

Aethelflaed – Lady of the Mercians

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

There have been many powerful Anglo-Saxon women in history. Traditionally, Anglo-Saxon women had more rights than we think the typical medieval women did. She could own land, was entitled to monies and properties, and could even divorce with good reason. While the typical Anglo-Saxon woman was not an equal to a man, there were several exceptional ones that broke the mold. Some fit into the “evil stepmother” role, wielding power to promote one set of sons over another. Names like Elfrida and Emma come to mind. But I want to talk about two Anglo-Saxon women who had a great positive effect on history. One is a nameless Angle Princess whose story enthralled the court of Justinian and the other is the daughter of the only English monarch to be named Great, Aethelflaed, the Lady of the Mercians.

Procopius’s Angle Princess

Procopius [1] related the following tale he learned from a Frankish mission to Justinian’s court. This would be around 540 AD. There was a tribe of people around the North Sea called the Varni. The king Hermegisclus of the Varni contracted to marry a Frankish princess and contracted an Angle Princess from Britiannia for his son Radigis. The King was ill so he advised his son that if he were to die, to break the contract with the Angle princess and marry his step-mother instead. The reason being that the Franks were nearby and would be better allies and worse enemies than the Angiloi across the sea.

The king did die and the son attempted to send his Angle wife back home. Radigis said she could keep the bride-price. However, among the Germanic peoples, accepting a bride-price was the same as consummating the marriage. It was not the just the English people who were offended but the princess personally. She directed the efforts to regain her honor. She initially sought an explanation but did not receive one. She then settled for revenge. She summoned a large army of her people (Procopius says 400 ships and 100,000 warriros) to invade the land of the Varni. She directed her soldiers to build a fort at the Rhinemouth. She sent her brother with a group of soldiers to capture her “husband.” Her brother defeated the Varni in battle and drove the husband off but failed to capture him. She beats her brother over the head for his failure and send him back out again. The brother finally brings the wayward husband back. The young King was expecting a death sentence but instead the Princess asks him to explain himself. The young King becomes a blubbering mess pleading for his life and blaming anyone he could think of for why he broke his promise. If only the Princess would let him live, he would throw over his Frankish wife and fulfill his promise. The Princess has him untied, treatly kindly, and married him. We don’t know what happened next but we do have a law code from the 9th century, Lex Angliorum and Werinorum, the laws of the Anglii and the Varni, which suggests that these two groups lived together for some time [2].

Procopius gets his story second-hand so we have no way to know if this actually happened or not. But it does serve to show the reputation that some of the Anglo-Saxon women had. They meant business and did not take “no” for an answer. Perhaps the pinnacle of strong Anglo-Saxon womanhood is Alfred’s daughter, Aethelflaed, the Lady of the Mercians.

Æthelflæd – Lady of the Mercians



Statue at Tamworth



Illustration from



by Mariel Black

The Cartulary and Customs of Abingdon Abbey, ca 1220).

A brief introduction. The Vikings had invaded England and conquered nearly all of it. Alfred was the King of Wessex and drove the Vikings back to the Danelaw area (York and Northumbria mostly). He built up various defenses and institutions to keep the Vikings at bay while his children finished the task he had started. Enter Aethelflaed.

Aethelflaed was Alfred’s oldest child [3] by Ealhswith of Mercia who was descended from the Mercian royal line. She was educated in Alfred’s new schools as was her other siblings. She was also taught warfare, as evidenced by her own military successes.

After driving the Vikings out of most of Mercia, Alfred needed to cement that alliance and he married Aethelflaed to Ealderman Aethelred of Mercia. The royal house of Mercia was eliminated by the Vikings. Aethelred was appointed by Alfred to an earl or warleader in Mercia. Aethelflaed was much more than arm-candy; she was a full partner in keeping the Vikings at bay. After 911, Aethelred falls ill and any and all gains are Aethelflaed’s.

Alfred was working on becoming King of England (as the last king left standing). There is some evidence that perhaps Alfred's grand plan was the unification of England and that Aethelflaed was an active supporter of that plan. It would explain some of the decisions that were made. Alfred's plan may have been that Edward and Aethelflaed would be working together to remove the Vikings from England and that Edward or Aethelstan would become King of a united England. William of Malmesbury wrote that Alfred the Great honoured his young grandson with a ceremony in which he gave him a scarlet cloak, a belt set with gems, and a sword with a gilded scabbard [4]. In my Legacy class, I lay out some of the things Alfred did to recover England. Aethelflaed expanded on those. She built burhs of her own.

In 886, Alfred and Aethelred attacked and seized London from the Danes. Aethelred was a true ally. Several sources say that Alfred giving the administration to Aethelred was the bride-price for Aethelflaed [5]. At this point in her life, she was a "normal" player in politics. Her job was the peace-weaver to keep Mercia firmly in Alfred's camp [5].

However, the Vikings were not interested in peace at this time. One famous story about Aethelflaed involves her journey from Wessex to Mercia as part of her bride journey. Vikings laid in ambush for her party. The Vikings surprised them. Aethelflaed fought with her guards, side by side, to protect her maids and dowry. Aethelflaed's group was forced to retreat. Sources disagree on whether it was an old fortress or a ditch, or perhaps a ditch that was part of an old fortress. Either way, Aethelflaed took command of the situation and rallied back to slay her attackers. The story ends with Aethelflaed, one maid, and one guard making it to Mercia [7].

We are on more solid ground about her life as the Lady of the Mercians though. Aethelflaed appears in the historical record along with Aethelred. Charters and decrees have both of them as issuing them. They continued Alfred's plan of burhs. After Aethelred's death, Aethelflaed established 9 to 10 burhs in Mercia; Bridgnorth (912); Tamworth (913); Stafford (913); Eddisbury (914); Warwick (914); Chirbury (915); Runcorn (915). Three other fortresses, at Bremesburh, Scergeat and Weardbyrig, have yet to be located [8]. The forts that she build protected both her eastern frontier (Northumbria and York) and her western (Wales).

Between 899 and 911, Aethelred's health was failing. During this time of ill health and then afterwards, Aethelflaed is ruling Mercia on her own. Aethelflaed continued the war against the Danes with her brother Edward the Elder. The two worked in concert and each controlled their own forces. When Aethelred finally dies in 911, Aethelflaed continues to rule on her own, establishing the forts and actively participating in raids. She was a commander and fighter, not just sitting back at home. One raid with her brother was to recapture the bones of St. Oswald from the Danes in Lindsey. The bones were laid to rest in Gloucester. St. Oswald was considered the patron of Mercia and the recovery of his bones was a significant morale booster to the English [9]

The Vikings were not united though. Aethelflaed arranges treaties between the Danes, Merica, Scotland and Wales against the Norse raiders. She would later making additional treaties with Constantine II of Alba and Constantine Mac Aed of Strathclyde against Norse York in 917. So well known was she for her diplomacy that the Ulster Annals say this of her, "Famosissima Regina Saxonium (A most famous

Queen of the Saxons)" [10]. It is worth noting that the *Annals* only mention Edward in passing and do not mention Alfred at all.

In 917, Aethelflaed captured Derby from the Danes and in 918 she advanced on Leicester but it surrendered without a fight. The Danish Kingdom of York was aware that a large Norse fleet was coming and was willing to subject themselves to Aethelflaed, not Edward. However, on June 12 917, Aethelflaed died. We do not know of what exactly. It could have been a wound from the battles she fought or something else. York would fall to the Norse but Aethelstan would go on to unite England [11].

Aethelstan represents another part of Aethelflaed's legacy and one that lends credence to the idea that Alfred had a grand plan for England. From early on, Aethelstan was sent to live and be educated in Mercia in Aethelflaed's court. For those who believe this was part of the plan, it was to give Aethelstan connections in Mercia with the Mercian nobles. Aethelflaed only had one child, her daughter Aelfwynn. When Aethelflaed dies, some Mercian nobles support Aelfwynn and Aelfwynn tries to become Queen. Recall that Mercia was not a kingdom at this point. This is likely an attempt by those nobles to free themselves from Wessex influence. Other nobles supported Edward. I believe that this was Alfred's plan and Aethelflaed supported that plan. I am sure Alfred understood that a divided England would not be able to keep the Vikings out since there would always be temptation to ally with the Vikings against a rival kingdom. Aethelflaed was not a fool and would have understood this as well. She and her brother worked closely together and seemed to like and support each other. She willingly fostered her nephew. Edward was able to fairly quickly bring Mercia back under control. Once Aethelstan becomes king, Mercia seems content under his rule [12, 13].

Further evidence can be found here. William of Malmesbury writes of Aethelflaed, "She was a woman of great soul, who, from the difficulty experienced in her first labour, ever after refused the embraces of her husband protesting that it was unbecoming the daughter of a king to give way to a delight which in time produced such painful consequence" [14]. Herbert gives some more insight that it is interesting that the story basically says that "sex is fun but the end result is a pain." William is a monk and seems to approve of this statement. One would have expected a vow of chastity or that sex is wicked as reasons a monk might approve of [15].

We know little of Aelfwynn. We know that she witnessed charters and fought in battles like her mother. She was not married or pledged to marriage. We don't know what she thought about becoming "Queen" of Mercia for a short time and for Uncle Edward coming in and taking that away. She was sent to an Abbey after that and never heard from again. Was she in favor of the grand plan of the House of Wessex? Did she believe that she could make an independent Mercia? Was she a pawn? We just have no way of knowing at this point.

Regardless of Aelfwynn's fate, it is Aethelflaed that we know. I am reluctant to say she was good as any man because I think that cheapens both sides. She was an exceptional person. Well-educated, powerful in battle, gifted in tactics, and smooth in diplomacy, she was the equal to any ruler with the epithet "Great". And yet, history has largely forgotten her. Given that history almost forgot her father, perhaps

that is not surprising. In another time and place, she would have been a Queen. But while there are many Queens, there was only ever one Lady of the Mercians.

References

[1] Procopius, *The History of the Wars* Book VIII ch 20.

[2] Herbert, Kathleen, *Peace-weavers & Shield-Maiden: Women in Early English Society*, p. 12

[3] Asser, *Life of Alfred*

[4] Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England*, pp. 31–33

[5] Rank, Melissa & Michael, *The Most Powerful Women in the Middle Ages*, p. 16 to 17

[6] Herbert, p. 20

[7] Most of this version is from Rank. It should be noted that this story lacks credible sources but is often repeated about Aethelflaed.

[8] [Stenton, Sir Frank](#) (1988). *Anglo-Saxon England*. P 326-7.

[9] Mercian Register

[10] *Annals of Ulster* June 918

[11] Herbert p. 23

[12] Foot, *Aethelstan, First King of England*.

[13] William of Malmsbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*

[14] William of Malmsbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*

[15] Herbert p 25