

AETHELFLEAD

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Heroic Elflede

Heroic Elflede! Great in martial fame,
A man of valour, woman though in name:
Thee warlike hosts, thee, nature too obey'd,
Conqu'ror o'er both, though born by sex a maid.
Chang'd be thy name, such honor triumphs bring.
A ween by title, but in deeds a king.
Heroes before the Mercian heroine quail'd:
Caesar himself to win such a glory fail'd.

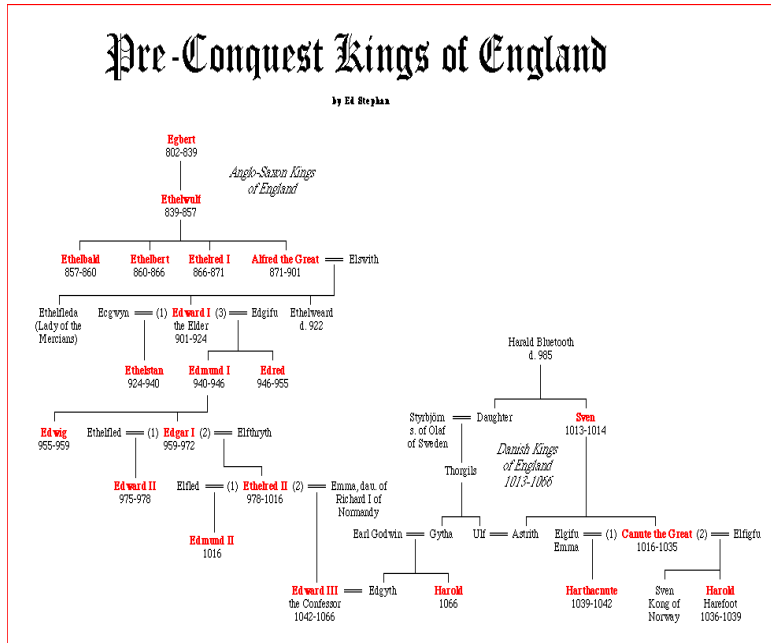
By Henry of Huntington

As Knights of York we have universal interests in our legends as the preservers of learning and knowledge. The legends behind Masonic rituals are historic and significant. In our organizations the legend of York forms the basis of an entire branch of Freemasonry. The York legend of Aethelstan and Prince Edwin of York are the foundation points in establishing regularity.

Aethelstan and Prince Edwin were real personalities in the historical record. Although Prince Edwin's life span was short, Aethelstan was a figure of imminence in Anglo-Saxon tradition. However, Aethelstan was not a standalone character. There were other contemporary actors in the drama leading to Aethelstan's rise and power

When researching the history of Aethelstan and his father, Alfred the Great, the name Aethelflead, daughter of Alfred the Great, appears. We as Masons know little about her and her place in history. Why, might you ask? She and her brother, Edward the Elder, helped shape England. Together they had great influence over Aethelstan, her nephew and his son.

Let's review a bit of genealogy. Alfred the Great had six children of whom the eldest was Aethelflead, followed by Edward the Elder. Aethelflead had a daughter, Aelfwynn, who succeeded her mother as Lady of Mercia. Edward had eight children of whom the oldest was Aethelstan. Aethelstan was sent to live with Aethelflead, his aunt. Aethelstan had no children and was succeeded by Edmund I, his half-brother.



Mercia was in the center of what we now consider England, (see map below). At the time it was bordered on the west by Wales, to the east, by East Anglia, to the south by Wessex, and to the north by Northumbria. Mercia was the largest of the Ninth Century kingdoms. During the years from 891-911, Aethelflead ruled with her consort, Aethelred, Lord of the Mercians. After Aethelred's death in 911, Aethelflead was named Lady of Mercia. This was quite unusual because at the time the Royal Ladies of Wessex were not allowed to engage in politics. Yet, as she ruled Mercia, she built and strengthened many strategic locations to fend off the Danes (Vikings).



England in 886 (9th Century)

We need to shift the time period to the year 849 in Wantage, Berkshire, and Wessex. Alfred the Great was born to King Aethelwulf and his first wife, Osburh, who was from Mercia. As their sixth child, it was unlikely he would become King of Wessex. King Aethelwulf died in 885. Alfred had gone to Rome as a young man. The story goes that when he met the pope, Alfred was consecrated as king. Following the line of succession, Alfred's older brothers became kings and died one by one, thus leaving Alfred to ascend to the throne of Wessex.

Alfred's oldest child, a daughter, Aethelflead, whose mother was a Mercian, was married to Aethelred (881-911), the King of Mercia. (Note: there were at least four persons with the name Aethelred, one of which was Alfred's brother). This alliance forged a bond between the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. The two kingdoms developed a common goal of defeating the Vikings who had often plundered Wessex, Mercia, and other kingdoms of the British island. Alfred was nearly captured by the Vikings at one point. He waged guerrilla warfare, regained his military strength, resumed fighting the Vikings and pushed them out of Wessex eventually.

After Alfred stabilized his kingdom, he began to improve his defense strategy. Alfred reorganized his military into a network of thirty-three burhs, which are old English fortifications or fortified towns, to thwart the Viking invaders. Each burh was about nineteen miles apart which allowed them confrontation of an enemy in a single day. The burhs were supplied by the local landowners. These fortified towns were listed in the Burghal Hidage, the official document detailing the location and taxing authority to support each town. This system required 27,071 soldiers which was about one in four of the freemen in Wessex. Alfred had created a standing army.

After Alfred has stabilized his kingdom, he worked to advance his personal education and that of his people. Alfred studied Latin and began translating Christian texts into the common language to foster an understanding of Christianity to his people. These texts included the "Dialogues of Gregory the

Great,” Gregory the Great’s “Pastoral Care,” the “Consolation of Philosophy,” and “St. Augustine’s Soliloquies.”

Alfred added his laws to a code issued by his predecessor, King Aethelred. These were combined and arranged into 120 chapters. These chapters were adopted from many synod books and “ordered to be written many of the ones his forefathers observed.” He kept the ones he that pleased him and discarded the ones he disliked.

A little about Aethelstan. Aethelstan, the oldest child of Edward the Elder and Ecgywynn, was born in Wessex in 894 and died in 939. He was coronated in 925 and reigned twelve years. Aethelstan’s father, Edward the Elder, “set aside” his wife Ecgywynn (Aethelstan’s mother) and married Aelfflaed. They had a son, Edwin, for whom Aethelstan’s son may have been named. Edwin drowned at sea under questionable and mysterious circumstances in 933. Later writers, namely William of Malmesbury and Simon of Durham, rewrote or revised the circumstances surrounding Edwin’s death. From these writings, Frank Stenton, a noted Anglo-Saxon historian, suggested that a rebellion against Aethelstan had been organized. Simon’s version inferred that Aethelstan ordered that his brother be drowned at sea. William’s account was that Edwin was put out to sea in a leaking boat without food, water, or oars. In desperation, he threw himself into the sea.

Aethelstan continued to build on the military, educational, religious, and secular laws of Alfred the Great, Edward the Elder, and Aethelflead’s successes. Aethelstan solidified his title as King at the Battle of Brunamburh against the Kingdom of Dublin and Strathclyde.



England (Athelflaed 10th Century)

Aethelflead

Aethelflead has become the unsung heroine of the day. She was born in 870 to Alfred the Great and Ealswith of Mercia. She was their oldest child. At that time the British Island was a divided country. The kingdom that Aethelflead came to rule was Mercia.

Information about Aethelflead is limited since there are no accounts of her exploits by a contemporary biographer. During the Elizabethan Age Aethelflead was overshadowed by Boudicca, 30 AD-60/61 AD, possibly because Boudicca had red hair as did Elizabeth I and because she led a rebellion against the Romans in 60 AD. In 1918 a statue of Aethelflead was erected in Tamworth, Staffordshire, to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of her death. The statue depicts her with a sword in her right hand and her left arm around a young boy's shoulder. The young lad is probably Aethelstan, her nephew whom she fostered.



Statue in [Tamworth](#) of Æthelflæd with her nephew [Æthelstan](#), erected in 1913 to commemorate the millennium of her fortification of the town

Most of the information we know about Aethelflead is from the Mercian Register, a part of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and from “reading between the lines.” If the accounts are accurate, she was rarely defeated. Other information about her is from the charters she witnessed with Aethelred and from later chroniclers, such as William Malmsbury (1095-1143). Aethelflead was in her forties when her name first appeared in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

Aethelflead was a child when the Danes suddenly attacked Alfred, her father, in January 878, in the area where the royal family was spending Christmas. She was with him while a fort was being constructed in Athelney in the marshes of Somerset. She was no stranger to the fears of war. She witnessed her father persevere in face of a superior force, and win.

Aethelflead’s life was formed and revolved around the wars with the Norwegians and the Danish Vikings. Alfred’s kingdom, Wessex, was the last to stand alone in the conflicts with the Vikings. It is likely that her uncle, Aethelred, was killed in battle with them. Alfred then became king and was thrust along with his family into the military and political world. The military role that Aethelflead was thrust into was Alfred’s exile in the Somerset marshes at the age of seven or eight.

Though she was a daughter of the Kingdom of Wessex, her ties connected back to Mercia, via her mother, Ealswith, and her aunt, Aethelswith, Alfred’s sister, who was married to Burgred, the last independent king of Mercia. At age 15 or 16 Aethelflead married Aethelred, the Lord (Ealdorman) of Mercia and an ally of Alfred. She may have been acquainted with him prior to their marriage, but it was most likely a political marriage as was the custom at the time. She spent most of the rest of her life in Mercia and became a political leader with her husband and the nobles of Mercia. In the years of the Tenth Century, Aethelflead emerged into a person whose political wisdom and strategy was sought after during her kingdom’s conflicts with the Vikings.

When Aethelred died in 911 AD, the Witan (speaking council) of Mercia, in an unprecedented move, made Aethelflead the leader of Mercia. With the passage of time and events the leading advisors and nobles of the country were convinced they had made a wise decision in choosing her as their leader. Aethelflead and her countrymen rebuilt Roman towns and founded new ones. The towns of Warrick, Runcorn, and Stafford, in whole or in part, exist due to her efforts. During her leadership she earned the respect and trust of the people of Mercia. Following in the footsteps of her father Alfred, Aethelflead led attacks on Danish occupied towns, and established fortified towns.

How, in a world of danger and treachery, did she survive? How did Aethelflead manage to fill the role of a man and not incur the wrath of the men around her? Henry of Huntington, an Eleventh Century scholar and nobleman said of her, "She was more famous than Caesar."

In 917 there were three failed invasions by three different Viking armies. Aethelflead sent an army who captured Derby and the surrounding territory. This is significant because Derby was a borough inside the Danelaw. The Danelaw was a part of England occupied by the Danes in the Eighth Century and became separate from England. In this area Danish law and government and prevailed. Aethelflead's seizure of Derby was, in effect, the beginning of a Reconquista. In taking Derby she left four of her most loyal thanes in possession of the reconquered land. Aethelflead was esteemed for her victory in Derby, which is considered by many as her greatest triumph. Her influence was further enhanced when the Danes of East Anglia surrendered to her brother, Edward the Elder, in late 917. Aethelflead was able to take Leicester without opposition, and nearly all of the Danish army surrendered to her. Using her tactical genius, she was able to capture Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, and Stamford. The Danish leadership of York sought an alliance with her to gain support in their struggle against the Norse Vikings raiding from Ireland. According to Frank Senton, (mentioned in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aethelflaed>), our Lady of Mercia was adept and clever in planning and executing the expeditions of the armies of Mercia. In 918 the York Vikings advanced a proposal to

concede to Aethelflead, but she died on June 12, 918, before she was able to accept the offer. This would be left to Aethelstan. In his efforts to establish the security of his kingdom, Aethelstan had to defeat the King of Dublin, the Earls of Clyde and Strathmore, resulting in Aethelstan being the first English king to control north and west England. Coins from the period bear the inscription “Rex totius Britannic” or “King of the Whole of Britain.”

In summary, Aethelflead proved to be a cunning strategist with the mind of a master warrior. She manifested herself as a victorious leader, pious, ruthless, politically astute, and, as her father a promoter of education, and the inspiration behind Aethelstan, King of all England.

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