The King's Wife in Wessex: The Tale of Wicked Queen Eadburh

by Anne Foerster

Studies on queenship in early medieval Wessex are usually bound to mention Queen Eadburh, whose presumptuous behaviour and wicked actions allegedly enticed the people of her husband's kingdom to categorically deny any king's wife the title of a queen and the throne beside the king's.[1] Writing roughly a century after this queen's lifetime, Asser, King Alfred's biographer, is the first to pay closer attention to Eadburh. According to his late ninth century *Vita Ælfredi regis*, this woman immensely shaped the way the following generations perceived and valued the wives at the side of their leaders. Asser's account on Eadburh has led modern historians to the conclusion that West-Saxon kings had wives, but not queens.[2]

Since source material for the eighth and ninth centuries is meagre and terse, and especially so when it comes to women, it is not necessarily odd that Asser was the first to report on her evil actions. Even so, it is still fruitful to take a closer look at other available sources, at Asser's narration and its place in the *Vita Ælfredi* in order to re-evaluate what the author can tell us about West-Saxon queenship. This brief essay will argue that, while having been read as an anecdote strengthening Alfred's legitimacy as West-Saxon king, and rightly so, Asser's story also reveals contemporary ideas on a queen's resources of power and influence. The findings will therefore give valuable impulses for further studies on queenship in general, and especially on perceptions of queenship and power structures at the royal court in the late ninth century.

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[1] Asser, Life of King Alfred, ed. William H. Stevenson, Oxford 1904, repr. 1959, pp. 11–14.

[2] Julie Ann Smith, The Earliest queen-making rites, in: Church History 66 (1997), pp. 18–35; Julie Ann Smith, Queen-making and Queenship in early medieval England and Francia, York 1993, p. 94 (Online: http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/2519. Accessed May 26, 2018); Percy Ernst Schramm, Geschichte des englischen Königtums, p. 1; cf. Andreas Bihrer, Begegnungen zwischen dem ostfränkisch-deutschen Reich und England (850–1100) (Mittelalter-Forschungen 39), Ostfildern 2012, pp. 261–263; cf. Pauline Stafford, The King's Wife in Wessex, 800–1066, in: Gender, Family and the Legitimation of Power. England from the Ninth to Early Twelfth Century, ed. Pauline Stafford, Aldershot 2006, IX3-27, pp. 4 and 17; cf. in the same volume Stafford's article on Succession and Inheritance: A Gendered Perspective, pp. 262–264. The story also influenced translations of the Anglo-Saxon terms ‚hlæfdige' and ‚cwen', see the corresponding articles in Joseph Bosworth and Thomas N. Toller (eds.), An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 2 vols., Oxford 1972, vol. 1, pp. 177 and 539, vol. 2, pp. 138 and 548.

Asser tells Eadburh's story in detail to explain the absurd West-Saxon tradition towards queens (*perversam illius gentis consuetudinem*).[3] He traces this custom back to Queen Eadburh, the Mercian wife of King Beorhtric of Wessex. As soon as she had gained power over her husband's heart and kingdom, Eadburh behaved, according to Asser, as tyrannically as her father – the great Mercian king Offa – and persecuted the men closest to Beorhtric. She whispered accusations into the king's ear with the intention to deprive those men of their power, and if her husband did not act against them as she planned for him to do, she secretly eliminated the denunciated men through poison. One day, the inevitable came to pass: the king accidently drank from a poisoned cup himself and died.[4]

From that time on, the West-Saxons did not allow for a woman to be called queen and to sit beside the king. This is, at least, what Asser says he had heard from his elders, maybe even from King Alfred himself.[5] And indeed, the wives of Beorhtric's successors, King Ecgberht and his sons, seldom left traces: in the historiography of Alfred's times only Osburh, Alfred's mother, and his step-mother, Judith, Æthelwulf's second wife, were given a place.[6] Alfred's own wife, Ealswith, is only briefly mentioned in Asser's *Vita*, and not by name.[7] The West-Saxon charters rarely mention female members of the royal family. After the times of Eadburh, Judith witnessed both of Æthelwulf's known charters,[8] but there is no trace of Ecgberht's wife, Alfred's mother and of the wives of Alfred's brothers except for Wulfthryth, Æthelred's wife.[9]

Historiographical evidence for Eadburh is also found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In annal 789 the great Mercian king Offa is said to have given his daughter in marriage to Beorhtric, king of Wessex. The chronicler even gives the bride's name. This is remarkable since for this

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[3] Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), p. 11.

[4] Ibid., pp. 12–13.

[5] Ibid., pp. 11–12; Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), pp. 262–264.

[6] For Osburh see Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), p. 4; For Judith see Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), pp. 11 and 17 and The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition, vol. 3: MS A, ed. Janet Bately, Cambridge 1986, pp. 45 and 52 (a. a. 854 and 855); cf. for the other versions the volumes of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition, ed. David Dumville et al., Cambridge 1983– cont.

[7] Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), pp. 23–24.

[8] Electronic Sawyer, S1274 and S326, see online http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/1274.html and http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/326.html, accessed April 19, 2018. Documents from the Electronic Sawyer are henceforth cited as S and number.

[9] S340 (see note 8), see online http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/340.html, accessed April 19, 2018; cf. Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), pp. 255–261.

period the Chronicle hardly reports on women at all.[10] The union reinforced a valuable alliance between the two kings. It provided Offa with a dependent West-Saxon king and Beorhtric with a powerful neighbour who would help him to secure his position. Annal 836 explicitly gives this marital union as a reason for Beorhtric supporting his father-in-law against Ecgberht, who had claimed the West-Saxon throne for himself.[11]

When the bride came to the West-Saxon court, she probably expected for herself a position comparable to that of her mother, Cynethryth, a crowned and anointed queen who partook in her husband's diplomatic practice and was even depicted on his coinage.[12] We do not know if Eadburh's life as wife of a king met with expectations of this kind, but it seems safe to assume that a daughter of a very important and powerful ally was considered to be valuable and was treated at least with reverence.

A possibly authentic charter of Beorhtric mentions the consent of *Eadburg regina* immediately after the king's.[13] Her appearance in her husband's diplomatic documents comes not even close to the numbers of Offa's charters that involve Queen Cynethryth. Nevertheless, Eadburh's name and queenly title in two of the charters still is remarkable, since West-Saxon kings' wives did not appear in royal diplomas very often.[14] But if they did, they were usually styled *regina* and held a high position in the witness-lists.[15]

What is striking about Asser's account on Eadburh is its chronology. As Pauline Stafford has already pointed out, the author does not tell his story about this wicked queen when recounting the history of Wessex in Beorhtric's times or when he mentions Beorhtric's death. He inserts it in his report on the year 856, when King Æthelwulf of Wessex returned from Rome with his new wife and consecrated queen Judith, daughter of the Frankish king Charles the

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[10] MS A (see note 6), p. 39; cf. Pauline Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), p. 261.

[11] MS A (see note 6), p. 43 (cf. the editions of manuscripts B and C); cf. Barbara Yorke, Kings and kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England, London 1990, p. 141.

[12] Janet Nelson, art. „Eadburh (Eadburga) (fl. 789–802), queen of the West Saxons, consort of King Beorhtric", in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford 2004, p. 524, see also online (subscription required) https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8380, accessed April 19, 2018; Susan E. Kelly, art. „Cynethryth", Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford 2004, pp.861–862, see also online (subscription required) https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/54442, accessed April 19, 2018.

[13] S268, see online http://www.esawyer.org.uk/charter/268.html, accessed April 19, 2018.

[14] Nelson, Eadburh (see note 12); Stafford, King's Wife (see note 2); Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), pp. 258–259.

[15] For Æthelburg († ca. 740), wife of Ine of Wessex, cf. S249 (see note 8) (where she is mentioned and her brother witnessed as frater regine); for Frithugyth, wife of Æthelheard of Wessex († 740), cf. S253–255 (in the latter without a title). Cf. notes 8 and 9.

Bald. Landing on English shores, the king found his son Æthelbald in rebellion against him, and Asser finds himself obliged to explain the reasons.[16] Stafford argues that the story of Eadburh is placed there to strengthen Alfred's right to the West-Saxon throne by weakening the claims of his elder brother's and predecessor's sons.[17] Eadburh is used to deny Judith the elevated status that could have made her mother of kings, who would thus outpace Æthelwulf's sons by his first wife in the line of succession. Since Judith bore Æthelwulf no children, that problem did not arise for Æthelbald, but Alfred's predecessor, his brother Æthelred, had sons by his wife Wulfthryth, who was at least once called queen. Therefore, for Alfred's cause the story was indeed helpful.

Asser legitimises the attitude towards kings' wives in characterising it as a *consuetudo*, while at the same time putting it up for discussion by criticising it as *perversa et detestabilis*.[18] Thus, he might have provided an opening for the succession of Alfred's son and the establishment of a succession from father to son.[19]

But Asser makes another point in this episode, probably without intending it. In describing the West-Saxons' change of attitude towards queens after experiencing the consequences of Eadburh's despicable actions and behaviour, he reveals his and his elders' perception of the sources and forms of power that are often found with medieval women. He names two measures to have successfully prevented the ruler's wives from gaining too much power over the king, his court, and the kingdom: firstly, the West-Saxons did not allow them to sit next to

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[16] Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), pp. 10–16; Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), pp. 258–264.

[17] Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), pp. 258–264. Cf. Richard Abels, Royal Succession and the Growth of Political Stability in Ninth-Century Wessex, in: Haskins Society Journal 12 (2002), pp. 83–97: Abels argues that Alfred and his court justified the prevalence of Alfred's bloodline over the ones of his brothers with biblical and theological analogies. But this is only one of various strategies that Alfred and his followers applied. While recognising the significance of the formula for the anointing of a queen in establishing a succession from father to son in Edward the Elder's times (p. 96), Abels neglects the scattered references to women in Alfred's reign that also serve to support the shift in succession practice. As Stafford noted in her article Chronicle D, 1067 and women: gendering conquest in eleventh-century England, in: Anglo-Saxons: studies presented to Cyril Roy Hart, ed. Simon Keynes / Alfred P. Smyth, Dublin 2006, p. 222–223: "women 'out of place'", e. g. narrations on women in chronicles that rarely refer to the female sex deserve close attention.

[18] Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), p. 12.

[19] Stafford, Succession and Inheritance (see note 2), p. 264. To secure the succession of Edward the Elder, Alfred's son, it would have been helpful to promote his mother Ealhswith as a queen in the *Vita*. Since it was written in the last years of Alfred's reign doing so would have made the antagonism between the arguments for legitimacy all too visible: For his own claim, Alfred needed to advocate the priority of the brother's claim over the son's. For the succession of his son the basis of Alfred's own legitimation had to be denied and changed into the opposite. It had to be reversed – Asser's wording of '*perversus*' could be read in that way.

the king, and secondly, they did not call them queens, but king's wives (*reginam iuxta rege sedere non patitur, nec etiam reginam appellari, sed regis coniugem, permittit*).[20]

Sitting next to the king meant unrestricted access to him and enabled his wife to influence his decisions. Removing her from his side barred this way of wielding power. Since, in all probability, husband and wife still shared a bed, this measure may not really have hindered her influence on him. But banning the marital bond from sight would have reduced the social capital the wife could gain by her connection to the ruler. The second practice would have worked in a similar way but affected another pillar of a queen's power: her own status. Even without a consecration or coronation ritual – an element Asser does not refer to even although he probably had Judith in mind – the title 'queen' implied more than being married to a king. To be called queen provided a woman with a status of her own. She was not only the consort, but royal herself and thus had royal authority. To deny her the title was to deny this authority.[21] Furthermore, since Asser seems to suggest a connection between Æthelwulf's return with his queen and Æthelbald's rebellion, Judith's status might have proposed her to be the mother of the next king. Being a queen thus promised close contact to the king not only for the husband's lifetime, but also for the son's.

The account on the wicked Queen Eadburh of Wessex in the *Vita Alfredi regis* thus reveals how Asser and his informants accounted for queenly power: firstly, the king's consort relied on the influence she could have on her husband or son, and secondly, she was able to use her own elevated status to wield power and authority. The ranks and positions the individual wives of the West-Saxon kings held may have varied and where they sat, we cannot know. Asser's statement that since Eadburh the West-Saxons did not call the wives of their kings 'queen' is, in any case, countered by charters naming Judith and Wulfthryth *regina*.[22] But then, those were the women endangering his king's legitimacy.

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[20] Asser, Life of King Alfred (see note 1), p. 11.

[21] Cf. Anne Foerster, Die Witwe des Königs. Zu Vorstellung, Anspruch und Performanz im englischen und deutschen Hochmittelalter (Mittelalter-Forschungen 57), Ostfildern 2018, pp. 253–256.

[22] For the Anglo-Saxon terms *cwen* and *hlæfdige* and their relation to the Latin *regina* see Foerster, Witwe des Königs (see note 21), pp. 63–65 and 150–151.