to the monastery of Whitby, and ruled there as abbess until her death at age fifty-nine in 714.<sup>69</sup> Bede's depiction of Ælfflæd in his *Life of Cuthbert* is one of the more controversial depictions of Anglo-Saxon women by a contemporary author. Cuthbert's encounters with Ælfflæd dominate three chapters (23, 24, and 34) of Bede's prose *Life*. In each, Ælfflæd is revealed to be a dynamic personality with significant interest and influence in both the secular and spiritual realms. According to Bede, Ælfflæd "had a deep affection for Cuthbert," and maintained a close personal relationship with the saint during her later adult life.<sup>70</sup> When Ælfflæd was ill from a mysterious illness and was suffering from paralysis, she thought of her friend Cuthbert, and wished that she had an object belonging to him by which she might be healed. Miraculously, after making this wish, "someone arrived with a linen cincture sent by Cuthbert," and Ælfflæd "girded herself with it and next morning was able to stand up straight. Two days later she was completely well."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>69</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 184.

<sup>70</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, in *The Age of Bede*, ed. D.H. Farmer, trans. J.F. Webb (London: Penguin, 2004), 74.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 75.

According to Bede, Ælfflæd expressed her continued interest in secular politics in one of her meetings with Cuthbert. Cuthbert apparently returned the affection which Ælfflæd held for him, because he readily and without question answered her summons “to come and talk over some important matter.”<sup>72</sup> After Ælfflæd and Cuthbert had had a lengthy discussion, Ælfflæd demanded that Cuthbert use his skills of prophecy to “tell her how long her brother Ecgrith would last and who was to rule after him.”<sup>73</sup> Ecgrith was Oswiu’s son and successor as king of Northumbria, and was Ælfflæd’s full brother by their mother Eanflæd.<sup>74</sup> According to Bede, Cuthbert was taken aback by Ælfflæd’s request and was reluctant to tell her what she wanted to know, although he did imply that Ecgrith’s death was imminent. Ælfflæd “wept at such dire prophecies, then wiped her face and with true feminine audacity adjured him by the Divine Majesty to say who would be her brother’s heir, since he had neither children nor brothers.”<sup>75</sup> Cuthbert was still reluctant to reveal what he knew, but stated that “one will come whom you will embrace with as much sisterly affection as though he were Ecgrith’s own self.”<sup>76</sup> When Ælfflæd demanded to know where this mysterious successor was, Cuthbert hinted that he would come from one of the islands near Britain, after which Ælfflæd “realized he was hinting at Aldfrith, the supposed son of Ecgrith’s father, who was away in Ireland being educated.”<sup>77</sup> D.P. Kirby has suggested that Ælfflæd knew very well that her illegitimate half-brother Aldfrith had a strong claim to the succession and that she fully supported his claim because he could continue the bloodline of her father Oswiu. Therefore, by asking

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>74</sup> D.P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.

<sup>75</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Cuthbert about Ecgrith's successor, she was in fact "testing Cuthbert to ascertain that his loyalties lay in the right place."<sup>78</sup> This would suggest an even stronger interest in politics than is apparent in Bede's account.

There is another story of the interaction between Ælfflæd and Cuthbert which presents a particularly unflattering portrait of her. According to Bede, Cuthbert was making a final round of visits to his parishioners before his retirement from his episcopal office when Ælfflæd "asked him to come to see her at one of the estates belonging to her monastery in order to converse with her and consecrate a church."<sup>79</sup> Bede wrote that when Cuthbert was having a vision at dinner of a holy soul being taken into heaven, Ælfflæd asked him what he had seen. When Cuthbert tried to resist, she "pestered him into telling."<sup>80</sup> Later, when she learned of the death of the man whose soul Cuthbert saw in the vision, she, "woman-like, acted as though stupefied" and announced the death "as if it were fresh news."<sup>81</sup> According to Stephanie Hollis, Bede's description of Ælfflæd is characterized by "considerable hostility," and presents her as a negative female stereotype.<sup>82</sup> However, it is possible that some of Bede's animosity could be explained by his disapproval of Ælfflæd's strong interest in secular affairs, a characteristic which he condemned in most individuals. Hollis further argues that Bede distorts Ælfflæd and Cuthbert's friendship into a "hierarchical relation in which Cuthbert's over-riding superiority is everywhere apparent."<sup>83</sup> But despite what appear to be critical and rather misogynistic comments from Bede, it is clear from the above passages that Cuthbert

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<sup>78</sup> D.P. Kirby, *Earliest English Kings*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, 87.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>82</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 179.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

deferred to Ælfflæd in some way; he always answered Ælfflæd's summons and usually provided her with the information she desired. As a bishop, Cuthbert should outrank Ælfflæd, yet he readily obeys her request to consecrate the church at Whitby. Whether his deferral is a result of her holiness, her rank within the Church as abbess, or her royal status is unclear. While a great deal of Bede's depiction of Ælfflæd is inconsistent and often critical, he does assert that she was loved and favored by the saintly Cuthbert, which suggests that she possessed a great deal of status and influence throughout the religious community.

Eadgyth, the daughter of Edgar, was similarly interested in the succession of her father's kingdom and the fortunes of the royal family into which she was born. Eadgyth grieved at the death of her father Edgar, both out of "filial piety" and in mourning for the "common parent of the fatherland," indicating that she was concerned about what would happen to the kingdom and its people now that her father was gone.<sup>84</sup> Eadgyth's brother Edward then succeeded his father on the throne. According to Goscelin, Eadgyth "dreamed that her right eye fell out," which she interpreted to be a sign of Edward's imminent misfortune.<sup>85</sup> Eadgyth was proved right when Edward was subsequently assassinated by his step-mother Ælfthryth, the mother of Æthelred the Unready.<sup>86</sup> Eadgyth's subsequent mourning over her brother's death indicates both a strong connection to her birth family and the transcendence of sibling relationships over spiritual vows, as well as her obvious support of Edward in the succession crisis following Edgar's death.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 49.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 107-8.

### **Humility, Holiness, and Power**

The tensions inherent in royal daughters' participation in the religious life as it relates to material culture and secular politics also existed in the outward behavior and inner psychology of these women. In both contemporary and non-contemporary sources, the royal status of the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings is explicitly linked to piety and sanctity, either in the sense of contributing to it or being replaced by it. The relationship between royal birth and sanctity in medieval hagiography was therefore highly complex and often inconsistent.<sup>88</sup> The holiness of royal women saints was often presented as being compounded by their royal status. In his description of Abbess Ælflæd in the *Life of Cuthbert*, Bede states that she looked after her nuns remarkably well, "adding to her royal rank the yet more noble adornment of a high degree of holiness."<sup>89</sup> Similarly, the *Liber Eliensis* says of Æthelthryth that, "being nobly exalted by her lineage, she adorned the nobility of her mind by the glory of sanctity."<sup>90</sup> Royal status thus served as a pretext for right behavior, and this elite social status was only increased by the addition of extreme piety and holiness.

However, there are also numerous instances in which a royal daughter's rejection of her royal status and the perhaps arrogant behavior that accompanied it served as an amplification of her sanctity. When Æthelthryth took religious vows, she who had hitherto "been mistress over a kingdom" suddenly "became a maid-servant of the

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<sup>88</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the complexities of this relationship, see Ridyard, *Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, 82-92.

<sup>89</sup> Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, 74.

<sup>90</sup> *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely*, 16.

handmaidens of Christ, taking upon herself the lowest of servile duties.”<sup>91</sup> Eormenhild, the daughter of Æthelthryth’s sister Seaxburh, took religious vows under her mother’s authority, “spurning the exalted standing of her royal rank.”<sup>92</sup> Edward the Elder’s daughter Eadburh “was not at the mercy of her own high birth, for she thought nobility lay in abasement in the service of Christ,” and expressed her humility by regularly engaging in the lowly chore of washing the socks of the other sisters.<sup>93</sup> In his description of Eadgyth, William of Malmesbury similarly states that “her noble character suppressed the pride that her high birth might have inspired.”<sup>94</sup> The fact that royal women in the Church were especially celebrated for non-royal behavior indicates that the pulling of secular rank and the taking advantage of socially inferior sisters may frequently have occurred in monastic life. This reflects the conflict which these women would have experienced between their inner knowledge of their own high birth and social status, and the outward behavior by which they sought to consciously downplay that status and prove their humility and sanctity.

One mark of the holiness of these royal female saints was their association with miracles. Bede depicted many holy women who were capable of performing or at least of being the intermediaries of miracles, and the most prominent among these were the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings who became nuns and abbesses. Bede wrote that “to this day the people of the district tell stories of the wonderful deeds and miracles of the nun Earcongota,” the daughter of King Earconberht of Kent, including the sight of her being carried up to heaven by a throng of angels and the strong scent of perfume around her

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>93</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 275.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 297.



tomb.<sup>95</sup> Æthelthryth was provided with a miraculously well-fitting marble coffin upon her death and her associative relics cured eye problems and drove out demons.<sup>96</sup> According to William of Malmesbury, the virgin Wærburh was able to communicate with a flock of geese and even restored one of them back to life after it had been eaten by her bailiff.<sup>97</sup> These miracles indicate that these women were viewed as holding great spiritual power, and that this power was amplified by, and in some cases contingent upon, their royal status.

Æthelthryth's sanctity was above all manifested in her virginity, which was all the more remarkable because of her entry into the secular tradition of royal marriage, one of the major components of which was the bearing of children and the formation of political alliances. Bede wrote that Æthelthryth married King Ecgfrith of Northumbria, and "although she lived with him for twelve years, she preserved the glory of perpetual virginity."<sup>98</sup> Bede dismissed any skepticism regarding Æthelthryth's remarkable steadfastness in preserving her virginity, stating that "there is no reason to doubt that such a thing could happen in our own day," and asserted that the miraculous incorruption of Æthelthryth's body when it was exhumed from her tomb served as indisputable proof of her purity.<sup>99</sup> Bede's insistence that Æthelthryth's virginity was entirely possible and should be believed indicates that the idea of a married woman remaining a virgin was doubtful even in his own time. Royal daughters who maintained their virginity disrupted traditional gender roles for Anglo-Saxon women because they refused to comply with the

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<sup>95</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 156.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-8.

<sup>97</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, 469.

<sup>98</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 236.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

queen's traditional role in continuing the royal line.<sup>100</sup> Thus, in addition to the spiritual power conferred upon them by their commitment to virginity, royal daughters were also able to exercise power over their own bodies by entering the religious life.

In addition to exercising spiritual power through their holiness and ability to perform miracles, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters exercised great administrative power as the abbesses of monastic institutions. During the Anglo-Saxon period, women were perhaps able to exercise the most power in the spiritual sphere, and abbesses were often the most powerful women of their day. The great majority of the most prominent abbesses in the Anglo-Saxon period were the daughters of kings. These abbesses built churches and monasteries and were often solely responsible for determining the locations of these institutions. According to Bede, Æthelthryth personally founded the monastery of Ely and chose to build it in East Anglia "because ... her forbears came from the province of the East Angles."<sup>101</sup> Æthelthryth's choice of East Anglia as the location for her new monastery suggests that she maintained substantial ties with her birthplace even after her entry into religious life. Goscelin also relates that Eadgyth commissioned a new church to be built at Wilton, and that she personally oversaw its construction and decoration.<sup>102</sup> Abbesses could also exercise power through the control of monastic lands. As discussed above, many monasteries were endowed with substantial estates, and the women in charge of these institutions often had direct control over them.<sup>103</sup>

While these women frequently held both real and spiritual power as abbesses, they were also able to wield significant power in the secular sphere. Some royal

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<sup>100</sup> Ridyard, *Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, 82-3.

<sup>101</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 239.

<sup>102</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 53.

<sup>103</sup> Foot, *Veiled Women*, 42.

daughters who entered the religious life were able to exert influence on the outcome of secular events. According to Stephen of Ripon's *Life of Wilfrid*, Ælfflæd played a major part in the succession of her half-brother Aldfrith and in the reconciliation of the Northumbrian royal house with Bishop Wilfrid. According to Stephen, Wilfrid had been appointed as archbishop of Northumbria shortly after the Synod of Whitby in 664, but was deprived of his authority twice: first by King Oswiu in 666, and then by Oswiu's son Ecgrith in 678, supposedly at the instigation of Ecgrith's second wife Iurminburh (although Wilfrid's multiple run-ins with both ecclesiastical and royal authority suggests that his confrontational personality may have been more to blame). Stephen writes that Ecgrith and Iurminburh even induced Archbishop Theodore to betray Wilfrid and appoint new bishops in his place.<sup>104</sup> Following Ecgrith's death and his brother Aldfrith's accession in 685, Theodore had a change of heart and "strove to make friends of all Wilfrid's former enemies."<sup>105</sup> In addition to writing to Aldfrith and asking him "to be reconciled to Wilfrid by peace treaty," Theodore "wrote to the holy virgin, Abbess Aelfflaed, urging her to have no hesitation in ... making friends with Wilfrid."<sup>106</sup> Although an abbess, and thus ostensibly a committed member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Ælfflæd apparently sided with her brother the king in a dispute that involved Church politics, suggesting that her familial bonds were stronger than her loyalty to the English Church. Furthermore, her influence was weighty enough to have a real effect on Wilfrid's situation, and Theodore perhaps expected Ælfflæd to use her royal connections to persuade her brother to reconcile with Wilfrid.

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<sup>104</sup> Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, in *The Age of Bede*, 132.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the temporary truce established by Theodore's efforts, Wilfrid quarreled with King Aldfrith, who banished Wilfrid from the kingdom in 691.<sup>107</sup> Apparently, Aldfrith later repented, for upon his death in 705, he expressed his desire to be reconciled with Wilfrid and entreated his own successor, "whoever he may be," to reinstate him.<sup>108</sup> Stephen notes that this information was provided to him "by trustworthy witnesses, among whom were Abbess Aelfflaed, herself a king's daughter, and Abbess Aethilburg."<sup>109</sup> Thus, Ælfflæd was considered to be a trustworthy person to relate the dying wishes of her brother, and her unimpeachable moral character, as well as her royal status and familial relationship with Aldfrith, enhanced her value as a witness.

Following Aldfrith's death, a usurper named Eadwulf briefly took the throne, but was successfully replaced with Aldfrith's young son Osred, probably with Ælfflæd's assistance.<sup>110</sup> In 706, a year into Osred's reign, Berhtwald, Archbishop of Canterbury, arranged to have Wilfrid's request to be reinstated to his bishopric of York heard at the Synod of Nidd. According to Stephen, the boy Osred and "all the bishops, abbots, and chief men of rank in the kingdom" were present at this council, and "Abbess Aelfflaed, the best of advisers and a constant source of strength to the whole province, was with them."<sup>111</sup> The attendance and influence of abbesses at church councils was not unprecedented.<sup>112</sup> Abbess Hild had similarly attended the Synod of Whitby in 664, and played an important role as the head of the Irish camp in the controversy surrounding the calculation of Easter. Ælfflæd was therefore able to play a prominent role in determining

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 80.

<sup>111</sup> Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, 174.

<sup>112</sup> Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 180.

Wilfrid's fate. When told that they must either reinstate Wilfrid or present their case before the Pope in Rome, the bishops stated their intention of abiding by the previous rulings of Theodore, Ecgfrith, and Aldfrith concerning Wilfrid's status. However, their minds were changed when "the holy Abbess Aelfflaed rose and spoke ... inspired words," stating that upon his deathbed, her brother Aldfrith had vowed to reinstate Wilfrid and requested his followers to "bid my son and heir, for the good of my soul, do the same."<sup>113</sup> The fact that, in Stephen's narrative, Aldfrith himself was vague about who his successor would be while Ælfflæd argued that he specifically named his son as his heir supports the fact that she was instrumental in ensuring Osred's succession.<sup>114</sup> During the debate over whether to reinstate Wilfrid as archbishop, Berhtwald, the Archbishop of Canterbury, provided the assembled bishops with his advice, while "Abbess Aelfflaed gave them hers," indicating that Ælfflæd's advice was given equal weight to that of the highest-ranking bishop in England.<sup>115</sup> The Synod of Nidd "ended with the decision ... to make an unconditional peace pact with Wilfrid," who was given his former monasteries of Ripon and Hexham.<sup>116</sup>

Ælfflæd's involvement in the Wilfrid situation indicates that she possessed some interest and influence in questions of episcopal appointments, matters that ostensibly should have been settled between bishops and kings. Although decided at the intersection between secular and spiritual authority, the appointment and investment of bishops was unequivocally associated with masculine power. However, Ælfflæd's involvement indicates that women could participate in these struggles as well. It was perhaps her

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<sup>113</sup> Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, 175.

<sup>114</sup> Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church*, 182.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen of Ripon, *Life of Wilfrid*, 176.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

status as a king's daughter, and as the current king's sister, rather than her rank as an abbess, that made this possible.

The sustained communication and influence which these women held within the secular world serves to underscore the status which they held as kings' daughters. This high social status, and the relationships which they maintained with their birth families, did not in any way change when they entered religious life. Although the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings played an invaluable role in the spiritual success of their respective families by serving as a crucial link between those families and the Church, their influence is perhaps even more remarkable in the various ways in which they crossed the boundary between religious and secular life. The connection between secular and religious power in Anglo-Saxon England was deeply intertwined, and the influence that royal daughters exerted on secular politics indicates that they served as an essential bridge between the two spheres.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Property and Politics**

While Anglo-Saxon royal daughters are highly visible as essential agents of dynastic alliance through marriage and as prominent figures in the English Church, their roles within the political sphere of Anglo-Saxon England may be less apparent. As evidenced by contemporary wills and charters, these royal daughters were able to inherit property from their fathers and brothers and hold that property independently of their current or prospective husbands. In addition, these women appear regularly in the charters of their fathers and brothers as witnesses to royal grants, indicating that they played an important role in political administration, which has generally been seen as the preserve of royal and aristocratic men. Furthermore, although succession by a king's daughter was highly unusual, there is evidence that a select few of these royal daughters may have been seen as viable political candidates to inherit the throne upon their father's death. The question of whether Anglo-Saxon women could rule over kingdoms by virtue of their status as royal daughters presents the most tantalizing possibilities, as well as the most significant limitations, to the potential roles of royal women in Anglo-Saxon society. At the same time, the active involvement of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters in property transactions and administration suggests that their royal status enabled them to participate in the traditionally masculine world of high politics.

### **Property and Inheritance**

Royal daughters, like women at other levels of Anglo-Saxon society, were able to freely inherit land from their relatives. Documents from the period indicate that Anglo-

Saxon princesses were able to inherit land and wealth from their fathers, brothers, and mothers. Perhaps the most prominent example of royal daughters as receivers of property can be found in the will of King Alfred the Great. In the 870s or 880s, Alfred drew up a detailed will in which he provided for his wife, children, and kinsmen. Alfred's will first mentioned the land which he wished to be divided between his sons. Edward the Elder received fifteen substantial estates widely distributed throughout Wessex, while his younger brother Æthelweard received seventeen estates concentrated in modern-day Devonshire.<sup>1</sup> Edward and Æthelweard also received five hundred pounds each.<sup>2</sup> Alfred also granted property to his three daughters. The eldest, Æthelflæd, received one estate in Hampshire, Æthelgifu received two estates in Hampshire, and the youngest daughter Ælfthryth received three estates, one on the Isle of Wight and two in Wiltshire.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Alfred bequeathed to his queen Ealhswith three parcels of land: "the estate at Lambourn, at Wantage, and at Edington."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, each of Alfred's daughters and his wife received one hundred pounds.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, Alfred's sons received significantly more land and money than his daughters or his wife. But we should not assume that this was necessarily because Alfred valued his sons more highly or that he did not care about providing for his female dependents. If the will can be dated to the 880s, which is likely,<sup>6</sup> Æthelflæd may already have been married to Æthelred, the ealdorman of Mercia. Alfred would therefore have had a reasonable expectation that Æthelflæd would receive substantial wealth and

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<sup>1</sup> Will of King Alfred, in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-7 (see notes 58-65 on p. 321 for the locations of Alfred's daughters' estates).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.



property from her husband upon his death. Again, if we can assume a later date for the will, Alfred's middle daughter, Æthelgifu, may have already been appointed by her father as Abbess of Shaftesbury, which he had built and to which he had already granted "estates of land and every kind of wealth."<sup>7</sup> The youngest daughter, Ælfthryth, was not yet married, but her later marriage to Baldwin II of Flanders suggests that Alfred may already have had plans to marry her to a high-ranking nobleman. Once married, Ælfthryth would become the beneficiary of her husband. Therefore, rather than indicating a lack of interest in the well-being of his daughters, Alfred's granting of more property to his sons than to his daughters may have been an attempt to ensure that all of his children received a relatively equal portion of land in the long run.

The three estates which Alfred's wife Ealhswith received were also not as insignificant as they at first appear. Lambourn was probably a "substantial royal estate," and may even "once have been earmarked for the support of royal women."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the sites of Wantage and Edington were extremely important places in Alfred's life story.<sup>9</sup> Alfred's biographer Asser wrote that in 849, "Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, was born at the royal estate called Wantage,"<sup>10</sup> and Edington was the site of the famous battle at which Alfred "destroyed the Vikings" in 878.<sup>11</sup> Alfred's grants to his wife and queen of personally significant pieces of land associated with his birth and his greatest victory could possibly have been a marked display of favor. We can also probably assume that Ealhswith already possessed her own property, possibly given to

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<sup>7</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 323, n.88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 89-90.

<sup>10</sup> Asser, *Life of King Alfred*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

her by her father, mother, or siblings. Asser wrote that Ealhswith was “of noble family.”<sup>12</sup> Her father was “ealdorman of the *Gaini*” in Mercia, and her mother Eadburh was descended “from the royal stock of the king of the Mercians.”<sup>13</sup> Ealhswith’s lineage gives every indication that her family owned significant property, some of which may already have been granted to Ealhswith or even her daughters. She may even have possessed a morning-gift, land which Alfred had already given to her and which she owned outright.

Furthermore, while Alfred’s daughters and his wife Ealhswith were only mentioned after his two sons, they were given precedence over his ealdormen and kinsmen. And while the amount of money they received from Alfred was significantly less than that received by his sons, it was still an enormous amount, and was about eight times the amount given to his other kinsmen. Undoubtedly, Alfred favored his sons to some degree. But the inequity between the land given to Alfred’s sons and daughters is not as significant as it first appears when we take into account the additional sources besides fathers by which Anglo-Saxon women received property. Additionally, the fact that Alfred’s wife and daughters were given prominence over his lesser male kinsmen indicates that they were generally valued as part of a close-knit family group, rather than simply dismissed on account of their sex.

King Alfred did not seem to feel any reluctance about the practice of leaving property to one’s daughters and female kin. Alfred’s will stated that his “grandfather had bequeathed his land on the spear side and not on the spindle side,”<sup>14</sup> meaning that his property had gone to his male rather than his female relatives. Alfred, on the other hand,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Will of King Alfred, in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 178.

chose to leave his property to both his male and female heirs, even going so far as to state that if his kinsmen desired any property which he has “given to any one on the female side,” then “they are to pay for it, because they are receiving my property, which I may give on the female side as well as on the male side, whichever I please.”<sup>15</sup> Alfred therefore showed concern about providing for his female dependents and was completely unapologetic about doing so.

King Æthelstan (r. 924-939), son of Edward the Elder and grandson of Alfred, similarly granted land to his female relations, in this case to his younger sister Eadburh, in a charter dating from 939.<sup>16</sup> As we have already discussed in previous chapters, Æthelstan was expected to provide for a large number of his sisters, a task which he apparently carried out ably. According to William of Malmesbury, Æthelstan was responsible for finding husbands for his younger sisters, as well as ensuring that those who did not marry found a respectable place within a monastery. This responsibility may well have extended to distributing land among his siblings. In 939, Eadburh was granted seventeen hides of land at Droxford by her brother, “pro germanitatis nostrae conglutinata propinquitate” (“on account of the firm bond of our relationship”).<sup>17</sup> This grant stipulated that Eadburh was able to leave this land to any heir of her own choosing after her death.<sup>18</sup> The legitimacy of the charter was also reinforced by the witness signatures of two of Æthelstan and Eadburh’s brothers, Eadmund and Eadred,<sup>19</sup> indicating that royal daughters were viewed as important recipients of land among Anglo-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, no. 446. Henceforward, all charters will be referred to in parentheses by their Sawyer numbers, indicated by S followed by the number.

<sup>17</sup> John Mitchell Kemble, ed., *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, 6 vols. (London: Sumptibus Societatis, 1839; repr., Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2009), 5:241-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 243.

Saxon royal families. Furthermore, according to William of Malmesbury, Eadburh had shown signs of her tendency toward the religious life as a very young child, and eventually entered the monastery of Winchester. Therefore, she had probably already taken monastic vows by the time this grant was made, and the fact that the land was granted specifically to her rather than her religious community indicates that Anglo-Saxon princesses were able to independently control royal lands even after their entry into monastic life.

Unmarried royal daughters who had not taken monastic vows could also benefit from their parents' involvement in land transactions. Ælfwynn, the only child of Æthelred, ealdorman of Mercia, and his wife Æthelflæd, the oldest daughter of King Alfred, was included as a beneficiary in a lease made to her parents. In 904, Wærferth, Bishop of Worcester, granted a lease to Æthelred and Æthelflæd (S1280), which stated that they were to have the use of a messuage at Worcester, as well as "meadow-land west of the Severn" and a substantial amount of land at Barbourne, "uncontested by anyone as long as they live."<sup>20</sup> However, Wærferth's lease did not apply to Æthelred and Æthelflæd alone. The document goes on to state that "if Ælfwyn survives them, it [the land] shall similarly remain uncontested as long as she lives," and will then be returned to the community of Worcester after her death.<sup>21</sup>

Although Æthelred was arguably only a thegn subject to his overlord Alfred and his son and successor Edward the Elder, he in fact held substantial and undisputed power as ealdorman, and essentially ruled over the former kingdom of Mercia.<sup>22</sup> We can

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<sup>20</sup> Lease of Lands by Werfrith, Bishop of Worcester, to Æthelred and Æthelflæd, in Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Maggie Bailey, "Ælfwynn, Second Lady of the Mercians," in Higham and Hill, *Edward the Elder*, 113.

therefore categorize Ælfwynn as a king's daughter. Maggie Bailey argues that Ælfwynn would still have been quite young when this document was drawn up and was possibly about sixteen years old.<sup>23</sup> Ælfwynn's appearance as a beneficiary in this document while still a young and unmarried woman shows that she was able to participate in the property transactions of her parents without the need for a husband as intermediary, and her ability to hold the lease after her parents' deaths indicates that she could continue to hold the status which she possessed as Ealdorman Æthelred's daughter even without their protection. This status ensured that Ælfwynn "was involved in arrangements made at the highest levels" of Mercian political administration.<sup>24</sup>

### **Charter-Witnessing**

The documents created by Anglo-Saxon kings were a crucial part of the state administrative apparatus. Royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England played an integral role in political administration by witnessing the charters of their fathers and brothers. Cyneburh and Cyneswith, both daughters of King Penda of Mercia, witnessed a supposed charter of their brother Wulfhere after he succeeded his brother Peada as king of Mercia in 656. In 664, Wulfhere granted substantial landholdings to the church of St. Peter at Peterborough (S68), a transaction which was also recorded in the Peterborough manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Although generally considered to be a forgery, Wulfhere's supposed grant indicates that Cyneburh and Cyneswith may have played an important part in the creation and legitimation of documents at the Mercian court. After setting out the lands and privileges which were to be given to Peterborough, Wulfhere

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

entreated his siblings to lend their signatures to his grant as an assurance that the entire family would benefit from his patronage of the Church: “tu quoque mi frater Aethelred, et uos sorores piissimae Kyneburga et Kyneswiða, pro mutua animarum nostrarum redemptione, huic testamento nostro testes optimi ut primus condigniores subscribite” (“You also, my brother Æthelred, and you, most devout sisters Cyneburh and Cyneswith, sign this our charter, best and most worthy witnesses, as I have done first, for the mutual redemption of our souls”).<sup>25</sup> Consequently, both Cyneburh and Cyneswith appear in the charter’s witness register. Both are referred to as “soror regis,” and are listed in positions of relative prominence: their names appear after those of Wulfhere, his fellow kings Oswiu, Sigehere, and Sebbe, and their brother Æthelred, but above those of the bishops, priests, and lesser princes.<sup>26</sup>

Although this charter was most likely a forgery, the fact that Cyneburh’s and Cyneswith’s signatures were added with the intention to make the document appear authentic suggests that the witnessing of royal charters by the daughters and sisters of kings was a regular practice. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Wulfhere “wished to honour and reverence” the monastery of Peterborough “according to the advice of his brothers Æthelred and Merewala, and according to the advice of his sisters Cyneburh and Cyneswith.”<sup>27</sup> The *Chronicle* goes on to state that Wulfhere, Æthelred, Cyneburh, and Cyneswith were present at the consecration of the church of St. Peter.<sup>28</sup> Cyneburh and Cyneswith are thus presented as equal participants alongside their brothers in Wulfhere’s patronage of Peterborough, which further suggests that the appearance of their signatures

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<sup>25</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, 5:11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

in the witness list of Wulfhere's charter would not have been unusual. The possibility that Cyneburh and Cyneswith were deeply involved in both the creation of their brothers' administrative documents and the establishment of their legitimacy shows that a king's daughters were given a potentially equally prominent role as their brothers in political administration. Their prominence in the charter also indicates that these women may have held an equal interest in and influence over the actions of their brothers when they became kings.

The daughters of King Offa of Mercia also regularly witnessed their father's documents. In 770, Offa's daughter Ælflæd witnessed a charter made with her father's approval (S59), and this document is, according to Dorothy Whitelock, "undoubtedly genuine."<sup>29</sup> In 770, Uhtred, "sub-king of the Hwicce," granted five hides of land to "my faithful thegn, namely Æthelmund, son of Ingild, who was ealdorman and 'prefect' of Æthelbald, king of the Mercians."<sup>30</sup> The stipulations of this charter stated that Æthelmund was allowed to possess the land for the remainder of his life, then to leave it to two heirs of his own choosing; after both of these heirs had died, the land would be given to the church of Worcester "as alms for me and for us all."<sup>31</sup> Uhtred did this "with the advice and permission of Offa, king of the Mercians."<sup>32</sup> In the witness list, Offa confirmed that he "consented to this, my sub-king's donation," and "placed on it the sign of the Holy Cross."<sup>33</sup> Offa's statement of approval is followed by the names of a number of witnesses, including Mildred, bishop of the Hwicce, Uhtred himself, and his brother

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<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*, vol. 1, c. 500-1042, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), 502.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.

Ealdred. At the end of the document, Offa's family provided the final witness signatures: his queen Cynethryth added her signature, followed by their children Ecgfrith and Ælfflæd.<sup>34</sup>

As the ruler of the Hwicce, Uhtred would have been a thegn of Offa who ruled this sub-kingdom on his behalf, and his seeking of Offa's approval of the transaction set forth in this document would have shown deference to his overlord. In return, Offa's approval and signature would have lent legitimacy to the document and the grant which it described. That members of Offa's household, including his wife, son, and daughter, also signed indicates that they each played an equal part in further legitimizing the document. Furthermore, Ælfflæd witnessed this grant before her marriage to the king of Northumbria, which occurred in 792.<sup>35</sup> The fact that this charter was written in 770 shows that Ælfflæd was probably quite young when she witnessed it. This indicates that Ælfflæd held some status as an unmarried woman. Her marriage did not provide her with status and identity; rather, she possessed an identity from her birth which enabled her to participate in the creation of documents during her father's reign.

Three of Offa's four daughters may also have witnessed another of their father's charters. In 787, Offa supposedly issued a charter in which he confirmed the property rights of Abbot Ceolnoth and his community at Chertsey (S127). Offa granted these privileges to Ceolnoth on behalf of his entire family: "pro me et pro Cynedritha regina mea et pro Ecgfrido filio meo et filiabus meis Aethelburge abbatisae et Aethelflede et Eadburge et Aethelsuitha hoc priuilegium libertatis ... ego praefatus rex concedo et confirmo" ("I, the aforementioned king, grant and confirm ... this privilege of freedom,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 55.



for me and for my queen Cynethryth and for my son Ecgfrith and my daughters: Abbess Æthelburh and Ælfflæd and Eadburh and Æthelswith”).<sup>36</sup> The witness list in this charter is dominated by Offa’s family; following Offa himself is his wife “Cynedritha dei dono regina,” followed in turn by “Ecgfridus filius regis,” “Aethelburga abbatissa,” “Aelfleda uirgo,” and “Eadburga uirgo.”<sup>37</sup>

That both Eadburh and Ælfflæd were referred to as *virgo* shows that they were still unmarried when this charter was issued. This would seem to suggest that the witnessing of charters by royal daughters occurred when they were still living within the royal household. As members of the king’s household, daughters therefore served as valuable witnesses to documents and as essential participants in the king’s administration. However, Æthelburh’s witnessing of the charter when she was already an abbess indicates that daughters not living in the household could also be sought out to witness a document, especially if their status within the Church would augment the authority of the charter. Like the grant of Wulfhere mentioned above, the authenticity of this charter is doubtful. However, as long as the charter was a plausible fraud at the time, it can show that the inclusion of daughters as witnesses was a commonplace, and probably standard, practice. It was the regular practice in Anglo-Saxon England for a king’s son, such as Offa’s son Ecgfrith, to witness his father’s documents as preparation for his own kingship. The placement of Offa’s daughters’ signatures alongside that of his son indicates that this role was equally available to royal daughters.

Another king’s daughter who witnessed administrative documents was Cwenthryth, daughter of King Coenwulf of Mercia (r. 796-821). Coenwulf succeeded

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<sup>36</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, 1:182.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

Offa's son Ecgfrith upon his death in 796, but was descended from a different branch of the Mercian royal dynasty that traced its ancestry back to an obscure brother of Penda of Mercia.<sup>38</sup> In 811, Cwenthryth witnessed a charter (S165) in which Coenwulf granted to Bishop Beornmod three "aratra" (units of plowland) to the south of the city of Rochester.<sup>39</sup> Cwenthryth signed the charter as "filia regis," and her name appears as the fourteenth of sixteen signatures, after Archbishop Wulfred, numerous bishops, Sigereð, king of the East Saxons, Coenwulf's queen Ælfthryth, several ealdormen, and two of Coenwulf's kinsmen.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the rather insignificant position which she occupied in her father's 811 charter, Cwenthryth was referred to as Coenwulf's heir in a charter from 825 (S1436). The document outlines a complicated dispute over land between Cwenthryth and Archbishop Wulfred, who believed that he was owed land that had been wrongfully appropriated by Cwenthryth; this dispute was finally resolved at the Council of Clofesho in 825.<sup>41</sup> In this document, Cwenthryth is specifically described as both an abbess and a king's daughter and heir: "cwoenðryðam abb[a]t[issam] heredem coenwulfi" ("Abbess Cwenthryth, heir of Coenwulf"),<sup>42</sup> and again "illa abbatissa cwoenðryð filia coenwulfi heresq[ue] illius" ("Abbess Cwenthryth, daughter of Coenwulf and his heir").<sup>43</sup> This again shows that royal daughters were able to maintain their royal status independently of their ecclesiastical rank, and had the ability to hold and control land outside of their religious community's interest. The identities of the humble, motherly abbess and the

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, 118.

<sup>39</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, 1:248.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Alan Thacker, "Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia," *Midland History* 10 (1985): 10.

<sup>42</sup> Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, 1:281.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

royal daughter enmeshed in political and property interests were in fact compatible, rather than mutually exclusive.

### **Political Succession**

According to many historians of the Anglo-Saxon period, women were not entirely or explicitly excluded from actively participating in the political arena. Doris Stenton has asserted that “the Anglo-Saxons seem to have had no fixed objection to a woman’s government.”<sup>44</sup> Stacy Klein has similarly stated that Anglo-Saxon “women were not technically excluded from royal succession; nor was their fitness for rule ever disputed,” although this is qualified by the statement that “Anglo-Saxon queens were almost always queens consort,” and usually “became queens through marriage rather than inheritance.”<sup>45</sup> While Stenton and Klein are perhaps correct in arguing that women were not excluded from politics on the basis of their gender, there is very little historical evidence that royal daughters were ever allowed to succeed to their fathers’ kingdoms and hold onto legitimate political power for more than a brief period. The question of whether Anglo-Saxon women could potentially rule by virtue of their status as a king’s daughter therefore requires further investigation.

As discussed in Chapter One, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were often distinguished from their other siblings by the status of *primogenita*, or first-born. This showed that royal daughters could receive the same distinction as sons based on their birth order. However, their status as the first-born did not necessarily guarantee them the right to inherit their father’s kingdom. Although she was described as the first-born of her

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<sup>44</sup> Stenton, *English Woman in History*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Klein, *Ruling Women*, 10.

siblings, Anna's daughter Seaxburh did not succeed her father as ruler of East Anglia. Rather, she was married to King Earconberht of Kent and, after his death, entered the monastery of Ely under the authority of her younger sister Æthelthryth, while her father Anna was succeeded by his brother Æthelhere. Alfred's eldest child Æthelflæd was also not expected to succeed her father, despite Asser's assertion that she was the first-born. She was instead married to Æthelred, Ealdorman of Mercia, while Alfred was succeeded by her younger brother Edward the Elder.

One reason why these royal daughters were not able to inherit their fathers' kingdoms may have been that succession practices in Anglo-Saxon England were largely informal. Dorothy Whitelock has observed that, during the early Anglo-Saxon period, "any man who could trace his descent back to the founder of the royal dynasty considered that he had a claim to the throne."<sup>46</sup> Before the formalization of consecration rites for Anglo-Saxon kings, "the election of a king was frequently nothing more than the acknowledgement of the obvious successor," whether it be the king's son or a more distant kinsman.<sup>47</sup> Peter Hunter Blair has further asserted that "primogeniture played no part in the succession" in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, all male candidates within the closest levels of kinship to the previous king often stood a relatively equal chance of being elected as the next king. While royal succession practices in Anglo-Saxon England for the most part lacked formal procedure, the implication is that viable candidates for the throne were always exclusively male.

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<sup>46</sup> Whitelock, *Beginnings of English Society*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 198.

In contrast, royal succession practices following the Norman Conquest of England followed a different pattern in which “legitimacy of birth,” rather than gender, became the decisive factor in determining who inherited the throne.<sup>49</sup> Less than a century after the Conquest, a woman was able to formally inherit her father’s kingdom based on her status as a king’s daughter. Matilda, daughter of Henry I of England, who was himself the son of William the Conqueror, was her father’s only legitimate heir upon his death in 1135. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that Henry tried to ensure his daughter’s smooth succession several years earlier by compelling the ecclesiastical and secular officials to “swear England and Normandy after his day into the hand of his daughter.”<sup>50</sup> Although Matilda was forced to engage in a civil war with her cousin Stephen after her father’s death, and was never able to exercise full authority in England, she was undoubtedly her father’s recognized successor.

There are a few recorded instances of Anglo-Saxon women who, like Matilda, ruled for a brief period in their own right; however, these women were usually the widows of kings who succeeded their husbands. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that after the death of King Cenwealh of Wessex in 672, “Seaxburh, his queen, ruled one year after him.”<sup>51</sup> Although unable to rule as the successor of her father Alfred, Æthelflæd succeeded her husband Æthelred after his death in 911 and ruled as “Lady of the Mercians” until her own death in 918. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that, throughout the 910s, Æthelflæd exercised political power over the kingdom of Mercia by independently building a defensive network of strongholds to ward off the invading

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<sup>49</sup> Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 256.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Vikings. As ruler of Mercia, Æthelflæd also engaged in multiple military campaigns. In 916, Æthelflæd “sent an army into Wales and broke down Brecon Mere, and there took the wife of the king.”<sup>52</sup> Æthelflæd even made significant inroads into Viking-ruled territory in the north of England. The *Chronicle* reports that, shortly before her death in 918, “the York-folk had promised her ... that they would be at her disposition.”<sup>53</sup>

Æthelflæd’s actions during her rule as Lady of the Mercians were certainly extraordinary, and her ability to wield unquestioned political and military power has attracted attention from numerous historians. F.T. Wainwright has argued that the evidence from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* indicates that, following Æthelred’s death, and perhaps even before, Æthelflæd stepped into the role and title of ruler of Mercia with such ease and assurance that her succession must have been totally unopposed.<sup>54</sup> Wainwright further asserts that Æthelflæd’s remarkable exploits made her utterly essential to the success of her brother Edward the Elder’s military strategy against the Vikings.<sup>55</sup> Pauline Stafford has argued that Æthelflæd’s success may have depended in large part on a strong tradition of female power within the kingdom of Mercia which took root in the ninth century.<sup>56</sup> However, Stafford also states that Æthelflæd’s “multiple identities” as wife, daughter, and sister to effective and powerful kings may have played some part in her success as a political and military leader following the death of her husband.<sup>57</sup> While Æthelflæd’s remarkable career may ultimately have stemmed from her

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>54</sup> F.T. Wainwright, “Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990,) 46.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Pauline Stafford, “Political Women in Mercia, Eighth to Early Tenth Centuries,” in *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. Carol Ann Farr and Michelle Brown (London: Continuum, 2003), 42.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

marriage to Æthelred, it is intriguing to think that her previous position as a king's daughter, and especially the daughter of a king such as Alfred the Great, may have imbued her with a different, and more intrinsic, form of power that was entirely dependent on her status at birth.

Although there are no instances in which the daughter of an Anglo-Saxon king was able to succeed to her father's kingdom and effectively hold onto political authority, there are some possibilities that may fit into the model of a daughter succeeding her father on the throne. One of these was Cwenthryth, the daughter of Coenwulf of Mercia. William of Malmesbury relates a vivid tale of the martyrdom of Coenwulf's son Cynehelm, more popularly known as St. Kenelm, in which Cwenthryth played a nefarious part. According to William, Cynehelm was seven years old when his father "entrusted him to his sister Cwenthryth to be educated."<sup>58</sup> Cwenthryth, "wrongly expecting to get the kingdom for herself, handed over her little brother to the page who had brought him up, to be put out of the way."<sup>59</sup> This page supposedly took the boy out hunting, murdered him, and concealed his body. William's tale goes on to relate even more sensational details. The murder of Cynehelm was made known to the Pope in Rome when "a parchment carried by a dove fluttered down upon the altar of St Peter's with precise details of his death and burial-place."<sup>60</sup> Since the letter was written in English, it had to be translated to the Pope and the assembled crowd by a visiting Englishman; the Pope then wrote to the English kings informing them of the boy's murder.<sup>61</sup> When the child's body was brought to his sister Cwenthryth's residence at Winchcombe amidst

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<sup>58</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 391.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

cheering and chanting, “the murderess put her head out of the window of the chamber in which she was standing.”<sup>62</sup> After reciting a psalm backwards, “hoping by some nefarious trick to mar the singers’ rejoicing,” “the eyeballs of that witch were wrenched from their hollow sockets, and polluted with blood” the psalter from which she was reading.<sup>63</sup>

Alan Thacker, citing the eleventh-century *Passio* of St. Kenelm, from which William probably got most of his information, perhaps sums up this story most succinctly as one “which bristles with historical problems.”<sup>64</sup> According to Thacker, there is a complete lack of evidence that Cynehelm ruled at any point after his father, who was in fact succeeded by his own brother Ceolwulf, or even that his sister Cwenthryth “died in disgrace soon after her father.”<sup>65</sup> However, Thacker does state that Cynehelm probably existed and was the recognized heir of Coenwulf until his death, which probably occurred around 811.<sup>66</sup> Whether or not the circumstances surrounding Cynehelm’s death and his sister Cwenthryth’s involvement as related by William of Malmesbury are strictly historically accurate, the most important part of the story for our purposes is William’s assertion that Cwenthryth was apparently fully “expecting to get the kingdom for herself.”<sup>67</sup> Cwenthryth’s apparent confidence suggests that it was not impossible for the daughter of a king to succeed to her father’s kingdom and rule in her own right. William’s distance from the time of the supposed events does not necessarily indicate that he was wrong about Cwenthryth’s ambitions or the possibility that they might become a reality.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Thacker, “Kings, Saints, and Monasteries in Pre-Viking Mercia,” 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, 391.



One royal daughter whose royal succession appears to be more historically plausible is Ælfwynn, the daughter of Æthelred, Ealdorman of Mercia, and his wife Æthelflæd. Ælfwynn appears to have succeeded to the rule of the kingdom of Mercia following the death of her mother in 918. The only mention of Ælfwynn outside of charter evidence appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which reports that in 919, “the daughter of Æthelred, lord of the Mercians, was deprived of all control in Mercia, and was led into Wessex three weeks before Christmas; she was called Ælfwynn.”<sup>68</sup> This entry suggests that Ælfwynn in fact possessed legitimate political power in Mercia, albeit for a very short period. Maggie Bailey has even suggested that Ælfwynn’s involvement in her parents’ charter activity as a young woman shows that she “was being groomed as a candidate to rule Mercia during her twenties.”<sup>69</sup> Historians generally agree that Ælfwynn was deposed by her uncle Edward the Elder, who saw in the death of his sister Æthelflæd an opportunity to unite Wessex and Mercia under his own rule.<sup>70</sup> Bailey states that Ælfwynn was most likely placed in one of the royal monasteries in Wessex, where she passed the remainder of her days in relative obscurity.<sup>71</sup> Although she was ultimately unable to maintain authority in Mercia, Ælfwynn’s deposition indicates that she may have posed a legitimate political threat to Edward the Elder. Ælfwynn’s status as a single woman and her brief rule in Mercia suggest that, under certain circumstances, royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England were able to succeed to their fathers’ kingdoms without having to rely on the authority of a husband.

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<sup>68</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Bailey, “Ælfwynn, Second Lady of the Mercians,” 115.

<sup>70</sup> F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oxford History of England, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 330. See also Bailey, “Ælfwynn, Second Lady of the Mercians,” 117, and Wainwright, “Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians,” 53.

<sup>71</sup> Bailey, “Ælfwynn, Second Lady of the Mercians,” 125.

Eadgyth, the daughter of King Edgar, serves as another royal daughter whose potential for succession to her father's rule may illuminate the political roles of Anglo-Saxon princesses. According to Goscelin, Eadgyth possessed some political status even before her father's death. Even though she was an abbess and thus living a monastic life, Eadgyth possessed a measure of influence over the secular world and her father's court. Goscelin stated that "the crowd of princes, nobles, distinguished ladies, and the entire nobility of her [Eadgyth's] father's kingdom venerated her as Lady," and "the whole of England was disposed to reverence her."<sup>72</sup> Eadgyth even received letters and gifts from "foreign kingdoms and principalities," while ambassadors from the Continent who came to visit her father "took pride in commending themselves to her holy kindness."<sup>73</sup>

According to Goscelin, Eadgyth was even chosen by the English nobles as the primary candidate for the throne following Edgar's death. Although Edgar had a son still living, the future Æthelred the Unready, the nobles in Goscelin's narrative "rejected Æthelred because of the murder of his brother," Edward, ostensibly at the hands of Æthelred's mother Ælfthryth, and "because of his infancy and his position as youngest of the children."<sup>74</sup> Goscelin then cited Eadgyth's status as the first-born of Edgar as one of the primary reasons why she was selected to succeed her father in Æthelred's place. Goscelin wrote that the council could easily reject Æthelred as a candidate, since "a first-born daughter survived, more worthy of her father's eminence," indicating that the gender of a king's child may not have been the overriding factor in determining his most viable successor.<sup>75</sup> The nobles and the people therefore decided to "elevate her [Eadgyth]

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<sup>72</sup> Goscelin, *Vita of Edith*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

to her father's throne – for women rule among many nations – believing indeed that a lady of mature foresight could govern so great a kingdom better than childish ignorance.”<sup>76</sup>

Eadgyth was ultimately depicted as rejecting the political power offered to her by her father's people, which for Goscelin served as ultimate proof of her sanctity. Goscelin reported that the leading figures of England “surrounded her, urged her, begged her, raised their voices, finally indicated that they would use force.”<sup>77</sup> But Eadgyth, “certain already that neither principalities nor powers ... nor anything anywhere could separate her from the unconquerable love of Christ ... smiled, untroubled, at the empty attempts of them all.”<sup>78</sup> Eadgyth then unequivocally rejected the entreaties of the people and “forced them to seek again the young king whom they had rejected.”<sup>79</sup> Goscelin even compared Eadgyth's reaction to the assembled crowd to the actions of Christ, who rejected earthly rule in order “to bring about his father's kingdom.”<sup>80</sup>

Whether the above episode has any basis in historical reality has been thoroughly debated by historians. Since the incident is apparently unique to the *Life of Edith*,<sup>81</sup> the offering of the kingdom to a royal daughter who has already entered monastic life cannot be argued to be a hagiographical *topos*. Susan Ridyard, however, has asserted that the “story can almost certainly be dismissed as a product of an eleventh-century hagiographical imagination prepared to go to considerable lengths to illustrate the otherworldliness of its subject.”<sup>82</sup> Barbara Yorke, on the other hand, does not find the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Ridyard, *The Royal Saints of Anglo-Saxon England*, 41.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 161.

possibility that Eadgyth was in fact offered the throne following her father's death so implausible. Yorke argues that Eadgyth may indeed have appeared to be a viable candidate for the throne amidst the factional politics following Edgar's death, in which loyalty was divided between the supporters of the murdered Edward and his implicated younger brother Æthelred, and that in this volatile situation, "a possible role for Edith could have been considered."<sup>83</sup> The possibility of Eadgyth succeeding her father on the English throne appears even more likely when we take into account that her "position could have been strengthened by marriage to one of the leading nobles."<sup>84</sup> Despite these tantalizing possibilities, Yorke does acknowledge that, ultimately, "discussion of a possible political role for Edith must remain largely speculation," since her younger brother Æthelred was in fact crowned in 979.<sup>85</sup>

The fact that so few royal daughters have been mentioned in historical sources in connection with political succession indicates that an active political life may have been one of the few roles that was denied to Anglo-Saxon princesses. However, the stories of Cwenthryth, Ælfwynn, and Eadgyth, whether real or legendary, suggest that these women could, under exceptional circumstances, inherit their father's kingdoms. If political succession was not a valid option for Anglo-Saxon royal daughters, their activity in the realm of landed property and their significant presence as witnesses in royal charters indicate that these women could at least play a legitimate role in political life. As inheritors and holders of royal property, charter-witnesses, and, on rare occasions, rulers

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<sup>83</sup> Yorke, "Legitimacy of St. Edith," 109.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

of entire kingdoms, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters were essential to the political success of their respective families.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion has shown that the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings possessed an inherent power at birth, and that this power made them extremely valuable members of the royal family. The status which these women held as members of the ruling dynasty made them essential players in their families' spiritual and political plans and enabled them to exercise a notable degree of agency and independence. As women possessed with inherent royal status, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters played active roles in their own educations and marriages, and were independent agents in the realms of early medieval monastic life and secular politics. While they may appear to be few and far between in the largely male-dominated historical record, the surviving accounts of royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England paint a picture of these women as vibrant individuals.

As the children of kings, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters received a privileged upbringing. The births and baptisms of royal daughters were often celebratory occasions, and their consecrations to the religious life as infants and young children were weighty decisions that were often tied up with the success and security of their fathers' kingdoms. Royal daughters in Anglo-Saxon England spent their adolescent years either within the households of their fathers or in the monastic communities to which they had been entrusted as infants. In either case, these young women maintained strong connections to their parents and siblings. As members of the royal family, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings either received a traditional monastic education or were taught by tutors within the royal court; they were usually literate and often extremely well-educated by the standards of the time. Furthermore, their individual upbringings adequately prepared them for religious and secular life.

As the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings grew into adulthood, they typically followed one of two paths: marriage or entry into monastic life. In royal families with multiple daughters, it was almost always the case that at least one would be married and at least one would enter a religious house. This practice was a deliberate strategy on the part of Anglo-Saxon royal families, not for dealing with unwanted or burdensome daughters, but rather for advancing the interests of the whole family. Royal daughters were thus essential to their family's political and spiritual success. By marrying the princes and kings of neighboring and continental kingdoms, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings served as the primary agents in the formation of dynastic and political alliances in Anglo-Saxon England. Yet these women were not entirely subsumed into their husband's court upon their marriage; rather, they continued to maintain their own religious and cultural identity. Nor were they simply used to cement an alliance and then forgotten; in many cases, these women maintained strong connections with their birth families, who continued to ensure that their rights and independence were safeguarded.

Just as royal daughters who married were instrumental in the political plans of their birth families, those who entered the Church were essential to their family's spiritual welfare. Young girls who were consecrated to the religious life as infants served a special role as representatives of their family's faith in Christ; as such, their consecration was usually a familial, rather than an individual, decision. However, women who chose the religious life as adults were able to exercise agency and personal choice in their decision to take monastic vows. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, monastic life provided one of the few opportunities for women to act as totally independent agents. While royal

daughters who married princes and kings were able to maintain a distinct identity within their husband's household, they were still considered to be under his authority. As unmarried women in charge of large monasteries, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters who entered the religious life were able to exercise more independence than their married sisters. As abbesses and saints, these women were able to attain an administrative and spiritual power that was equal to their male counterparts, and this power was often explicitly linked to their royal status. In some cases, these royally-born abbesses were even able to exert their spiritual authority in order to influence the outcome of events in the secular world.

In a few remarkable cases, Anglo-Saxon royal daughters were able to exercise formal power in a political context. As discussed previously, the daughters and sisters of Anglo-Saxon kings appear frequently in the witness lists of royal charters. The prominent role which these women played in the legitimation of their fathers' and brothers' official documents shows that they actively participated in political administration. In a few instances, the daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings could even succeed to power in their fathers' kingdoms. While there are no recorded instances in which female succession was sustainable in Anglo-Saxon England, the potential for women to serve as legitimate political candidates and, in some cases, even momentarily inherit their father's realm presents the possibility that royal daughters could rule kingdoms by virtue of their status at birth.

The study of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters offers up the possibility that status in Anglo-Saxon England may have been much more dependent on class than on gender. The daughters of Anglo-Saxon kings were not dismissed simply on account of their sex, nor



were they entirely dependent on marriage to a powerful man for political power and social influence. Rather, royal daughters were born with an inherent form of power which was directly related to the strength of kinship networks in Anglo-Saxon England, and which enabled these women to actively engage in family, religious, and political affairs. The experiences of Anglo-Saxon royal daughters in childhood, marriage, monastic life, and secular politics indicates that women born within the royal family may have held a status that was largely unquestioned by their male contemporaries, and that enabled them to operate within every sphere that was available to men.

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